

to teach us **how** to pray. When we pray the Divine Office we know we are praying with the whole Church, Christ's Bride, whom he so loves, and that our prayer will be in harmony with the desires of his heart. This too, then, like all the sacred liturgy, is a huge gift.

## What is NOT Liturgy?

There are numerous devotions and forms of prayer designed to be used by gatherings of the faithful. These are obviously valuable and praiseworthy. Jesus promised his special presence with the prayers of a group. (Mt 18,20) The recitation of the Rosary, Novenas, the Way of the Cross, are obvious examples. A prayer service may appropriately be devised by some group for a particular occasion or purpose. But none of these forms part of the Church's liturgy, which is always, and only, the official action of the whole Church.



*The Diocesan Liturgy Commission offers this Newsletter  
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## Diocesan Liturgical Commission Christchurch

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To: Priests and Pastoral Assistants  
Parish Liturgy Committees  
Parish Councils  
Directors of Religious Studies  
Religious Houses  
Principals - Catholic Schools  
**All Parishioners**

### WHAT IS LITURGY?

Catholic liturgy is the Church's official and public worship of Almighty God. It is distinct from personal or group spiritual practices, prayers and devotions. In the liturgy the incarnate Son of God acts in the Church through the power of his Holy Spirit. The most intimate and efficacious presence and action of the Holy Spirit takes place in the Church through the liturgy.



The CCC (1076) says that since the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost we are in a new era, the age of the Church. During this era the risen Christ continues to make present his work of salvation through the liturgy of the Church, "until he comes". In this age, in our time, he lives and acts in his Church

in a new way, sacramentally, in the liturgy. And it is in the liturgy that he fulfils uniquely his promise to remain with us always.

We saw in a previous Newsletter (24) that Christ's power to bring about a new creation, won by his death and resurrection, passed from him into the sacraments of the Church. The sacraments, "God's masterpieces", are integral components of Catholic liturgy. The others are the Mass and the Divine Office. It is these that will be the focus of this Newsletter.

## The holy sacrifice of the Mass

The Mass is, of course, itself a sacrament – the supreme sacrament. Recall that the sacraments are signs of God's effective actions which in the Church bring about what they signify. Specifically, sacraments are always Christ's actions – it is he



who baptises, reconciles, anoints, ordains, seals our marriage covenants. When Mass is celebrated the risen Christ becomes present among us in all his saving power. Christ's once and for all sacrifice on Calvary is re-presented in unbloody, sacramental form so that we can choose, by our participation of mind, heart and senses, to embrace the salvation it has won for us.

We need to be absolutely clear that the Mass is not just a remembrance of the Last Supper, it is not a memorial tableau. What happened once in historical time now becomes a present reality. It is of the nature of

## When Mass is not available

In the absence of a priest at a scheduled Mass time a Service of the Word may be conducted, in a form authorised by the Bishop, at which Holy Communion may be distributed, using Hosts consecrated at a previous Mass. It does not replace the Mass but is recommended to Catholic people where it is not possible for Mass to be offered.

## The Divine Office, the daily prayer of the Church

While this is not a sacramental activity, it is nevertheless an integral part of the sacred liturgy of the whole Church. It is undertaken as a daily obligation by the ordained clergy and religious, and is also recited by many lay people. It is a vital part of the continuous worship of thanks and praise that goes up from the Church in its work of giving God the glory that belongs to him.

The readings and psalms that make up the Office are chosen by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It has been said always and everywhere the Church exists. The psalms are unique prayers in that they are inspired by the Spirit.

They are **given** prayers. They were taught by Mary and Joseph to Jesus, who used them all his life, and at the hour of his death. They are intended for our use, and also



◆ We remember that the Sacred Liturgy is an intrinsic part of the Church's Tradition. It has profound **theological meaning**. As the Church believes, so she prays. To adapt the Eucharistic celebration to



meet assumed local needs or relevance to the local community totally misses the point of what it is. It makes no more sense than it would to change the Creed, adding in or leaving out beliefs according to our subjective perceptions.

### What do we bring to the Eucharistic celebration?

We bring ourselves in faith and gratitude and love. We exercise our own priestly role by offering ourselves, all we have and are, to be united with the sacrifice of Christ through the liturgical ministry of the priest. How fully we participate will be conditioned by our faith and our longing, will depend on our openness and readiness to receive God's generosity. Our faith does not produce grace, but it disposes us to receive it as the gift God offers us in the Church's liturgy.



sacramental, liturgical activity to be at once **in** time and to **transcend** it. In the celebration of the Eucharist, which is a divine/human action, earth and heaven meet, we have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet for which we are destined. This is what comes about when we receive the whole Christ really present under the appearance of bread and wine in Holy Communion. By his death and resurrection, which make our encounter with him possible, we are offered a share in his new life, and empowered to take part in bringing about his new creation.

### The Mass is celebrated by the whole Church



Whenever and wherever Mass is celebrated, it is an act of the whole Church. Christ, who is indivisible, is offering his sacrifice of love and obedience to his Father by the power of his Spirit, in and with his body, the Church. We who are assembled are only enabled to participate in the celebration by our baptism and through the essential ministry of the ordained priest. The ordained priest is empowered by the authority given by Christ to his apostles and handed down in the Church through the sacrament of Holy Orders. This empowerment no man could claim for himself and no person or community could give him. The Eucharistic Sacrifice requires the priestly ministry of the person who does not speak in his own name or on his own authority but who acts in the person of Christ, the head and shepherd, and thus is capable of representing the whole Church of all times and places.

## The local assembly does not celebrate alone

The earthly liturgy does not exist of itself. Our parish worshipping assembly is part of the communion that lives in the life of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who through Christ is the primary actor in the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Then come the angels, the biblical saints (like Abraham, our father in faith), the martyrs, the all-holy Mother of God, the great multitude of the communion of saints, all creation, joining in our hymn of praise. The celebrants of the sacramental liturgy include the whole Body of Christ extending through time and space, then the local worshipping assembly because it is part of this Body.



## What follows from these reflections?

◆ We realise that the Eucharistic celebration is pure **gift**. We do not bring it about. It is not “our” liturgy. It does not belong to us, we belong to it. We prepare for it with repentance for our sins and a deep desire to participate to the fullest in what is offered to us. We manifest with visible reverence our awareness of the magnitude of what is happening.

◆ We understand that it is the **participation of mind and heart** that matters, that this is what is meant by “active” participation, more importantly than what is visible and external, or in



having ministries. Ministries such as lectors, altar servers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, exist to serve the participation of the whole community. After all, the indispensable ministry of the priest comes from a sacrament that is primarily for the sanctifying of Christ’s people.

◆ We do all in our power to make every material aspect of the liturgy worthy of a **sacred action** – providing sacred space, sacred music, worthy vessels, ministers trained to witness recollected devotion.

◆ We remember that because the liturgy is a **sacramental action of the whole Church** we have no authority to alter it to suit imagined local needs. Because it gathers together people of all kinds and because it is the action of the whole Church, the ritual of the Liturgy is properly **ceremonious, formal, repetitive**. Its human impact, as the social anthropologists tell us, comes precisely from this repetitive formality, from **familiarity**, from knowing what comes next, so that we become absorbed into the divine action, able to lose ourselves in it ever more deeply. The liturgy is made up of words, symbols and gestures – the **meaning** they convey has many levels, of its nature not quick or easy to understand. We are not dealing with ordinary mundane human realities but with sacred, mysterious realities. We should not expect to grasp them at first hearing. Our participation in the liturgy needs for it to be predictable and familiar. Spontaneity and on-the-spot adaptation are completely alien to liturgy and impede our genuine participation.

