

POST #2 - MASS AND LITURGY OF THE HOURS

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Preparation for Mass

A good way for a seminary spiritual director to prepare seminarians for the Liturgy is to have the men read the day's readings beforehand, during their private prayer. Such a practice helps prepare the seminarians to receive the Word with reverence.

Spiritual directors ought to encourage the men to arrive early to recollect themselves in order to meet the Risen Eucharistic Lord. It can be helpful to suggest that in order to recollect themselves, they acknowledge first that God is there to love them during the Liturgy. Secondly, it is good to acknowledge how they perceive themselves and their lives at that moment, as they come to that Liturgy. Early in their years in the seminary, the men's yearning for holiness and knowledge can lead them to an abstraction from who they are to who they hope to be. Some men strain so much in this fashion that they bring an unreal sense of themselves to their prayer and worship. We all believe that we receive the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice, but we ourselves need to have a real presence to Him also.

When we have acknowledged who God is, and who we are, we open ourselves to the Lord, telling Him about what is going on in our lives, about what we are feeling, what is claiming our attention. We bring that self to the Lord who is about to draw near to our assembly, not on the back of a donkey, but through the Holy Spirit and the Church's prayer.

Distractions during Mass

It is best to direct the men to acknowledge their distractions and consciously to give those distractions to the Lord. During the Liturgy, when we are distracted, we should gently and firmly bring our attention back to the prayer or rite we are praying.

Unless the seminarian has a service role with responsibility over a certain gesture or rite, he should be directed not to engage in critically examining the theological or liturgical oddities, mistakes, and errors which will be there in abundance. Thousands of hours of liturgical prayer are wasted each year because seminarians do battle in their imagination with such matters. Nor is the time of the Mass or Liturgy of the Hours the time to reorder the liturgical art or furniture in the church. Such matters are all very important, but the celebration of the Liturgy is not the time to specify the errors, make corrections, or identify the lack of virtues of the priest (bishop, deacon, acolyte, organist, usher, etc.).

It is amazing how penetrating our insights can seem about the neglect of a liturgical rite and the decline of western civilization, about the lifeless proclamation of the gospel and the impediments to the New Evangelization. Such insights, if valid, will reappear after the liturgical celebration is over and can be evaluated then. Until the praying of the Liturgy is over, this kind of ruminating has to be avoided.

Many men new to the seminary are looking for the right formula for fixing the Church. There is a formula, of course, which is living in Spirit-given union with God in the Church Christ founded. But the formula we seek when we are new to the seminary is often perceived as consisting of specific liturgical

matters, certain key doctrines, and a defined pastoral manner. Some decades ago, the formula insisted that altar rails be removed, the profound import of the baptism of the faithful be upheld, and the priest be easygoing and approachable. The more contemporary formula is that once the Mass is offered *ad orientem*, once the dignity of the priesthood is restored, and once priests act with more authority and courage, all will be well.

The seminary spiritual director needs to watch for the times when these liturgical, doctrinal, and pastoral matters become so important that they block the seminarian's ability to enter into a Liturgy at which the current perceived formula is not being followed. In the seminary, men grow and mature by wrestling with the various aspects of ecclesial life. Everyone wants the Church to grow and be more holy. However, the spiritual director needs to be judicious as he accompanies a man who is discerning these matters. Attachment to the external expressions can block our celebration of the inner reality.

People do need to reverence the Word of God and the Blessed Sacrament, but many seminarians feel they have a mission to force the truth onto others. Directors need to emphasize the humble reality that people come to faith by grace. Helping the men appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit will help them avoid some of the facile interpretations of ecclesial life which blame everything on poor catechesis, lazy priests, and weak bishops.

Spiritual directors assist men in moving toward liturgical maturity by helping them cultivate a certain dispassion regarding liturgical styles and periods. As the men are formed to appreciate the Liturgy, as they read ecclesial documents and peruse blogs, they can become viciously (in the sense of vice-infused) attached to schools of thought so that these attachments attack the very charity without which the Liturgy cannot be prayed.

Seminarians can dismiss appeals to charity as appeals to "niceness," so the director will need to be clear that he is not advocating secular tolerance, but a virtue without which the seminarian will become a bad priest. Younger men can be attracted to *odium theologicum* because it is blood stirring and can give a false sense of dedication and zeal. We can all be talented at finding a saint whose example supports our errant zeal. In such cases, the director will talk the man into charity, into maturity, and away from foolish arrogance.

The Offering

It is the common teaching of the Church that each of the faithful who participates in the Eucharistic Liturgy makes a sacrifice, according to their baptismal priesthood, as the priest does through his ordained ministry at the altar. It can be helpful for the seminarians to regularly make a particular intention as they offer the Mass through their character as baptized Christians. Such offering is good for all the baptized, but is a particularly helpful practice in assisting seminarians to become men who regularly offer their lives for others.

Thanksgiving

It is good for directors to encourage their directees to spend a few moments after Mass thanking God for Holy Communion. It is common these days to see seminaries in which the whole community has this practice. If that is not the case, the seminarians can be individually encouraged to give thanks to God.

Liturgy of the Hours

Going back to the first centuries, the Church has immersed people in her prayer and then catechized them about the prayer. Such a method of introduction to the Liturgy of the Hours often happens in seminaries. New seminarians buy their breviaries, are—possibly—told where to put the ribbons, and then begin reading or chanting away. So, it is often up to the spiritual director to introduce the men to how to pray the Office. Even later in the first semester of a man's first year in the seminary, the spiritual director should not presuppose that because the man has had a conference on the Liturgy of the Hours that he knows how to pray the Office.

Spiritual directors should begin introducing the Office to the seminarians by pointing out the times that Jesus prayed the psalms, or took part in the Temple liturgy and synagogue prayers (Psalms 22, 31, 91, 113-118). As the men reflect on Jesus praying with the psalms, the men will come to see their own place, in Jesus, of praying for themselves and for others. Many of our men come to the Liturgy of the Hours with the supposition that if it is not felt personally, or not fully consciously prayed, it is not valuable, or not as valuable as their private prayer. Directors ought to tell the men that the psalms are prayed for the whole Church, that the words and situations of the psalms do not have to correspond to their own situation and mood, that as the objective word of God, the psalms have great value.

To assist the man in understanding the fullness of praying the Hours, one might suggest that the seminarian spend one month praying the psalms and canticles by trying to connect personally with what is said. Such a prayer exercise can be invaluable in building up the man's biblical competence, in giving him the inspired phrases and words which illuminate his own experience as a disciple and member of the Body of Christ.

A second exercise is to pray the psalms and canticles according to the Christological and ecclesiological notes given above the psalm or canticle in the breviary. This exercise can help open up the man to his being a member of Christ's Body, united to Christ as, in the Spirit, Christ offers worship to the Heavenly Father.

A third exercise is to take a month to pray the psalms and canticles for others in the Body of Christ for whom the psalm or canticle does express their situation or season of life. This exercise can be very helpful in giving the men the prayerful experience of their being members of the Body of Christ, connected to others and interceding for other members of the Body, whether they know them personally or not. In addition, for men who feel they are being swamped by life, this method of praying the Office can help pull them through their trial. It enables them to experience the reality that by focusing on others during times of trouble, they will often find healing, or perspective on their own difficulties.