

# Bringing Our Lives to the Table: Intentional Preparation for the Liturgy

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An account of a typical Sunday morning in the Gaillardetz household:

*Sunday morning, 8:00 a.m.* The alarm goes off and I awaken and shower while still groggy. I stumble down the stairs, get the local newspaper and read it over a bowl of cereal. The children (four boys, 7, 9, 12, 12) are in the family room watching cartoons. I wander through and greet them, muttering something about not watching so much TV, and then remind them that they need to eat breakfast and get dressed for 10:00 a.m. mass.

*8:30 a.m.* I go back upstairs and give the newspaper to my wife who is just beginning to awaken. I begin to get dressed but as I am doing so, I hear an argument downstairs. The kids are fighting over what to watch on TV. I plod down the stairs again and arbitrate that dispute only to return upstairs as Diana arises and begins to get ready for mass.

*9:00 a.m.* Dressed and ready, I go into the study and log on to the internet to read the New York Times on the web and check other e-mail. I get lost in my electronic world and lose track of time until Diana rushes in to point out that it is now 9:30 a.m. and none of the boys are dressed. I run downstairs and angrily herd the boys back upstairs to get dressed. I am met with shouts of protest. The twins were out at a boy scout activity the night before and celebrated vespers, scout-style. They make a half-hearted appeal for thus having fulfilled their mass obligation. I give an equally half-

*hearted lecture about the difference between vespers and mass while noting that attending Sunday mass should not be viewed as a legal obligation—they aren't buying it. Indeed, "buying" is an apt word here, for the boys seem to view mass as a kind of commodity, a spiritual product, and a pretty mediocre one at that. On the level of overall entertainment value, the mass doesn't stand a chance next to the latest Japanese cartoon import, to say nothing of the latest play station game that awaits them in the basement game room.*

***9:50 a.m.** Three children are in the van, but the fourth is looking for one of his dress shoes, not to be found in any of its customary locations, which is to say, pretty much anywhere in the house. I am now steaming at the prospect of, once again, being late for mass. Diana suggests, quite practically, that we allow the guilty party to wear tennis shoes instead. I snap back at her about teaching the children the importance of appropriate liturgical attire.*

***9:55 a.m.** We are in the van on the way to church as I launch into a five minute jeremiad on being more responsible with "our" time. As we pull into the church parking lot I am vaguely aware that I have not exactly set the proper mood for celebrating the liturgy, but it is too late for that now. At this point it is all about getting an empty parking spot and, if God is good, a pew for six.*

***10:03 a.m.** Miraculously, we find the empty pew, but it is in the front so everyone gets to see the theologian's family sheepishly follow the opening procession up the front aisle. We barely settle in and the two youngest boys begin bickering about who gets to sit next to Mom (the seat next to Dad is never contested). I try to enter into the spirit of the penitential rite, but I am distracted by one of the twins who is moping and refusing to*

*participate in the liturgy. I am mightily tempted to point out that, in the light of this morning's behavior, this part of the liturgy might have particular relevance to him (I recall, in the nick of time, the biblical passage about removing the plank from one's own eye), but no matter, we are past it now as we sit for the proclamation of the scriptures. I catch a few bits and phrases, but it doesn't matter, I am fuming over the morning's events and the liturgy is effectively over for me. Besides, as soon as we receive communion we will be rushing off to beat the crowd out of the parking lot in order to make it to a soccer tournament.*

## SUMMIT AND SOURCE

In their Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the bishops wrote:

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavor is that all who are made children of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his church, to take part in the sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper. The liturgy, in its turn, moves the faithful filled with "the paschal sacraments" to be "one in their commitment to you"; it prays that "they hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith" (SL # 10).

It is one of the classic texts of the council and is worth returning to as we consider the more general theme of preparing for the liturgy. We miss the import of the passage if we allow our focus to be directed to the liturgy itself. As I read it, what the text is highlighting is not the liturgy but the rhythmic movement toward and from the liturgy that is the substance of the Christian life. To live as a member of the church does not mean living within the confines of the liturgy. Many mistakenly think this way and so consider a liturgical spirituality to consist of a quantitative maximization of one's

exposure to the liturgy. In this view, liturgical spirituality would demand not only active participation in the Sunday eucharist, but regular attendance at daily eucharist as well. Rather, to be a member of the church means not living within the liturgy but *living for and from the liturgy*. This is conveyed in the twin metaphors “summit” and “source

To see the liturgy as the source and summit of the church’s life is to place the liturgy in vital relationship to daily Christian living.

### **A. *Living for the Liturgy: The Daily Patterns of Living as Preparation for the Liturgy***

Our most fundamental preparation for the liturgy comes not in the hours immediately prior to the Sunday celebration of the eucharist but in the patterns that give shape to our daily living. Several of those patterns were on display in my Sunday morning diary.

#### ***1. Patterns of Leisure***

Sunday morning is a time of leisure in our family, as it is for many. But note the way our leisure was enacted. My children were sitting in the family room watching cartoons while I was upstairs on the computer reading the *New York Times* on the internet. It would be inaccurate to say that this is a typical characterization of leisure in our household—the children are not allowed to watch TV during the week and I usually read the *New York Times* and other e-mail at work—but the diary indicates something of the patterns of leisure today. These patterns are increasingly characterized by passivity, control, high levels of sensory stimulation and relatively low social engagement.

The most obvious example of passivity in leisure is the practice of “watching” television. Even our language betrays the spectator’s role we assume when we sit on the

couch and channel surf until we find the program we desire. The passivity and immobility of television watching, sitting at a computer or playing a video game, go a long way toward explaining our country's growing problem with obesity. Leisure has become less an activity than a passivity, a "watching" rather than a "doing." It is a bit disconcerting to realize how television, for example, has subsumed so many other forms of leisure that, in the past, demanded higher levels of activity and human interaction. Many sports fans find it preferable to watch a game on TV than to actually play a sport or even to attend a sports event in person. The negative associations we have with traffic and crowded stadiums and the numerous and at times intrusive and unpleasant encounters we have with others at such events (e.g., the surly parking attendant, the drunken fan in the row behind me) make the privacy of the family room a much more appealing option for viewing a sports event. It demands so little of us—we are not called to forgive the parking attendant or stand up and confront the unruly fan—that we will gladly trade in the immediacy of attendance at a sports event for the less demanding context of our living rooms.

My children sitting in front of the television are not really "playing" together, nor am I really engaged in "play" at my computer. Indeed, were they to move from the TV to a video or computer game, the real "play" involved would increase only marginally. Video gaming, from my perspective, seems limited to electronic interaction with a video screen presenting high levels of sensory stimulation. Video play requires improvisation within the confines of the game, but not as part of the participant's direct social

interaction with other persons.<sup>1</sup> It requires little development of the skills of compromise and conflict resolution that are always a part of genuinely cooperative play. The high levels of sensory stimulation mitigate against any real development of the imagination and the rapid concatenation of images and gaming scenarios demands very little in the way of patient attentiveness or even contemplation that might be demanded, for example, in a game of chess.

These patterns of leisure surely have implications for our ability to engage in the liturgy. We know from ritual studies that human play is the closest anthropological analogue we have to religious ritual. Both involve non-productive activity that is, in a sense, “wasting time.” The liturgy is, after all, an activity that demands, as Vatican II reminded us, “full, conscious and active participation.” It also demands a stance of contemplative attentiveness that is largely absent from our leisure lives today.

What I am suggesting is that vital to our preparation for the liturgy is careful consideration of the patterns of leisure that we enact in our daily living. When our leisurely play is genuinely cooperative, demanding patient and attentive engagement with our larger world, we are better able to enter into the patterns of the liturgy. A fuller immersion into the patterns of the liturgy, in turn, means a more profound participation in the paschal mystery that they enact.

Another dimension of the typical patterns of leisure today concerns the influence of consumerism. My children’s arguments about the poor spiritual “product” that the mass provided is but one example. Of course in some real measure I am in sympathy

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that there are more sophisticated forms of video games that call for much higher levels of social interaction and imagination, but they still are the exception and an adequate consideration of them is beyond the scope of this article.

with their concerns. The number of parishes that go through the motions in the enactment of the liturgy, giving little care to liturgical preparation and the skills of liturgical ministry, along with those who have long since settled for mediocre preaching, is a cause for real concern. However, the sad state of many parish liturgies does not change the fact that the culture in which my children are growing up is ill-disposed to prepare them for even a well prepared and well celebrated liturgy.

My children belong to a generation inundated with the patterns of consumerism in which every human good is reduced to a commodity to be consumed with a minimum of effort. Such a culture, grounded in the endless consumption of commodities, is singularly ill-disposed to receive the goods of creation as gift. Even worship becomes subject to the demands of consumerism and the expectation of endless entertainment. The dominant values of a consumerist culture render them ill-equipped to participate in even a well prepared and well celebrated liturgy because the purpose of this ritual action is not entertainment but the offering of praise and the corporate submission to the transformative grace of God.

Authentic preparation for the celebration of the liturgy in a consumerist culture demands that we try to recover a spirituality of gift that can govern our daily lives. The ancient Christian belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation from nothing,” was concerned not with speculations on an ancient version of the Big Bang theory, but with the conviction that creation itself, human existence itself, is not the product of some metaphysical necessity but is the completely unmerited gift of God. One can even read the doctrine of the trinity as a formal expression of this insight: God is pure gift. Only when the goods

of life are received as gift can we enter properly into the Christian liturgy which is itself about the reception of divine gift and our “return gift” of gratitude in corporate praise.

## ***2. Patterns of Communal Living***

Much has been written on the communal dimensions of the liturgy, However, I am not sure if enough attention has been drawn to the necessity of finding contact points between the communal celebration of the liturgy and our daily experiences of human community. After all, it is the substance of our daily lives that we bring to the liturgy. This is the significance of the ancient prayer over the gifts offered by the priest:

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life....

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. It will become our spiritual drink.

The bread and wine we bring to the altar come from the earth and our common labor.

They are our lives being placed on the altar to be transformed into our spiritual food and drink. This presupposes that there are some connections between our daily lives and the liturgy. This is the key to the Catholic commitment to the principle of sacramentality.

Vatican II taught that the church does not just administer the sacraments, it *is* a sacrament.<sup>2</sup> Just as any sacrament, in order to function as such, must draw its “matter” from worldly realities, so too the church could not function as sacrament if it were not able to acknowledge the inherent goodness and value of daily experiences of human

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<sup>2</sup> “[T]he church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race...” *Lumen gentium*, # 1.

community.<sup>3</sup> It is this ordinary experience of human community that we bring with us to be transformed into our experience of community among the people of faith gathered at the Lord's table. As the sacramentality of the eucharist depends on our bringing to the altar bread and wine, the stuff of ordinary human nourishment, so too the sacramental character of the church presupposes that we bring to this communal celebration our ordinary, human experience of community. But it is precisely this ordinary experience of community that has become more difficult to achieve in our North American culture.<sup>4</sup>

David Matzko McCarthy has described three vital and overlapping networks that have traditionally sustained an American experience of community. According to McCarthy, they are: kinfolk, friends and neighbors. By kinfolk he means those persons with whom we are usually related by blood and with whom we have lifelong commitments. By friends he means those persons with whom we have relationships sustained by something less than a lifelong commitment. By neighbors he means those with whom we share some significant common geographic space.<sup>5</sup> The struggle in American life today, particularly for the many Americans who live in modern suburbia, is that all of these spheres have been significantly weakened.

The growing phenomena of divorce and the rise of single-parent or mixed households has weakened in many ways the bonds of extended family. These bonds have been further weakened by the heightened mobility of modern Americans that makes it less likely that we will live in the same town as our extended family. This geographic

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<sup>3</sup> See David Hollenbach, "A Prophetic Church and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination," in *The Faith that Does Justice*, edited by John Haughey (New York: Paulist, 1977), 234-63.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller development of this theme see, Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 79-108.

<sup>5</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 85-108.

distance makes it much more difficult to turn to extended family members for support when a child is ill or a marriage is floundering.

The frenetic and over-programmed lifestyles that many of us have cultivated have also made it difficult to sustain networks of friendships that are more than casual acquaintances. Even our experience of living in a neighborhood has changed. The new familial goal has become independence, autonomy and privacy.<sup>6</sup> Think of the young family today just starting out, often forced to live in a crowded and noisy apartment complex. Their single-minded goal is to move “up” to a home with sufficient space that neighbors would no longer be intrusive. It is not that they are unfriendly; they just wish to be able to choose when they will and will not interact with their neighbors. This modern desire for independence, autonomy and control is reflected in the demise of the front porch in new homes. The front porch was once the social space for spontaneous interactions with passersby. It has now been supplanted by the fenced-in backyard deck, where guests are entertained strictly by invitation. Cumbersome household responsibilities like landscaping, painting the house, house-cleaning, mowing the lawn, that once were engaged by an interlocking set of neighborhood relations (the boy down the street would mow the lawn, the next door neighbor might shovel the elderly couple’s drive way) are now professionally contracted out.<sup>7</sup> It is less messy this way and less awkward if the job is not done well. The desideratum for many families, then, is a less demanding and intrusive experience of neighborhood. But what happens when we bring this more sanitized sense of community with us to the celebration of the liturgy? How

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Howell, *Helping Ourselves: Families and the Human Network* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 71.

<sup>7</sup> See McCarthy, 93ff.

well does it equip us to deal with crying children, authoritarian ushers, tiresome requests for monetary support and the like? Ought not the Christian liturgy to be more in keeping with the hospitality of the front porch than the privileged, by-invitation-only character of the backyard cookout?

This struggle to maintain an authentic sense of community in our daily lives is evident as well in the attempts of Christian families to make of their households a domestic church. The squabbles that our family had on the Sunday morning I described above are, in large part, ordinary fare for many families. Yet I do find myself wondering, on occasion, if there is not something more to these squabbles. Our family schedule is highly programmed with the children playing piano, participating in sports events, being active in scouts, etc. The fact that on this particular morning we were racing out of mass and off to a soccer tournament was a reflection of the busy schedule we keep. Each one of these activities can be defended, but taken as a whole they have led to a family life which is harried and frenetic. The consequence is that our family operates at a constant state of stress and anxiety that, I believe, directly contributes to much of the bickering. It is very hard to make a smooth transition from that state of family bickering to an act of worship intended to be the “summit” of Christian community life.

What is required, it would seem, is a more profound reflection on what it means to speak of a Christian household as a domestic church. The term “domestic church” is used frequently today. It is often invoked as a way of celebrating the every day holiness of family life. But what makes a household a domestic church? It is not the presence of religious statuary or the frequency of family prayer, it is the way in which the structures of daily life are formed according to the values of Christian living. The family is a

domestic church when it strives to be a genuine faith community in which each is honored for their giftedness and each is called to a life of shared responsibility for the life of the household. This community life of the home cannot be assumed simply because all the members count that same address as their official domicile. The community life of the household emerges out of a commitment to the welfare of the household. That community life is shaped by the regular practice of shared meals, shared chores and shared conversation. The centrifugal forces of an over-programmed family pull at the seams of the household and render the members ill-disposed to family commitment to common worship together. How can any family expect to enter into the peculiar rhythm of the paschal banquet when their home life marches to the discordant rhythms of a fragmented and frenetic existence?

What I have been suggesting here is that vital participation in the Sunday eucharist as a sacramental celebration of Christian community presupposes that there are contact points in our daily lives in which we have experiences of meaningful human community. If we have nothing to “bring” to the liturgy, there is nothing to be transformed.

### ***3. Intentional Preparation for the Liturgy***

As I said above, intentional preparation for the liturgy will require much more than taking a few moments before the opening procession to “collect oneself” or “enter into the presence of the Spirit.” Preparation for the celebration of the liturgy must begin with a conscious and intentional examination of the patterns of our daily lives. Unless the patterns of our daily existence are properly attuned, the peculiar rhythm of the liturgy, with its distinct approach to time, its celebration of the paschal mystery and Christian

community, and its demand for a contemplative attentiveness to the dynamisms of ritual and symbol, will appear as the discordant babble of one speaking an unfamiliar language.

In this article I have focused on only one element of the dynamic movement of living *for* and *from* the liturgy described in the council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Even as we focused on our daily lives as preparation for the liturgy, we must never forget that the liturgy is also itself a preparation for daily Christian living. The Catholic Christian life is always to be lived for and from the liturgy as we strive to deepen the connection between the sacramental celebration of the paschal mystery and the patterns of paschal living that ought to characterize our daily lives.

### **B. Living from the Liturgy: The Eucharist as Transformative Source and Power for Christian Living**