

Do we have it all wrong?



Not about politics, the economy, or gender terminology -- but about liturgy

Liturgy is that dynamic activity by which we express who God is for us, and form and express who we are before God. What is the structure of our liturgy? In simple terms, we begin our Eucharistic (thanksgiving) liturgy with a gathering hymn. Then we immediately launch into a confession of our sinfulness and request for forgiveness, a liturgical cleansing of ourselves before hearing and receiving the scriptures being proclaimed. And

finally, the bread of the word having been broken, and our statement of faith made, we enter into that component of the liturgy which is the divine meal. It's all so familiar. But is it right and good? Or is it shame-inducing, shame-producing, reducing the effectiveness of the scriptures, and making us less able to enter into true thanksgiving around a meal with Christ as the center? St Ignatius of Loyola insisted on the first principle and foundation, namely that (in colloquial terms) God created the world and us, and God doesn't create junk. As part of creation, we are a thing of beauty to God, inherently good, no matter how much we may fall short of that goodness in what we think, say or do – or fail to think, say, do. Ignatius was also clear that, if we skipped that first principle and foundation, anything else would only go downhill. And yet, in our liturgies...

Christians are good at inducing shame

We have a gathering hymn determined by people who may or may not understand its central importance, the need for it to not only gather us, but to point to the greatness and ultimate goodness found in God's love and mercy. The selected hymn may (if we are truly fortunate) do that – but it may as readily leave us with nothing by which to know God's love, the context for our repentance. Then, without further ado, we launch into a statement of our sinfulness and corresponding request for forgiveness – and somehow think that will cleanse us, make us good and pure and able to hear the words of scripture, take them to heart. After all, it seems, we can't receive them if we are not first in a state of grace. The result, I suggest, is to induce guilt and shame, not for what we have done or failed to do, but for what and who we are, sinners to the core. And God knows, we Christians are good at inducing shame. We know that stories, well told, can induce self-recognition. They can also induce us to recognize what we have done or failed to do which reduces our human authenticity, what we can and should do, or choose not to do, if we are to become more authentically who we are. Yet we demonstrate, in our liturgies, that we believe we must be pure and good before we hear the scriptural stories, before we can allow them to work their effects in us. And somehow we seem to think that is right and proper, and effective in producing good and holy people. I would argue that this process is anything but the case.

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