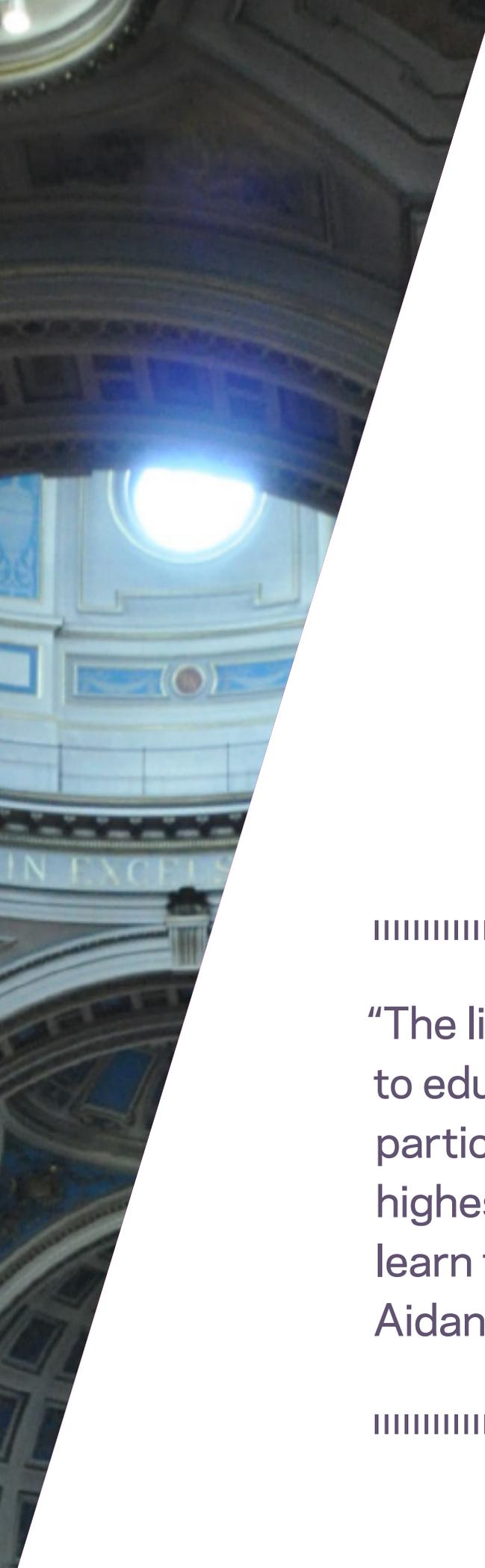


Brompton Oratory

LITURGICAL EVANGELIZATION

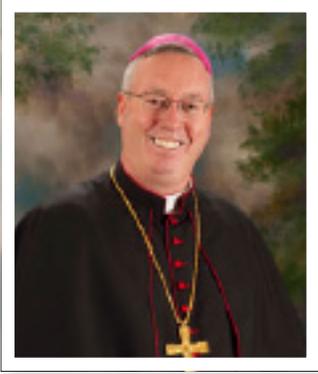
BY BISHOP CHRISTOPHER COYNE





“The liturgy, like the feast, exists not to educate but to seduce people into participating in common activity of the highest order, where one is freed to learn things which cannot be taught.”
Aidan Kavanagh





Bishop Christopher Coyne is auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis and since September 2011, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese.

The death of a friend or a loved one is a moment of crisis in anyone's life. It throws us out of our normal patterns of existence. We find ourselves confronted with moments of intense activity and moments of bleak emptiness. We relate to those we know, even intimately, and they to us differently: what should we say to each other, how do we act, is it "okay" to talk about the deceased, what can I do, what should I do?

Ritual, both social and religious, has in the past given a framework by which this personal and familial chaos can be addressed. Neighbors would come to the house offering simple words of condolence and substantial acts of consolation: food, baby-sitting, housekeeping, whatever was necessary. People fell into the "doing" of things. They were not there as grief counselors or spiritual directors. They simply were there. Yet, they also brought the most important gift to the grieving: personal presence. They sat with the bereaved. They knew the simple but expected phrases: "I'm so sorry. You have my prayers. Just let me know what I can do." Some might complain that these were nothing more than empty, rote phrases, devoid of meaning, but they would be wrong. They were ritual phrases that everyone knew and understood and expected as the giver and

the receiver of these words. They allowed for structure and clear communication in the midst of a chaotic moment of life.

The same was true for the religious rituals centered around the funeral rites. Within the Jewish community, after the burial rites were carried out, the family would normally sit in "Shiva" for three or seven days. During this period, friends and family paid a Shiva call to those who were sitting Shiva, normally bringing food rather than flowers since those who were mourning were not to be concerned with such mundane things.

Within the Christian context, the three-fold pattern of wake, the service or Mass, and burial offered another familiar framework. In times past, we all knew the drill." Friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, all would come to the wake. Flowers would be sent; notes or Mass cards would be placed on a table and answered later; and again, the formal words of consolation would be spoken by all. This same pattern of ritual played out within the Mass/service and the burial rite. The religious and social rituals allowed us to deal with the grim reality of death, to speak when it was difficult, and to act within a pattern of behavior that was understood by



all. These simple expected words and actions of the rites bore deeper complex meanings: we are here with you, we understand, we all see ourselves in you, and, in the case of religious rituals, they professed belief in God, belief in heavenly communion, and belief in eternity.

This ritual familiarity has been the case in the past but it is not quite the case now, especially when one is talking about the civic and social rituals surrounding death. Part of this is that structures of family and community out of which these rites happened organically in the past

are no longer automatically there. Families are smaller and more fragmented by distance and time. Neighborhoods are more closed and insular and the numbers are just not there anymore within our parishes and religious communities. In many instances, the ritual model has been replaced with the therapeutic model and we can no longer assume that people “know the drill.”

Gospel Book Entry Into Jerusalem, Ethiopia, c. 1420

The reason for this is not the point of this article. I simply raise this as a given to underline the impact it has on the practice and understanding of the funeral rites of the Church. We cannot assume that the people present at the Church's rites are either believers or knowledgeable participants in the rites. Yet, religious ritual, done consistently and well, according to the intention and directives of the Church offers a framework in which grief can be expressed, hope can be nourished, and the deeper longings of the human person can be articulated in faith even when one is only barely able to either understand or participate. But what is even more important is that religious ritual can, at the same time, call people to faith.

Many who work in service to the Church's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) will tell you that oftentimes those who come to the rites discerning entrance into the Catholic Church have had a profoundly moving experience of the mystery of the Church within a funeral. The deceased may have been a family member, a friend, or maybe they were attending the funeral to support someone they knew who had lost a loved one, but somewhere within the ritual of the funeral rites, they sensed something intensely disturbing, in

the good sense of the word, such as to disturb one's slumber.

My point here is this: the Church's liturgy, by its very nature is an evangelical act, meaning it is a proclamation of the Word who became flesh, who desires an encounter with us that sparks a relationship grounded in his Body through Word and Sacrament. Even more so, if Christ is truly present in the Word proclaimed and in the Sacrament celebrated, those present at the liturgical celebration, no matter how nascent or lukewarm their faith may be, who are seeking something true and deep in their lives, will hear the call of Jesus Christ to come to Him even if they are not sure what they may be experiencing.

Notice something important here. It is that word "relationship." Jesus Christ calls each of us to Himself. He calls us to a relationship with Him that invites us to come to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him. This call is manifested clearly in the Church's announcement of the good news of salvation and this announcement, as the Church teaches, reaches its heights in its liturgy celebrated by Christ the Head and we the Body. This call of Christ to a deeper relationship with Him is made to all who are present within the liturgical assembly.

But allow me to state the obvious: there is often a disconnect between what is supposed to be happening in the liturgy and what actually occurs. Christ's call is often met with what seems to be "deaf ears." While the full reasons for this are unique to each individual, it seems to me that there are two basic end points at which the connection between the human person as participant and the liturgy as an evangelical act can break down. The first is when the person who is participating is not able to connect to the deeper meanings and reality of the liturgy because their own life is so far away from the meanings and realities present. So, for example, if one's life is disordered by selfishness and sin, it is very difficult to see and accept the call to conversion into the person of Christ present in the Church's liturgy. Or if one is intellectually hostile to the possibility of a Divine Being or a revealed religion, one cannot see the liturgy as anything more than a bunch of superstitious nonsense. The disconnect is from the side of the person and no celebration of the liturgy no matter how well done is going to matter in their lives.

The second end point occurs when the celebration of the liturgy is done so poorly and with so little care that even the most saintly of believers would find it difficult to experience any encounter with the transcendent. If the liturgy is going to be evangelical, meaning by its very celebration a proclamation of the “good news”, intended to call those with no faith to faith and those with faith to deeper faith, then we have to pay attention to all of the details of its celebration. This means the liturgy has to be celebrated with dignity, grace, and care according to how the Church desires it to be celebrated. Done without explanation. Done in a church that is clean, well-lit, and comfortable. Done with clean and beautiful vessels, vestments, and books. Done so as you can hear what is being said, with preaching that speaks to the words of Scripture and the rite itself, preaching that speaks to the life of the Christian and preaching that is good news. Done by clergy and people who look like they really believe and really care.

In all of this, the foundational starting point is to let the Rite be the Rite. In other words, allow the Church’s liturgy to do what it does by paying attention and tending to the details. There is no need to “reinvent” the Liturgy. Just do it well.

Read the rituals. Know the options that are already available within the rite for its celebration. The Church’s Liturgy works if one just gives it a chance. But when we treat it shabbily or carelessly, it can’t.

This also means trusting the rite. Too often what we find happening in ritual celebrations such as funerals and weddings and baptisms are efforts to make the rite “relevant” or therapeutic rather than allowing the rite done well to take the person where it will as the Church intends. Just as the cultural frameworks of ritual already exist for dealing with something like a death in a family, so too the ritual framework exists in the same way. We just need to rediscover both.

I try to remind myself each time I celebrate the Church’s liturgy to “get out of the way of the Church’s worship,” to be a bridge that serves to connect the people of God with the person of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. If, as one truly believes, the Triune God is present in Word and Sacrament and in the Body of Christ gathered in faith, then one needs to get out of the way and allow the rite to do what it does. In that place in which holy things are being done by holy people, there are many present who may not believe or whose faith may be weak or who are just seekers of truth. The Church’s

liturgy speaks to them, as it does to all, proclaiming the evangelical message of the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord if we only take care to allow it do so.

