

“I am fascinated by what Timothy O’Malley has done in this book, espousing Luigi Giussani’s visionary insights to the RCIA process. How can the Christian initiation process provoke a deeper desire for God? How can the catechumenate propose a more human life anchored in Christ? How can catechumens verify the truth of this proposal so that they might respond by making a gift of their lives? O’Malley argues persuasively that not only is the RCIA inclined towards these questions, the liturgy itself forms us along this trajectory. This book is a must read for all those invested in the RCIA, but also for each of us who desires to truly live the Christian life.”

—Dr. James Pauley  
Professor of Theology and Catechetics  
Franciscan University of Steubenville



# Divine Blessing

Liturgical Formation in the RCIA

*Timothy P. O'Malley*



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“O God Beyond All Praising.”

Words: Michael Perry

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For Maxwell Johnson—mentor, scholar, minister, and friend



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# Introduction

During graduate work, I took an intensive summer course in the ancient liturgical language Syriac. Like Hebrew, Syriac is read from right to left. In the early days of the course, it took effort to retrain my eyes to read in this way. Successfully deciphering Syriac was not reducible to memorizing grammatical rules. It was a physical undertaking whereby I developed a new habit of moving my eyes over a page from right to left. Learning to read in this way took hour after hour of practicing the exhausting craft.

Learning this new way of reading had global effects. I began deciphering each English word as if it were written in Syriac from right to left. A STOP sign became POTS. My spouse's name, Kara, became A-RAK. The church on Notre Dame's campus was the ACI-LI-SAB. As my spouse can attest, I was an annoying passenger to schlep around town.

Formation in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* involves a similar comprehensive retraining of the way we perceive the world. We don't just read texts. We read everything. We make judgments each day, both small and large, about the meaning of life's happenings. Dark clouds rolling in on a beautiful spring day portend thunderstorms. A stop sign on a road declares to us that our vehicle must come to a complete and absolute stop for the safety of cars, other pedestrians, and ourselves. A crucifix around someone's neck reveals that he or she might be Christian.

To be human is to be a reader of such signs. But as readers of signs, we know that we can make mistakes. Sometimes, we don't

yet understand the meaning of a particular sign. If I hold my hand out to vigorously shake the hand of an infant, I should not be aghast if the infant responds with a blank stare. We travel to a foreign country, trying to decipher the word for “bathroom” and “restaurant” lest we confuse the two. To a novice, the game of soccer is nothing but rarely kicking a ball into a goal; but to the soccer aficionado, the beautiful game involves thousands of smaller competitions and strategies that delight and entertain. All of education, entrance into a culture, involves learning to read signs.

But this education is not reducible to the act of mental gymnastics. As readers of signs, our whole self is often involved. Imagine someone who has an addiction to shopping for shoes. His or her closet is full of black, brown, gray, green, blue, and orange tennis shoes, boots, flats, heels, and sandals. This person *loves* shoes. *Hopes* for more shoes. *Desires* shoes. In fact, the desire is so strong that each time this person goes to the mall, the only objects that occupy the attention of our footgear devotee are the shoed feet of passersby and the rich smell of leather coming from shoe stores.

Learning to read signs involves an education into a certain way of desiring. Our servant to the gods of footwear may experience a conversion one day, recognizing that such exclusive focus on boots, flats, and heels has led not to increased happiness but to a diminished bank account. The former shoe-lover would need to discover a new way of “reading” the meaning of footwear—shoes are used fundamentally for walking and only secondarily for adornment. This reeducation will not be immediate. It will require learning to desire something else—whether that be a less full closet, a fuller bank account, or a simpler way of life.

The RCIA provides this reformation of desire, this education of learning to read signs well, through the church’s liturgy. Formation in the Christian life is an often painful process of discovering what is worth loving in the first place. We Christians are a funny sort that adore not at the altar of political power or the throne of economic efficiency. We worship the God who reveals the power of powerlessness in God’s birth as infant, in dying as a human being, in being raised up from the dead through the power of the Spirit. We give praise to the God who operates according to, not

a scarce economy, but a gratuitous economy of gift. It shouldn't surprise us that learning to adore this God of self-giving love might take a process of reeducation.

Liturgical formation is integral to the RCIA because it's at the heart of Christian life. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans exhorts Christians "to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:1-2). The Christian is to see the entire world as a sign pointing toward the reality of God's love. Creation is a place of gift, of meaning, of hope, and of love. The proper response to this love is to offer the entire self in return. The gift of our entire self is the one gift that God really wants.

Learning the grammar of the worshipful orientation of Christian life requires basic knowledge of the signs. But it also necessitates a deeper formation. We are meant to become a "living sacrifice" to God. That's the ultimate end of the RCIA because it's the very meaning of Christian life! We human beings are made for self-giving love.

## **Liturgy as Curriculum**

It is easy to forget, based on present pastoral practice, that the RCIA is concerned about the formation of human beings into a new way of life grounded in Christ. Too often our approach to the RCIA suffers from one of two temptations. First, we focus on a single task of catechesis: knowledge of the faith. We teach people how to decipher the signs. Catechumens and candidates for full communion are given a short course in Christian doctrine, the sacraments, the moral life, and practices of prayer. This education is conducted in a classroom where ideas are presented but never lived out. The sign is understood, while the desire of the catechumens remains unaffected.

A second temptation exists around the language of experience. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis notes that the "primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received,

the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him" (EG 264). The encounter with Jesus Christ in the church is meant to take up every dimension of our being—our feelings, our intellect, and our will. Conversion to Christ is a powerful experience in which we discover the presence of the risen Lord, changing the way we engage in everything. But there is a temptation to understand the "powerful experience" as the locus of the encounter. Not every aspect of the Christian life will be full of feeling. There are dry spells in our prayer. There is the mundane task of going to Mass on Sunday, of feeding and caring for poor persons, and of living together in the community of the parish.

The initiatory catechesis of the RCIA must include a systematic account of what constitutes Christian life that avoids both dry didacticism and an excessive emphasis on individual feelings. As *The General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) describes:

This comprehensive formation includes more than instruction: it is an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life, it is a "complete Christian initiation," which promotes an authentic following of Christ, focused on his Person; it implies education in knowledge of the faith and in the life of faith, in such a manner that the entire person, at his deepest levels, feels enriched by the word of God; it helps the disciple of Christ to transform the old man in order to assume his baptismal responsibilities and to profess the faith from the "heart." (68)

Formation in the RCIA is conversion, training the disciple to take on a new form of life in Christ. Its final end is profession of faith with the fullness of heart. This means our whole being including our bodies, our minds, our affections, and our wills given over to God.

Liturgical formation is essential to this apprenticeship in the Christian life. In the liturgy, we encounter the doctrines of the church through embodied practice. Christmas manifests to us the incarnation of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, we learn what it means to say that God has died. And on Easter, we understand the resurrection of the Word made flesh through Alleluias that ring

out all over the world. We are also asked to reconsider what constitutes human happiness as we celebrate the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in the liturgical year. Liturgical prayer is something that we're supposed to think about. What does it mean for me that the Word became flesh at Christmas? What can I learn about sacrifice through Easter? We discover new ways of living our day-to-day lives through practices of worship that spill over into the home. A Christian is not someone who expresses abstract confidence in theoretical systems of belief. A Christian perceives, thinks, and acts as a Christian in the world.

The church's liturgy, therefore, is not just one of the things that needs to be taught in the RCIA. By means of careful liturgical formation throughout the process, the catechumens or candidates receive the fullness of a Christian personality. They become the kind of persons who can read the "signs" of the world aright. As Catholic philosopher and theologian Dietrich von Hildebrand remarks, "The conscious, fully awakened act of performing the Liturgy imprints upon the soul the Face of Christ. In taking part in the Liturgy, we make our own the fundamental attitudes embodied in it" (*Liturgy and Personality*, 11). Liturgy is the school of discipleship in which we find ourselves practicing the embodied art of self-giving love through kneeling, marking our body with the sign of the cross, and giving our voices over to the praise and adoration of the living God.

### **Liturgy's Pedagogy: Provocation, Hypothesis, and Verification**

How does liturgy teach? How does the act of praying together in the liturgy work toward a mature Christian faith? One way of answering these questions is to rely on the educational insights of Fr. Luigi Giussani (1922–2005), the founder of the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation. A priest, professor, spiritual director, high school teacher, and mentor to thousands, Giussani developed an approach to Christian education that is fully human, grounded in the story of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ, and

appropriated through learning to live in friendship in the church (Savorana, *The Life of Luigi Giussani*).

Although Giussani did not write extensively on the liturgy, he did place baptism at the center of his understanding of Christian education. He recognized that baptism reoriented the Christian toward a new reality. He writes:

Nothing is more radically decisive for human existence than this fact called Baptism—a fact so real that its external effect can be wholly described: it has a precise date; it physically took hold of us in a given moment. Like any fact, it may appear to be something very fragile. . . . But with that Event called Baptism, something irreducibly new began in us. It is a real Event that enters a situation and changes it, then determines it in a new way. (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, 46–47)

Initiation into the church brings about a new way of seeing the world. Have you ever stopped for a moment and thought to yourself, “I really exist”? The things that happen to us each day are real, not only figments of overactive imaginations. The actions we perform have consequences, not in some universe far away, but in our day-to-day world. For the Christian, baptism should awaken us to an even deeper reality than the existence of the world. As St. Paul attests, “no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). Formation for baptism should prepare the Christian to live not as an isolated “I” but as someone whose whole life has been taken up with Christ. My daily decisions, every thought, every action is to manifest divine love.

Christian formation, for Giussani, thus cannot be separated from human formation. We must think through how our “I” has been transformed by the encounter with Christ’s “Thou.” Giussani argues that every act of good education begins with provocation. Provocation doesn’t mean trying to get a rise out of someone—it would be an unwise provocative to yell “Let’s Go Sox” in the

middle of Yankee Stadium. A proper sense of provocation requires taking the risk of looking at reality for what it is. Anyone who has held a newborn child can recognize the way that this experience provokes us toward the deepest questions: What really matters now that this child exists in my life? How will I live after this encounter? Every human being is born with this natural religious sense. And the educational task of provocation brings us face-to-face with the “really real,” with the questions that matter. Provocation is the first step of seeing the world even in all its messiness for what it is—a gift to be contemplated (Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 101).

For Giussani, such questions are not the ultimate end of Christian formation. After all, questions may not merely reveal. They may hide too. A certain critical attitude can arise in which we question whether anything exists beyond scientific reason. The question “But how do I know that she loves me?” often functions in this manner. The Christian educator does not succumb to this temptation. Instead, the catechist dares to suggest that there is something about the Christian story that provides an answer to life’s deepest questions. The educator offers a hypothesis. Giussani writes, “Only an educational approach that introduces human and cosmic reality in the light of a hypothesis presented by history or a tradition can systematically prevent young people from making false starts” (*The Risk of Education*, 57). As we are initiated into Christian life, we discover that to be human is to be created in the image and likeness of God and thus oriented toward community. We learn that the happy life is not a matter of grasping and seizing power but an apprenticeship in the art of self-emptying love. We discover that God has a preferential option for the least of these. These are hypotheses that make sense of what it means to be human in the world—hypotheses that are challenging for the adolescent and the adult alike!

But, it’s not enough to present these hypotheses and demand that the person accept them. That’s not education—it’s indoctrination. The risk of education is that we must invite each person to verify these truths in his or her own life:

Even a clear presentation of the meaning of things and the real, intense authority of the education is insufficient to meet the needs of the adolescent. He must instead be stimulated to *personally confront his own origin*. This means that the student must verify the traditional contents being offered to him, which can be done only if he himself *takes the initiative*: no one else can do it for him. (Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, 67)

Persons receiving a Christian education grounded in freedom need to practice a life that has become attuned to Christ's. They will need to compare what they discover in the hypothesis of the church's proclamation with the experience of being human. They will need to do so not under the compulsion of the educator who holds out a sacramental stick but through giving their lives over to this act of verification. They'll have to take the risk of asking, "Is it true? And if it is, how will that change everything?"

The individual is provoked, encounters the hypothesis, and verifies the truth of the hypothesis in his or her life through the church. For Giussani, the church is the place of friendship with Christ and one another. It is the concrete space in time and history where we encounter the risen Lord through the community of disciples. Defining the formative quality of the church, Giussani states:

The great dwelling place that is the Church becomes flesh, is realized in capillary terminals . . . in which it becomes present in every place, chosen beforehand by God's plan. The great dwelling place that is the Church is realized inside homes, the dwelling places that are the concentration, the coalescence of her life in a day-to-day dimension of time and space. (Giussani, Alberto, and Prades, *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, 73)

Christian formation includes friendship with those Christians who have been provoked by the mystery of Christ. It is a community of disciples, called the church, who have become a living sign of the church's hypothesis. It is a community that verifies, incompletely of course, the reality that God is the meaning of life. And because we know this meaning, we live in the family of God in a

way that witnesses to the presence of God's love in our families, friendships, workplaces, and the public sphere.

For Giussani, this threefold approach of provocation, hypothesis, and verification is the privileged way that Christianity can be taught in our own age. It is passed on through not only a textbook or a video series but an encounter with Jesus Christ through the mystery of the church. This encounter does not leave behind the deepest desires of the human heart but takes them up: "God *wants* to pass through the humanity of all those he has taken hold of in Baptism" (Giussani, *Why the Church?*, 126–27).

Giussani's approach to formation is similar to the RCIA's. The catechumenate is a journey in which one is provoked to initial conversion, to a progression in faith throughout the catechumenate, to receiving the sacraments of initiation in which the mystery of Christ is now verified in one's very body (RCIA 6). Throughout the process, one is accompanied by the entire community of the church, who themselves join "the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously" (RCIA 4).

Liturgical formation in the RCIA is not merely about the catechumens and candidates. It is the re-formation of the desires of the whole community of believers to verify the radical hypothesis that has brought us together into one: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). If we believe that God is love, that this love is available to us in parish churches throughout the world, if we verify this love in our very lives, we will find ourselves living out the worshipful wisdom that Christ has provided for the salvation of the world.

## **Liturgical Formation in the RCIA**

The journey of the RCIA is permeated with liturgical formation. Everyone who has been involved in the process knows this.

Who can forget their first Easter Vigil as the elect were plunged into the water of salvation? The new Christian is led from the earliest stages of faith awakened through the church's worship to participating as baptized, confirmed, and eucharistized sons and daughters of the triune God. Liturgical rites function as efficacious moments in which one's identity is formed. After initiation, the process of mystagogy is not concerned only with "explaining" what took place in the rites. Instead, one is to be led more deeply into the mystery of Christ that unfolds through the liturgical year. The rest of Christian life becomes an echoing of this mystery as lived in day-to-day life.

Liturgical formation is thus essential to the RCIA throughout the process. In this book, written for those engaged in the pastoral practice of RCIA, we will undertake a deeper inquiry into the nature of liturgical formation in the act of initiating Christians. The book will consider the specific liturgical rites of the RCIA, the formative nature of the eucharistic assembly, and the manner in which liturgical practice spills over into the domestic sphere.

The book centers around Giussani's threefold pedagogy of provocation, hypothesis, and verification. The goal of this examination is not a deeper reading of Giussani's work. These three moments of education assist the pastoral minister in thinking through the purpose of liturgical formation. Liturgy provokes, it offers a hypothesis about the ultimate meaning of life grounded in Christ, and it is a moment in which our life in Christ is verified through sacramental practice.

Each time the church prays the liturgy, these three moments of provocation, hypothesis, and verification are assumed. But for the sake of helping us think through liturgical formation in the RCIA, I will develop a model in which the following occur:

1. Liturgical provocation is the privileged educational approach of pre-evangelization and inquiry.
2. Liturgical hypothesis is the privileged educational approach of the catechumenate.

3. Liturgical verification is the privileged educational approach of the period of purification and enlightenment, culminating in the celebration of the Easter Vigil.
4. Mystagogy is a re-presentation of the liturgical mystery of the church that provokes, offers a new hypothesis, and involves practices for verification.

Chapter 1 of this book will take up liturgical prayer as a moment of provocation. The chapter will analyze six dimensions of late modern life that stops the process of questioning for the catechumen: a thin sense of God, a rugged individualism, an overemphasis on technology as salvation, a loss of wonder, a throwaway culture that bypasses the dignity of the human person, and the “liturgy” of consumerism. The church’s liturgy should provoke one to see the reality of God, of life in communion, of the need for a salvation that emerges outside of ourselves, of beauty, of the intrinsic dignity of the human being made for worship, and of the nature of the world as gift. The liturgy should function as this moment of provocation for every person, especially those who are first inquiring into the nature of Christian life with one another. The chapter also argues that this “moment” of the RCIA requires non-eucharistic liturgical celebrations (adapted versions of the Liturgy of the Hours) where an evangelizing provocation can unfold in each of our parishes. Such liturgies must be celebrated not by the RCIA group alone but by the whole parish. Finally, this chapter shows how the rite of entrance into the catechumenate now transforms the inquirers (now catechumens) into occasions for provocation for the entire church. The required dismissal of the catechumens solidifies this moment of provocation for the assembly and the catechumens alike.

Chapter 2 of this book will take up the pedagogy of liturgical hypothesis for the catechumenate. During the period of the catechumenate, the goal is to move the catechumen from liturgical provocation to a reasonable account of the liturgical life of the church. Reason here does not mean scientific inquiry. Instead, it is the process whereby we begin to make sense of the “really”

real through the church's practices of worship. The chapter begins by looking at some of the rites ascribed to the catechumenate, including celebrations of the Liturgy of the Word, blessings, and exorcisms. These liturgical rites are not optional but emphasize that all catechesis in the catechumenate should function as an occasion of offering a liturgical hypothesis for human life.

This chapter also argues that such a process of liturgical formation requires an initial familiarity with the signs and embodied practices of worship. It is liturgical competency. Such competency is akin to a pianist first learning where middle-C is, what posture to assume while playing piano, and how to play chords rather than simply melody. The basics matter. And we have to do a better job of teaching these basics in the RCIA itself rather than just presuming that everyone will pick them up on their own.

The catechumenate is also concerned with a deeper understanding of the liturgical and sacramental life of the church. Just as musical competency leads to the study of music theory, so too we move from liturgical competency to a deeper study of what we're doing in the act of worship. The core rites and sacraments of the church must be taught in a way that the contemporary person sees them as the gifts that they are. The rites and sacraments of the church should be taught as a hypothesis for the deepest desires of the human heart.

Chapter 3 of this book deals with the pedagogy of liturgical verification. It begins with a close examination of the Rite of Election, or enrollment, as a privileged moment of verification. The catechumen now becomes the elect, preparing for the Gospel to be written upon one's body. The chapter then looks closely at how this verification plays out in the scrutinies during the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent; the handing-over (*traditio*) and giving back (*redditio*) of the Creed; the presentation of the Lord's Prayer; and preparation rites for Holy Saturday. The chapter shows how the rites of the Easter Vigil are the supreme moment of liturgical verification in which through the sacraments of initiation the elect become priests, prophets, and royal figures through the rich efficacy of the signs of this dazzling night.

The fourth and final chapter takes up the period of mystagogy. The chapter begins by focusing on some ways that mystagogy may be practiced as a way of inviting the neophytes to reflect on their experience of the Easter Vigil, learning to meditate on the wisdom that they celebrated in the liturgy itself. But, the chapter further argues that mystagogy will only be effective during the season of Easter if the parish practices mystagogy throughout the liturgical year.

Finally, a note about this book. The book presumes that the RCIA is oriented toward the initiation of unbaptized Christians. Such a presumption is not evident in many parishes, where those seeking fuller communion in the Catholic Church are often inappropriately initiated at the Easter Vigil. Christians seeking full communion with the Catholic Church should be able to enter during any season of the liturgical year. Yet, in practice it often makes sense, at least from the perspective of pastoral resources, to do a similar formation with baptized Christians and catechumens. For this reason, after chapter 3, I will provide a brief excursus on the role of liturgical formation in receiving those seeking full communion with the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, where the book speaks about the nature of liturgical formation with catechumens, it can be presumed that the insights are true of all human beings whether they are inquirers, catechumens, those seeking full communion with the Catholic Church, or Catholics reared in holy mother church from their very first breath of life.

This book is dedicated to Maxwell Johnson, professor of liturgical and sacramental theology at the University of Notre Dame. It was in a liturgical history course with Dr. Johnson during my senior year that I discovered what constituted a mature approach to liturgical formation. His commitment to a retrieval of a deep understanding of liturgical history, of a proper celebration of the rites of initiation, and his commitment to ecumenism has been formative to my identity. Any insights in this book are the result of the sophisticated formation he has provided his students in the art of living liturgically. Any deficits are my own.



# Chapter 1

## Liturgical Formation in the Precatechumenate

Students entered the auditorium, attending a talk on *The Saint John's Bible*—a lecture that the professor (yours truly!) assigned for extra credit. Many of them had grown up with the Scriptures in their homes. Some had read and prayed with the Bible in the context of the family or in youth groups. Others had a copy of the Good Book somewhere in the home, perhaps on the shelf of a family room. Not a few of these students were reading the Bible for the first time in the context of a theology course at the University of Notre Dame. No matter the background, each of the students had grown up with the Bible as “another book” that could be placed on a shelf. While most thought that the text of the Scriptures were inspired or at least quite important for Western history, they grew up with the assumption that the Bible (at least in terms of production) is like other books.

Over the course of the hour, their relationship with the Bible changed. *The Saint John's Bible* is a handwritten, illuminated copy of the Scriptures, created by a team of scribes throughout the world, led

by the artist Donald Jackson. It was Donald Jackson's dream, even as a young artist, to produce a handwritten copy of the entire Bible.

The kick-off lecturer led the gathered crowd in a tour of *The Saint John's Bible*. They learned about the art of calligraphy, the vellum used as the pages of the Bible, and the history of the ink that the scribes employed in copying the Scriptures. Many attendees were interested in the illuminations that decorated page after page of the Scriptures from the opening page of Genesis to the closing chapter of Revelation.

At the end of the lecture, they gathered at the entrance of the auditorium, approaching the volume of the gospels. Fifty or so students huddled around *The Saint John's Bible*, waiting for the text to be opened. As the lecturer opened the book to the first page of the Gospel of Matthew, there was an audible gasp. In brilliant red and gold was a menorah, illuminating the genealogy of Jesus Christ. A chapter of the Bible that had previously meant nothing to the students, listing the genealogy of "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1), provoked questions from the students. What were the various names written in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic? Why did the artist choose to decorate the opening chapter in this manner, using a menorah? Why would someone devote so much attention, so much care to a single chapter of the Bible?

The next day in class, I asked the students what they thought about the Bible. They told me that they couldn't believe that someone would spend so much time, so much money, *so much* in creating this piece of art. They found themselves provoked, wondering what this meant about their own relationship to the Bible. If Donald Jackson (and before him countless professional scribes and monks) found this text so important, maybe there really was something here in the Scriptures worth looking at.

## **A Second Look**

All across the world, people know about Christianity. They know something about the Catholic Church. Even if they're not experts in doctrine or practice, they know that Catholics have a

pope. They know that Catholics go to Mass. They may have an image of dimly lit churches with lots of candles, statues, processions, and incense.

Yet as every teacher has learned, knowing something is often far worse than knowing nothing. If I know nothing about baseball except that it is a game where people hit balls with bats and run in a circle, it may explain why I find the game useless. To really know baseball, to savor it, I may need to be open to that which I don't know. I would need to give baseball a second look. I might need to attend a game, experiencing baseball not as a virtual event on television but in the flesh—to smell the odors of the ballpark, all the while savoring the experience of a sun-splashed summer day in the bleachers at Fenway Park.

The process of evangelization or the precatechumenate in the RCIA invites men and women to take a second look at the church. As the rite clarifies, the purpose of this stage of evangelization is the conversion of men and women, who although not yet Christians encounter the living God in the person of Jesus Christ and “commit themselves sincerely to him. For he who is the way, the truth, and the life fulfills all their spiritual expectations, indeed infinitely surpasses them” (RCIA 36). The precatechumenate facilitates a conversion “so that the genuine will to follow Christ and seek baptism may mature” (RCIA 37). This period of the RCIA is not a way of finding more space in a curriculum to teach particular doctrines or practices. It's not like the drop/add period that takes place early in a college semester, whereby students can determine if they like the professor or the course material enough to continue. The period of evangelization and the precatechumenate is the time to provoke men and women to become disciples.

The liturgical life of the church is integral to this process of evangelization. But, in many ministerial circles, it is not uncommon to hear that men and women must *first* be invited into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ before they discover the fruitfulness of life in the church. We should preach Jesus, not the church, they say. After meeting Jesus, they'll learn to love the liturgy, studying Christian doctrine, and caring for the poor.

There is a truth to this claim. If we treat the church as a repository of abstract ideas or required practices, it's a problem. The church does not offer a thesis to the world like a philosophical school but provides a space to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. Catholicism is an event in which men and women throughout the world meet the risen Lord.

At the same time, if we radically separate Jesus and the church, it's also a problem. The scandal of the cross is that Jesus Christ comes to us through the human words of the Scriptures, through the prayerful rites of the church, through the communion of love shared among the faithful, and through the immigrant who suffers the results of political power. As John Henry Newman preached in his sermon "Christ Hidden from the World" to students and faculty at Oxford, "The Church is called 'His Body': what his material Body was when He was visible on earth, such is the Church now" (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*). To encounter the risen Lord means that we must come to know his hidden presence in the church.

We must invite individuals to take a second look at the mystery of the church as a way of coming to know the person of Jesus Christ. The doctrines that we teach, the stories that we tell, the practices that form us into God's family reveal in a hidden and wonderful way the presence of Jesus Christ operating in the world today.

For this reason, liturgical evangelization is not an oxymoron. Evangelization is not reducible to one-on-one ministry or small groups, even if it will necessarily include such encounters. Liturgical evangelization is part of an approach to missionary discipleship that focuses on the basics. As Pope Francis describes in *The Joy of the Gospel*, the charter of evangelization in our age: "When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and the same time most necessary" (35).

During the stage of evangelization and the catechumenate, the seeker should slowly be attuned to the way that the church's public prayer, her liturgy, is necessary to following Jesus. This

doesn't mean inducing guilt in those seeking to enter the church (you know, to be saved, you really need to go to Mass every week). Instead, we need to invite people to participate in the liturgy in our parishes. We need to say to those budding followers of Jesus, come and see. Come and take a second look at the wondrous mystery of love that we celebrate at our parishes every day of the week!

## **Liturgical Evangelization as Celebration**

If we're going to invite seekers to come meet the risen Lord in our parishes, the first step is to make sure that everyone else in the parish is aware that the risen Lord is in fact present in our parish. As a theologian, I spend a lot of time traveling around the world. This means that I'm often away from home on Sundays, looking for a place to worship God wherever I find myself. The good news is that I can often find a Mass, one in which I'm not the youngest person in the church. The bad news is that so many of our parish liturgical celebrations are sometimes without joy, devoid of hospitality, closed to everyone except the local intelligentsia who know what is happening.

Friends of mine once attended a Mass in the Archdiocese of Boston. It was St. Patrick's Day in a parish in the North End. A Saturday Vigil Mass, there was no music. And the cantor welcomed them into the celebration of Christ's sacrificial love by pronouncing at the beginning of Mass, "Welcome, outsiders!"

This New England "welcome" is extreme. But imagine that my visiting, very Catholic friends in Boston had stepped into that church for the very first time not as Catholics but as seekers. Perhaps they had just lost their father and were turning to the church for comfort. Perhaps they were struggling with their marriage and had turned to God in their suffering. Perhaps they had just welcomed a child into their lives and wanted, in some small way, to offer thanksgiving to the God whom they had come to recognize through the joy of a new child. The religious conversion begins with the great perhaps.

The Sunday Mass at parishes and college campus ministries throughout the United States remains a privileged space for evangelization. It's one of the few places that a seeker can show up without committing to the whole thing. A seeker can sneak in the back, try to blend in with the other worshipers, and perhaps experience God in the process. This is precisely what both Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day did in New York City. It was part of their own evangelization. They entered into these churches and discovered a presence, a love, call it a "mystery," that made sense of everything else they were experiencing in their lives.

The parish "evangelizes" in its celebration of the rites of the church. It evangelizes through celebration. The connotations of the English word "celebration" do not sufficiently communicate what the Latin *celebratio* means. The church's "celebration" of the Passover of Jesus Christ from death to new life, of humanity's participation in this mystery of love, isn't a birthday or anniversary party. *Celebratio* points to a large gathering of people, a public act of praise and commendation, or a festival with a large number of persons in attendance. The liturgy is a celebration not because it's always happy, always full of what we consider good news like winning the lottery or a national championship. It is a celebration because it is a public space where the world can partake in the festive news that love unto the end, divine love, is the meaning of the world. The liturgy is the most serious of all celebrations.

The liturgy thus evangelizes because men and women are invited into the festivities of the once dead and now risen and living Lord. Seekers should see on the faces of their fellow worshipers not ecstatic happiness but real joy. Joy that comes from the good news that life has conquered death. In the great battle between power and love, God's love wins! Every dimension of our humanity is meant to be redeemed through the power of Christ.

That's why the liturgy should be full of song. That's why our preaching should sound like a victory proclamation instead of a dreadful catalogue of dos and don'ts. That's why our churches are meant to be beautiful spaces that fill every one of the senses with wonder. The *celebratio* taking place in each parish is the redemption of humanity through the glorification of God.

The nature of the liturgy as *celebratio* does not mean that a Sunday morning Eucharist at our parish must be filled with artificially happy people. It's good to introduce oneself to newcomers in the parish, asking their names and welcoming them into prayer. But it's dreadfully artificial to say that Mass *must* begin by asking everyone present to stand up, turn around, and greet one's neighbor. That's inauthentic. Many of those in the parish come to the liturgy with wounded hearts, with sorrows that they are offering up to God in love. The *celebratio* of the liturgy means that even our sorrows can be healed through the loving balm of Jesus Christ. Liturgy gives people space to enter into divine love within the communion of faith without erasing their freedom.

I'll always remember the Mass that I attended in Belgium after receiving word that my grandmother had suffered a terminal stroke caused by her Alzheimer's. I entered the sparsely attended Vigil Mass in the cathedral. The Mass was celebrated in French. While my French is good enough for reading, my aural comprehension is so-so. I thus sat in silence. The music was unfamiliar to me. But the familiar ritual of kneeling and standing, of crossing myself and gazing up at the presence of Jesus Christ, was comforting to me. Exchanging the sign of peace with my fellow pilgrims was a source of deep comfort. There was no artificiality to the celebration, to the very real communion that I shared with God and neighbor that late afternoon. My time at Mass was a way for me to find a little space in a foreign city where for a moment I could offer my own sorrow to God, aware that Jesus Christ and the entire communion of saints would share it with me. I walked away from the cathedral that day, a stranger among strangers, nonetheless full of joyous hope.

The privileged locus of evangelization for each and every parish is the regular, beautiful, faithfully prayed liturgy of the church. It is the place where the long-time Catholic and the seeker may come and discover the risen Lord working in the midst of God's people. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy at the Second Vatican Council noted, "the liturgy, through which 'the work of our redemption takes place,' . . . is supremely effective in enabling the faithful to express in their lives and portray to others

the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church" (2). If we want to have parishes that are evangelizing, we better have really good liturgical celebrations.

## **Good Liturgy Is Provocative**

But what constitutes good liturgy? If you're familiar with battles among liturgists, you may be tempted to stop reading this book immediately! The question of good liturgy can be neuralgic. The person who loves smells and bells despises guitars and banners. The lover of Haugen and Haas hates Palestrina and Tallis. Entering into these battles, I often think about the words that Dante encounters as he passes through the gates of hell, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

But, fearful reader, read on. This book will not be an occasion for another round of liturgical wars. This is not because I don't think there is such a thing as good liturgy. There is, and I'll define it below. Instead, it's because I believe that there are a variety of possibilities for good liturgy when you get the definition right.

What do I mean by good liturgy? To answer this question, let's start with what good liturgy isn't. Good liturgy doesn't change the words and structure of the Mass so that the priest can prove to his local ordinary and assembly that he's not afraid of following his own drummer. Nor is good liturgy an aesthetic performance where the focus is on the quality of the choir, the glory of the architectural space, and the splendor of the vestments. Good liturgy doesn't mean that everyone in the parish takes a turn as communion minister and lector. It also doesn't mean total silence and absolute formality reign all the time. In each of these cases, the focus of the liturgy is on the liturgical performance rather than on the purpose of the liturgy: the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity.

Good liturgy glorifies God and sanctifies the human person. You can't separate the two moments. In the liturgy, we bring every dimension of our humanity into the act of worship. At Sunday Mass, I don't go to my parish church as a God-glorifier while leav-

ing behind my identity as a husband, father, friend, and teacher. I am a human being whose vocation is the glorification of God and who carries out this glorification through my identity as a husband, father, friend, and teacher. At the same time, the focus of the eucharistic liturgy is not on my identity. We don't enter into Mass, hearing hymns that talk just about my situation, my identity, or my preferred cultural group. I enter into the church's act of sacrificial praise to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I arrive as I am, and in the act of worshipping, I place my identity in a larger story—the narrative in which the triune God has redeemed the human family.

Good liturgy gives the necessary space for the process of sanctification to unfold in the lives of each member of Christ's Body, the church. And it does so because such liturgy places the mystery of divine love at the center of the activity. For example, at Christmas, lots of folks come back to church who haven't been in a while. Sons and daughters of active parishioners travel in, attending midnight Mass in an almost nostalgic manner. They enter into the celebration of Christmas perhaps with some anxiety, as they restore relationships with family members they haven't seen in a while. In our parishes, there are some who struggle with Christmas. They're lonely, suffering from the death of a spouse or a dear friend. Christmas is a *celebratio* in which Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, takes up all these aspects of the human condition. On the feast of Christmas, we wondrously celebrate that the Word, the very Creator of the world, took flesh and dwelt among us as an infant. The Word became speechless. And therefore, God can enter into every aspect of what it means to be human, raising it up to be transfigured through the radiance of love.

A good Christmas liturgy places this mystery of love at its center. It may include polyphony like *O Magnum Mysterium* or the hymn *Silent Night*. The organ may be used along with mariachi music. Whatever music is used in the liturgy, it should allow the mystery of love be given expression through songs of praise and joy. The Mass will include ample silence for the assembly to reflect on the wonder of the mystery. The presider will not rush through

Mass but invite the assembly to contemplate what has taken place at Christmas. There will be joy among the assembly, not just because Christmas is a feast, but because God has dwelt among us in the most intimate of ways, taking up our flesh. Liturgists must begin from this wondrous mystery, from this divine provocation, if the liturgy is to be good.

Good liturgy is provocative. It provokes from us mortals a response of wonder before the God who is love. The wonder that we experience does not leave us paralyzed with fear. We enter into this mystery, aware that the God who became infant wants every part of our humanity to become a space where the Word can become flesh and dwell among us. There is something for us to do—to give ourselves over to this process of sanctification. Good liturgy creates space for God to act, to enter into our history once more in love.

If we want evangelizing liturgies, the ones that will attract seekers from off the street, celebrating good, “provocative” liturgies are key—liturgies that place at the center God’s salvific activity rather than the priest, the choir, or the assembly. It is precisely this kind of liturgy that will lead seekers to take a second look at the church.

## **Provoked: What Next?**

In the following chapters, the reader will have more opportunities to think about what happens in the act of liturgy and why it’s evangelizing for everyone from seekers to mature Catholics. But since this chapter is focusing on the stage of evangelization and the precatechumenate, what happens when these seekers find themselves provoked by the church’s worship? How do we lead these inquirers into a deeper understanding of what is happening in the liturgy? How can we bring these new Christians into the practice of radical discipleship that the liturgy teaches?

In his important trilogy on “cultural liturgies,” the Reformed Christian philosopher James K.A. Smith describes the process by which modern culture forms us into certain assumptions or postures toward life. When seekers or inquirers enter into our churches, we have to remember that, while they are not natives to

Catholic liturgy, they have been formed through various cultural practices or stories that are part of day-to-day life. They have been worshipping something or someone before they have darkened the doors of our churches.

I've often discovered this fact, especially around the time that RCIA groups I've participated in discuss Catholic social teaching. When our RCIA community begins to discuss the common good, solidarity, human dignity, and the preferential option for the poor, catechumens bristle. Formed in a political world shaped by Republicans and Democrats, they presume that Catholic social teaching will align with one party or the other. They have been educated for polarization through the annual cycle of debates and elections. And they often find it challenging to discover that the church upholds the dignity of the unborn, the undocumented immigrant, and the prisoner on death row. There is something pushing them away from recognizing the wisdom of Catholic social teaching because everything they've ever learned about society and politics has been mediated through ritual blaming performed on cable news.

Just as political partisanship and polarization is an obstacle to encountering the wisdom of Catholic social teaching, many of those seeking Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church have their own difficulties entering into fruitful worship. They find themselves distracted or confused about what is happening. They need good mentorship from a more mature Catholic to guide them through the process of worshipful wisdom. They confuse the mundane gift of weekly worship for boredom, expecting constant affections rather than slow attunement to divine life. They take these signs as evidence that the Christian life isn't working, that it's time to look elsewhere for a hypothesis.

Thus, those involved in running the RCIA process, as well as the entire pastoral team, have to function like doctors. They have to diagnose where our false assumptions about the nature of worship make it harder to adore the living God. Having worked with adolescents, undergraduates, and adults over the last eight years, I have learned that the primary malaises we bring to the act of

worship include a thin sense of God, individualism, a hope that technology will save, a loss of wonder, a throwaway culture, and the liturgy of consumerism.

## **The Malaises That Inhibit Worship**

### *The Absent God*

The sociologist Christian Smith has analyzed the presumed religion of most Americans. He calls this religion Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Americans often believe in a God who exists somewhere out there, who gets involved in our lives when we're interested that this God be involved, but who happily doesn't ask too much from us. If we're nice and decent, not shoving people into doors, then we all go to heaven where we'll hang out together. This is the kind of God that politicians invoke at public events, asking that this "God" bless America.

Many of my students are at least "kind of" Moralistic Therapeutic Deists. They're happy to have God operating on the outside of their lives as a divine butler who intervenes when asked. They assume that one should be a decent person, and they find folks who engage in terrible behavior abhorrent (probably bound for something like a really boring hell). They don't actively deny the existence of God, but they also don't allow this God to influence key decisions about work, family, politics, or leisure time.

For this reason, they also think that worship is a matter of "begging" for this God to pay some attention to their lives when it's necessary to do so. We go to Mass or we engage in private devotions because we hope that this God will let me into college, heal my mother from her illness, and let me find my spouse. If these things don't happen, it is assumed that God isn't real or just doesn't listen to our deepest problems. If a budding Christian comes to Mass on a weekly basis, hoping that God will finally intervene in a situation involving the sickness of a loved one only to discover the disappointment of continued illness or death, they could easily walk away. They could come to the conclusion that God doesn't care. God doesn't exist.

Mature Christians, of course, know better. We know that the God we worship is so radically involved in our lives that “he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Our God is the one who entered into the history of Israel, choosing this nation among all nations to be God’s own. Our God is the one who became flesh, entering into friendship with humankind. Our God is the one who freely gave himself on the cross, loving us unto the end. Our God is love.

### *“Rugged” Individualism*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not the only problem that many of our fledgling Christians struggle with. For some, worshiping in a community is also a difficulty. Immature Christians could imagine that the act of worship should be a radically individual experience—one in which the entire created order disappears except for God and me. Everyone else is a distraction, moving me away from the mystical encounter that is my destiny.

As a parent with two young children, I often encounter this malaise. Once, my baptized son, then three years old, was not being especially reverent during the celebration of the Eucharist. He was jumping up and down on the pew during Mass, creating a scene that we were attempting to quell, using our powers of parental persuasion. But, you know three-year-olds. The woman in the pew behind me kindly asked that we leave the Mass because she was trying to pray and could not because of the presence of our son. In her imagination, liturgical prayer was a private encounter with God in which every possible annoyance should be eliminated. The liturgy was a moment in which the individual person, the self, experiences an encounter of love apart from the rest of the community.

Now, it is more than reasonable to take a three-year-old out of Mass if he’s being especially irreverent, screaming at the top of his lungs to escape. I have often been the parent dragging my son to the back of the church when he has passed beyond the bounds of acceptable human behavior. As a member of Christ’s

Body, I'm aware that there are many men and women attending the liturgy seeking to encounter the living God, who enters into their lives with a love that no human being can imagine. I want to foster this encounter. Leaving with my son or daughter is part of my act of worship, my contribution to the community on a particular Sunday.

But part of this encounter is through the assembly of Christ's Body including young children struggling to behave, members of Christ's Body singing out of tune, and the regular assembly who are on pilgrimage toward holiness. This radical belonging to Christ's Body, such that my neighbor becomes part of my deepest concern, is integral to Christian salvation. We are not saved as individuals alone. As Pope Francis has written, "We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people" (Rejoice and Be Glad, 6).

This claim goes against the primary assumption that many bring into the religious act—that salvation is about the cultivation of a spiritual self, of my "personal" and thus "individual" spirituality. Liturgical prayer, of course, recognizes that there is an individual personality that participates in the liturgy. That's why good liturgy should leave space for the entire catalogue of human affections—praise, adoration, lament, silence, and wonder. But I don't go to Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours because it "resonates" with my individual spirituality. I go because through baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist, I have been initiated into Christ's Body. I go because when I'm in attendance (even if I'm in the narthex letting my one-year-old walk around), I'm acknowledging that my body, my life, my whole existence is not my own. It is Christ's. It is a self who discovers his deepest identity in the church, in the communion of believers who celebrate the festival of the Lamb once slain. The end of Christian life is not reducible to the salvation of the individual human being but the transformation of the whole world, starting with this parish, into a space of love.

### *Technology as Salvation*

Some years ago, the University of Notre Dame hosted a forum on the crisis precipitated by climate change. At the event, engineers made suggestions about the role that technological innovation could play in saving the planet from destruction. Such technological interventions ranged from the creation of biodegradable packaging for food to the making of new sources of renewable energy.

One of the engineers on the panel revealed a problem with the plan. A prominent snack food company created biodegradable packaging for chips. But the packaging made an annoying noise when customers opened up the bag. Because of this noise, the customers rejected the packaging, causing the company to switch back to the older packaging. The engineer noted that while technological innovation could be used to help the planet, something more is needed. Human beings have to want to change. They'd have to change their own habits of consumption if the planet has a chance to survive.

This narrative provides an image for understanding the third malaise under examination: a false sense of the salvific possibilities of technology. Now before proceeding, it is essential to underline two things. First, I am not saying all technology is bad. I don't avoid iPhones or computers as if they are the plague. I don't sit in public places, bemoaning the sins of the young who spend so much time on screens. Such technology is part of my day-to-day life too. And this technology is often very helpful, enabling me to keep in touch with scholars and ministers around the globe. Second, I'm appreciative that technology has led to a number of gifts to human life in the last century. Because of technological innovation in the creation of medicine, for example, when my son gets an ear infection, we're not worried that this might be the disease that will end his life.

What I'm worried about is the assumption that everything in our lives can be solved through technological innovation. If only we had better computers, dating apps, ways to produce energy, mobile phones, and transportation, then human beings will finally

be happy. People will form connections that last a lifetime, find a spouse, be able to use energy without any effect on the environment, create videos of every experience, and be able to develop nearly infinite mobility.

Now, very few people would profess such a credo to us at least using these exact words. But, it's possible to look at advertising to see how this dynamic plays out. Several years ago, Apple produced a commercial for Christmas showing a video of a young man visiting his family but never looking up from his phone. At the end of the commercial, the young man presented to his family why he was gazing with almost iconic devotion to his phone—he was making a video that documented every dimension of his family's celebration of Christmas. The commercial, most likely directed to parents of teens obsessed with devices, performs an act of persuasion. If every parent purchases a phone for their child, there will be the possibility of a renewed human relationship. Buy this phone. Save the relationship.

What does this hope have to do with liturgy? Our adoration of technology must not be understood as a clash between adoring the transcendent God of Catholicism versus worshiping at the altar of immanent technology. Rather, the problem is that technology itself taps into our desire for transcendence, for a source of salvation outside of ourselves. The hope that we might be saved through the creation of the next novel device functions almost like a religion. Think about what happens when you look at your phone, checking for a new e-mail message or a notification from Instagram. There is a sense of euphoric delight. Someone has connected with me. We grow addicted to this encounter, gazing with frequency at our phone. We hope that another message will appear on our phone, that another connection will be made.

The smartphone is therefore a rival to authentic worship. For in the act of worship, we await the coming of the triune God into history. It is not technological innovation that will save but the love of God that has shaped the past, becomes present in our world here and now, and will be with us into the future. We are saved through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ—the one who came as an

infant, who comes this very day through the proclamation of the Scriptures and in his eucharistic presence, and who will come at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. This encounter is mediated not through sophisticated chips and shaped glass but through the materiality of water, bread, wine, book, and oil.

The boredom that so many people experience in worship is caused by this misplaced hope that technology will provide an interminable answer to our desire. But divine worship cultivates a radically different hope: that the insatiability of our desire is not soothed through innovation but the eternal, ever-present, ever-coming Lord of the universe.

### *Loss of Wonder*

The nearly universal presence of technology in our lives has also changed the way that we encounter the world. Growing up, I would go on lengthy hikes in the mountains of East Tennessee. Climbing to the top of a peak, I would be struck by the beauty of the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. In the summer, I would contemplate the lush greenery of the Appalachian Mountains. I'd take the same hike in the fall, encountering a fiery palette of red, orange, and yellow. During each of these hikes, I found myself wondering at the beauty of the created order, sitting in silence on a rocky hilltop. While hiking, I'd often sit at the top of the peak for hours—journaling, thinking about the great questions that occupied the attention of my adolescent or young adult self. Hiking allowed me not only to encounter the *wonderful* quality of creation, but to encounter the wonder of existence itself. Who made me? What did I hope for out of life? Was I in love with her?

Since I purchased my smartphone eight years ago, my experience of hiking has changed. I still love the mountains, the silence that falls over me as I ascend the trail. But when I reach the top of the trail, rather than sit in silence, I begin to “curate” the experience. I try to find the best picture to take that I'll later send out to followers on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. I'll attempt to take a “selfie,” one that shows evidence of my rugged hike but still

makes me look like a handsome hiker. I'll search for a signal from a roving tower, hoping that I can send pictures out to my family, friends, and #CatholicTwitter. Where there is no signal, I'll move down the mountain as quickly as possible, looking to reconnect to the digital world through my phone.

Wonder, as a human experience, is not reducible to being overwhelmed by beauty. Wonder is also an openness to meditation, to asking great questions that are written in the human heart. Looking out over the Grand Canyon, I wonder at the sublime beauty of creation. But I also "wonder" when I engage in practices of reflection, not just as an individual but with a community of fellow inquirers. Some of the best conversations I've had with my spouse were on hikes or in isolated places where we were able to talk to one another without interruption.

Many of the undergraduates whom I work with are losing this capacity for wonder. I look up at the beginning of class and see everyone's eyes are focused on their smartphones. They don't talk to one another but sit as isolated monads. Because they're so concerned about "curating a self," they're often unwilling to ask the great questions that matter in life. From a young age, they have been told that success in life is what matters, and the way to achieve this success is through an education that enables them to get good jobs. They think they know who they are, what they need, and are pursuing an education to receive the credentials that will allow them to be successful. Many of them suffer from anxiety, caused by a mixture of perpetual activity, unrealistic expectations about what constitutes human happiness, and a sense that their lives are not their own.

Still, they hunger for isolated spaces where they can separate themselves from the constant notifications provided by technological devices. They want to spend time together in conversation and prayer, apart from the noise of life. They want to be around that which is beautiful, to encounter something that raises in them the great questions that each human being will eventually have to answer.

In other words, this loss of wonder can be healed through creating spaces of wonder through the liturgy. But we in the church are

just as likely to allow the efficiency of modern life to intrude on our act of worship. We rush through prayers, homilies, and sermons—giving no one a chance to think. Presiders fill the liturgy with words upon words, refusing to let a moment of silence blossom in a desert of verbosity. We, in the church, have to ask why we seem to be so afraid to create these spaces of wonder that may provoke both mature and developing Christians to desire God anew.

### *Throwaway Culture*

In his preaching, Pope Francis often characterizes modern society as a “throwaway culture.” Human beings have been created with dignity by God. They are part of a whole ecology of creation. But a throwaway culture puts too much emphasis on the power of human beings to shape the world according to their own desires. This emphasis on human power to do whatever it wants is deadly not just for the environment but for our call to solidarity with our fellow human beings. He writes in *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*:

When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities . . . it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself. . . . Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble. (116)

If rugged individualism sees salvation as exclusive to the individual, then the throwaway culture viciously extends this individualism to everyone and everything. The homeless man on the street has nothing to contribute to society so we can pass him by without a second thought. The unborn infant in the womb can be aborted because it’s really the lives of the strong that matter. The person with disabilities is expendable because he or she is not capable of dwelling “normally” in society. The undocumented immigrant can be treated as garbage by customs agents, because he or she is “not one of us.”

The throwaway culture, as described by Pope Francis, is not just a matter of human beings being bad people. It's a culture, a series of unexamined assumptions that do not allow us to see the humanity of others. Men and women are not distinct persons whom I encounter. Instead, they are "objects" for me to use (or not to use) depending on my needs. Every relationship is expendable.

The throwaway culture is a problem of commitment, of the impermanence of everything. This impermanence to all relationships can be a significant challenge for those seeking to attend a weekly celebration of the Eucharist that is, for the most part, the same from week to week. The throwaway culture problematizes establishing relationships in parishes in which we move beyond isolated monads who go to the same church toward living in solidarity as brothers and sisters in Christ. Many attending our parishes will find Mass to be a significant source of inspiration *until* they don't. And at that point, they may move on to something that better meets their needs. Rather than see themselves as part of a pilgrim band of brothers and sisters, moving toward Christ, they may painfully recognize the hypocrisy of other believers—determining that it'd be easier to go it alone in life than deal with this group of sinners.

### *The "Liturgy" of Consumerism*

If there is a practice that is especially formative of human beings in a throwaway culture, it's shopping in a consumer society. Often, we think about consumerism as a matter of acquisition. The more stuff we have, the happier we will be. Certainly, this assumption exists among many people. Americans have so much stuff that we've invented a business whereby we pay money to put things that won't fit into our house elsewhere—storage warehouses.

But it's too simplistic to argue that consumerism is about only stuff. For example, I have an addiction to buying books. It is rare for me to finish an academic tome without purchasing one or two additional books online that were mentioned in footnotes. On my honeymoon, I dragged my poor wife to a seedy neighborhood in London so that I could spend four hours perusing a theological bookshop. I love books.

What is the source of this love? It's not just an addiction to being in the presence of lots of books. Otherwise, libraries could fulfill my addiction with greater ease. At Notre Dame, I have millions of books that I can check out, making it possible for me to dwell in the presence of thousands of serious and ancient tomes at once.

No, I love books because, in purchasing books, I get a kick. I see a book that I want. I search for it online. I find it. Then, I buy the book, eagerly awaiting its arrival at my door. I open the package, exhilarated to be in the presence of a new tome. After scanning the book, I place it on a shelf and feel, momentarily, the august accomplishment of being an academic—someone who is the kind of person who reads books like this.

The “liturgy” of consumerism for me is about shaping a certain kind of self through the act of acquisition. I want to be seen as an academic, as someone who pursues wisdom through reading and writing. Of course, anyone can (and does) buy books. One doesn't need a degree to do so. But somehow, the acquisition of books has become for me a way of expressing my identity as an academic. I don't need to read or even know what is in the book. Simply having the book on a shelf shows everyone who comes into my office, *this is a learned person*.

Consumer practice is thus shaping a certain kind of person through “practices” of shopping that are often unrelated to what it means to “become” this kind of person. Buying yoga pants doesn't turn one into a practitioner of yoga. Purchasing soccer cleats doesn't make one a World Cup star—otherwise, call me Ronaldo. To become this kind of person would require taking on a series of practices related to either yoga or soccer that would actually cultivate this self. Consumerism confuses the hard work of cultivating an identity with purchasing power. I buy, therefore I am.

## **Worship That Heals**

As any doctor knows, there is often a bit of pain that takes place even in the midst of healing. The malaises that blossoming Christians and perhaps those of us who work in the RCIA suffer from

can in fact be healed through commitment to liturgical practice. The act of liturgical worship may be hard for the modern person because of our belief in an absent God, a rugged individualism, a hope in technological salvation, a loss of wonder, a throwaway culture, and the “liturgy” of consumerism. But it is precisely our experience of worshiping in the church that can also heal us of these sicknesses. For in the liturgy we are taught to see the reality of God irrupting in history, to dwell together in communion, to expect salvation not from ourselves but from God, to wonder at beauty, to be committed to the dignity of the human person, and to experience the world as gift.

The language of healing has been intentionally chosen. During the precatechumenate, much of the work on the part of the catechist is one-on-one. A doctor doesn’t show up with a program of health and walk away. A doctor listens to the needs of the patient and then offers a good medicine.

That’s what we do as catechists. We enter into conversations with men and women about what really matters to them. Yet even here, there is a bit of teaching that’s possible. It’s not an education that unfolds in a classroom but the wisdom that is shared by intergenerational groups of parents who get together to talk about how to choose a good school for their kid.

I often engage in this kind of teaching during office hours. Students come to me not simply with problems they’re having with material but with big questions about life: How do I know if I’m in love? How do I know what I’m called to do with my life? What does it mean to be a serious Catholic who also works in the world?

It would be naïve to simply say that each person has to find his or her own way. They’ve come to me because they see me as a “doctor,” as someone who can provide a bit of wisdom on their pilgrimage. And I do. For the persons wondering if they’re in love, I give examples from my own marriage and family life. But I also ask questions of them—how do they understand love, for example?

The medicine that we can offer many of our seekers will be from the liturgy. The rest of this section provides a handbook of sorts for those looking to heal some of the malaises of the contemporary

person through reference to the church's worship. The hope is that readers will not just be happy with what is in the handbook but will adapt the examples and stories for their own use as catechists and spiritual mentors to those seeking to know something more about Christian faith.

### *The Irrupting God*

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a malaise in which men and women cannot understand the presence of a God involved in human history. God is "out there," taking some notes, but mostly inattentive to creation. When such men and women encounter suffering in life, they can only assume that this God doesn't care or is without power.

The God that we worship in Catholic liturgy is not the deity adored by even these accidental Moralistic Therapeutic Deists. In the liturgy, we encounter a God who has entered history, forever transforming what it means to be human. On the feast of the Annunciation, when we commemorate the Blessed Virgin Mary's radical yes to God's plan of salvation, the church prays:

O God, who willed that your Word  
should take on the reality of human flesh  
in the womb of the Virgin Mary,  
grant, we pray,  
that we, who confess our Redeemer to be God and man,  
may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

*(Roman Missal, The Annunciation of the Lord, Collect)*

The Word became flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. God becomes human. And this intimate union of God and humanity in the person of Jesus has global repercussions for us. The incarnation is not a "past" event but has infinite meaning for the present. We human beings can become partakers in the divine nature of Jesus Christ not through leaving behind our humanity. The more we

enter into the human condition by giving our will over to God, just like the Blessed Virgin Mary, the more that we become divine.

The feast of the Annunciation is not unique in Catholic liturgy. Every celebration, every feast we commemorate focuses on a concrete way that God entered into history. But it also shows how God's involvement in history is the pattern for our present and future too. At Easter we remember that Jesus has risen from the dead, keenly hopeful that our death will be transformed in Christ. We will rise again, for God has defeated death. On the feast of All Souls, we commemorate the blessed dead themselves, knowing through faith that even the vale of tears caused by death cannot cut us off from communion with one another in Christ.

The liturgy teaches us that God has not abandoned the person who experiences suffering in his or her life. Instead, the limitations that are part of being human can now become the space where God irrupts in history. God is neither uninvolved nor powerless. Rather, God is present at the heart of our joys and sorrows alike, promising the possibility of redemption through the presence of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son. Talk about a provocation!

### *Made for Communion*

Linked with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a rugged individualism, whereby we are trained to imagine that we are saved exclusively as individuals. Blossoming Christians, struggling with this assumption, may find it difficult to worship within the context of the ecclesial community. They'll be disappointed to discover that our liturgies are places not just for individual contemplation but for communion with Christ's Body. They may encounter the disappointment of scandal, of individual Christians who, although they identify as Catholics, are also public sinners.

The grammar of the church's liturgy can be salutary here. An astute catechist should underline the language of the church's prayers. The church does not use the first-person singular in the eucharistic prayer: I celebrate or commemorate. Instead, the church's eucharistic praying is a common activity, offered in the

first-person plural: we celebrate or we remember. In the preface for the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation I, the church prays:

For you do not cease to spur us on  
to possess a more abundant life  
and, being rich in mercy,  
you constantly offer pardon  
and call on sinners  
to trust in your forgiveness alone.

Never did you turn away from us,  
and, though time and again we have broken your covenant,  
you have bound the human family to yourself  
through Jesus your Son, our Redeemer,  
with a new bond of love so tight  
that it can never be undone. (*Roman Missal*)

Notice that the church does not plead before God that the individual alone would experience conversion. The entire church is called to ask for pardon, God never turns away from us, the whole family of God is invited to a confession of sins, and we join with the heavenly hosts to adore God. Even related to sinfulness, where we often focus on the individual alone, the church thinks about the entire body of believers. It is the church herself who is on pilgrimage to the Father, whose members are both burdened by sin and yet also redeemed through the graciousness of our Lord.

In the liturgy, we discover that we are made for communion, for friendship with one another in Christ. The liturgy teaches this not only through the texts of the prayer. Several years ago, I attended a Benedictine monastery where we were chanting Evening Prayer together. Entering the assembly, I sang the opening hymn with full gusto. An older Benedictine monk pulled me aside during the prayer, asking me to quiet down so that I could listen to the person on my left and right. My first reaction was annoyance. How dare he tell me how to express praise to the living God! But on deeper reflection, I realized there was a deep wisdom to this

Benedictine practice. The individual's prayer is not his or her own. It is always a single voice of praise offered to the Father through the Son within the context of the church. Since then, I enter into the church's worship aware of those around me, conforming my own responses to the person to my left and right. I seek to allow my voice to join with theirs.

This small practice has transformed how I engage in the liturgy. I am not a single individual, catering to my own personal salvation. I am involved in a common act with my neighboring parishioner whether we know each other well or not. As I join my voice with theirs, I've learned concern for every dimension of their lives. I've learned to recognize that I'm involved in the salvation of my children, my spouse, and my neighbors. We are made for communion.

### *Salvation through God Alone*

A mark of modernity is an expectation that technology can save us. If we create the right medicine, develop the proper technological device, or create a suitable source of renewable energy, we can live forever. We *could* save ourselves.

In the church's worship, there is a univocal focus on the source of all salvation—the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. Even our individual good works are possible through Christ alone. On the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, we pray:

Almighty ever-living God,  
 direct our actions according to your good pleasure,  
 that in the name of your beloved Son  
 we may abound in good works. (*Roman Missal, Collect*)

Human activity, no matter how well intentioned, cannot save. Rather, every good deed is possible only because every dimension of our lives must be oriented to Christ. God has intervened in history. And now, God acts in history to bring men and women to salvation through the church.

This logic is found everywhere in the church's prayer. Yes, people need to come to Mass. Yes, they need to give themselves over to the sacramental life of the church. Yes, we must offer our humanity as the place where God will act. But this salvation does not unfold because people cared enough to pray. It is not because there is a community of really nice men and women who belong to a parish. Salvation happens because God has acted in history. Because in the eucharistic liturgy of the church, it's not we who lift ourselves up to God but heaven that comes to dwell among us as we join our voices with the divine praise of the city of God: "And so, with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones and Dominions, and with all the hosts and Powers of heaven, we sing the hymn of your glory, as without end we acclaim" (*Roman Missal*, Preface I of Advent).

Reverence in the liturgy demonstrates the salvific seriousness of worship. Such reverence need not be stuffy. Over the years, I've often attended daily Mass at Westminster Cathedral in London. In the parish, there is a boys' choir who processes in at the beginning of Mass, dressed in choral surplice. They're obviously boys, struggling to keep a straight face. They're awkward, and they sometimes trip a bit while turning to the left or right. But there is seriousness about their act of worship that exhibits to the assembly that something rather important is happening at the cathedral. God comes to dwell among us through the joyful seriousness of these well-trained, musical children.

Even the simplest gestures at Mass can manifest the seriousness of our act of worship. An acolyte who genuflects before the altar of God when lighting a candle establishes a reverence within a space that can transform even the emptiest of churches. Incense creates an atmosphere that reveals that a church building is different from a school or mall. The elevated language of a collect or eucharistic prayer says that something different is happening here—something salvific.

When we celebrate the Eucharist or the Liturgy of the Hours we make available to the world the firstfruits of God's reign. Men and women come forth, offering their wounded hearts to the triune God who promises that all tears will be wiped away. In the

Eucharist, especially, Christ comes entirely to dwell among us, pitching his tent in our midst. In order to avoid communicating a sense that it's really our work that saves, the church has to get out of the way in the liturgy, allowing God to act in the midst of Christ's Body.

### *The Wonder of Beauty*

The loss of wonder, as described above, is a twofold concern. We cease to wonder, to attend to the glorious nature of reality because we're too focused on our smartphones to pay attention to the world. Staring at Facebook or Instagram, we no longer look down at our playing children. Likewise, the loss of this wonder risks eliminating spaces for meditation in our lives. We need quiet places where we can encounter that which is most beautiful, good, and true—in the process, asking ourselves what such beauty, goodness, and truth means for the rest of our lives.

Beauty has an important role to play in restoring wonder to the human condition. As mentioned above, I'm a hiker. And on a regular basis, I find myself taking long treks to out-of-the-way mountains with vistas that take one's breath away. Some years ago, I took high school students from Newton, Massachusetts, on a hike in a Pennsylvania state park. The hike was no more than half a mile, but these city dwellers had never been on such a trail. As we climbed up the short trail to a tower overlooking the mountains, they were struck with awe. They said that they had never seen anything so beautiful as these mountains. Along the hike, they began to have the kind of serious conversations about their future that I had always hoped would take place in the context of the youth group. Being around beauty opened them to deep conversations about things that matter.

I've also seen this happen with my graduate students that I teach in a summer course on liturgical-sacramental catechesis. I hold the first two hours of class at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart on Notre Dame's campus. A church building filled with gold, stained glass, statues, gorgeously decorated columns, and

a variety of altars is to function as their “contemplative” space for 120 minutes. Their assignment in class that day is to spend time looking at things. In encountering such beauty, I encourage them to draw, write poetry, and journal as a way of creating a space for wonder. Univocally, they tell me from year to year that this was their favorite class day not only because I didn’t lecture but because they were given a space to wonder, to contemplate the gift of divine love, in a purposeless manner.

One would imagine that our liturgies could provide a space of wonder in the present world. But often, silent wonder is absent from our celebrations. Priests are quick to say too much in their preaching or in opening remarks at the beginning of Mass. The prayers of the Mass are not chanted but are clumsily spoken aloud.

Liturgical music, so important to our sense of beauty, is often viewed, as a Jesuit colleague of mine says, as “sprinkles on top.” What really matters at Mass are the words that are spoken. Music, architecture, incense, and statuary are optional accessories to the real meat of the liturgy—speech.

If we want to create a space of wonder in the lives of those coming to Mass, beauty matters. We have perhaps allowed a certain rationalism to enter into our worship, one where our focus is on endless chattering. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger cautions:

Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. Of course we must not underrate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought; it remains absolutely necessary. But to move from here to disdain or to reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time. (Message of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Remini)

The example that I always use when speaking about beauty in worship is incense. Many parishes use incense once or twice a

year at Christmas or Easter. This sparse use of incense misses an occasion for all our senses to participate in God's beauty. Our eyes are drawn to the way that light enters the church, refracted through the smoky haze. The smell of incense becomes part of old churches, serving as an embodied memory of the sacred rituals performed within the walls of the church. Even the sound of the thurible clinking becomes part of the beauty of the eucharistic encounter with Christ. In Catholicism, matter matters.

When we delight the senses in worship, we are facilitating an encounter with Jesus Christ and the worshiper. I'll always remember the Easter Triduum weekend that changed my life. I was a freshman at Notre Dame, where I was also an undergraduate seminarian with the Congregation of Holy Cross. But I was lost. I wanted God to be direct, to tell me my future. Was I to be a priest or not?

These questions came with me as I wandered into the half-lit basilica at eleven o'clock at night for Tenebrae. The air still smelled of the incense that had accompanied the Blessed Sacrament to the chapel of repose for the evening. I crowded into a pew, surrounded by other Notre Dame undergraduates, faculty, and staff. Over the next hour, I was moved by an encounter with the beauty of the liturgy. I remember the haunting voice of the cantor: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God*. The choir sang a setting of the *Kyrie* composed by Louis Vierne from his *Messe solennelle*, Op. 16. This piece culminates in a crescendo in which the entire body of the listener is seemingly filled with sound. My very chest felt like it was going to explode, crying out with all my being for God's gracious mercy. All the while, seminarians from Holy Cross extinguished candles that were at the front of the altar. In the passion of Christ, we were entering into the darkness. At the end, the church was pitch black as the assembly participated in the *strepitus*, banging on the pews with their hands. It was loud, appropriate for a liturgical action meant to symbolize the earthquake after Christ's death.

The liturgy ended, and we processed out after midnight. My senses had been filled with beauty during the hour and a half

liturgy. I wandered down to the Grotto at Notre Dame, a replica of the one in Lourdes, France, where the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette. I knelt in prayer, asking God once more to reveal my future. And in response to this prayer, a passage from the psalms came to my mind, "The LORD is my light and my salvation" (Ps 27:1).

On this cool spring night, I spent time meditating on this phrase surrounded by glowing candles at the Grotto. Over the next hour, still swimming in the beauty of the liturgy, I realized something. God had no plans to "tell me" the future. Instead, God is that light which illumines our steps. Christ is there with us in the darkness, asking us to give our wills over to the Father. It was not a matter of figuring out my future. Instead, I had to learn to sit in patient love even in the darkness of the unknown.

Surely, someone could have told me this directly. In fact, I have no doubt that someone did. My rector in seminary probably sat down and said to me during one of our one-on-one sessions, "Tim, you have the wrong understanding of God. God isn't an old man in heaven, leaving irritating clues for you to figure out your future." But it was only in the wondrous space created in the liturgy that I could finally see who God was. This was the God who never abandoned Israel, who died on the cross out of the depths of love, and who dwells now in the church. If I entered into this practice of self-giving love, then I would find God wherever I ended up. To have this insight on my own, I needed the wondrous beauty of the liturgy.

Beauty has this kind of power. And we want to include beauty in the liturgy not because we're a bunch of aesthetes who like pretty things. Beauty is part of how God communicates to us human beings. And it's how we, as human beings, find space to be alone with God.

### *The Liturgical Dignity of the Human Person*

Recall the earlier discussion of the throwaway culture. The throwaway culture does not recognize the personhood of my

neighbor, especially if he or she is on the margins. The unborn, the immigrant, and the prisoner can be treated without dignity because they're not of use to me.

The liturgy can provoke a worshiper to perceive the dignity in one's neighbor. Think, for example, about infant baptism. The infant, unable to make decisions on one's own, to speak, and even to control the bladder, enters into sacramental life. The nonspeaking, nonrational infant becomes a priest, a prophet, and a royal figure capable of sanctifying the created order even as a baby. All of those lowered in the waters of baptism, with no exception for race, socio-economic status, and education, are transformed into Christians. Every person in the church has this liturgical dignity, a vocation to adore the living God.

I think about this often as men and women process to Communion. In a downtown parish in Chicago, I see men and women with Down Syndrome, immigrants from throughout the world, and homeless men and women coming off the street. The dignity of each person is obvious to me in such moments. Every human being, no matter how rich or poor, educated or impoverished, has a vocation to adore the living God.

But it's not just people who are dignified in the liturgy. Through our celebration of liturgy, we discover there is nothing in creation that can merely be thrown away, treated only for its economic value. Everything in the world has a primary use, which is the glorification of God. One of my favorite prayers from the dedication of a church building perfectly expresses the liturgical vocation of creation:

For you have made the whole world a temple of your glory,  
that your name might everywhere be extolled,  
yet you allow us to consecrate to you  
apt places for the divine mysteries.

And so, we dedicate joyfully to your majesty  
this house of prayer, built by human labor.

*(Roman Missal, For the Dedication of a Church)*

In this prayer, all of creation serves as a divine temple, pointing to God's glory on hilltop and plain alike. The church building is not a space apart from the rest of the world but instead attunes our eyes to see the world for what it is—infused with the spirit of divine love. The material construction of the church is itself a sign, pointing to the temple of Christ's Body and the heavenly Jerusalem. Our bodies are like temples, consecrated to God for the sanctification of the world. The stones of the church building are signs of each one of us, who make up a holy city whose constitution is eucharistic love.

The problem with a throwaway culture is that it's a form of idolatry, a failure to recognize that creation is gift. We are not made as isolated individuals who can dominate one another. We have been created for love. The liturgy reforms our imaginations to see this fact anew.

### *A Gift Economy*

Consumerism is not just about purchasing things. It's about a misunderstanding of how identity formation takes place. I "become" a person through buying things.

But that's not how identity formation takes place. Becoming a Christian takes work. It's not a matter of buying a Bible or a copy of the Liturgy of the Hours or of updating one's Facebook page with regular posts from Bishop Robert Barron. In each of these "consumer" cases, the work of being a Christian is entirely up to me. It's a matter of exchange: I perform this action and thus become a Christian.

Many blossoming Christians, seeking entrance into the Christian life, may struggle with the gift economy of Christian life. They may see individual practices as something they "do" in order to "receive" grace. They buy; God gives. And they may be surprised that these practices take time. They take time because no human being can control divine generosity. The initial posture of the worshipping Christian is reception, not bargaining with God for grace.

Catholicism operates according to a different economy. If the liturgy of consumerism teaches, "I buy, therefore I am," the church's

liturgy forms us to become what we receive. Christian life does not pertain first and foremost to the individual acquiring anything. Christian existence is first gift. It's a response to a love that is first given.

Liturgical prayer operates according to this kind of economy—we offer back to God what is first given. In Eucharistic Prayer III, for example, the church offers to the Father what has been given through Jesus Christ:

Therefore, O Lord, as we celebrate the memorial  
of the saving Passion of your Son,  
his wondrous Resurrection  
and Ascension into heaven,  
and as we look forward to his second coming,  
we offer you in thanksgiving  
this holy and living sacrifice. (*Roman Missal*)

The sacrifice of Christ at the heart of all liturgical prayer is God's total and absolute gift of love. In the Eucharist, this love becomes present among us. And the church having received this love now offers it back to God. Part of this offering is the church reforming itself so that God may make of us an offering. Each and every Christian must become this love that is received. That is part of the return gift.

This return gift takes time. On a regular basis, I struggle to both receive God's love and to offer it in return. I enter into Mass distracted by looming book projects or family problems. I'm too busy accompanying my daughter on a seemingly eternal pilgrimage around the church building. At the end of Mass, I find myself too easily angered by my son or daughter. The slow driver in front of me annoys me. I avoid the homeless man or woman on the street because they make me uncomfortable. I still suffer the effects of sin.

The genius of Catholic liturgy is that we have to enter into this process of reception and gift regularly. We go to Mass each Sunday. We rise to praise God in the morning. We interrupt our work-a-day schedule for worship. We conclude our evening through confess-

ing our sins to God. Christian identity is not bought. It's what we become through the regular practice of receiving divine love and then giving it away. It's a slow process, more like marinating a roast than microwaving a hotdog.

## **Liturgical Evangelization**

Above, I have highlighted some of the ways that liturgical prayer can be provocative for the contemporary person. Based on your experience in the RCIA, you could probably add your own provocations to this list. The hope is that, through this exercise, you've been able to see how important liturgical practice is even to the period of evangelization *before* the catechumenate.

For this reason, it's important that some of this work of evangelization is carried out through liturgical celebration. The RCIA does not presume that dingy church basements with poor lighting are the ideal settings for Christian formation. Nor for that matter does the rite specify that the period of the precatechumenate happens only at the beginning of the academic year. A robust commitment to the RCIA presumes that men and women are entering into the period of evangelization throughout the liturgical year. Much of the work of preevangelization will happen in one-on-one conversations. But for those learning to desire an encounter with Jesus Christ, it is essential that we provide a space for such an encounter.

One way that a parish might create this regular space of encounter is through a monthly celebration of Vespers. On this night, no parish activity would take place except for an adapted version of Vespers. Children in religious education, the choir, the men's group, and all those in formation within the RCIA would attend this liturgy.

The celebration of Vespers would function as a "school" of evangelization. The chanting or singing of psalms, with periods of silence, would give space for contemplative wonder. Lengthier passages from the Scriptures could be chosen, appropriate to the liturgical feast of the day, allowing the parish to encounter the

beauty of salvation history. Hymns from a variety of different styles could appeal to the affections, fostering an encounter with the beautiful God. Finally, there could be preaching in the context of this adapted Vespers, enabling seekers and mature Christians alike to contemplate how the baptized have lived out the kerygma of the church.

Creating regular liturgical space for encounter is essential for seekers. While the liturgy is evangelizing, the Mass is a complicated prayer. There's lots of kneeling, sitting, standing, and responding that make a visitor stick out like a sore thumb. This monthly Vespers might be precisely the occasion that would convince a visitor to take a second look at the church. And it would do so in a comfortable, hospitable way. After Vespers, the various parish groups could gather to talk to one another, building the kind of community that is important not simply for the RCIA but for a flourishing liturgical life.

A proposal like this is rather simple. But it may ruffle some feathers. It may require those in charge of religious education to rededicate one class per month to this prayer. It would necessitate a real sense of evangelization among parishioners, actively inviting friends and neighbors to come and see. But hard work like this would result in a culture of liturgical evangelization, a sense that the church's prayer is essential to inviting people into an encounter with Jesus.

## **Provoked Catechumens**

Liturgy provokes the blossoming Christian to desire God, to offer one's whole life as a gift of love. The seeker, the one longing to meet Jesus Christ, begins to accept healing through the church's liturgy. It is thus appropriate that the church celebrates the acceptance of the candidate into the order of catechumens through a liturgical rite that repeats the healing they have already received.

### *Rite of Acceptance*

The stage of the pre-catechumenate ends with the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. Enrollment into the catechu-

menate is not like transitioning from primary to secondary school. Rather, it's a change in the catechumens' identity. Catechumens are part of what the church calls an "order." The catechumen is now "ordered" toward initiation into the church. And catechumens have certain rights that come with their new identity—they may marry within the church using the appropriate rite and receive a Christian burial.

Entrance into the catechumenate should not be automatic. As the rite requires, "The prerequisite for making this first step is that the beginnings of the spiritual life and the fundamentals of Christian teaching have taken root in the candidates" (RCIA 42). The catechumen-to-be should show signs that he or she is involved in a life of prayer and understands and has some experience of belonging to the church.

The catechist should engage in a process of evaluation with each catechumen-to-be. This evaluation is not meant to be judgmental, whereby a priest or catechist makes an assessment as to whether someone is "worthy" to be a catechumen. Instead, the sponsors, catechists, deacons, and priests together "have the responsibility for judging the outward indications of such dispositions" (RCIA 43).

The category of provocation may be helpful in making such an assessment. The question could be asked, "Has the catechumen-to-be been provoked by his or her involvement in the life of the church?" Attending Mass, are they asking questions about the nature of a eucharistic life? Have they experienced the beginning fruits of conversion, worshiping the triune God rather than politics, prestige, or economic power? Do they have a sense that salvation is not the activity of an individual but deeper entrance into participation in the mystery of the church, in the friendship of believers? Whatever questions one asks, the process of inquiry should provoke the catechumen-to-be to articulate the way that his or her life has already been changed by an encounter with the mystery of Christ.

The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens should take place within the community of the faithful. There is no single time of year that the rite should be celebrated. In fact, it could occur several times per year if there were a sufficient number of

catechumens. The rite begins either at the entrance of the church or ideally outside. The location of the rite at the beginning is intentional. The catechumen-to-be, who is on the outside looking in, is about to enter into a new relationship with the church through acceptance into the order of catechumens.

Importantly, the priest or deacon goes to greet the catechumens-to-be. There is a wisdom to this liturgical action, one that should be transformative for the entire parish. A parish should not just wait for people to arrive at its door but should go out to invite men and women into the salvation available in Christ. The celebrant's first words upon greeting these catechumens-to-be should be one of welcome. This is a joyful occasion, a *celebratio* worth celebrating. At this point, the sponsors and candidates are invited to come forward, still outside the church or at the entrance of the parish, accompanied by singing. The rite recommends Psalm 63:1-8, which reads:

O God, you are my God—  
 it is you I seek!  
 For you my body yearns;  
 for you my soul thirsts,  
 In a land parched, lifeless,  
 and without water.  
 I look to you in the sanctuary  
 to see your power and glory.  
 For your love is better than life;  
 my lips shall ever praise you!  
 I will bless you as long as I live;  
 I will lift up my hands, calling on your name.  
 My soul shall be sated as with choice food,  
 with joyous lips my mouth shall praise you! (Ps 63:1-6)

Psalm 63 is provocative! It uses language like thirst, faint, seek, and behold. The catechumens-to-be who listen to this psalm and the assembly gathered in worship come to recognize that Christian salvation is about desire. This rite is not just a quaint exercise for recruiting new members to the church. Likewise, the psalm

provokes by promising what will come at the end of initiation. There will be water to quench the thirsty soul. There will be a feast of Christ's Body and Blood. How can those of us who have been baptized into Christ, who celebrate the Eucharist from week-to-week, not be provoked ourselves as we recognize the wondrous gift of Christian life celebrated in the liturgy!

The rite continues with an opening dialogue. The celebrant asks the candidates to state their names. They are also asked to express their desire for faith and eternal life with God. Although the rite allows for a large group of candidates to be asked these questions as a group, it is appropriate, if the group is small enough, to ask each individual. Each individual person comes to the church with his or her story. And his or her "I" is to become part of the church's "We." My desire for faith, my longing for eternal life with God is to be shared in this community of faith.

After the dialogue, each candidate (if the group is small enough) is asked to express his or her acceptance of the Gospel. The candidate hears a shortened proclamation of the kerygma. This moment of the rite follows the pattern of liturgical remembering that heals us from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Eternal life is not entering some out-of-the-way place we call heaven. It is knowledge of Jesus Christ who has entered into history, who has died and risen from the dead, and who is ruler of the created order. Salvation involves making every part of our identity conform to the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, letting salvation history become our history. To accept the Gospel is not to accept a series of abstract precepts delivered from on high. It is instead to give oneself over to a new story, a new history revealed in Christ. The candidates' acceptance of the kerygma is more than a general agreement with what the priest or deacon has said. It's a commitment of the self, the most important liturgical offering that the candidate has made thus far.

This commitment is not exclusively an individual one. Having committed to life with Christ, the church through the ministry of the sponsor pledges fidelity to the candidate. The sponsor and the entire assembly promise to "help these candidates find and follow Christ" (RCIA 53). The church pledges to live out the eucharistic

life at the heart of her identity—to become a place where divine love dwells. The homily during the Liturgy of the Word should underline not only the commitment of the new catechumen but the loving obligation to shepherd these fledgling Christians to participate in the mystery of salvation.

The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens is not exclusively verbal. The rite includes a signing of the forehead by the celebrant, as well as optional rites of signing each of the senses by the catechists or sponsors. An action, such as signing each of the senses, is a ritual performance that effects the transformation taking place in the soon-to-be-catechumen. The celebrant declares:

N., receive the cross on your forehead.  
 It is Christ himself who now strengthens you  
 with this sign of his love.  
 Learn to know him and follow him. (RCIA 55A)

The transformation that the new catechumen has undergone is not the result of his or her serious study, the sponsor's charism, or the presider's good preaching. It is Jesus Christ who is the primary actor who transforms the candidate into a catechumen, into one who seeks total union with Christ. Such a transformation involves the entirety of one's body. The ears are signed so that one may hear the voice of God. The candidate-become-catechumen receives the sign of the cross on the eyes so that he or she may perceive God's glory in every dimension of creation. The lips are signed so that the catechumen can respond in praise to God's glory. The breast is signed so that Christ may dwell in the heart of the catechumen. The shoulders are signed so that the catechumen may bear the gentle yoke of Christ to the world. And then each catechumen is blessed by the presider, a blessing that recognizes the wondrous transformation that has taken place.

Imagine an assembly, still gathered outside the church, watching this transformation. What would it provoke to a Catholic who has become bored with the church? To young children, baptized in infancy, coming to recognize what it means to belong to Christ's

Body? Catholicism isn't just a nice tradition. It's an entrance into salvation that takes up every dimension of our humanity.

The celebrant then offers a concluding prayer. Only now do the catechumens and the sponsors come forward into the church, preparing to hear the Liturgy of the Word. The rite suggests that they come forward, singing selected verses from Psalm 34 in which the soul cries out for divine wisdom. This psalm provides a lens for understanding the liturgical nature of the catechumens' vocation. Having enrolled in the catechumenate, the catechumens and assembly together participate in the Liturgy of the Word. After the readings and homily, intercessions are offered on behalf of the catechumens. They will now be prayed over and dismissed before the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Even if they have attended Mass for years with their families, as is often the case, they may no longer stay for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This isn't because the church does not want to feed them with the finest of foods. The catechumen is learning to eat, to chew on the wisdom of God found in the Scriptures. The catechumenate is a time to hunger for the Word of God, to seek the Lord alone. The homily should have touched on these themes. Likewise, it is appropriate that a Bible be given to the catechumen at this point, for the liturgical object *par excellence* for the catechumen is the Scriptures.

As already mentioned, this moment of dismissal could be misinterpreted. The catechumen could understand this moment as a separation from the communion of believers: Now that I'm a part of you, how could you ask me to leave? This isn't the right way to think about the dismissal. To be dismissed from the Eucharist is intended to increase desire. Originally, the dismissal during the catechumenate was intended to guard the mystery of the Eucharist. In the ancient world, one could not attend the eucharistic liturgy except if one was baptized. For us, people attend Mass all the time who are not part of the communion of the church. We don't throw them out.

So when we dismiss the catechumens the intention is to provoke deep desire for the Eucharist. The longing for the Eucharist does not begin right before the Easter Vigil. It is a hunger that is to take

over every dimension of the catechumen's being. And likewise, the catechumen serves a liturgical function for each member of the baptized assembly. It is easy for us baptized Christians to forget the wondrous nature of our vocation. We grow complacent with showing up. But each time a catechumen is dismissed from our midst, we should wonder anew about the glorious gift of the Eucharist that we receive weekly or even daily.

## **Conclusion**

Liturgical prayer is provocative. Liturgy provokes not through violent rhetoric or salacious content. It provokes because the liturgy provides a vision of human happiness that inevitably butts up against other ways of living. For seekers, regular participation in the liturgy can and should provide the best introduction to the gift of love at the heart of Christian life. And good catechists will lead these seekers to understand how the logic of love at the heart of liturgical prayer may be calling them to a new way of life. The Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens fully reveals the power of Christian liturgy in transforming men and women into disciples of Jesus Christ.

Those provoked by the liturgy will hopefully want to enter more deeply into Christian formation. They'll move from being seekers to entering into the order of catechumens. And here, the church through the worshipful wisdom of the catechist will be able to propose the hypothesis that answers the question at the heart of being a human being: we are made for worship.