

7 steps to a more robust liturgy: Abbondanza! (No skimping!)

For many years, Celeste Pizza has boasted about its *abbondanza* approach to pizza: “no skimping on the old family recipe.” When it comes to Catholic ritual and sacramental expression, the same should hold true: no skimping! The sacraments are intended to be celebrated with an *abbondanza* mentality. However, all too often, this is not the case.

On a recent trip to Hawaii, I visited the Polynesian Cultural Center and got a firsthand glimpse of the ritual expression of the Polynesian people: bold, dramatic, rich, deeply expressive, highly energizing. I found my imagination stirred, my heart moved, and my senses stimulated as young people explained and performed ancient rituals to the beat of drums and the sounds of various stringed instruments. In short, their ritual expression was *robust*.

I began to think of Catholic liturgy and how we need to have a more robust approach to our ritual expression. It should be unheard of to be bored at Mass, and yet this is the reality for too many Catholics. Our all-too-often perfunctory approach to liturgy is missing the mark when it comes to capturing the imagination of the assembly. For example, our processions (opening, Gospel, offertory) are typically approached as a way of getting from point A to point B in the shortest amount of time. They are visually meager and can often be missed if you blink. Liturgical music,

more often than not, tends to be wimpy and bland. It is safe to say that few Catholics would want to listen to a CD of their parish’s music as they drive to work or as they work out at the health club. Rarer indeed would be the teenagers who allow their parish’s liturgical music to even come near their iPods. Men in particular feel ill-at-ease with hymns that are sung at high pitches and melodies that lean heavily toward the feminine. (In my experience, women more easily adapt to a “masculine” environment than do men to a “feminine” environment. You can see women enjoying themselves at a football game, but when was the last time you saw a group of men having a blast at a knitting bee?)

Ritual prayers are often perfunctorily *recited* instead of dramatically *proclaimed* by both priest and assembly. Finishing quickly and efficiently seems to be the aim. Members of the assembly are, for the most part, passive, as if attending a performance by someone else rather than actively participating in the work of the people that is liturgy. Imagine a group of hearing-impaired Catholics sitting or standing idly at Mass and watching their interpreter but refusing to sign along with him or her during their responses. Sounds ridiculous, yet this is the equivalent of what many hearing Catholics do when they don’t pray along with spoken or sung prayer. And finally, too many priests and music ministers feel the need to fill every moment of the Mass with sound, rarely

allowing God’s primary language — silence — to be “spoken.”

Simply put, many liturgies are not robust. How can we make them so? We don’t need to change the liturgy; all of the elements are there. We need to revisit our approach to its various elements and consider how to celebrate them more robustly. If we are going to speak to the next generation of Catholics, we need to turn our ritual expression up a notch. In this article, I outline seven steps to creating a more robust approach to liturgy in the parish so that our existing rituals are expressed more fully — with an *abbondanza* mentality!

1. A more robust opening procession

A procession is meant to be a spectacle. In essence, a procession is a holy parade, a victory march. Most opening processions at Mass consist of three altar servers (cross and two candles) who race down the main aisle, trailed by a lector, a deacon, and the priest. Not the right kind of spectacle! What might a proper robust procession look like? Consider the following:

- The assembly is called to attention by the sound of a drum (snare, bass, congas) slowly but loudly and dramatically sounding a beat that signals the beginning of the celebration. Who can play such a drum? There is no shortage of teens participating in their schools’ band or drum and bugle corps who know

their way around a drum. Why not utilize these talents at Mass and get our young people involved? This sounding of the drum as a call to prayer would last 20 to 30 seconds.

- As a rousing opening hymn is sung, the cross-bearer, candle-bearers, and, when possible, incense-bearer *slowly* process down the aisle (at the pace of a bride taking her walk toward the altar) and, on reaching the entrance to the sanctuary, turn, face the assembly, and await the arrival of the other liturgical ministers. The cross remains held high.
- Banner carriers then *slowly* process, not only down the main aisle but also down any side aisles, accompanied by small groups of members of the assembly who simply process with hymnals and join in the singing. On reaching the front, they bow and proceed to their places (banners can be placed in stands either in or just outside the sanctuary).
- Lectors and other liturgical ministers then slowly process, keeping a distance of 15 to 20 feet between one another. As they reach the entrance of the sanctuary, the cross-, candle-, and incense-bearers slowly turn and go to their appropriate places as the liturgical ministers do the same, bowing to the altar as they do so.
- If a deacon is present, he follows with the Book of the Gospels held high for all to see. On reaching the entrance of the sanctuary, he turns to show the Book to all before bowing to the altar,

placing the Book on its stand, and going to his place.

- Finally, the priest processes, leaving another 15 to 20 feet behind the deacon, and goes to the presidential chair after reverencing the altar. Such a robust procession might last a total of five minutes if done with the appropriate reverence, thus enabling the assembly to sing perhaps four or five verses of the opening hymn. New roles can be created (banner carriers, drummers, procession participants) so that processions can be done this way on a regular basis. Such roles would be ideal for young people.

Of course, this same robust procession could take place at the end of the Mass, minus the Book of the Gospels.

2. More robust silence

The rubrics of the Mass call for appropriate periods of silence, but in most cases, these moments are not observed. As a result, the Mass becomes a wall of sound. Silence (20 seconds or so), which can be very dramatic, can and should happen at the following moments:

- The assembly can be called to silence before the opening procession. If a drum is used as described above, a period of silence can take place both before and after the sound of the drum.
- When the priest says, “Let us pray,” for the collect (opening prayer), this should not be a signal for the server to

come forward with the Roman Missal. Rather, everyone should pray silently for 20 seconds or so. The priest can then motion to the server to bring the missal for the collect. This format should be followed each time the priest invites us to pray during the Mass with the words, “Let us pray.”

- At the end of each Scripture reading, the lector and deacon or priest should pause for 10 seconds before saying, “The Word of the Lord” or “The Gospel of the Lord.” Likewise, the music minister should wait another 10 seconds before beginning the responsorial and the Gospel acclamation.
- After the homily, the deacon or priest should be seated for an extended period of silence — perhaps 60 seconds.
- During the profession of faith, the assembly can be taught to pause for five to seven seconds of silence *before* each “I believe” statement. This allows space for the words of this prayer to echo in our hearts. After each short pause, the priest can simply lift his hand to invite the assembly to continue.
- As the intercessions are read, the lector or deacon should pause three to five seconds between each intercession.
- After communion, when the priest has returned to the presidential chair, there should be an extended period of silence, 60 to 90 seconds, allowing the assembly time to give thanks for the Eucharist.

All told, these moments of silence might add another six to seven minutes to the Mass. If silence is indeed golden, these would be six to seven golden moments during which God’s mysterious language of silence can speak to our hearts.

3. A more robust Gospel procession

Too often, the Gospel procession is virtually nonexistent. A more robust Gospel procession would involve the following:

- The Book of the Gospels, carried in the opening procession, can be placed