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Archbishop Blair Addresses the 2021 National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions

The 2021 National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions took place in San Diego on September 28-30, focusing on study of the Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar with the theme “This House Brings to Light the Mystery of the Church.” Keynote addresses were given by Rev. Paul Turner and Rev. Thomas G. Simons. The 2021 Frederick R. McManus Award was presented to Rev. Edward Foley, OFM Cap.

The Committee on Divine Worship was represented in person by Rev. Andrew Menke, Secretariat Executive Director, and Hartford Archbishop Leonard P. Blair, Committee Chairman, addressed the meeting attendees via pre-recorded video. His speech is reprinted here, slightly edited for length, for the benefit of our readers:

At last year’s meeting, I noted the Committee on Divine Worship’s desire to promote a better and more fruitful celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, the *ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating the liturgy. I’m heartened to hear that next year’s national meeting will be devoted precisely to this theme: “*Ars Celebrandi: Something More is Required.*” Today, I’d like to focus a bit more on that theme, in light of the upcoming National Eucharistic Revival, our Holy Father’s *motu proprio Traditionis custodes*, and the USCCB Committee on Doctrine’s document on Catholic Hymnody.

National Eucharistic Revival

Perhaps you’ve heard that our Bishops’ Conference is preparing for a National Eucharistic Revival. An advisory group for the Revival has been formed, at which I represent the Divine Worship Committee, and the Secretariat of Divine Worship is represented on an executive team as a co-chair of the Liturgy and Devotions working group.

I hope that you will be able to assist and to promote this project on the local level. Spearheaded by the Bishops’ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, the goal of this initiative is “to renew the Church by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist.” The Revival will occur in three phases. Year One (2022-2023) focuses on renewal at the diocesan level, Year Two (2023-2024) on renewal at the parish level, and Year Three (2024-2025) on the ongoing revival at all levels nationally, with special attention to the mission we have: to go forth with our faith, especially to the peripheries.

A key focus of the Liturgy and Devotions working group is the promotion of the *ars celebrandi* among the whole Body of Christ in the diversity of its members. Celebrating the liturgy well is very important for nurturing our eucharistic relationship

with the Lord Jesus Christ, a truth eloquently described in article seven of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. There we are told that “every liturgical celebration is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], no. 7).

The *ars celebrandi* is really about the pursuit of excellence in the liturgy from every perspective. Last year I mentioned the challenges posed by the multiplication of Masses, sometimes only for convenience, even though we have fewer and fewer priests, not to mention all those who exercise liturgical functions at each and every Mass. This constitutes an external challenge to the *ars celebrandi*. But as Pope Benedict once observed, if we celebrate the Eucharist with intimate participation in faith and prayer, then it is not simply an external duty; then the *ars celebrandi*, he says, comes naturally, because it consists in celebrating from the Lord’s perspective and in communion with him. These words of Pope Benedict were addressed to priests, but they may be fittingly applied to anyone participating at Mass.

Ars celebrandi also has to do with the manner of celebration, and we who are Catholic ought to have deep appreciation of our extremely rich heritage with regard to liturgy’s outward forms of beauty, authenticity, and fidelity to teaching, tradition, and good order.

Motu Proprio *Traditionis custodes*

The *ars celebrandi* also figures in Pope Francis’ motu proprio, *Traditionis custodes*, issued this past summer, by which he modified the conditions for using the liturgical books in force prior to the reforms that arose from the Second Vatican Council.

While the Holy Father focuses primarily on the Missal of 1962, several comments in the letter accompanying the motu proprio refer to our current situation with regard to the *ars celebrandi*, or should I say the lack thereof. The Holy Father says: “I am saddened by abuses in the celebration of the liturgy on all sides. In common with Benedict XVI, I deplore the fact that ‘in many places the prescriptions of the new Missal are not observed in celebration, but indeed come to be interpreted as an authorization for or even a requirement of creativity, which leads to almost unbearable distortions.’”

“Unbearable distortions” is a very strong statement, but in reality, liturgical license and abuses do indeed inflict a profound wound on people’s understanding of the mysteries of faith, and in some cases even the validity of the sacraments when liberties are taken with matter and form. Abuses deprive the faithful of their rich Catholic heritage that the Second Vatican Council meant to reinvigorate, not destroy. This is preeminently true of the celebration of the Eucharist.

Abuses also wound ecclesial unity. In the quote I referred to a moment ago, Pope Francis is citing the letter of Pope Benedict that accompanied *Summorum Pontificum* regarding “unbearable distortions” arising from creativity as a principal reason for some of the faithful to remain strongly attached to the usage in force prior to the post-conciliar liturgical reforms. Benedict argued that to some extent today’s liturgical divisions are the fruit of yesterday’s poor *ars celebrandi*. To celebrate the liturgy well is a work of ecclesial unity.

Pope Francis concludes his letter with this plea to bishops: “I ask you to be vigilant in ensuring that every liturgy be celebrated with decorum and fidelity to the liturgical books promulgated after Vatican Council II, without the eccentricities that can easily degenerate into abuses.” In fulfilling this duty of vigilance, we who are your bishops in the United States look to you to assist them in this duty of vigilance precisely by helping to form the clergy, religious, and faithful so they both know and practice a serene and sound *ars celebrandi*, that ensures the unity and spiritual communion of us all with Christ and with one another.

Doctrine Evaluation of Catholic Hymnody

Finally, I would like to say something about music, hymns in particular. The singing of various parts of the Mass and other liturgical rites by the celebrant is part of the *ars celebrandi* and needs to be more greatly promoted. With regard to congregational singing, there is also a need to ensure that what is sung is not only worthy of the liturgy but that it is also consistent with what the church believes and teaches.

In its document, *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*, our Bishops' Doctrine Committee has now published criteria for the doctrinal evaluation of hymns for use in the Sacred Liturgy.

The first criterion is consistency with Scripture. In the words of the document: "The Church's liturgy is the milieu in which the Word of God lives. The Sacred Scriptures, in particular, provide the normative idiom for the expression of the mystery." The inspired and authoritative texts of Sacred Scripture, faithfully translated, can be said to be the fruit of the Church's prayer; these texts emerge in and from a liturgical context. Sacred Scriptures "provide something of a 'norm' of expression when communicating the mystery of faith in liturgical poetics, or hymnody." In selecting hymns for the liturgy, liturgical and scriptural language is our guide. Indeed, according to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, "The texts intended to be sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine; indeed they should be drawn chiefly from holy scripture and from liturgical sources" (SC, no. 121).

The committee's document gives some tools for evaluating musical texts. I simply want to emphasize that the mysteries we celebrate in the liturgy are powerfully inscribed in our minds and hearts through song. Even in daily life there are texts that always remain in our memory because we learned them in song. I understand that even with some forms of dementia, musical memory is nevertheless preserved. Our assemblies are immersed Sunday after Sunday not only in the spoken texts of the Mass and the Scriptures, but also by what is sung. We will want to be sure that what is heard accurately expresses the faith of the Church, and at the very least does not contradict or distort it.

In conclusion, I'm grateful to have had this opportunity to share some thoughts with you, and I hope this National Meeting of the FDLC will be a source of encouragement and inspiration. Thank you again for all that you do in service of the Church, and may God bless you!

Presentation of Rev. Paul Turner on the Dedication of a Church

Reprinted for the benefit of our readers is an excerpt from the keynote address of Rev. Paul Turner at the 2021 National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. Fr. Turner, a priest of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, framed his presentation on a passage in the Prayer of Dedication in the Order of the Dedication of a Church: "Here, may the poor find mercy, the oppressed attain true freedom, and all people be clothed with the dignity of your children, until they come exultant to the Jerusalem which is above."

Today's prayer of dedication relies upon the spirituality, witness and charity of previous generations, who fed us with faith, words, and buildings.

The earliest evidence for the inauguration of churches indicates that the mere celebration of Mass dedicated the new building. Even today the rite says, "The celebration of the Eucharist is the most important rite, and the only necessary one, for the dedication of a church" (*Order of Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, ch. II, no. 15). However, by the eighth century an elaborate ceremony of dedication took place before Mass. Only in the twentieth century did it unfold within Mass.

The antecedent for a prayer of dedication goes all the way back to the son of King David. Solomon constructed a Temple in Jerusalem around 950 BC and prayed at its dedication (1 Kgs 8:23-53). The passage blends key words with a posture for solemn prayer. Solomon approached the altar, stood before it, stretched out his arms toward heaven, and only then recalled the wonders that God had done. He addressed the Lord who had promised him a dynasty. Solomon reminded the Lord of that promise and asked for his faithfulness. Whereas today's prayer wants the people clothed with dignity, Solomon asked that God show his vigilance. Looking around at the new Temple and relying on God's help, Solomon prayed "that your eyes [, Lord, God of Israel,] may be open night and day toward this house."

Seventeen hundred years later, around 750 AD, the Gelasian Sacramentary recalled some of these sentiments in its dedication prayer: "Hear [, O God,] the prayers of your servants, and may your eyes be open upon this house

day and night” (690). By the tenth century, the Roman-Germanic Pontifical expanded these thoughts. The bishop begged the presence of the eternal God:

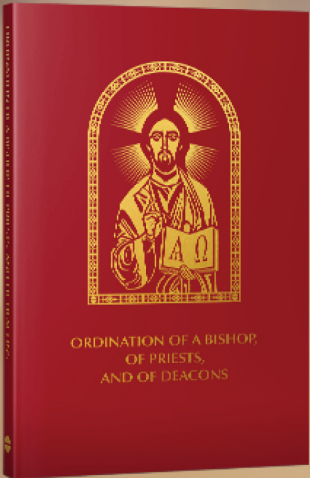
May your Holy Spirit, overflowing with the richness of sevenfold grace, descend also upon this your church, which we, though unworthy, consecrate under the invocation of your holy name in honor of the holy cross on which your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, coeternal to you, was pleased to suffer for the redemption of the world, and [in honor] of your holy martyr N., so that whenever your holy name will be invoked in this your house, the prayers of those who will have called out to you may be heard by you, the loving Lord.

This prayer then makes subsequent requests that anticipate the lines we hear today. The tenth-century bishop asked that the church become a place where “the sick are healed, the weak recuperate, the disabled are cured, lepers are cleansed, the blind receive sight, and demons are driven out.” As bold as that request is, it is no more dreamy than the one we make today. Generations past asked for physical and spiritual healings in the new church; we ask for mercy, freedom and dignity.

Today, the bishop’s prayer makes many allusions to the bible before landing on the one about Jerusalem that concludes our citation. He recalls John’s vision of the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven “as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). That is the church: the bride of the Lord. Jeremiah relayed God’s message to Israel, “I had planted you as a choice vine,” and Jesus called his followers the branches on him, the vine (Jn 15:5). That is the church: the chosen vine of God. St. Paul said that the followers of Christ are “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone” (Eph 2:20). That is the church: the building of God.

Jesus called his followers “the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden” (Mt 5:14). That is the church: a city on high. The bishop recalls John’s vision of a city that “had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb” (Rev 21:23). That is the church: the light of the Lamb.

Those allusions, brothers and sisters, prepare for the final intention that launches our gathering today. It prays that the People of God may “come exultant to the Jerusalem which is above.” The cascade of images bathes the assembly in the Word of God to dedicate a space where that Word will resound. God’s word is holy. The building is holy. God’s people are holy. This building will so form them that, at the end of their days, they may come exultant to the new and eternal Jerusalem because they have offered mercy, freedom and dignity.



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