Principles for Putting Liturgy Together

1. *A liturgical event, like a sentence, contains parts which function in different ways. It also belongs to units larger than itself.*

As a writer must know the nature and function of the various parts of speech, so one who is responsible for putting a liturgy together must know its parts and their different functions. A liturgy is neither a monolith nor a univocity, but a functioning concert of parts done by different persons. The way these various parts combine constitutes the grammar and syntax of rite in a particular liturgical idiom. And while liturgical parts are for the most part common across Christianity, the ways in which they are used vary widely, producing distinct idioms such as the Syrian, Byzantine, Egyptian, Gallican, and Roman. To study the various Christian liturgies comparatively is to study dialects of a common liturgical language, a study which often sheds light on one's own.

The main *verbal* parts used in the liturgy are the following.

Prayers:
petitionary orations, such as the entry prayer, prayer over the gifts, and communion prayer.
intercessions, such as occur sequentially in litanies.

praeconia, such as Easter *Exultet*, which are unmetered prayers highly rhetorical, even poetic, in nature.

apologiae, such as the acknowledgements of unworthiness in the president's private prayers at communion. These are never said aloud.

thanksgiving prayers, the most important of which is the great eucharistic prayer of the president over bread and wine. This prayer has evolved into a continuous proclamatory declamation of *anamnesis*-thanksgiving and is proper to the president alone.

Acclamations: such as "Christ is risen …," Alleluia, and Agnus Dei. These are short, simple, and easily memorized, affording the assembly opportunities to participate frequently in verbal utterances of president, deacon, reader, cantor and choir.

Hymns: unmetered, such as scriptural canticles, Sanctus, and Gloria; metered, such as sequences, office hymns, and the like. Unmetered hymns, especially those of some length, are sometimes difficult for the assembly at large without some assistance from cantor or choir.

Psalmody: predominant especially in the liturgy of the hours, but also in the eucharist at entry, preparation, communion processions and between the readings as meditative chants and with Alleluia before the gospel. The same difficulty occurs with psalmody as with unmetered hymns on the assembly's part. For this reason, tradition associates antiphons with psalmody—short phrases the assembly can easily repeat between verses sung by cantor or choir similar to acclamations.

Lessons: which the liturgy presumes are always from God's Word or, in the liturgy of the hours, sometimes from approved works which lie close to God's Word, the liturgy being fundamentally the celebration of that Word and no other.

Blessings and consecrations: which are graceful gestures and words meant to recall the assembly to him from whom all good flows. The assembly is aware that neither it nor any of its ministers make things holy. Things and persons are holy just as creatures of an all holy Creator. All the assembly and its ministers can do is to discover and proclaim that holiness to the most intense degree which seems appropriate to the occasion.

Invitations, dialogues, responses, greetings: which are the stylized form taken by the discourse necessary for transacting public business in faith.

Dismissals: originally these were several, especially in the eucharist, complex in form and thus rather protracted. Most occurred at the end of the service of readings, when catechumens, penitents, and the "possessed" were dismissed from the service with common prayers, a blessing, and dismissal of each group in sequence—a mark of the assembly's pastoral concern for each group in its midst who were not considered capable of doing the eucharistic banquet, at least for the present. So important a service were the dismissals thought to be that the Latin churches came to refer to the entire eucharistic rite as *missa*, the dismissal. The dismissal of catechumens has been restored in the Roman liturgy by the 1972 *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. While no specific procedure is prescribed for such a dismissal, the tradition suggests that some sensitive form for doing this must be developed.

Litanies: which are a longer or shorter sequence of brief petitions or intercessions. These occur in both liturgies of the hours and the eucharist, and in addition during processions of various kinds.

Homilies: these are creative opportunities for the assembly's president to retell and give specific point to the gospel within the liturgy.
The homily must be sensitive to its being a part of the liturgy rather than time out from it. The homily must not separate Word and sacrament but unite

them. It does this by speaking of the Word not academically but parabolically as the Lord did—in story, sign, symbol, image. These are models of discourse sympathetic with the liturgy, which enacts the Word in the same ways. The homily is not a religious, political, or devotional talk. It is an intrinsic part of the liturgy and must be governed by liturgical laws and principles.

The main *nonverbal* parts used in the liturgy are the following.

Silence: this is not the embarrassed, barren, uncontrolled lack of sound which occurs when things break down and no one knows what to say or do. Liturgical silence is purposeful, pregnant, and controlled—the thunderous quiet of people communicating that which escapes being put into mere words. Such silences should be allowed for after lessons well read, after homilies well preached, during communion time and after it, and at any other unexpected time when silence seems to speak louder than words or music. Such silences should not seem to interrupt the rhythm of the service but to be an integral part of that rhythm.

Processions: moving together, even vicariously as at a parade, is a compelling human experience because of the solidarity with others which rhythmic and coordinated movement seems to make palpable. The key is coordinated rhythm of motion, speech, and music, all of which are best kept simple and repetitive so as to foster participation by making recourse to books and other printed materials unnecessary. Processions, whether penitential or festive, also need elements of ritual and artistic flair, as one so often sees in secular parades, trooping of colors, and even funeral corteges. In most churches processions are usually perfunctory, ill-planned, poorly executed, arhythmic, and utilitarian at best, characteristics foreign to a good parade or procession.

Gestures: these are body-language acts of communication within the assembly. They should have the naturalness appropriate to such communication and avoid seeming bizarre, overwrought, precious, or humdrum.

Sounds: not all sounds are verbal sounds. Melismatic chant concentrates not on words but on the sheer splendor of melody, and the same applies to good instrumental music and to the pealing of bells. Non-verbal sounds are important components of liturgical worship to which too little thought is given. They help reduce the verbosity of liturgy done by ministers and assemblies who assume that liturgy is a text and that celebration requires continual talk.

Sights: while the liturgy is not a stage show nor its ministers actors, the entire event is something which is not only said but seen by its participants. How liturgical ministers behave physically in the assembly is something all must endure. Ministers must not pose or seem pompous; neither should they be careless or seem to be self-conscious, flippant, or condescending. They must be and seem to be completely attuned to the nature of the event and the assembly celebrating it. A sense of natural physical grace in deportment, a sense of simple dignity, a certain self-discipline with regard to personal idiosyncrasies translate into a general impression by the assembly of its being respected and competently served by its liturgical ministers. The minister at the liturgy, like a Zen master, should be as "uninteresting" as a glass of cold, clear, nourishing water.

Smells: places where numbers of people gather over long periods of time develop distinctive odors, and the olfactory sense is as much a human faculty of communication as any other. Altering the familiar odor of a place, such as filling rooms with evergreens at Christmas, is normally a powerful act of communication without words. It defines space and time to be different from the ordinary, and thus it alters perceptions and expectations, often profoundly. Manufacturers of canned or bottled aromas know this fact very well and make their living off it. The liturgy knows the same fact equally well, which is why it has for so long used incense and aromatic chrism, in addition to lilies and evergreens, to mark times, places, and persons important to the assembly.

Touches: the liturgy also has traditionally placed high priority on the human sense of touch. A touch of a human hand, an embrace, the bathing and anointing of bodies all speak volumes about the assembly's confidence in things and people and in the commerce by which human and divine reality is constructed. For with touching without words goes an immense and risky ambiguity—an ambiguity which allows escape from the tyranny of words and texts and safe expectations, howsoever briefly.

2. *As does any art form, the liturgy gives enlarged room for imagination, for investment in and appropriation of values, and for freedom.*

The difference between a liturgy which does this and one which does not is the difference between art and propaganda, between creation and exploitation. A liturgy put together to foster some particular piety, devotion, or ideology is in violation of this principle.

3. *Liturgy is canonical.*

This means that the liturgy is an art constrained by rule, which is what *kanon* means in the original Greek. Every liturgical system in existence, Christian or not, is based on this principle simply because so highly complex a social art as liturgy must maintain a defined order of regular expectations lest it fail to be a participated event, one done by a host of different people for common purpose. One who would put Christian liturgy together must therefore be mindful of what the basic canons or rules are within the particular worship tradition of the assembly which will do such a liturgy. Traditional Christianity has maintained four such basic canons: 1) the canon of scripture, including both Old and New Testaments; 2) the canon of baptismal faith, the several Trinitarian creeds; 3) the canon of eucharistic faith, the eucharistic prayer or prayers of the Church's tradition; 4) the canon laws which have traditionally regulated the assembly's life both in the liturgy (e.g., the rubrics) and outside it (e.g., "canon law" in one form or another). To ignore these canons or rules runs the highest risk of leading the assembly into idiosyncratic dead ends, no matter how ap-

pealing these may appear to be at the moment.

4. *Liturgy is not adapted to culture, but culture to the liturgy.*

This reverses what one usually hears, namely, that the liturgy must be, and for the most part always has been, adapted to the culture in which it exists. Were this true, however, then the death of a culture either should result in the death of its liturgy (something not historically verifiable) or should indicate that the surviving liturgy never was wholly adapted to the deceased culture. More theologically, it is difficult to see how a Christian liturgy could remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ while allowing itself to become perfectly adapted to a culture hostile to that Gospel. In such a case, the liturgy would be supine before that which the assembly of faith is obliged to undercut, overturn, and reverse.

The culturalization process in the liturgy must therefore be different from this. There can be no doubt that the liturgy does indeed make use of forms and symbols it finds in culture. Pagan elements exist in the blessing of the font and the new fire ceremonies of Easter; the feast of Christmas was partly influenced by the Roman cult of the Unconquered Sun at the winter solstice. Yet neither Gospel nor Church nor liturgy became adaptively identified with any of the cultural elements. The assembly absorbed them as it renovated them to bespeak not their original pagan messages but the message of Jesus Christ. In this sense, the liturgy filtered, changed, preserved, and adapted cultural elements to itself, to the point that the only place one may still sense some elements of the vanished cult, say, of the Unconquered Sun, is in the Christian feast of Christmas.

The moral of this seems to be that the liturgical assembly is normally always in the business of absorbing cultural elements into itself in a rich diversity of ways and over long periods of time. The liturgy is not an artificial or abstract construct like Esperanto or computer language. It is more a lump of clay dug from the earth, shaped by people's hands, bearing their fingerprints, and sparked by divine genius in Christ if the people remain faithful in him. The liturgy thus survives cultures even as it adapts them to itself. The process can perhaps be monitored and remarked upon, but it probably cannot be forced or retarded for very long.

5. *Liturgy has more in common with an act of declamatory rhetoric than with scientific analysis or a classroom lecture.*

Liturgy is not a speech, but of the three sorts of speech mentioned it has more in common with the first than with the other two. This means that the liturgy declaims and proclaims something rather than it analyzes or teaches something. For this reason one should be serious, affirm forthrightly, avoid looseness and the commonplace, not annoy or polarize the assembly, and act with a gracious simplicity because humbug and mystification are foreign both to Christianity and its worship.

6. *In liturgy as in poetry, rhetoric, and music, meaning is as often communicated by rhythm and scale as by words alone.*

Liturgy is a ritual language, embracing far more than words and texts alone. One who would put a liturgy together cannot stop merely by getting straight the things to be said. Things to be done must also be considered, where they are to be done, and how they are to be done. Scurrying around the sanctuary in confusion suggests lack of clear purpose which even the most sensitive acts of presidency cannot smooth over. But stiff and rigid behavior is just as bad, suggesting that what one is watching is little more than a drill being done by rote. The constrained art of the liturgical "composer" requires higher degrees of forethought and creativity than this.

7. *Choose a liturgical style and hold to it.*

A liturgy of particular idiom such as the Roman, like a particular language, possesses its own logic and genius. This is ill served by throwing into it elements of alien idioms such as the Byzantine, rather as pretentious writers stuff their prose with foreign phrases. Syncretizing a liturgy with alien elements weakens its own logic and genius, making it more like a liturgical museum than a living act of worship. The best thing is to do the given assembly's liturgy straight.

8. *All possible liturgical options do not have to be implemented all at once.*

A Christian liturgical system like the Roman, which has enjoyed many centuries of development, contains a vast repertoire of texts, music, and ceremonies. In practice, this repertoire is much too vast to be used in its entirety by any one assembly. To bring as much of it as possible into use over the course of a year is something to which generations of liturgical experts have devoted perhaps more industry than pastoral good sense. This process was enhanced during the medieval period in the west, when the liturgy became an affair increasingly in the hands of clerical liturgical experts whose need for variety corresponded to the high quantity of liturgy they performed while the laity watched. The modern Roman Liturgy thus finds itself to be a rite of enormous variability, especially in its liturgies of the eucharist and the hours.

While all traditional Christian liturgical systems observe a certain variability, particularly in those parts proper to president, deacon, readers, and singers, all of them except the Roman keep the variability of the people's parts to a minimum. This enables the people to participate easily and by memory, especially in the eucharist of Sundays and feasts, when the full participation of the whole assembly is most crucial. For this reason, perhaps, other Christian liturgical systems have not suffered the cleavage between clerical and lay pieties, between liturgy and devotionalism, that was typical in the Roman system prior to the Second Vatican Council.

The notion on the part of many well-meaning people since the Council that this cleavage will be overcome by inducing the laity to take full part in the high variability which marked the clericalized medieval and counter-Reformation Roman Liturgy is a mistaken one. It mistakes an abnormality for the norm, for liturgy is not a clerical but a popular affair. It assumes that high variability is an aid to participation rather than an inhibition of it. It must then swamp the assembly with printed orders of service, printed collections of music

all must sing, printed rubrical changes, practice sessions which distract and weary, and constant commentaries for the confused on how the event is going. All this confounds people, reduces many to passivity, and drives them away.

Good liturgy does none of this. It simplifies to the point that participation by the non-expert is facilitated without recourse to printed sheets, books, and practice sessions. Its variable parts are the responsibility of competent ministers; its invariable parts are the responsibility of everyone else, and the music for these parts must keep this in mind. Those responsible for putting liturgy together must realize that their task is one of keeping the high variability of the Roman Liturgy within acceptable limits for the vast majority of the assembly who are not, do not wish to be, and do not need to be liturgical experts. Responsible people will choose among the array of options contained in the reformed liturgical books so as to construct a basic public service which best serves the needs and abilities of the local assembly in context of its communion with the larger assembly of the Church universal and its traditions. This must be a work of high and creative responsibility. It must never be overwhelmed by fads, personal idiosyncrasies, or lack of authentic pastoral insight. It must be prosecuted by people who have the courage to obey the rubrics and the strength to resist being overwhelmed by them.