

The Christmas Liturgy

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I read in a liturgical publication some months ago the observation of one author that Christmas was a feast having the potential to express the very best and the very worst in our liturgical practice. More pointedly, the thought that we Catholics can have a tendency to overdo the multi-themed season of Christmas as a birthday celebration for the Infant Jesus was expressed. While there is no denial that God came to us as an infant babe, as the scriptures tell us, how we express that profound act of God's love for us in the liturgy of Christmas says something about the real import of this mystery of faith.

Saying that Christmas is for children and preparing everything in the religious realm to the sensibility of children is not really fair to the rest of the believing church. We are all God's children, those who range in age from conception to 100 and beyond. Yet, there is an attitude permeating our liturgical seasons especially the one focused on the anniversary of our Savior's birth that desires to create a different emphasis at Christmas. Many liturgists express this observation as a matter of secularizing the sacred.

One example how this manifests itself in the liturgy is the decision to forego the assigned Christmas readings at Mass and replace them with a play or dramatization on the birth of Jesus. Instead of using the appropriate readings and translations approved for Masses with children, God's little ones are ushered into the sanctuary adorned in bathrobes and towels wrapped around their heads to re-enact the birth scene in the stable. It might warm the heart of the adults in the church to see their little ones participating at Mass in a different way, but what does it say about our adult understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation?

We are reminded in the 1993 revised *Lectionary for Masses with Children*, "The Mass is not an historical reenactment of the events of salvation history and care should be taken not to give the impression that the liturgy is a play" (art. 52, Introduction).

In some parishes, the singing of traditional and contemporary sacred Christmas hymns have been overridden completely by the secular tune sung at many dining room tables on the birthday of a family member. And to visually supplement the singing of "Happy Birthday Jesus" at those Christmas Masses designated "for children," a birthday cake (without 2,000 candles!) is wheeled on a cart from the entrance of the church to the sanctuary. It is very heart-warming and more advisable a custom for the Catholic home, but what does it say about our understanding of the profound mystery and truth we are commemorating as the Body of Christ?

The revised *Lectionary for Masses with Children* continues, “The Christmas Mass should not be presented as a birthday party for Jesus, nor should secular notions of Santa Claus be introduced into the Christmas liturgy” (art. 52, Introduction). The reason for these directives is not to be insensitive to the crowd that gathers for Christmas Mass in our parish churches. There are many ways to express a hospitable and inclusive invitation to all who gather to celebrate the liturgies of Christmas. The liturgical directives cited above remind us of the primary intent of even commemorating this solemn feast: a divine love that God has for humankind, so much so that this love became one like us in all things, but sin, to save us. The Church and the entire world stand in awe of this mystery of faith. Christmas is about salvation. It is about our redemption from the darkness of the world. It is for that reason that the people of God on earth joins together with angels and saints in heaven to sing a glorious song of praise.

Liturgical tradition captures this sentiment in a sung antiphon about the Christmas mystery: “*O marvelous exchange! Man’s creator has become man, born of a virgin. We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*”