


Introduction

 THIS IS SO BORING! Amen, amen, I tell you, out of the mouths of my babes (aged 6 & 9) has come this plain chant, *Daa aa aa ad* week after week, year after year. And coincidentally, I believe they are right.

This is not some pandering to the kiddies. As we will see, children really do have critical eyes to see what they see. The poor dears have been exposed weekly to inferior liturgy and decisions on so-called “children’s liturgy”—they have been packed away from the family into their “own liturgy.” “So are we going to our liturgy or your liturgy today, dad?” *Quid?!* How come these kids don’t realize there’s only one liturgy? Because, with a separate kid’s liturgy, there are actually two: if it walks like a duck...

Kids really do say and pray amazing things. One of the goals of this book is to encourage us to listen to what children have to offer. Buyer beware: this isn’t a collection of children’s anecdotes by an Art Linkletter.

This book is about doing effective liturgy. While we develop the principles of children’s liturgy, we may first be called to “be like children” in order to have effective liturgy of any sort. We may want to call upon God to help us regain the simplicity of a child.¹ Simplicity and clarity go hand in hand. Since Vatican II, *claritas* is above all. So, good adult liturgy may very well be the best of children’s liturgy. We may be called to really and liturgically “be like little children to enter the kingdom.”

Chapter one is a scriptural analysis of the word “child,” leading to a christological view of children. Chapter two is an analysis of what makes effective liturgy, including detailed analyses of three sets of norms: the directory for Masses with Children, the United States Lectionary for Children, select General Instructions of the Roman Missal and other liturgical documents.

¹ “You became like a child and lay in a manger; renew in us the simplicity of little children.” Intercession, *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours*, Catholic Book Publishing, New York, 1976, p. 226

Chapter three is an analysis of how children can inform liturgical practice with a list of practical suggestions.

Kids have almost always received a bum rap in the Church. Even in the choice of canonical scripture, those books² presenting Jesus' life as a kid were tossed aside for various reasons other than Jesus being a kid. After all, who can take a God seriously, serious being the operative word, who has the habit of knocking off his pals when they displease him, only to have Mummy make him resurrect them?

One practice that lasted was infant baptism, culminating in the popular Jesuit maxim: "if I get 'em by age four (substitute your choice of early ages here), they're mine for life." What an opportunity to fill kids' heads with stuff, which is what we all try to do, isn't it? What institution wouldn't go for that, both guns blazing?

What do we know about kids and church? These days, that is every three years, the assembly hears something about what Jesus thought of children. We have a nominal history of referring to ourselves as children of God. However, we often consider ourselves adult children when we toss that one around.

There is so little written on children's liturgy or liturgy as event, that the way we can think about how to perform liturgy remains undeveloped, even at the level of descriptive language. We'll try to develop principles and language, even theological language, to help our thinking about liturgy as we perform it.

My approach is to use the vocabulary of performance that is suitable to liturgy as event: theatre and, in this case, children's theatre.

First though, let's toss aside the red herring that liturgy isn't about pretending the way that theatre is. I mean after all, in Church we deal with God and the real presence of Jesus Christ. We're not faking it. Plays and play acting and acting aren't real, are they?

² See "Infancy Gospels" in James, M.R., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924 (1972), p. 38—89.

Such sentiments betray an uninformed view of what theatre actually is—a technique for story telling. Just as liturgy tells the story of salvation history, so does theatre tell other histories. In fact, actors in plays are seen as good actors when they don't "pretend" but react to situations "as if" they were real. Actors try to be as fully human as possible in a given situation. Fully human is what God calls us to be in daily and liturgical life.

My belief, supported by the history of liturgy and theatre in the late middle ages,³ and, to an extent, in the late 1960's and early 70's,⁴ is that when liturgical drama arises, it means that the extant liturgy doesn't work properly. There is a need, easily satisfied at a superficial level, for something "more." The same is true when we promote a separate children's liturgy: the "main" liturgy isn't working *for the kids*, who will express their dissatisfaction. The adult population will tolerate the inefficacy on the grounds of validity and/or extra-liturgical considerations, like days of "obligation," as in show up whether you like it or not.

Liturgy and theatre are different and ought not to be confused, yet both use identical techniques at the level of communications. It shouldn't be surprising. After all, God did become *man*, speaks like *men, women and kids* and uses the techniques available to them to communicate.

Therefore, let's draw on the years of practicum available to us from adult and children's theatre to help us with the practicum of children's liturgy.

And so....

³ Medieval plays arose when the population was cut off from comprehending the mass as illustrated by the use of incomprehensible Latin versus the *lingua franca*, and the use of hidden gestures, e.g., the priests' back to the nave and the assembly until after the Second Vatican Council. The assembly could see nothing of the activity happening at the altar and, therefore, invested these actions with meaning rather than taking meaning out of them.

⁴ As the rites were shifting to the vernacular and presiders were often incompetent to handle the new rites because of a marked lack of training, parishes began to look elsewhere for "meaning." Balloons, clowns, confetti and plays started to appear as experiments. Nativity plays expanded into liturgical multimedia shows, dance and drama. Training in the rites remains shockingly absent from the budgets of every diocese in North America but that is another book.