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Times for Renewal: Retreats for Liturgical Ministers

Corinna Laughlin

The formation and training of liturgical ministers is an important part of parish life. Calling attention to the training of these ministers, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), 29, states, “Servers, readers, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function. . . . Consequently, they must all be deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy, in the measure proper to each one, and they must be trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner.” Most of us take this quite seriously: we dedicate hours to the training of liturgical ministers. It is not unusual for new ministers to spend four, eight, or even more hours in training

before being blessed or commissioned into one of the liturgical ministries: reader or cantor, altar server, usher, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. By the time they begin their ministry, they have already learned how to use their voice most effectively as readers or cantors or where to stand and how to hold the host or cup as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. They learn about the importance of a welcome and a smile as ushers and ministers of hospitality.

All of this is important. But the Council Fathers dreamed of more than liturgical ministers able to “perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner.” They envisioned lay ministers “deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy.” And that is not something to be accomplished in a few hours of training.

Nor can we assume that all of our ministers will acquire this spirit naturally once they are actively engaged in a ministry. If this part of the Council's vision is to become reality, our ministers need opportunities to keep learning and praying about the liturgy after they have been trained.

Liturgical ministers are typically at the heart of parish activities—without them, our parish retreat days, evenings of recollection, and adult faith formation events would be sparsely attended indeed! The kinds of gatherings and retreats discussed here cannot, and should not, replace opportunities for learning and prayer that include the entire parish. But liturgical ministers, with their special opportunities for service, also face special challenges, and they need time to reflect with other liturgical ministers. In this article, I describe two kinds of special events for liturgical ministers: “Liturgy Day,” a four-hour gathering combining reflection and learning with practical refreshers, and a two-and-a-half-hour evening retreat for liturgical ministers. Events such as these provide much needed opportunities for renewal, allowing liturgy coordinators an opportunity to address problems that may have crept in and giving ministers a chance to reenergize and recommit themselves to service.

A LITURGY DAY

In my parish community, the primary gathering for liturgical ministers each year is called “Liturgy Day.” As the name implies, it is a big time commitment—four hours on a Saturday morning. Our liturgical ministers understand that Liturgy Day is an expected part of liturgical ministry in the parish. Of course, that does not mean that all three hundred plus liturgical ministers attend. But by putting energy into making Liturgy Day an organized and rewarding event, we ensure that even if one hundred percent attendance is not reached, the attendance increases annually.

When is the Liturgy Day? Most often, we schedule our Liturgy Day for early September. Most liturgical ministries do not take a hiatus over the summer, but we feel the excitement of fresh beginnings as students head back to school and parish programs gear up for a new year. That makes the fall a good time for Liturgy Day as well. There are challenges—it's a busy time for parents of school-age children, and, depending on where you live, people tend to treasure the last few Saturdays before autumn and winter arrive. Other times of the year also work, especially when Liturgy Day is tied to one of the liturgical seasons. The liturgical new year starts with the First Sunday of Advent, so a Saturday in early November (staying far from Thanksgiving) also can be a good time to gather. We have found that a weekend shortly before Lent, or even during Lent, is a good time for this gathering, since we are more open to change—and to sacrificing a few hours—at Lent than at other times of the year.

Who attends? Of course, it makes the best theological sense for all liturgical ministers to participate—priest and deacon, choir members, altar servers, ushers, readers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. On a practical level, however, that can be challenging. Many of our altar servers are children and teens, and even the most gifted speaker will find it hard to engage an audience that includes children, teens, and adults. For



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this reason, we have a separate (much shorter) Liturgy Day for youth involved in the liturgy. Another challenge we face each year is whether to include the choir. Since they already dedicate several hours to preparation each week, it is hard to ask them for yet one more day. One way around this is to schedule Liturgy Day at a time when the choir is already gathering—for example, their first rehearsal or gathering of the year.

Who speaks? If you've never offered a Liturgy Day before, draw on parish leadership. Invite the pastor to share his vision for the liturgy, or call upon a knowledgeable staff member or ministry leader to speak. If for whatever reason this is not a possibility, look further afield. Someone in your area may naturally spring to mind for a gathering of liturgical ministers; if not, many dioceses have a list of recommended speakers that you can draw on. The key for a gathering like this is for the presentation to connect on a very direct level with what the ministers do. A very good speaker who does not talk about liturgy is probably not the right one for this gathering. Make sure the speaker knows the audience, too: we once had a renowned liturgist speak at Liturgy Day whose use of insider language—in which I include shorthand such as “GIRM” and terms such as *pericope*, *anamnesis*, and *metanoia*—caused the group's eyes to glaze over within a few minutes. The keynote for Liturgy Day is an opportunity for enrichment, not a fragment of a college course.

Of course, inviting a guest speaker may not be an option. It may be a tight year in your parish budget. You may be in a rural area where experienced speakers are few and far between. Or there may be no one with the liturgical experience to do something relevant for the group. At times such as these, you may find yourself tasked with preparing the keynote. The task need not be burdensome: many approaches may be taken!



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The thoughts and ideas of the morning can take root during conversations at lunch.

Delve into the Scriptures. Choose a Scripture passage with particular meaning for liturgical ministers. One place to look is the *Book of Blessings* (BB), where chapters 60–66 are specific to parish life, including several blessings specifically for readers and other liturgical ministers, as well as a list of relevant Scripture passages. Look at BB, 1839, for a selection of readings about the power of God’s word. The Rite of Blessing of Altar Servers, Sacristans, Musicians, and Ushers (BB, 1851ff.) offers readings focused on community—the vision of the early Christian community of Acts 4:32–35, the gift of love in 1 Corinthians 12, the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), among others. The Order for Commissioning of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (BB, 1871ff.) suggests nineteen widely varied Scripture passages related to this liturgical ministry, any one of which could form the basis for a presentation to liturgical ministers. You could begin by inviting liturgical ministers to make connections with the passage by journaling on some simple questions: *How do I react to this Scripture reading today? Where do I find myself in this story?* Then read the Scripture again and offer a brief presentation, providing context for the passage, reflections on the community in which it first emerged, and comments on how it speaks to us today. Invite ministers to talk in small groups about what the passage is saying to them as parish ushers, hospitality ministers, readers, altar servers, or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. It may not be a

conventional keynote address—but it will be a valuable exercise for your liturgical ministers.

Borrow from the Pope. The Vatican website (www.vatican.va) is a treasury of resources. At the most recent Liturgy Day in our parish, our pastor delivered the keynote, in which he adapted for liturgical ministers the address Pope Francis gave to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2014. Our pastor narrowed down the Holy Father’s list of fifteen diseases of Church ministers to ten traps for liturgical ministers. By taking a humorous tone, he was able to get our liturgical ministers thinking about the pitfalls liturgical ministry can bring—the trap of doing too much (what Pope Francis calls the Martha complex), the trap of thinking of ourselves as indispensable, the trap of gossiping, grumbling, and backbiting, among others.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *The Joy of the Gospel* is written in clear and accessible language, and a rich and rewarding session could be based on a portion of this wonderful document. While *The Joy of the Gospel* does not deal directly with liturgy (except for the lengthy segment on the homily), it is nevertheless highly relevant for liturgical ministers. You might focus on how all of us are called to take part in the mission of proclaiming the Gospel (111ff.). It might be challenging for liturgical ministers, who are called to service *within* our church buildings, to respond to Pope Francis’ call to move *out* of our church buildings and into a world sorely in need of the Gospel message (15).

Use the solid resources you already have. If you use LTP's *Liturgical Ministry Series* for training liturgical ministers, you'll find a wealth of material in those volumes for learning days and retreats. In addition to practical, hands-on guidance for the liturgical ministry, each volume includes the chapter "Spirituality and Formation." These chapters provide an abundance of material for helping liturgical ministers get beneath the surface of their ministry and uncover and nurture a deeper spirituality. As an example, the chapter on the spirituality and formation of sacristans takes the form of a series of reflection questions on the "things" of liturgy—from the seats we occupy, to the books we use, to the bread and wine for the Eucharist. Author Paul Turner invites us to reflect on these ordinary things and how they become extraordinary when we bring them to the Eucharistic table. This chapter would readily lend itself to an extended meditation on the Mass for all liturgical ministers.

AFTER THE KEYNOTE

The keynote address is the centerpiece of Liturgy Day, but the sessions that follow for each group of liturgical ministers are important as well and should be carefully planned, with a balance of training and reflection. Since one staff person often oversees several liturgical ministries in the parish, it will not be possible for that person to be everywhere at once. Have trusted volunteers take leadership at these smaller gatherings. One person might lead the group in prayer, another could provide an overview of new information or updates to be shared with everyone. Still another could be entrusted with leading a question-and-answer time with the whole group. This portion of the day can include practical training for specific ministries—for example, vocal coaching for readers, a CPR refresher course or emergency training for ushers, even a tour of the church building for altar servers.

If your liturgical ministers are anything like the wonderful liturgical ministers I work with, they might have a tendency to get into the minutiae of ministry. Our extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion even have a descriptive name for these kinds of details: *nitties!* Details are important, and the Liturgy Day is a good time for everyone to get on the same page about the perennial questions of "when do I . . ." and "what do I do when. . . ." But correcting problems and answering questions are not the primary purposes of Liturgy Day. The ultimate goal of a gathering such as this is not to send ministers away well-trained, but rather renewed and ready for the gifts and challenges that come their way.

Following the breakout sessions, invite the entire group to come back together for prayer. Depending on your schedule, you could celebrate Mass together, and incorporate a rite of blessing from the *Book of Blessings* (see chapter 62, for example). Celebrating Mass together is the perfect climax of the day, as we come together around the altar to remember where all of our ministry finds its beginning and its culmination. Over the years, we have moved away from including Mass in our Liturgy Day schedule, because many of those who come on Saturday morning will be back in just a few hours for the anticipated Mass on Saturday evening. In lieu of the Mass, we celebrate a brief Liturgy of the Word incorporating the Blessing of Liturgical Ministers.

If budget, space, and time permit, conclude Liturgy Day with a shared meal. It is the perfect opportunity for the thoughts



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The ultimate goal for a Liturgy Day is to renew ministers and prepare them for the graces and challenges they will encounter.

shared during the day to take root through the informal conversations among ministers that occur around the lunch table.

PLANNING AN EVENING RETREAT

Liturgy Day is an ambitious undertaking, requiring a considerable amount of space and planning. But an evening retreat is simple, short, and within the capacity of almost any community. If you have access to a good retreat leader, it will be worth the investment; but if you don't, you can still create a memorable and valuable evening of prayer for your liturgical ministers.

Of course, retreats come in all shapes and sizes, and for those who regularly participate in weekend or weeklong retreats, an evening gathering will not seem like much more than dipping a toe in the water. But for many of our volunteers, it will be their only retreat experience of the year, and hopefully an invitation to take advantage of other opportunities in the area.

Timing. Retreat attendance will be considerably better just before Advent, Lent, or Holy Week. These seasons also offer a natural focus for the retreat. In Advent, as the Church reflects on the two comings of Christ, we can meditate on the liturgy we celebrate Sunday after Sunday, which is an Advent liturgy: "When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again" (*The Roman Missal*). Just before Lent, a retreat can be geared toward preparing our hearts for the approaching holy days. A retreat before Holy Week could revolve around Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, as the liturgical ministers are challenged to welcome Christ in the many visitors who come for Holy Week and Easter liturgies.

Balance words and silence. With a retreat, it is a more common problem to have too much material than to have too little. Don't overwhelm the evening with words; allow ample time for quiet and reflection. It is amazing what an impact even five minutes of silence can have on people who, like most of us today, are often deprived of it. Allow time for musical meditations as

well—a guitar, if a guitarist is available, or the simple chants of the Taizé community in France.

Pay attention to the space. If you start with a meal, have it in a different space from the retreat. Set the tone through lighting and arrangement of chairs. The space you use for the retreat should say that what the ministers are doing is different from the usual—not a Mass, not a class or lecture, but a guided time of prayer. If at all possible, provide space for participants to move around, since some people contemplate better when in motion. In some climates and seasons, this wandering can occur on the church grounds or the neighborhood, but in inclement weather, it could be within the church or in a gathering space or parish hall.

Keep it challenging. Make sure the content is geared toward the ministers and directly impacts their service. Keep participants looking outward as well as inward. Invite ministers to reflect on how their service inside the church building impacts their engagement with the broader world. Ask questions such as: Does my faithful attendance at Mass change the way I engage with others in my family or workplace? Am I building up the Body of Christ as I serve the Body of Christ at Mass? Does my service increase my compassion for the poor? Does it spark me to indignation when justice is denied to others?

Conclude the evening with shared prayer. You might use the Office of Night Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, or develop another prayer, perhaps with a ritual action, such as the lighting of candles, the veneration of the cross, or the sharing of a sign of peace, that relates to the season or subject of the retreat.

CONCLUSION

The Church's liturgy is indeed source and summit (CSL, 11), and serving the liturgy is a great privilege. But rote has a way of creeping into even the holiest and most important actions of our lives. Rote can be a particular risk for liturgical ministers, leading us into what Pope Francis has called "spiritual Alzheimer's"—when we forget why and for whom we got involved in the first place, and find ourselves serving out of habit, or to be with friends, or because we feel we have to, or for any number of other reasons that are not the first and most important reason: Jesus Christ. Retreats and liturgy days are the perfect antidote, breaking into our routine, inviting us to explore new ideas, and helping to create a habit of reflection on ministry that allows us to serve more intentionally and to become more and more "deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy" (CSL, 29). ♦

CORINNA LAUGHLIN is the pastoral assistant for liturgy at St. James Cathedral, Seattle, Washington.

Timeline for Liturgy Day

- 8:30–9 AM** Arrival and check in. Have nametags available since those involved in different ministries—choir members, readers, ushers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion—do not always get to meet. Provide coffee, tea, a light breakfast.
- 9:00 AM** Pray Morning Prayer, either in the sanctuary (if conveniently located) or in the gathering space.
- 9:30 AM** Take a short break. Provide a simple ice-breaker activity if many don't know each other (and if the size of the group allows).
- 9:35 AM** Keynote address of thirty to forty minutes.
- 10:15 AM** Time for quiet reflection followed by discussion in small groups.
- 10:30 AM** Facilitated large-group sharing and time for questions and answers with the presenter.
- 10:45 AM** Break and move to separate meeting spaces for each ministry.
- 10:50–11:50 AM** Breakout sessions—each ministry has an opportunity to gather as a group.
- Noon** Closing prayer or Mass, incorporating a blessing of liturgical ministers.
- 12:30 PM** Share lunch. The day wraps up around 1 PM.

Plan for an Evening Retreat

Every retreat leader develops a different balance of time for talk and time for reflection. This simple plan envisions the evening in terms of fifteen-minute blocks of words and quiet reflection.

- 6:30–7 PM** Gathering time. Begin with a light supper. If the budget is tight, make it a potluck.
- 7:00 PM** Move into the space designated for the retreat. Open with prayer.
- 7:15–7:30 PM** First reflection from the retreat leader.
- 7:30–7:45 PM** Time for reflection, journaling, or wandering. Provide questions for each period of meditation. Incorporate music into these times if desired.
- 7:45–8 PM** Second reflection from the retreat leader.
- 8–8:15 PM** A little more time for reflection. Encourage people to wander, stay put, visit the church, as they prefer.
- 8:15–8:30 PM** Concluding reflection from the retreat leader.
- 8:30–9 PM** Silent reflection and concluding prayer or ritual.