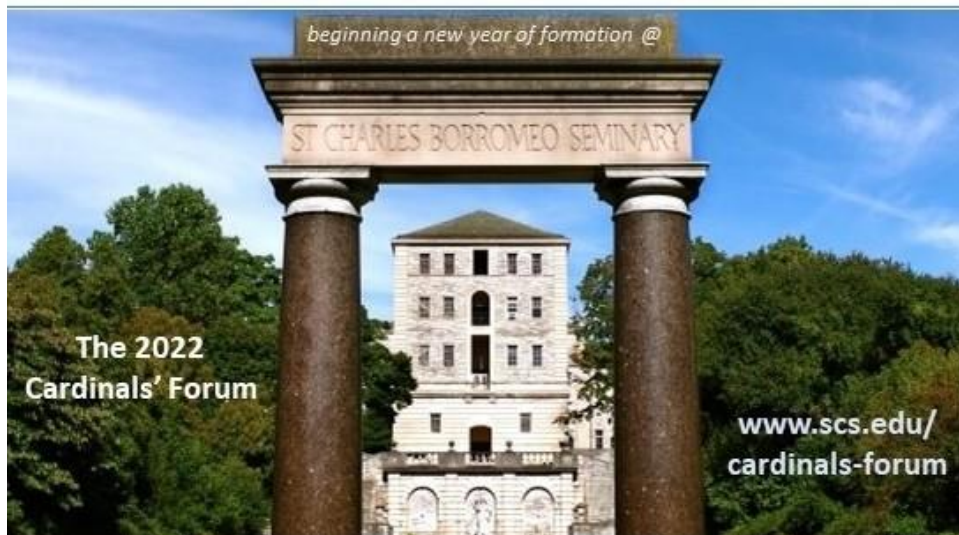


“From Sunday to Sunday”
the liturgical formation of the People of God



presentation by

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This may be the most lyrical encyclical I have ever read. As the Holy Father himself indicated, he wanted to provide some reflections for meditation on the liturgy rather than provide a dogmatic treatise. Because the encyclical is so lyrical and rich in poetic imagery, I would think that it can best read in brief passages and used for meditation.

With respect to our own formation here at St. Charles, the Holy Father writes: “The plan of studies for the liturgy in seminaries must take account of the extraordinary capacity that the actual celebration [of the mass] has in itself to offer an organic and unified vision of all theological knowledge.” (#37)

The reason the celebration of the holy mass has, in itself, a unified vision of all theological knowledge is of course because it is in the eucharist that the seminarian encounters the Person of Jesus Christ Himself who is the object of ALL theological knowledge. This realization should lead the seminarian to approach the altar with docility and trepidation because there he encounters the One about whom every

theological treatise is written, the One who is the source of every event the seminarian encounters in courses in Church history. Even the subject of Canon Law brings us to an encounter with the Incarnate One of the liturgy, for the Code states, "The Supreme Law of the Church is the salvation of souls," and salvation can be found only in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Of course, even as the seminary forms men theologically and spiritually to celebrate the mass, those men are being formed by the Eucharist itself. There can be no separation between what we are learning intellectually, and what we are learning affectively when we encounter the Eucharistic Lord every day.

Dogmatic theology ought to be studied with particular intensity because it is there that the attempt is made, through the meager resources of our own intellect, to attain some grasp of the ineffable mystery that is presented to us in every celebration of the mass. Every discipline studied here in the seminary is informed by the liturgy.

Moral theology in particular should be shaped by our encounter with the Eucharistic Lord. The mass becomes the source and summit of the moral life and of the study of the moral life. One can of course affirm the church's teaching on the intrinsic immorality of fornication. Indeed, one must. But an abstract precept becomes existential and personal when we are face to face with the reality of Christ Himself, brought about by the eucharist. Rather than violating a precept against fornication, St. Paul in First Corinthians understands such an act as an unspeakable defiling of the Body of Christ Himself. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take a member of Christ and unite it with a prostitute? Never!" (I Cor 6:16) Being formed in the Eucharist by Christ Himself is the foundation of the moral life, not being obedient to precepts of the Church. As St. Paul said, "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

In addition to its rather lyrical character, I was struck by the profoundly incarnational themes found in the encyclical. The Holy Father speaks not only of the encounter with the incarnate Christ in the mass but, in fact, of the manner in which every physical thing we encounter can become, by virtue of the incarnation, a means of attaining God Himself. [At times the Holy Father seems almost mystical in his awareness of how, not only the bread and the water and the wine of the mass, but indeed how the entire

natural order can be sanctified and can draw us to God because of the Incarnation. “Above all,” Francis tells us, “we must reacquire confidence about creation. I mean to say that things — the sacraments ‘are made’ of things — come from God” (#46)]]]]

If we should stand in wonder of the radical implications of the incarnation for all of the natural order then how much more should we have a sense of wonder when we come face to face with the incarnate Lord Himself. I have always been impressed with the decorum and beauty one finds in the celebration of the mass here at St. Charles. The liturgical drama is carried out in such a way that it points beyond the actors to the reality being brought about by the priest and the assembly. The Holy Father laments that this has largely been lost in contemporary society. He writes: “To have lost the capacity to grasp the symbolic value of the body and of every creature renders the symbolic language of the Liturgy almost inaccessible to the modern mentality. And yet there can be no question of renouncing such language. It cannot be renounced because it is how the Holy Trinity chose to reach us through the flesh of the Word.” (#44)

[[[[[When the Holy Father speaks of symbol and symbolic language in the encyclical, however, he not using the word in the weak Protestant sense of the bread and wine of the Eucharist being merely reminders, if you will, of the Body and Blood of Christ at the Last Supper. Francis speaks of “the power of the symbol, which does not consist in referring to some abstract concept but rather in containing and expressing in its concreteness what is signified.” (#26)]]]]

Francis goes on, “Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things. It is the marvelling of those who experience.” (#26) The priest himself, body and soul, acting in Persona Christi, God and man, brings the incarnate, sacramental Christ to us.

St. Benedict told his monks to treat the tools of the workshop with as much reverence as they would the sacred vessels of the altar. All too many of us, however, have regrettably witnessed priests handling the sacred vessels of the altar with as much disregard as though they were the tools of a workshop. But this can never occur with proper liturgical formation.

[[[Again, as the Holy Father writes, “For ministers as well as for all the baptized, liturgical formation . . . is not something that can be acquired once and for all. Since the gift of the mystery celebrated surpasses our capacity to know it, this effort certainly must accompany the permanent formation of everyone, with the humility of little ones, the attitude that opens up into wonder.” (38)]]]]

The Holy Father calls us to wonder and awe when he quotes the words of his namesake, Francis of Assisi, at the conclusion of the encyclical.

“Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!”

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