

An A+ Analysis: Pope Francis and the Beauty of the Liturgy  
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I have taught liturgical presiding and preaching for the past 33 years at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. During this tenure, I have worked with seminarians from all over the globe.

Our course sessions engage the students in the art of celebrating the divine mysteries of the Roman Catholic tradition, especially the Eucharist. In the sphere of word and sacrament, I have had the honor of encouraging fledgling presiders to learn the skills of understanding, celebrating, and preaching the rites.

Knowing sacramental theology, honoring the rubrics, cherishing the cultural expressions of the communities they will serve, and becoming confident with their strengths and limitations of body and voice, become the central learning outcomes of the courses.

The art of presiding and preaching is an essential part of the formation of future priests, deacons, and lay leaders of prayer. It is about learning to be an artist, learning the basic steps of the divine choreography of the Trinity.

As such, the art of celebration and learning the roles of the leader of a celebration is not unlike becoming a disciple of Christ, as Tertullian suggests: Christians are made, not born – Presiders are made, not born. Presiding and preaching classes are meant to make leaders of the liturgy. They are spaces, a Kairos of sorts, meant to be formative of body, mind, and spirit.

The art of leading a celebration demands a radical conversion, leading to the heart of our faith experience: “it is no longer I who lives but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2: 20). Thus, there is an inner formation of the presider which complements the outer expressions to be learned. While this inner formation of the student is a much more comprehensive transformation, and while it is not something that happens through classroom instruction, it is, nevertheless, an essential element of the art of presiding and preaching, which is necessary for the student to become aware of in their personal lives.

I often tell students that the preaching and presiding classes are the most important classes they will take in preparing for ministry. The communities they serve will see them most publicly and know the depth of their faith commitment, kindness, and goodness from how they speak, gesture greetings, and share the bread and wine, the oil, the water, and the fire.

To this end, the Bishops of the United States affirmed the essential part that liturgy, and by inference, the formation of the presider, plays in the life of the entire parish. In their 1972 document: **Music in Catholic Worship**, they state: *Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it.* (6)

As you might expect, I have graded many papers on liturgy and presiding and have heard and watched many class presentations about the theology of presiding and the practice of celebrating the rites beautifully and with great care.

I have learned a lot working with these students and reading their essays. I have been able to synthesize a great deal of scholarship about sacraments, culture, communication skills, marketing,

neurobiology, and good old fashion good taste. I am grateful to the students I've worked through the years for this acquired wisdom.

With each new academic year, they continue to teach and encourage me to learn more about the importance of liturgical worship. Our students have helped me to believe that our liturgical activity is an intentional act of public theology.

I've been edified through their struggles to learn the habitus of presiding, their awkwardness with their bodies, their determination to communicate from the heart, and their deliberate refusal to go on automatic pilot as presiders.

With them, I have come to appreciate that the reformed rites of the Second Vatican Council have ample enough "symbolic density" to offer an encounter with the beauty of Christ beautifully.

Thus, you can imagine my delight when I picked up Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter, Desiderio Desideravi, this July. It was published at the end of June 2022, subtitled: On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God.

As I read this document, I was taken by the depth of its sacramental theology and insights into the liturgy. I began to wonder if Pope Francis himself ever taught liturgy or the art of presiding. It seemed like it could be an outline of a presiding course.

Reading, I heard echoes of my doctor father, David Power, OMI, of happy memory. It was a balance of contemporary sacramental insights, a thorough knowledge of the social sciences, contemporary philosophy, and the practical skills of taking a ritual book and making it come alive in the flesh.

By the end of the text, I said that if this were a student essay or even a master's thesis, it would deserve an A+ or a summa cum laude.

Here's why.

## 1. The Gift of God

The Apostolic Letter grounds the whole reality of sacrament in the theology of gift. This is the recognition that what is being offered to humanity is a creative invitation to participate in the divine life of the Trinity. As a gift, it is gratuitous. It cannot be bartered, earned, or bought. The reality of this gift is the call of God to humanity, a summons from the old humanity, which tends towards death, into a new humanity that is fully alive in Christ. From the beginning of creation, this has been God's desire. God has called deeply allured people into a covenant of love. This love is so profound that even our response to receiving this gift arises from God's desire for us. In other words, our surrender to the gift is Christ's greatest desire. Thus, this text's title implies God's profound desire for humanity's transformation.

It is a lifelong process of formation that the liturgy offers. This is not to be understood in the abstract but known in the full context of the experience of Metanoia; the gift is an invitation to what the Orthodox Christians call *theosis* or divinization. Paragraph 41 of the letter says, "The full extent of our formation is our conformation to Christ. I repeat: it does not have to do with an abstract mental process, *but with becoming Him.*" (Italics mine). Becoming Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit in liturgical action is always the work of God.

## 2. Baptism as an Entry

The entry point into such formation and transformation is our baptism. Paragraph 12 states this clearly: *“Our first encounter with his paschal deed is the event that marks the life of all believers: our baptism. This is not a mental adhesion to his thought or the agreeing to a code of conduct imposed by Him. Rather, it is being plunged into his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, being plunged into his paschal deed. It is not magic... In perfect continuity with the incarnation, there is given to us, in the virtue of the presence and action of the Spirit, the possibility of dying and rising with Christ.”*

This is a renewed understanding of the motive to be baptized and the significance of the sacraments of initiation. In a former theological environment, infants were baptized because of the fear of early death and the peril of surviving forever in limbo. Limbo was conceived as a place of happiness without encountering the divine. In recent theological conversations, limbo is understood as a theory that never achieved the status of formal Church teaching. And, in the Catholic Church’s catechism, limbo is not even mentioned. This motivation, therefore, is no longer authentically Catholic.

This text suggests a more ample reason for baptism. Namely, it is in the profound desire on the part of the human to be inserted into the mystery of Christ and the promise of abundant life even now. And all of this is a gift.

Within this context, it is to be noted, therefore, that baptism is the beginning of the entire initiation-formation process. The document is extensive in acknowledging the ongoing need for formation for liturgy on the part of the clergy and the entire communion of faith.

What is important is to recall that baptism and confirmation are the unrepeatable sacraments of initiation. The Eucharist, on the other hand, the liturgical source and center of our Christianity, is the *repeatable* ongoing sacrament of initiation. While the text does not emphasize this point, it seems to be a necessary conclusion from the importance given to the formational aspect necessary for the liturgy to be experienced as the transformational gift of God to the community into Christ.

I would suggest that we remember that Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are the three sacraments of initiation. The first two lead into the third. The liturgy of the Eucharist repeats over and over and over as God’s gift in the Spirit that transforms the baptized into the living body of Christ. From this, it seems that the purpose of the Eucharist is to be received as a gift from God to transform humans into the divine. And thus, the human reaching out in love to others in justice and all creation becomes the living sacrifice of praise, the true worship of God.

### 3. Readiness for Symbolic Experience

I consider one of the most interesting parts of this text to be the observation that we are presently living in a culture where symbolic understanding is not as available as it has been in the past. Paragraph 27 strongly suggests this: *“Therefore, the fundamental question is this. How do we recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action? This was the objective of the Council’s reform. The challenge is extremely demanding because modern people – not in all cultures to the same decree – have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act.”*

This is a series claim. It impacts how Christians appropriate the sacramental meaning and are transformed by it. To this end, the letter offers suggestions to remedy this lack: the liturgical formation of the laity and the clergy. Appealing to the writings of Romano Guardini, paragraph 34

of the text, two aspects of formation are noted: formation *for* the liturgy and formation *by* the liturgy.

Formation for the liturgy is a comprehensive study of the sacraments' history, theology, and practice. It is a liturgical-sapiential plan of studies that would offer a complete formation, especially for seminarians, who would be ordained, and for the laity, who will be working in the liturgical life of a parish or a diocese. I would suggest that ignorance of the rites, history, pastoral options, and cultural questions make any liturgy leader incompetent for the work.

Again, I am most honored to serve within this formational context.

The other formation that the text suggests as an antidote to this cultural climate of symbolic non-readiness is the formation by the liturgy.

Paragraph 40 suggests: *"I refer to our being formed, each one according to his or her vocation, from participation in the liturgical celebration. Even the knowledge that comes from studies of which I was just speaking, for it is not to become a sort of rationalism, must serve to realize the formative action of the liturgy itself and every believer in Christ."*

After making such a statement, the letter speaks about the existential way this may happen through intentional attentiveness to the celebration's words, actions, and symbols. All must pay attention. Mindfulness of what is spoken and what is felt is paramount.

Then I believe, and here is where the A+ comes in, the letter hits the nail on the head. For intentional attentiveness, paying attention to all involved in the liturgy, silence within the rite is *absolute*.

It is not a silence that creates some isolation from others or somehow leaves the liturgy because the liturgy is a distraction from prayer.

Instead, as paragraph 52 concludes: *Liturgical silence is something much more grand: it is a symbol of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit which animates the entire action of the celebration. For this reason it constitutes a point of arrival within a liturgical sequence. Precisely because it is a symbol of the spirit and has the power to express the spirit's multifaceted action.... Through it, the Spirit gives us shape, gives us form.*

In my experience, encouraging presiding students to practice silence where the ritual book of the Eucharist prescribes that it belongs is the most challenging task. Perhaps it is lacking in their experience of celebrating mass in the pews, perhaps because silence is a way of humble surrender to the fact that Christ is doing the liturgy within us. Or simply because in the United States and other countries, there is no silence ever. The lack of silence turns this wonderful third sacrament of initiation into words words words, words words. And with no one listening.

A+ to this letter for claiming that silence is of absolute importance in the liturgy to form us into the new humanity that Christ calls us to amid such a noisy world.

#### 4. Standing in Astonishment

All formation for and by the liturgy is the cause of great gratitude, praise, and thanksgiving. Such dispositions of the heart lead to, what I believe to be, the heart of being a Christian: astonishment. Or, as David Power, OMI, names it: Bedazzlement. To stand in wonder at all in the gift of God.

It is the astonishment at the good news that the mystery of Christ is present in sacramental signs: the liturgical and the cosmic. It is the wonder of experiencing the nearness of love in the Spirit and the readiness to be ravished by God.

Let Desiderio Desideravi have the final word, Paragraph 26:

*Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things. It is the marveling of those who experience the power of symbol, which does not consist in referring to some abstract concept but rather in containing and expressing in its very concreteness what it signifies.*

May the liturgy inspire such wonderment. And may all our desires be the desire of Christ for us and all creation.