

A Eulogy

This evening I attended Liturgy at a parish on the west side of the state. It was the first time with the new book; the first time without a good friend that had led and sustained me for over 45 years.

In my earliest years, Catholics prayed in Latin. The priest spoke softly in a language I did not understand but ever since fourth grade I would follow along, reading the English translation on the opposite page from the clerical Latin. It was the language I used when I had the opportunity to become an altar server like most of the other boys in my classroom. And when the day came that I finally served at the altar, I watched mesmerized as the priest prayed in Latin imposing his hands over the bread and the chalice. My partner had to wake me from my trance to ring the bells that accompanied the unseen actions of the presider who stood with his back to all but the chosen ones who knelt to his right and left.

In many ways, it was serving at the altar that re-awakened a desire to be priest; a desire that began with my First Communion.

In September of 1964 I began 8th grade. I was elected class president; a real honor for a kid who had come into the small Catholic school as stranger and outsider only two years before. I was also tasked with the responsibility for training new servers in the centuries old Latin Liturgy.

By January of 1965 it was obvious that the Second Vatican Council in Rome was about to make momentous changes to the Liturgy. Our pastor was not willing to simply wait for them; he began to introduce them into the life of our Flint parish. The first change was that while he read the Epistle and the Gospel softly in Latin; I or one of the other 8th graders would read the English translation at the same time over the PA system. By the summer a new altar was being constructed to allow him to face the congregation rather than the wall and he began using the first translations of the English Liturgy.

As I moved on to high school the Liturgy was in a state of flux. Sometimes the presider used the Latin at the “high altar” while a different presider would use English at the newer altar nearer the people. Music became a part of the ritual as well. It was not the solemn Gregorian Chant of the Latin Liturgy but the hurriedly composed, folksy type which had little connection with the classics of ecclesiastical music. The other choices given to us were standards that had been in the Protestant hymnal forever.

All these changes were very disconcerting to many including several in my family. Liturgy which had been a gathering of many people praying their private, personal prayers was now to be a gathering of God’s people praying and singing the same prayers together. Often those who were disconcerted wanted to know why the changes which led me to ask the same questions and seek the answers.

Over the years of high school and college I learned more. But more importantly I truly fell in love with the words that filled the red book that servers held for the presider. All of the congregational parts became committed to memory, not from intend but from daily usage. (Yes, I have gone to Mass

daily for most of my life.) That became even more true after I was ordained a priest. Like so many of the songs in the hymnal, the constant usage left a virtual hymnal in my mind.

For almost 47 years I have heard and prayed the words of the Sacramentary that were in use even before it became our official prayer book in 1969. Over these many years I have prayed them to express my joy, even what seemed like inexpressible joy, on occasions of profound happiness. They are the words that have sustained me through times of confusion, trial and doubt. In those bleak stretches of desert, when my own personal prayer was stilted and dry, the words from the Sacramentary gave me a voice I did not have on my own.

Perhaps most of all, it was in the depth of grief that I most appreciated and relied on that red book. I would approach the altar overwhelmed with grief at the loss of a parishioner I had come to love and admire, a friend who had died or for a funeral of a family member that had been so much a part of my life. Somewhere in the words that had been committed to memory, in the words that had become a very part of my personhood, I found the prayer that soothed my mind, my heart and my spirit. Words that had once belonged to the Roman Catholic Church belonged to me and they were often prayed not from rote memory but from the core of who I am as a priestly person.

I pondered all of this today before, during and after attending a Liturgy with the new book for the first time. I have read the new book and there are to be sure, a few wonderful and poetic lines added to the presider's text. But most of the changes, especially to the people's text are petty and pointless. Yes, I know there are theologians who would argue differently but most of them are academics and not pastors. I know there are a few pastors who have resigned rather than use the book and a few others have simply refused to use and will await for the day their bishop removes them for disobedience. I have considered those options for myself; but in the end neither of those choices will spare you from the new book.

So I have a copy of the new book with me during the last weeks of my sabbatical and I review parts of it each day. I appreciate the occasional good turn of phrase and struggle to make sense of long, run on sentences that are a consequence of transliterating from Latin to English rather than truly translating.

The new book, I suspect, will never replace the Sacramentary for me; a book that has been a good friend sustaining me for many years. Perhaps I will even grow to like the new book as its words become familiar to me from usage. I will grieve the loss of my old friend from many years to come.