

Effective Liturgy

There are lots of works dedicated to myriad elements of liturgy, from manuscript traditions, through liturgy as learning, to communion in the hands. Here, we will look at how liturgy can be effective.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR LITURGY TO BE EFFECTIVE?

The classical understanding of what goes on in liturgy comes to us in two Latin phrases: *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis*¹. The *operato* side reflects the activity of God within our liturgy as guarantor and sender of grace. It has to do with issues like individual salvation. The *operantis* side reflects our participation in the physicality of the rite. It has to do with building up community. Not all classical issues pertain to today's liturgy.

For instance, classical questions on the intentionality of the priest really don't concern a vernacular liturgy as much as it does a faux-mystery liturgy, that liturgy using unintelligible language and inorganic gestic patterns. Since, in pre-conciliar liturgy, it was impossible to tell if the liturgy was "effective," arguments had to be made to ensure that "trust" in some kind of an effect was secured. The intention of the priest was hidden but nonetheless asserted. With the vernacular and its assembly friendly gestures, intentionality is an integral part of efficacy that can be adjudicated on-the-fly in real time. In other words, since intention is no longer hidden, it can be sensed.

¹ DOL, op. cit., para 2243. The use of liturgy here and throughout this book refers to the Sunday eucharist. While strictly speaking, from a sacramental theology point of view, the two phrases refer only to the seven sacraments, they also work as communication theory for any event. For any event, participants can trust that the reality encountered is present and by working with the form of that reality, the participants can help it be effective for themselves. The content of the sacraments is distinct. Their techniques are indistinct from any other communication event. So, one can easily extrapolate from efficacy of Sunday Mass to the efficacy of any other event, liturgical, para-liturgical or otherwise. The fact that one can do this is a sign that God does indeed use human communications to reach humanity.

Assembly preparation and knowledge was also an issue when meaning had to be placed on to an event rather than derived from it. While inner disposition of the assembly plays a role, the responsibility for communication in vernacular liturgy rests solely with the sender of the communication, not the receiver. If the receiver isn't "getting it" then the sender has failed to be effective.

While we usually cannot say that a "mass isn't valid," that it doesn't offer sanctifying grace in the ancient parlance, we can say with relative ease that a mass wasn't very edifying to the assembly. Some common signs of a liturgy's lack of effect are assembly comments like 'it was really boring' or, even more common, 'I couldn't hear most of it.' If comments constantly refer to crying babies, coughing and wheezing or trucks rolling by the open doors, in other words the fact of overwhelming distraction, then that liturgy is in trouble. Often, in such cases of poor liturgy, even the least distraction is enough to derail effect.

IT'S A DIFFERENT BALL GAME.

Does liturgy actually accomplish anything? Does it do anything? Adult talk on liturgy often focuses on sacramental realities like "real presence" or "validity of orders." But do sacrament and liturgy mean the same thing?

How many times do we actually do "real presence" or "validity of orders"? We don't ever. Whatever we do at liturgy helps bring about these realities but these realities are not actions or products within liturgy. They are the by-products of our actions. A by-product comes about only in an indirect way as a result of our doing something.

The basic action in liturgy is prayer. And prayer never accomplishes anything by our hands. Sacramental reality comes about as by-products of the "work of human hands" (what we do in liturgy) because God acts in our midst. So, we have both very little to "do" to accomplish anything and yet quite a bit to do to accomplish anything. We are both irresponsible and re-