

**A Handbook  
for  
The Assembly**

**A THEOLOGY OF LAY LITURGICAL MINISTRY**

*"But you are a 'chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pt. 2:9).*

All liturgical ministers are, first and foremost, members of the Body of Christ. Through their baptism they are the "holy people and royal priesthood" whose right and privilege it is to participate in the ministry of Christ. How the lay faithful exercise this ministry in the world varies, but the fullest and most fundamental expression of it has always been "conscious, active and fruitful participation in the mystery of the eucharist" (General Instruction Of The Roman Missal - GIRM, Introduction #5).

Since the celebration of the Eucharist is the "action of the whole Church" (GIRM, Introduction #5), everyone in the assembly has "an individual right and duty to contribute their participation" (GIRM #58). Some of the faithful are called to serve God's people in a more particular way through one of the many liturgical ministries that have flourished in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. This diversity of roles, functions and ministries enriches our celebrations and assists us in our prayer. Serving in one of these ministries is both an honor and a responsibility, and those who commit to it need nurturing and support. This handbook has been prepared to help you grow in a deeper understanding and love for the liturgy, your ministry and ultimately the Lord whom we all serve.

## **THE CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY**

In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), the Second Vatican Council teaches that Christ is present and active within the Christian community in a variety of ways:

“Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations. He is present. . .in the person of his minister; under the eucharistic elements; in the sacraments; in his word (and) lastly, when the Church prays and sings (CSL #7).

Most Catholics have been taught since childhood that Christ is present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and in the priests who preside at our sacramental celebrations. There is a growing awareness among Catholics that Christ is also present when the scriptures are read and preached in Church. Also growing is the awareness of Christ present in the people gathered to pray in his name. We call this gathering of Christians for prayer and worship the “assembly” and consider participation in the assembly as the most basic right and privilege of baptized Christians.

Since Vatican Council II Catholics have become accustomed to lay people serving during the liturgy as lectors, eucharistic ministers, cantors, musicians, ushers and altar servers. We accept these people as “ministers” and recognize that they have an important role in our liturgical celebrations. However, the most important liturgical role of any Christian is "member of the assembly", and we are appointed to this role by baptism. Liturgical ministers serve the assembly and assist in its prayer.

The assembly is as worthy of reverence as the eucharistic elements and the sacred books, and those who make up this gathering are called to nothing less than “full, active and conscious participation”(CSL#14). This handbook is intended to assist members of the assembly to understand and fulfill their role.

## **I. GATHERING AND PREPARATION**

Before the liturgy even begins the assembly gathers and prepares to pray. When does this gathering start? As Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles puts it in his 1997 pastoral letter on the liturgy: "In houses and apartments all through the neighborhood, the true entrance procession . . . is in full swing" (#40). He envisions young and old, families and singles, children, adults and teens leaving their homes and streaming toward the Church. Here indeed is the beginning of our celebration. And just as lectors, servers and homilists ready themselves before the liturgy, so too should the assembly.

- We arrive early and take seats toward the center and nearest the front, leaving the seats in the back and on the aisles for latecomers and families with young children.
- We greet those around us and take up our song sheets or hymnals as we prepare to sing and pray together. The Sunday liturgy is not the time for private devotional prayer.
- We center our thoughts, "not by leaving behind the cares and distractions of home and work, but by bringing them into the gospel's light" (Cardinal Joseph Bernadin, *Guide for the Assembly* # 22).

## **II. LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD**

From the first reading to the prayers of the faithful, the assembly listens to the word of God. This listening is an alert attention to God's word as it comes alive in our midst. This "liturgical" listening entails:

- Looking at the lector or homilist with our full attention. Lectors and homilists are encouraged when they have the full attention of the assembly.
- Putting aside our missalettes and refraining from reading along as the texts are proclaimed.
- Singing or chanting the psalm refrain with enthusiasm and energy.
- Maintaining a reverent silence before, during and between the readings.
- Praying the Creed with one voice and making the intercessions our own by enthusiastic repetition of the responses.

### **III. GIVING THANKS AND PRAISE**

- As the table is prepared for the Eucharist, the collection “for the poor and the church” (GIRM #49) is taken. Here we offer the fruits of our labors back to the Lord for the good of the whole community. Along with the bread and wine for consecration, these gifts of the people for the people are brought to the table by representatives from the assembly.
- The Eucharistic Prayer is our great prayer of praise and thanksgiving and a key moment of assembly participation. Led by the presider, we sing, pray, listen, stand and kneel as one, praising God for all the wonders of creation and especially for the salvation offered through Jesus Christ.

### **IV. COMING TO THE TABLE**

The Liturgy of the Eucharist continues with the Lord’s Prayer, Sign of Peace, Lamb of God, Communion Procession and concludes with a period of silent prayer.

- Of the many ways the assembly participates in the celebration of the Mass, none is more vital than "sharing together in the Lord's table" (GIRM # 62 ).
- As a sign of unity we pray the Lord’s Prayer together, then prepare to approach the table by offering a gesture of peace and reconciliation to those around us.
- We show our reverence for the Eucharist by the way we move and sing during the procession; by the way we stand to receive communion; and by our clear "Amen" when the bread and cup are offered to us.
- Since uniformity in movement and posture is a sign of unity that "expresses and fosters the spiritual attitude of those taking part" (GIRM #20), we refrain from any action that would draw attention to ourselves.
- After communion we enter into a period of peaceful silence that is “a wondrous mixture of personal and communal prayer” (Mahoney # 76).

## IV. GOING FORTH TO SERVE THE LORD

The concluding rites are very brief—a blessing and a dismissal—and prepare us to go forth to live what we have just seen, heard and experienced. Often we sing as we depart—carrying a song in our hearts as we re-trace the path back to home or apartment, dispersed like God’s leaven until we assemble again.

## V. GLOSSARY

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| <b>Ambo</b>                | A sacred place from which the word of God is proclaimed. It is reserved for the readings, the psalm, and the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet), but may also be used for the homily and general intercessions.   |
| <b>Assembly</b>            | The people of God gathered for prayer and worship.  |
| <b>Book of the Gospels</b> | The book containing the Gospels that is carried in procession each Sunday and from which the priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel.   |
| <b>Lectionary</b>          | The book containing the scripture readings used on Sundays and the readings for Mass during the week.   |
| <b>Liturgical Minister</b> | Someone who serves in a special role during a liturgical celebration.   |
| <b>Missal/Sacramentary</b> | The book containing the prayers used by the priest during Mass.   |
| <b>Participation</b>       | How the assembly takes part in liturgical celebrations.   |
| <b>Parts of the Mass</b>   | The Mass is divided into four main parts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introductory Rites - The parts of the Mass before the scripture reading, from the entrance song through the opening prayer.</li><li>• Liturgy of the Word - From the first reading through the prayer of the faithful.</li><li>• Liturgy of the Eucharist - From the preparation of the gifts through the prayer after communion.</li><li>• Concluding Rite - The priest's greeting and blessing and the dismissal of the assembly.</li></ul> |
| <b>Sanctuary</b>           | The sacred space around the altar usually set apart in some way from the rest of the church building.   |

## **VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

Bernardin, Cardinal Joseph. *Guide For The Assembly*. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997

*The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource, Volumes I and II*. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications. (The most important documents regarding liturgy from the Vatican and the Bishops of the United States.)

Mahoney, Cardinal Roger. *Gather Faithfully Together: A Guide For Sunday Mass*. Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997

## VII. CONCLUSION

This handbook has been prepared by the Office of Liturgy to assist you who are called to liturgical ministry. It defines your responsibilities according to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2nd.edition - 1975) the current directives of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.

Consultation and study of the *Institutio Generalis Romani 2000* is in progress. the actual text of the new Roman General Instruction cannot be changed, however, emendations can be made for its application in the United States. While the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy continues its work, Bishop Griffin has directed that no changes be made to current liturgical practice within our diocese (protocol #09/00).

We are committed to supporting you in this ministry and in your desire to grow in your understanding of the liturgy you serve. It is our hope that this handbook will be the beginning of a dialogue between liturgical ministers that encourages us to reflect upon why we do what we do and how to enter into "full, active, conscious" participation in the liturgy through the ministry to which we have been called.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas to add to the revision of this handbook, please direct them to:

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Peace and all good!

## **A MINISTER'S PRAYER**

(Adapted from an ancient Celtic prayer attributed to St. Patrick).

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the eye that sees me,  
Christ in the ear that hears me.