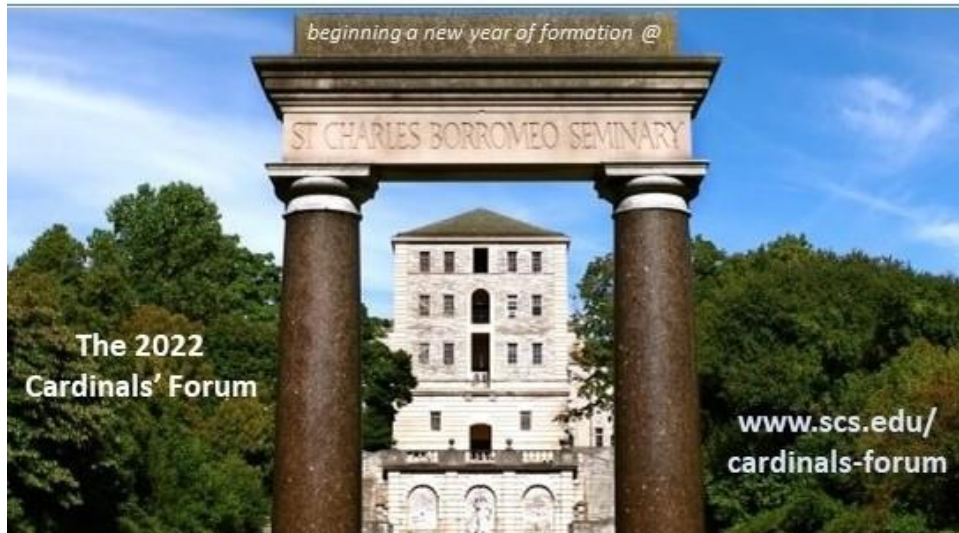


“From Sunday to Sunday”
the liturgical formation of the People of God



presentation by

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What strikes me about the pope’s reflections on the Mass is his emphasis more on experience than on theological concepts or ritual practices.¹ As he puts it, “knowledge of the mystery of Christ ... does not consist in a mental assimilation of some idea but in real existential engagement with his person” (41). He adds, “We know well that the celebration of the sacraments, by the grace of God, is efficacious in itself (*ex opere operato*), but this does not guarantee the full engagement of people ...” (45).

In terms of fostering that engagement, Pope Francis emphasizes the *ars celebrandi*, reminding we who are, and you who will one day become, priests about the “fundamental importance” of our having “a keen awareness of being, through God’s mercy, a particular presence of the risen Lord” (57). How we be that presence involves both how we act and how we speak.

The document addresses how we act in some detail, and even includes a list of approaches to presiding that the pope describes as “certainly inadequate” due to “a heightened personalism of the celebrating style which at times expresses a poorly concealed mania to be the centre of attention” (54). You can, and should, read the list for yourself – and note how it covers both ends of the presiding spectrum!

What I would like to expound on is the speaking mode of presence. In a predecessor to his current letter,² then Cardinal Bergoglio highlighted two distinct senses of an *ars dicendi* to be incorporated in the *ars celebrandi*.

With regard to liturgical texts, he said, “We need a way of speaking that is not simply reading ... but above all sincere praying.” What’s the difference? I’d say that prayerful speaking calls for an attention to the rhythm of the text, to the particular words to be emphasized, and to the emotive tenor with which we speak. Perhaps we could all benefit from a formation conference on how to use our voice well.

The other area of the art of speaking has to do with what he calls “free formulations.” No, he’s not suggesting that we learn how to “wing it” on Sundays! He’s referring to those times when the celebrant has to speak in his own words, as, for instance, when preaching. About this, the cardinal-now-pope offered – in good Jesuit fashion! – three specific points.

First, he said, the priest “must communicate in a living and sensible language.” In other words, speaking *with* people, rather than *at* them, is the key. The terms we use, the expressions we employ, the pictures we paint – if our words are not those with which people can relate, then the message sounds good only to ourselves! Preachers need to remember the basic dictum that “what is communicated is not what is said but what is heard.”

Second, the future pope said that the priest “must speak to the heart.” That’s a challenge, not only due to our gender (!) but due to our academic training. Our current and continuing education concerns what is in our heads, which, of course, we want to share with others. But, as another Francis – *de Sales* – wisely wrote,³ “The one who wins a person’s heart has won the whole person.” Preaching to the heart makes for a homily that not only informs, but transforms the congregation.

Finally, then-Cardinal Bergoglio noted that the priest “must not ... distance himself from what is required by the circumstances and the celebration of the mystery.” That makes it quite clear that preaching is always to be a proclamation of the person and power of Jesus and not, as some think, a raging commentary on news in the church and/or in the world. People already have their own social viewpoints; what they want – what they need! – is to experience the Good News of the Gospel.

How might we foster a liturgical formation in this *ars dicendi*? Let me briefly mention three suggestions. Perhaps you’ll have other and better ones during our discussion.

First, I think we could use a more “narrative” approach to texts ... so that the words we hear and speak are not just historical or ritual, but inspirational. After all, what we preach is the “Story of stories” and what we celebrate is “the great love story between God and humanity.”⁴

Second, I think we could use a more “aesthetic” formation to liturgy and to life ... so that, even in this digital world, our preaching will communicate the beauty revealed by God’s Word, and our celebrations will help people recognize the beauty of God’s presence in their lives.⁵

Finally, I think we could use a more “secular” appreciation of the laity, that is, a greater awareness of the states-of-life in which the majority of the People of God live ... so that we can assist them to see how all of life is transformed by our shared participation “in the infinite desires, motives, and creativity of God” that we celebrate on Sundays.⁶

Participating in that love story, that beauty, that transformation – that’s what the good Lord has “earnestly desired” for us in instituting the Last Supper and exhorting us to do this in remembrance of Him.

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¹ Pope Francis, “*Desiderio desideravi*,” apostolic letter on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God, 29 June 2022.

² Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “L’Ars Celebrandi,” ponenza per la Plenaria, Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, 1 Marzo 2005.

³ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part III, chapter 23.

⁴ Pope Francis, “Life Becomes History,” Message for World Communications Day 2020, n. 3; cf. Thomas Dailey, “Preaching the ‘Story of Stories’,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 27 February 2020.

⁵ See Dennis Cali, “Homiletics for a Digital Age,” in *Catholic Media Studies: Theology and Pedagogy*, eds. Brett Robinson, Alba Sabaté Gauxachs, and Caroline Murphy (Ramon Llull University, 2021): 150-166.

⁶ Peter Andrastek, “The Catholic Church Lacks an Imagination for Lay Agency,” *Church Life Journal*, 26 May 2022.