

Liturgy Unites, Fortifies Disciples to Bring Justice to the World

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The Sacred Liturgy, by its very nature, unites a community in solidarity first and foremost to give praise and thanks to the source of our collective being. Mother Church and, I would daresay, God desire our “full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14).

God invites our participation in his very life, which implies from the Second Great Commandment our full, conscious, and active openness to pursue, develop, and share our God-given potential with the world and to offer our support to others, especially the poor and disenfranchised, in doing the same.

Many people have the desire, but not the opportunity, to fully pursue, develop, and share their God-given gifts. This is the tragedy of the sin of our world that has created the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. This is why the Church raises up the mandate to “do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). This is why the work of social justice is so integral to our Catholic Christian tradition, that respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life is core to that tradition, and that the preferential option for the poor serves as the measure of our judgment of ourselves in order to be welcomed into the eternal life won for us through the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ.

In Pope Francis’ papacy, the world has witnessed an overarching theme of mercy centered in the gift and invitation to divine accompaniment. In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis places before us the privilege of reflecting God’s accompaniment of each of us:

In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone . . . into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Exodus 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life. (169)

Divine mercy, this invitation to embrace divine accompaniment so as to naturally enter the ministry of accompaniment and empowerment (social justice), echoes throughout the liturgy. The entire Mass is steeped in the language of God’s mercy, of God walking with us, working through us and in us.



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The liturgy invites prayer that expresses our hunger for a world united in faith, hope, and love.

LITURGY AND JUSTICE GO HAND IN HAND

I have had the privilege of accompanying many faith-filled people and people of good will in my broad work in social justice. It is impossible for us to sustain the necessary energy to do the work of social justice for the long haul without being centered in the sacred liturgy, the sacraments, and daily prayer. The World Synod of Bishops cited this when they wrote in *Justice in the World*, “The liturgy, which we preside over and which is the heart of the Church’s life, can greatly serve education for justice. For it is a thanksgiving to the Father in Christ, which through its communitarian form places before our eyes the bonds of our brotherhood and again and again reminds us of the Church’s mission. . . . [T]he Eucharist forms the community and places it at the service of people” (58). Without the Sacred Liturgy, there is no firm foundation in which to root us, no living Word with which to guide us, no pure divine sustenance to fortify us, and no community of disciples to accompany us.

So how does the liturgy (the work of the people) support, invite, and perhaps even obligate us to the work of social justice (the work for and with the people)? Justice is defined as our right relationship with God, which Jesus inextricably connects to our right relationship with our brothers and sisters throughout the world. It demands a spirit of solidarity.

The Sign of the Cross at the beginning of Mass centers us as we profess in solidarity as one body our belief in Jesus Christ in loving, life-giving relationship to the Father and Holy Spirit. It reminds us that our Baptism unites us as a priestly people, a prophetic people, a royal people. It reminds us of whose we are

and who we are called to be in relationship to the very source of our being, drawing strength from the God who is pure love in humble service to only that which is life-giving.

The work of social justice moves us beyond the essential ministry of meeting the basic needs of the poor to the even greater task of effecting change in the systems that prevent the poor, the disenfranchised, the immigrant, the person of color, the ex-offender, the unborn child, the elderly, and the disabled from adding their gifts to the building up of the Kingdom, to the ongoing work of creating the beloved community of all humankind. The work of social justice invites, even mandates, our communal participation in changing societal structures that prevent select groups of our fellow brothers and sisters from pursuing and realizing their full God-given potential. It requires us to confront our complicity and participation in such systems.

TRUSTING THAT GOD WILL TRANSFORM

It is essential to note that Matthew 25 (the Final Judgment) calls us beyond responding to the sole individual or individuals suffering the effects of injustice, to address the root causes of that injustice: to help the many who are “naked” due to poor educational opportunities; those hundreds of thousands still imprisoned by a system that is unforgiving of ex-offenders even after they have served their time; the many unemployed persons who hunger for the dignity of a well-paying job to support his or her family; the millions of children who thirst for opportunities to pursue their hopes and dreams in a safe and supportive home and educational system, and so many others afflicted by institutional, spatial, and internalized racism and sexism.

The liturgy provides a refueling stop for this work, a home base for us in Christ and among Christ’s body. The liturgy provides a place of freedom to give praise and worship, to speak our pain and hurt, to voice our hopes and dreams, to lay all of those on the altar and to trust that the Spirit of God will transform all of those things into opportunities to experience resurrection for ourselves and participate in resurrection for others.

It provides a space where we are clothed, and we clothe one another and all of God’s people and creation, in prayer, not just the prayer of the gathered community, but the prayer of “the cloud of witnesses” present with us every time we celebrate the Mass.

The liturgy, at its best, invites prayer that not just our personal hungers be met, but expresses our greater hunger for a world united in faith, hope, and love, and our commitment and desire to participate wherever God calls us in responding to that greater hunger.

HEEDING THE CALL THAT ALL MAY BE ONE

The call to social justice is a response to God’s deepest longing “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). It is this invitation of God to enter into his heart, into his life, into his joy and pain and loneliness that moves us toward a desire to participate in social justice, a desire that must move us beyond head and heart into committed communal action.

“That they may all be one” expresses God’s deepest longing that all be united one day in solidarity with the divine. Until such unity is achieved, God will be restless, lonely; and we, in turn, must be as well. The biblical references to the groanings of



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The Scriptures call us to take risks sharing God’s love and desire for a more peaceful world.

the Spirit — for example, Romans 8:26, relate the cries of a woman giving birth, thus the implication that life is ever issuing from the heart of God through the Spirit and will ever do so until all are one in the heart of God.

Even as we enter the sacred space where we will celebrate the liturgy, we are already reminded of our connection with Christ, with each other, and with all creation as we dip our finger into the font, signing ourselves with the cross of Christ into which we were initiated at Baptism. It also reminds us of our adoption through Christ and of the privilege and responsibility of belonging to a greater Christian family and an even greater human and heavenly family.

The Penitential Act unites us in our collective desire to be freed of every impediment that would prevent us from union with God and, by extension, with each other. As we pray through the Penitential Act, our “Lord, have mercy” expresses our invitation to God to enter more deeply into our life, into our hopes and joys, our pains and struggles, and into those dark places that need transformation. In this act, God invites us into God’s very life, to dwell there for a time and feel God’s joy at all that is good in the world and also be willing to be touched by and share God’s pain and tears at the injustices against the human family across the spectrum of life from conception to death, and against the environment that sustains us to be stewarded by us for the posterity of future generations.

The Gloria centers us in the life-giving and dynamic relationship of the Trinity, inviting our entering into this sacred dance of life-giving and life-receiving relationship, inviting us to be open, pliable, willing to be stretched and filled by that divine love. Such love moves us to see beyond our limited perception of how much we can do, how much we can love, to take greater risks for love in outreach to the poor and forgotten as God invites us to do so.

A MISSION TO BUILD THE KINGDOM

The Gospel of service and social justice, proclaimed at ordinations, is Luke 4:16–21. The words Jesus proclaims from the prophet Isaiah (61:1) speak of Jesus’ core mission and, by extension,



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our mission as his disciples. In that passage Jesus invites us into his mission: “Today, these words are fulfilled in your hearing.” The call to the work of social justice, to building the kingdom where “all may be one” is dependent upon our truly hearing, taking to heart and engaging our bodies, minds, and spirits in the collective work of social justice.

Thus, the Liturgy of the Word invites the hearer to listen more intently to how the Scriptures call us not only to conversion within, but to a greater resolve to be involved in taking risks to share God’s love, to participate in God’s desire for a more just and peaceful world. It is no coincidence that virtually every story of Jesus is centered in community, healing, casting out demons or challenging divisiveness, calling people to unity, harmony, and peace.

In the Creed we profess that we are united in a divinely blessed social bond as one (working together), holy (united with God), catholic (recognizing that we are part of a universal family), and apostolic (always being sent/mi ssioned into the world). The petitions in the Prayer of the Faithful reinforce this bond as we raise up universal prayers, asking God to not only answer those prayers but, when possible, for us to participate in being the answer to those prayers.

The ritual of the Presentation of the Gifts of bread and wine should reinforce our desire to become instruments of Christ’s justice. Simple bread and wine represent gifts given us by God. They also represent our gifts, abilities, talents and attributes, our time and treasure. They are also our pains and struggles, our challenges, and inadequacies. They are also the injustices, violence, oppression, and harm inflicted on the poor and disenfranchised of our world.

These latter two “gifts” that sound much like burdens are indeed gifts, especially because they call forth the best and the fullest sharing of the God-given gifts in each of us to respond to the needs of others. They call us not only to individual responsibility but to a social responsibility.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, heaven unites with earth, simple gifts become the gift of Jesus’ Body and Blood, and through receiving his Body and Blood, our collective gifts are inspired with the Spirit, strengthened, and fortified for us to go forth from



The Eucharist nourishes disciples for their work in the world.

the assembly to utilize those gifts in more powerful ways than we could ever do on our own “for the salvation of all the world” (Eucharistic Prayer III).

The keystone and central phrase of the Lord’s Prayer is: “Give us this day our daily bread.” For some, daily bread is the simple sustenance of a meal and access to potable water. But daily bread is also more importantly about life-giving relationships, those relationships that sustain us, affirm us, and compassionately challenge us. God gives us our daily bread with the hope that we in turn might be(come) daily bread in alleviating the hungers of those beset by the spirit and life-sapping forces of injustice.

In receiving the Body and Blood of Christ (One Bread, One Body) we approach the altar seeking the spiritual sustenance we need to fortify our bodies, minds, and spirits for the work God calls us to do in the world. We also “receive” God’s longing that each of us be consumed by his love so much that our natural response is to go forth, filled with God’s Word, filled with Jesus’ life-giving presence, filled with the collective encouragement and prayers of the community, to be instruments individually and collectively, in the work of building a more just society. ♦

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