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# Leading the Prayer of God's People

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*Liturgical Presiding for Priests and Laity*

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A DOCUMENT OF  
THE ASSOCIATION OF NATIONAL LITURGY SECRETARIES OF EUROPE

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# Chapter I:

## Liturgical formation, an urgent priority

### 1. We need to rekindle the enthusiasm of the Council

Pope John Paul II recently stated that, twenty-five years since the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, appeared, ‘the most urgent task we have is that of the biblical and liturgical formation of the people of God, both pastors and faithful.’ In saying this he was underlining once again, particularly for priests, what the Council had already said: ‘There is no hope that full and active participation on the part of the faithful can be achieved unless the pastors themselves become imbued more deeply with the spirit and power of the liturgy’ (*Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Constitution on the Liturgy*, 1989, no. 15). ‘This’, he added, ‘is a long-term programme, and it must be begun in the seminaries and houses of formation, and continue right throughout their priestly life’ (*Ibid.*).

As secretaries of National Liturgical Commissions of the European countries, we would like to highlight this need. Our experience convinces us, without exception, of its urgency. There is no doubt that commitment to liturgical formation is uneven from country to country. In some areas great strides have been made, with very encouraging results, and the promotion of liturgical reflection and formation is actively pursued at many levels. In spite of this, however, it is all too frequently true that liturgical formation falls far short of what was called for by Vatican II.

A word on seminaries. A simple reminder that the *Instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education* (6 January 1970) directed that ‘in future Sacred Liturgy is to be considered one of the principal subjects’ (No. 79), and that it should come next in importance to Dogmatic Theology. This arrangement indicates a liturgy course which is both theoretical and practical. It should include formation in the art of presiding — and should provide for this by a sufficient number of periods devoted to practical workshops.

The weakest area in liturgy is undoubtedly the manner of exercising the ministry of presiding. Many celebrants, while there can be no doubting their personal worthiness or their good will, don’t seem to be able to preside effectively.

But have they been adequately trained to preside? Sometimes it would appear that they lack something of the enthusiasm which provides the motivation necessary to animate an assembly and focus the celebration of the liturgy.

This is what the Holy Father is underlining when he writes that ‘the time has come to recover that wave of enthusiasm which lifted the whole Church on its crest in those days when the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was prepared, discussed, voted upon and introduced in to the life of the Church’ (*Ibid.*, No. 23).

### 2. Why have we written this document?

It would have been a waste of time to produce a document unless we believed it could lead to concrete decisions, especially as regards the seriousness with which liturgical formation is taken at all levels of the Christian community, in its ministries and apostolic mission. Since we are secretaries of the National Liturgical Commissions, we will be very closely involved

with such concrete' decisions, and this document is an indication of our desire to commit ourselves to their success.

In preparing for our assembly of 1990 in Bruges, we conducted a survey throughout Europe. The findings of this survey prompted this present document. Its immediate concern was the topic *Presiding at Liturgy*, but what emerged with great clarity was the urgent need for liturgical formation of high quality.

Consequently, our intention is to place before you the results of our common reflection on the kind of formation which is necessary to ensure good liturgical presiding, including the conditions under which it is conducted and the spirituality it implies. We address ourselves primarily to the bishops of the Conferences of Bishops of Europe and to all in Europe engaged in and responsible for liturgical formation.

Our reflection on the presiding ministry of priests and deacons (and of course of bishops) in no way wishes to exclude consideration of lay leadership of worship. Pope John Paul, in the message already quoted, writes that 'an appropriate formation is indispensable for lay people also, especially since in many regions they are called upon to assume ever more important responsibilities in the community' (No.15).

### 3. Liturgical Presiding at the present time

#### *a. The chief celebrant of the liturgy is the assembly*

The liturgical assembly itself is the primary and most fundamental celebrant of liturgy. It is called together in order to carry out, in faith and in praise, its baptismal priestly ministry. When it is duly constituted, the assembly is the outstanding sign of the presence of Christ to his Church. 'Liturgical actions are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church, the sacrament of unity, namely, the holy people united and ordered under the guidance of the bishops. Liturgical actions, therefore, belong to the whole body of the Church... though they involve individual members in different ways, according to the diversity of orders, functions and levels of participation' (SC No. 26).

According to the same teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the presence of Christ to his Church is also signified by the proclamation of the word, the eucharistic celebration and the minister who presides.

Our main concern in this document is the presiding minister. We wish to underline, however, that it is not our intention to overlook the primary role of the assembly.

#### *b. When an ordained minister presides*

Various questions of a practical as well as a theological nature are posed in our countries by the function of presiding in the liturgy. The very use of words like 'presiding' and 'presider' is a source of astonishment to some. The fact is, however, that this usage is in line with the structure of the liturgy and with the most ancient tradition of the Church.

We must, nevertheless, be clear about the specific implications of this kind of vocabulary when we are dealing with the liturgy. Every aspect of the liturgical assembly and of its celebrations — and particularly the ministries of presiding over and animating the assembly — must flow from the unique nature of the assembly itself. This is also true of the various means and techniques used in ensuring a fruitful celebration in which everybody is involved,

even though in this case it is legitimate also to consult and apply the various communication sciences.

The exercise of liturgical presidency does not find its basic justification in a certain hierarchy of rank and dignity within the Church, nor in professional competence, nor in the need to share out various tasks. These have their place, but the fundamental reason why every liturgical celebration needs someone to preside is that no celebrating assembly can exist except in the name of Christ and called together by Christ, rooted in the living tradition of the catholic and apostolic faith. This reality is what presidency in the assembly expresses.

This is easily seen in the case of episcopal and priestly ministry. They are entrusted, by virtue of the sacrament of orders, with the task of ensuring, *in persona Christi*, the building up of Christ's Church; they are to gather it together and preside over the sacraments and other liturgical celebrations. Their ministry of presiding is a constant reminder and expression of the fact that it is Christ himself who convokes, assembles and animates his Church.

There is a risk — and it must be strenuously resisted — of looking on the one who is thus called to preside as one now placed outside the assembly or in a position of dominance over it. Bishops and priests are charged with presiding over the prayer and praise of the people of God (its 'spiritual sacrifice'), but they cannot accomplish this except insofar as they are themselves members of the Body of Christ, since it is the Church as the baptised people consecrated by the 'royal priesthood of the faithful' which is the 'subject' of liturgical action, and especially of the eucharistic sacrifice. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (introduction, No. 5) reminds us of this truth when it is establishing that the participation of the faithful in the eucharistic action is necessary. Presidency, and the exercise of the 'ministerial priesthood' which presiding involves in certain cases, are always a service offered to the 'baptismal priesthood' of all the faithful.

To be successful, the liturgical celebration must express all the wealth of meaning contained in this sense of Church and must convey it effectively to the gathered community. This will happen most easily and securely if it is symbolised in the manner in which the presider and the assembly experience their interaction during the celebration. Where this is achieved, the assembly finds that it has a genuine experience of being the true 'subject' of the liturgical celebration, as a result of how the presider relates to it, but also that, through the presence of the presider, it experiences what it is to be the Body of the one Lord, Jesus Christ.

Deacons are also ordained ministers, and may be called upon to preside over certain celebrations. The document entitled *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (Congregation for Divine Worship, 1988) offers some reflections on what the presidency of the deacon implies.

The deacon presides in virtue of his ordination. 'He is ordained to guide and increase the people of God. He is empowered to direct prayers, proclaim the Gospel, preach the homily and distribute the Eucharist' (No. 30). Nevertheless, the presidency of the deacon is a supplementary one. Diaconal ordination does not have as its goal liturgical presiding. In fact, the deacon cannot preside over the primary celebration of the liturgical assembly, which is the eucharist.

### *c. When lay Christians are called to lead the assembly*

Lay Christians are being invited more and more frequently to take responsibility for celebrations of the people of God, when priests are not available. Under what title do they under-

take this task? The Directory mentioned above offers some indications, which may also be useful in considering other kinds of liturgical celebrations.

In the first place, Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest are unequivocally referred to as ‘assemblies’ and ‘celebrations of the Word of God’ (Ibid., No. 20). This means that these celebrations are truly gatherings of the Church and not just devotional meetings. One might think of the parallel case of the Liturgy of the Hours. The *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* declares that ‘when the faithful are invited to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours and gather together in unity of heart and voice, they constitute a manifestation of the Church which celebrates the mystery of Christ’ (GILH No. 22, cited by the Directory, No. 33).

In speaking of lay people the Directory speaks not of presiders but of ‘leaders’ (Latin: *moderator*). The distinction is interesting from the point of view of grasping what is involved. The term ‘leader’ implies that one guides the unfolding of the celebration, ensuring that there is a proper balance between its various elements and between the different roles undertaken by members of the assembly. What the concept does not imply is a pastoral responsibility for the gathered faithful; this falls to the priest. Neither does it suggest a permanent ministry. In this sense it is correct to say that a lay presider acts as one member of the assembly among others. And yet his or her exercise of the ministry must show that this is a genuine assembly of the Church.

In most cases of lay leadership it is envisaged that the one who leads will use the official texts and rites of the liturgical books. This implies a ‘certain form of presidency’ which must be guided by the meaning, symbolism and laws of the liturgy which apply to all presiding. The basis of the exercise of presidency is the mandate received to conduct the celebration, but also — and more fundamentally — the responsibility proper to every baptised Christian and rooted in the ‘common priesthood of the faithful.’ Pope John Paul refers to this in the Apostolic Letter cited at the beginning of this text: We must give thanks to God for the movement of the Spirit in the Church represented by the liturgical renewal... for the ministries exercised by lay people and the responsibilities they have assumed in virtue of the common priesthood into which they have been initiated through baptism and confirmation’ (No.12).

The normal situation in which a lay person may be called upon to lead a liturgical assembly, in accordance with the law and with local regulations of the bishop, would be at the Sunday assembly, the celebration of marriage (Canon 1112) and the celebration of funerals when a priest or deacon is not available. More commonly, however, lay people might lead the Liturgy of the Hours, certain blessings, vigils, and group celebrations such as those for children or young people.

In these situations, one must be careful to avoid causing confusion in roles. For this reason it is envisaged that a lay leader of liturgy does not use the presidential chair or stand at the altar as the priest does. Rites which are proper to ordained ministers (some greetings, blessing the assembly) are replaced by other formulas which do not suggest that the leader is in a ministerially representative role before the assembly. Thus the leader does not speak to the assembly by addressing them as ‘you’, but always refers to ‘we/us’ to indicate his or her being one among the group. It may also be a good idea, to underline this relationship further, that the celebration be led by different members of the assembly from celebration to celebration.

It is also necessary, however, that it clearly appear that every assembly is more than a merely human get-together, that it is in fact gathered by Christ and exists in communion with

all other ecclesial communities, especially with the local diocese. The attitude with which leadership is undertaken and the demeanour of the leader should be such as to convey these truths. The signs of the presiding presence of Christ, the cross and the book of the word, will also be duly highlighted and held in reverence, as indeed happens in every assembly.

We felt it necessary to clarify the various roles and degrees involved when we speak of presiding in liturgical celebrations. All that follows takes these distinctions into account. But we will now address ourselves to all forms of liturgical presiding and leadership/animation. This will make for simplicity. The general terms presider and presiding will be employed; the reader will make the necessary distinctions.

## Chapter II:

# General Guidelines

### 1. What does the task of the presider involve?

#### *a. Welcoming and coordinating*

The one who presides at a Christian assembly does not simply present himself before the gathered people as a total stranger. As far as possible, he will welcome the faithful as they gather, greet them warmly and make them feel truly at home as members of God's family in God's house.

The presider will not do this alone, but surrounded by all those who are to carry out ministries during the celebration. This will usually be a fairly sizeable group of people.

This raises immediately the relationship between the presider and all the other ministers among whom his own ministry is exercised. To preside is not to feel one must do everything that needs to be done, to the exclusion of the ministries of others. The first role of the presider is to be present, to regulate the distribution of ministries and to coordinate their exercise within the unity of the celebration. Too many presiders yield to the temptation of monopolising all liturgical tasks.

But a presider may also risk letting other ministers take over, forgetting that their role is a subordinate one. It is up to the presider to ensure that this is not allowed to happen — that, for instance, the cantor or the animator or the organist do not set themselves up as dictators of what happens in the assembly.

#### *b. Being present*

This means more than actually being in the church and not leaving during the celebration (e.g. if someone else is delivering the homily). It means first of all that, by means of his presence, both in visible demeanour and by inner attentiveness and reverence, the presider succeeds in conveying to the entire assembly that the celebration in which they are engaged is, even in its smallest details, something important and wonderful. The personal presence of the one who presides is a vehicle of the presence of Jesus Christ to his Church at prayer.

#### *c. Opening and closing the celebration*

It falls to the presider to open and close the liturgical rites. This is true of the ensemble of the celebration (the opening greeting, the concluding blessing). But it is also true of the different liturgical units which may go to make up the celebration (for example: the introductory rites, the prayer of the faithful, the dialogue which opens the eucharistic prayer, the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, and so on).

In many instances it will be sufficient that the presider begin and conclude the rites. This will be enough to establish presidency. All the elements in between can — often must — be entrusted to the entire assembly or to other ministers.

#### *d. Leading the prayer of the Church*

It is the task of the presider to pronounce, in an audible and appropriate tone of voice, those prayers which are called 'presidential prayers.' These prayers obviously presume that all the



people are involved and consciously participating, while the fact that they are said by one person, the presider, signifies that they are greater than the prayer of anyone individual and are in fact the prayer of the Church, the body of Christ. Standing to pray *in medio Ecclesiae* and *in persona Christi* will always be the expression *par excellence* of what it means to preside in the liturgy.

An inescapable consequence of this is that it is not sufficient that the one who presides be a man or a woman of prayer. A close familiarity with the prayer of the Church — its content, its style, its theological basis and its ritual context — is also indispensable in the one who leads liturgical prayer.

#### *e. Positing the sacramental actions*

According to the circumstances, it belongs to the presider in the liturgical assembly to posit the essential actions which are constitutive of the Church's sacraments.

#### *f. Preparing for each celebration; preparing oneself*

It would not be right to embark on a liturgical celebration, much less to assume the presidency of a celebration, without careful and detailed preparation. All the ritual books nowadays envisage the possibility of choices among texts and rites, as well as points when the presider is invited to speak freely and personally to the assembly.

The most effective improvisations are invariably those which have been foreseen and carefully prepared. The presider must also gauge the assembly over which he is to preside, if his words are to be authentic and his actions confidently pitched.

Preparation, therefore, may be envisaged under a double heading:

- What kind of assembly am I called to lead in this celebration?
- What are the component elements of the celebration and their relationship to each other?

These questions are not simply technical ones. They imply also the need for an interior preparation of soul and body, of heart and mind.

## 2. Communication through ritual and sign

### *a. Communicating*

One does not preside for one's own benefit. Presiding is inextricably linked with others — and therefore with communication. It is important to reflect on what this entails, since the kind of communication we are concerned with is specific to the liturgy, and in fact differs from one liturgical action to another.

The presider must never tire of asking himself the questions:

- To whom am I speaking?
- In whose name am I speaking?
- For whom am I performing this action?
- In whose name am I acting?

This is not as easy as it may sound; acting accordingly requires a degree of sensitivity. For instance, in a *greeting* one is speaking *to* the assembly and *in the name* of God, while in a *prayer* one is speaking *to* God and *in the name* of the assembly. These are two very different modes of speech. One must find in each case an appropriate tone of voice, a manner of directing one's eyes which reinforces the words, and a suitable style of gesture.

In this matter of presidential texts, the Instruction *Eucharistiae Participationem* makes a telling point which reinforces what we have just said: 'One should avoid, on the one hand, a monotonous, uninflected style of speech, and, on the other, a manner of speaking and gesturing which are too personal and dramatic. As the one who presides over the rite, the priest should, by his speech, singing, and actions help those taking part to form a true community that celebrates and lives out the memorial of the Lord' (No.17).

### *b. Ease and dignity in presiding*

The presider must be at ease in celebrating with the Christian assembly. He must also convey an appropriate gravity. Being at ease does not imply any indifference or couldn't-care-less approach, since it has to mesh in with a sense of the dignity required in celebrating the mysteries of God. On the other hand, a sense of seriousness or gravity in liturgy is not the same as forced or artificial behaviour. It should flow with great naturalness, in the freedom of the Spirit, from a profound sense of what is involved in every liturgical act rather than from a stilted rubrical literalness.

It comes down to a sense of being at home with a mode of behaviour which is both ritual and symbolic.

The *ritual aspect* is a matter of the repetition of liturgical elements which are compact and of necessity well known to all. But it must be done in such a way that the assembly is enabled to appropriate them as so many expressions of its identity.

The *symbolic aspect*, for its part, is introduced in order to enrich and vitalise the seeming fixity of ritual by opening it up to new dimensions which go beyond what is apparent; in liturgy these dimensions centre on the living relationship of the assembly with the Christ who is invisibly present.

One who presides must therefore acquire the ability to engage in the liturgical gestures and speak the ritual words in such a way that these actions and words will lead the assembly to experience an ever-greater identity with its one Lord as his living Body. This is a very different agenda from simply mouthing the words and getting through the actions because the rubrics prescribe them.

### *c. Authentic signs*

In the liturgy everything must be genuine, notably the signs used and the attitudes these express. Liturgy is an activity of the human body. Its celebration engages the whole universe. It is an orchestration of creation. Since the presider is at the heart of the assembly and constitutes a kind of reference point, it is particularly vital that he or she embody a realisation of this cosmic openness.

The gestures of the presider, sparing and authentic, welling up from a profound sense of the celebration, will speak far more eloquently of the symbolism which is the life of liturgy than a spate of words or an interminable commentary. The beauty and noble simplicity of environment, artefacts, vesture, and above all the elements necessary for the sacraments, will evoke far more effectively the mystery being celebrated than a surfeit of explanations which are just a doomed effort to cover up for miserably inadequate signs.

In stressing the above, we do not mean to suggest that the relationship between presider and assembly should be devoid of warmth and spontaneity. Far from it. Symbolic presence is a way of being which is rooted in each one being genuine, true to himself. This is totally consonant with a deep sense of seriousness about serious things. Perhaps the fusion of these

elements is best expressed by the way in which one looks at people, since the eyes are the soul of the outer self. All the ministers in the liturgy, when they understand and experience themselves as ministers, will look at their brothers and sisters in the assembly with a gaze which 'reflects the countenance of Christ, which is the glory of God.'

The presider is also responsible for creating periods of silence during the celebration and for highlighting their value. Some of these are, of course, envisaged by the liturgical books. The presider will ensure that they do not become inordinately prolonged, or cut short in an urge to 'get on with it.' A sensitive presider will acquire the ability to 'feel' the mood of the assembly; even more, he will succeed in establishing and moulding it.

A sense of inner silence and recollection should be created by all those who minister — by their deportment and their very manner of speaking and singing. This should be the case even when a pause for physical silence is not appropriate.

#### *d. Should the presider sing?*

Should the ritual words be chanted by the presider?

First of all, if the presider's singing voice is totally off-key or he is utterly tone deaf, then common sense would say: don't inflict 'singing' on the people!

Having said that, different cultural groups have different expectations and different standards. This must be taken into account. A further factor is that the places where the possibility of singing may arise are not all of equal significance. The dialogue before the preface (for instance) or the opening greeting are not in the same genre as the preface itself or the collect. Where there is an answer to be elicited from the assembly, experience shows that it comes more readily when the phrase of the presider is sung rather than said. This would indicate that, even if the presider doesn't feel up to singing the collect, he might sing the conclusion. And so on.

Directives to the assembly, however, are of a different genre, and not intended for singing.

### 3. Liturgical space and liturgical vesture

#### *a. The presidential chair*

As we have said, the presence of a presider in the assembly is symbolic in function. This symbolism is expressed in various ways, among them the place from which he presides, the chair. In the case of a bishop or a priest, the chair should be 'an expression of the function of the one who presides over the assembly and directs its prayer' (GIRM No. 271).

When the liturgical space is being designed, the importance of this factor should not be overlooked. The presider's chair should be so positioned that the one seated in it is genuinely seen to preside over the whole gathering. It should also be an effective statement in symbol of the presidential function. But it should never assume the appearance of a throne.

The chair is the place of presidency. The presider remains there unless it is required that he be in another place for a specific purpose. It is a pity that in very many cases the altar is still treated as the place of presidency. It is scarcely necessary to add that when the church is equipped with an amplification system there must be a microphone at the chair.

The broad principle which we have applied to the chair is relevant to liturgical space in general: each liturgical area should be clearly reserved for the function allotted to it, and should not be used for anything else. Thus, the area of the presidential chair must not become a place

for storing books and leaflets, or a site for the amplification control-box. The altar is not to be treated as a sideboard or a lecture podium.

*b. Liturgical Vesture*

The importance of liturgical garments lies in the fact that they are always an expression, in one way or another, of our status as baptised Christians: in baptism we have ‘put on Christ.’ The liturgical garment is the sign of the glorified Lord. In our countries it is not customary that all who gather for liturgy put on such a garment (the alb). Yet we should be aware that celebrating together calls for the ‘festal robe.’ This does not offend against simplicity.

When a lay person presides it will be necessary to take each cultural context into account in deciding about vesture. Should the lay presider wear ordinary street clothes, or wear a symbolic garment, or simply wear an emblem?

The vestment proper to the priest, over the alb, is the stole. When presiding at the eucharist he also wears the chasuble (GIRM No. 299). Choosing vestments calls for special care, and will involve discussion with the crafts persons who make them. And a final thought: one wonders if it is a development to be welcomed when one sees in various regions that the use of the chasuble is being discontinued. It is, after all, a sign of the presidential function and it ‘contributes to the beauty of the liturgical celebration.’ (GIRM No. 297)

# Chapter III:

## Presiding at the Eucharist

*Please note: What is indicated in this chapter as regards presiding at the Eucharist may be applied, in so far as it deals with parallel liturgical structures and prayer forms, to liturgies in which a deacon or a lay person presides.*

### 1. The Introductory Rites

#### *a. The assembly and the presider*

Before taking his place at the presidential chair, the priest is encouraged to walk through the assembly with the other ministers of the celebration, especially the deacon who solemnly carries the book of the Gospels. This procession takes place during the opening song. This ritual action already gives symbolic expression to the relationship — itself theologically complex — between the assembly and the presider.

Having reached the sanctuary, the priest is invited to venerate the altar and the cross. He should recall what the GIRM says about the dignity of each (Nos. 259 and 268–270). In executing these gestures of veneration with deliberateness and reverence, the presider manifests to all his sense of the source from which his ministry flows, since the altar represents Christ.

#### *b. Greeting and opening words*

The priest opens the celebration by saluting the assembly in a ritual greeting. Various forms of this greeting are proposed, but all have a Christological or Trinitarian content. There is more at stake here than a simple ‘Good Morning. The greeting is a symbolic rite; its purpose is to evoke the nature of this ecclesial assembly. It is a faith-statement: it is the Lord alone who summons and welcomes his Church.

When greeting the assembly, the presider extends his hands towards the people. In a short while, when he prays in their name, he raises his hands towards God. These symbolic gestures are similar — in fact the rubrics mixed them up for a long time. But they are different and should appear as such.

However, no exaggerated poses are called for in carrying out these gestures. They will be seen as true and authentic only if they are an expression of a genuinely free and relaxed body and an inner spirit of reaching out to communicate.

The priest may now say a few words which will introduce his brothers and sisters to the mystery of the day’s celebration. How well one can do this is perhaps the best indicator of successful presiding. It will combine friendliness and dignity. It will not be a précis of what is going to follow. Neither will it be a string of woolly phrases indicating vague goodwill. Its task is to evoke the mystery of this assembly, gathered together by the Lord. Priests might ask themselves whether they have developed a sufficient ability to speak to the people about the surpassing mysteries which outstrip their capacity and which nevertheless are the very heartbeat of their lives.

As the penitential rite and the singing of the *Gloria* unfold, the presider acts as one of the assembly — as he did during the entrance song. His ministry is not a dispensation from being

a brother among sisters and brothers! He sings with them (though he will make sure that he is not drowning them out by singing into the microphone in front of him). He responds to his own invitation to silent prayer as they do, as a prelude to his gathering together ('collecting) the prayers of all.

### *c. The Opening Prayer*

The 'gathering together' of the prayers of the assembly is the first presidential utterance of prayer by the one who presides. It is a first climax of the liturgical action, which is convoked primarily for prayer. A case could well be made for saying that the conclusion ('*through Jesus Christ*') is actually more important than the content of the prayer, because when the priest expresses in this ritual way the mediation of Christ the Lord, he is declaring that he is presiding over the assembly not just in its name but also in the name of the one who presides in truth over all the cult rendered by the Church to God.

In the case in which the presider is not an ordained minister, it is appropriate to turn towards the cross when saying the prayer.

## 2. The Liturgy of the Word

### *a. Hearing the Word*

When the Church gathers, it is not on the initiative of its members but because it is called by the Lord. Since this is so, the first liturgical activity of every assembly is to listen to and reflect on the word of God.

So now the centre of gravity of the assembly moves to the ambo, the place of the word. This liturgical space must be worthy of its purpose and symbolise the importance of the word (GIRM No. 272). At this point in the liturgy, the presider sits and listens to the readers. His function is the same as that of the other members of the assembly during this time — unless there is no deacon or priest to proclaim the gospel. The task of delivering the homily is usually entrusted to the presider, though it need not be.

One might ask: if the presider is doing nothing special, is he not abandoning his role as presider? Not at all! In fact the opposite is the case. By his attitude of attentive listening and his obvious respect for the word which is being proclaimed, and by his wholehearted participation in the singing of the psalm and the gospel acclamation, he is an encouragement and a stimulus to the people in their undivided attention to the proclamation of God's word. His attentive presence at this moment is far more valuable than anything else he might do — apart from the fact that he would be usurping the ministry of readers, psalmists and deacon, which must be respected in every celebration.

### *b. Biblical formation as a liturgical requirement*

One of the vital elements in the formation of all presiders is a biblical grounding. The presider ensures that the word of God is duly proclaimed in the assembly. The presence of the presider is a guarantee that the Liturgy of the Word is celebrated integrally and worthily, and that the Church experiences itself constantly as being under the judgement of God's word and at the same time the grateful beneficiary of that word.

Presiders therefore must do more than just know the word. They must, as it were, be one with it. We might ask ourselves to what degree this has happened.

Solid exegetical studies are ready to hand nowadays. But on their own they are not sufficient to ensure a full liturgical preparation. It is the liturgy which makes of the letter of the scripture a living word: When the scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people and Christ, present in his word, announces again his gospel' (GIRM No. 9). Where this reality is mediated and experienced, a dialogue between the living God and those who listen to his word can take place. In fact the goal of biblical formation is precisely such a dialogue, deeply personal and fully communitarian at the same time. Only God can summon his gathered people to speak with him. Facilitating such an exchange is the privilege of the presider and also his first responsibility; its object is the moulding of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, by God's own word.

### *c. The Homily*

We still need to underline what a homily is meant to be. Too many homilies fail by remaining at the level of moral or social reflection, or by stringing anecdotes together or mounting polemical attacks. Or else they insult the word of God by reducing it to the level of a common denominator of human acceptability. The *General Instruction* is clear: 'The homily is an integral part of the liturgical action' (GIRM No. 9). Since this is so, it must appear clearly as an authentic liturgical act. It must be consciously attentive to God. It must be fashioned in praise and prayer. It must serve and foster the covenant between God and humankind. Whatever its thought or information content, the homily can never be reduced to being simply an 'exposition.' There are other forums in which we can expound the faith. It is too wild to hope and trust that if we permit the homily to be true to its own nature 'all the rest will be given as well'?

We do not advocate abandoning the effort to apply the word of God to concrete situations and to address contemporary life. What we wish to stress is that the first requirement of the homily is that it convey in the words of today the message of God. The homily is a liturgical act. It is also, by that very fact, a prophetic act. And true prophets have always been those who can be quiet and allow God to speak.

Would we be overstating the case if we said that our suspicion is that many presiders are very sluggish about preparing their homilies and immersing themselves in the word of God? We should be wary of the situation in which improvisation rules the roost and our whims become the order of the day. It would be appropriate for each of us to examine his or her conscience to see whether we have been guilty of making the homily a soap-box for personal causes.

There is of course an equal obligation to ask ourselves if our homilies really strike a chord with the congregation and speak to its real life.

### 3. The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The sacramental actions required in the eucharist mirror those of the Last Supper: 'He took bread and the cup... he gave thanks... he broke the bread... he gave the bread and wine to his disciples.' The different stages of the celebration correspond to those basic actions: preparation of the table, eucharistic prayer, breaking of the bread, communion (GIRM No. 48). The priest presides over each of these activities, although he does so in each case in a manner appropriate to the rite.

### *a. The preparation of the altar*

The preparation of the altar falls to the deacon and the servers. It is done, however, as an expression of the activity of the whole assembly; the bread and wine are ‘the offering of the people of God’. It is therefore the normal practice that the gifts be carried to the altar from the assembly. When all is ready, the priest comes to the altar and completes the preparation by the rites and prayers prescribed. It should be noted that the gestures involved do not denote an act of offering; they simply indicate the preparation of the gifts.

The missal is clear that the only texts which must be recited aloud are the Prayer over the Gifts with its introduction. Some of the other prayers may be said aloud (the prayers at the presentation of the bread and wine), while the remainder are silent, since they belong to the category of private prayers of the priest. The private nature of such prayers should be respected — if only to spare the people from a flood of undifferentiated words.

### *b. The Eucharistic Prayer*

The Eucharistic Prayer is the presidential prayer *par excellence*. We would like to highlight some of its characteristics in view of its recitation by the presider.

#### *It is a presidential prayer...*

It must therefore be pronounced always in a clear and audible voice. When there are concelebrants and they are praying parts of it together, they must do so in a low voice (*submissa voce*), in such a way that the voice of the presider is clearly heard. In this case the intercessory sections of the prayer may be assigned to individual concelebrants, but this is not obligatory.

The presidential character of the prayer implies that the whole assembly is involved in it. The people express their endorsement of the prayer at its beginning and at its completion. The singing of the *Sanctus*, the memorial acclamation and (in some cases) other acclamations also express participation in the prayer. The presider must never lose sight of this, and should aim at evoking the praise and prayer of all those who are gathered, by his manner of proclaiming the prayer and his prayerful attitude.

#### *It is from start to finish a prayer...*

The entire text of the Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to God the Father. This is true even when the text is ‘narrating’ the ‘wonderful works’ of God, especially when telling of the Last Supper. It is in prayer that the presider asks that the Father send the Holy Spirit so that the bread and wine may become the body and blood of Christ. The consecration, also, of the bread and wine is expressed within the structure of a prayer addressed to the Father: ‘He gave you thanks and said...’.

This form of prayer is called a memorial. The Church stands before God, recites to him the wonders of his grace and begs that he continue his saving work.

It is important, therefore, that the narrative sections of the Eucharistic Prayer do not become stories told to the assembly, or mimed for its benefit. It is God who is being addressed all through. By listening to the prayer and by intervening when called to do so, the assembly fulfils the duty of making the prayer its own.

#### *It is the prayer of the eucharistic table...*

The bread and wine are placed on the Lord’s table. They are consecrated by the Eucharistic Prayer. But the Eucharistic Prayer is not the place for copying the ritual acts used by Christ at the Last Supper — apart from that of ‘giving thanks.’ Care must be taken that the gestures



which are prescribed do not turn into a mime. Above all, it is totally inappropriate to break the bread at the moment of the consecration.

### *c. The Communion Rites*

#### *The breaking of the bread*

Among the rites and prayers which precede the communion, the breaking of the bread has a privileged position which derives from the symbolism of the action. 'The gesture of the breaking of the bread, as the eucharist was called in apostolic times, will more clearly show the eucharist as a sign of unity and charity, since the one bread is being distributed among the members of the one family' (GIRM No. 283).

If the presider takes the time to break the bread for the communion of the entire assembly, while the faithful sing the accompanying chant, the symbolism of his function in regard to the Lord's Supper will be fittingly highlighted. This important action of the presider is often reduced, unfortunately, to almost total insignificance.

As far as possible, taking communion for the faithful from the tabernacle during the course of the eucharistic celebration is to be avoided. The reserved Blessed Sacrament is intended primarily for communion of the sick and should therefore be small in quantity.

The singing of *Agnus Dei* has a ritual purpose, that of accompanying the breaking of the bread and, where necessary, the distribution of communion to concelebrants.

#### *The Communion*

The priest, in his capacity as presider, introduces the praying of the *Our Father*, wishes his brothers and sisters the peace of the Lord and invites them to share in 'the wedding-feast of the Lamb.'

Presenting the body and blood of Christ to the members of the assembly is not, strictly speaking, a presidential function. It belongs to the deacons to minister the cup, while other ministries may be associated in distributing the gift of the eucharist. But it is the presider who first gives to the communion ministers the consecrated bread and wine which they will distribute to the faithful.

## 4. Concluding the celebration

The presider concludes the celebration by saying the Prayer after Communion and giving the blessing. It is very suitable — especially if one is using a more solemn form of blessing — to chant the blessing formula so that the people can chant the 'Amen' without any hesitation.

It is not appropriate for all the concelebrants to pronounce the blessing together: it is a presidential act and therefore of its nature should be given by one person.

## 5. Concelebration, acolytes

Concelebration raises a practical difficulty for the notion of presidency. Presiding cannot be shared out, and the concelebrants must avoid infringing on the role of the presiding priest. The presence of concelebrants can serve as a reminder that the ministry of the bishop or priest is exercised within an *ordo*, while the focus on just one presider refers symbolically to Christ, the one Lord of the Church.

In celebrations, one sometimes notices a tendency to allocate to some of the celebrants functions properly reserved to other ministers — the deacon, the readers, acolytes—in order to have them ‘doing something’. This is wrong. The various ministers are called to fulfil their proper roles, no matter who else is present. They are not simply supplementary ministers ‘in the absence of a priest’!

A final word as regards acolytes. In order to carry out the ministry of presider in a competent manner, the priest needs the assistance of competent persons.

The ministry exercised by such persons must not be devalued. After all, how can we expect a presider to be at ease if there is nobody to hand who can foresee what he may need? At the presidential chair, how can a priest lift his hands in prayer if there is nobody to hold the sacramentary?

We believe that the ministry of acolyte (or ‘server’) is an important one which is necessary to facilitate good presiding, and we recommend that it be revived and renewed in our celebrations.