

*The Problem With Themes*

Although it risks becoming a liturgist=s cliché, the paschal mystery is the reality that we celebrate at any and every liturgy. This mystery is the power of Christ=s incarnation, life, suffering, self giving unto death, dying, rising, giving of the Spirit, and promise to bring all history and creation to fullness in God. It is a power that God revealed wholly in the person of Jesus and, by the Holy Spirit, continues to unleash in human history in the Mystical Body of Christ.

The paschal mystery is Christ=s passing over from death to new life *in us*. By our celebration of liturgy, day by day, Sunday by Sunday, year by year, Christ=s paschal mystery becomes the pattern of our individual and communal lives and transforms the world in which we live.

Why emphasize this point yet again? When we lose sight of this foundation of liturgical theology, planners can lapse into the practice of creating theme-based or topical liturgies. For Catholic educators, who work regularly with lesson plans and instructional materials, it is especially tempting to look for themes and topics when preparing school liturgies. Themes, after all, are useful for focussing students= attention, and a clear curriculum of topics provides criteria for evaluation.

However, while the classroom uses analogies and analysis as tools for understanding, liturgy relies on the language of symbols, gestures, myths, stories, and rituals to do its work. Liturgy, unlike a lesson plan, is about formation, not information. Compare liturgy to a lover=s affection. Liturgy is more like a kiss than an anatomy lesson. The latter might teach the physiology of kissing, but it=s nothing like doing it. Similarly, liturgy doesn=t teach us about our relationship with God in Christ; it *is* the encounter, awakening us to the personal and transforming presence of God in the Body of Christ.

Such an encounter is far from predictable. With the awesome mystery of Christ our Lover in mind, to plan a liturgical experience based on a topic seems one-dimensional. Common themes such as friendship, joy, solidarity, new beginnings, forgiveness, thanksgiving for the harvest and so on suggest significant human experiences. But liturgy=s awakening power goes far beyond a single feeling or experience or idea.

The thematic or topical approach to liturgy preparation yields many aberrations. Planners might feel compelled to provide ever new images to stimulate attentiveness. So, we get basketballs and globes and artwork in eucharistic processions, to the neglect of real bread and plentiful wine. Exciting novelty usurps the vitality of our living tradition. Topics engender burlap banners bearing slogans, instead of the evocative colours and textures of fabric art. Intercessions reflect narrow, rather than inclusive and global needs. Presiders become presenters, and the assembly is reduced to an audience, to the further demise of full active participation. Planners in a didactic paradigm sometimes print scripture readings in worship aids, arguing that visual learners retain better what they see and hear. The worst anomaly is the instructional liturgy, a sort of play by play that explains various elements of the service as they are experienced. Of course, celebrating liturgy is not about retaining what we

hear or remembering often incorrect explanations of its historical development. Liturgy is the ritual embodiment of mutual presence. It is about God=s Spirit coming upon this community to enflesh in its prayer and daily living the One who is the Word of God.

The solution to a thematic or topical approach lies in recovering our capacity for symbols, metaphors, stories, and rituals. These modes of communication are the bearers of human meaning and shapers of relationships. Such recovery depends always on our preparation of full and richly expressed symbols, but it also requires a new effort on the part of worshippers.

People who gather for liturgy must renew and stretch their capacity as ritual beings. Symbols and rituals speak truths and untruths at the same time. They admit contradictions, which can be very uncomfortable for persons accustomed to rigid parameters. As symbolic communication, liturgy is rife with ambiguity and tension. For example, the Exsultet proclaims A O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam.@ What could it mean to rejoice in our sin? Liturgy does not try to offer an explanation, but it propels us into the mystery of our sinful and creaturely being as a meeting place with God. Good liturgy dynamically places us in the felt tension of being in-between our fragmented nature and our wholeness, our weakness and our strength. In that A in-between-ness@ we receive divine healing love and we blossom in creative growth.

Themes and topics do not admit such creative ambiguity and tension, and they may well obscure the subtle movements of God=s Spirit at work in our lives. The symbols and stories of a liturgy or liturgical season, on the other hand, tell our whole story of suffering, death, and resurrection. The unsearchable riches of friends and strangers at one table, of immersion into baptismal waters, the touch of healing oil on a suffering body, the glorious fragrance of incense reduced to nothing in its self offering, the simplicity of a piece of bread and a cup of a wine, the unfathomable depths of an ancient story told again and again, the mark of discipleship in a cross of ashes B in such symbolic rituals as these, our being does not merely conform to a topic or theme, but becomes the Christ whom the early Christian hymn exhorts us to be (Philippians 2:6-11) B self emptying, not clinging to equality with God, detached and humble even to death.