

Response to the Frederick R. McManus Award

By Nathan D. Mitchell

National Meeting of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, Omaha, 13 October 2006

To begin, I want to express my gratitude to the FDLC board and membership for this recognition; it is a privilege indeed to find myself standing this evening among “so great a cloud of witnesses.”

Second, I want to acknowledge my debt to those giants—women and men—on whose shoulders all of us stand when we work for the renewal of our church’s worship. For myself, I have to confess that I’ve never had an original thought in my life, and I freely admit not only that I’ve relied on the kindness of strangers, but that I’ve depended, always, on the faith, courage, skill and expertise of those who’ve been generous enough to teach me not only by their thought and writing, but by the witness of their lives. As I often say to students, the best theology is written by people who don’t know they’re doing it; and similarly, I suspect, the finest liturgies are celebrated by communities whose faithful gatherings, Sunday after Sunday, attract precious little scrutiny from either the media or academic professionals. The poor, after all, are by definition negligible and unimportant, so it is often difficult to notice that *their* cries and prayers are what get all the rest of us into heaven.

Third, I want to recognize that an award like this has little to do with honoring an individual, but it has *everything* to do with celebrating the dangerous vocation we share in common. I call it a “dangerous vocation” because, as you well know, liturgy isn’t work we plan and do for God, *it’s work God does among us*, for the *world’s* sake. Our vocation—to use Annie Dillard’s astonishing image—is to serve as “Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding.” Dillard’s prose is far punchier than mine, so I’ll quote her here:

“The higher Christian churches . . . come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing . . . In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked.” (Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* [New York: Bantam Books ppb., 1979], 60.)

As you may know, persons of the Mohawk tribe were once heavily recruited for work in the construction industry because of their legendary reputation for surefootedness at dizzying heights. They appeared to saunter calmly along a skyscraper’s steel beams quite oblivious to the 600 feet of sheer nothing that stretched between them and the street below. Ours, I’m suggesting, is the perhaps unenviable vocation of serving a liturgy that *belongs to someone else* (God and God’s People), to serve it “*as though we knew what we were doing*” (even though we don’t), and to serve it without stopping to notice that the chariot of orthodoxy threatens to topple over a cliff.

For yes, the church we love and serve is surely the Body of Christ and the Spotless Bride of the Lamb, *but it also a train wreck*—and has been, I suspect, ever since *somebody* thought it would be a good idea to ask the question, “Who among us is the greatest?” (See Mk 9.33-37) I hardly need to remind you that the progress of liturgical renewal over the past two decades has been—well, let us say, “uneven.” As Ed Foley says, “If you think things are going *well* today, you need to ask your doctor to lower your medication.” Perhaps I fall into that category. Yet as I look ahead the future does not seem bleak or dismal to me. Perhaps that’s because, at my age, I tend to see visions of a golden beach in Key West or a sunlit retirement villa nestled along Italy’s Adriatic coast.

But truth to tell, the real reason for my optimism is people. Forty-three years ago, largely through the work of *periti* like Fred McManus and Godfrey Diekmann, Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum concilium* **made the breathtaking decision to entrust the liturgy to the people**, by stating unequivocally that “*in the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else*” (SC 14). Notice that the Council did not say the “*aim to be considered before all else*” is the avoidance of abuses, or the placating of disgruntled traditionalists, or the placing of tabernacles in the “sanctuary area,” or the translation of Latin *editiones typicae* into bowdlerized English. (Incidentally, Thomas Bowdler, whose work and name gave us the verb “bowdlerize” got his reputation by an publishing an “improved,” prudishly expurgated, “family” version of that naughty English bard, William Shakespeare!) Note too that the Council spoke of the “**restoration of the sacred liturgy**”—a clue to the clueless, surely, that the state of the *Missale Romanum* in 1962 did not exactly represent the *acme* of good liturgical practice.

So the Council—knowing full well that **PEOPLE** are liable to spit up, spill things, munch Cheerios from plastic bags during the homily, squirm in their seats, snore during solemn moments, and otherwise whoop, wheeze, wail, and wiggle—*knowing all this full well*, the Council entrusted the sacred liturgy of our church to “**full and active participation by all the people.**” We experts may not know what we’re doing, but I suspect the Spirit that inspired Blessed John XXIII to call a council *did*. God’s People are *feline*; they always land on their feet, even when their leaders land on their butts.

I believe, moreover, that the most vital impulses in Christianity today are not to be found *either* in ancient churches confident of their longevity, wealth, influence, power, and celebrity, *or* among sprawling suburban mega-churches, or among conservative evangelicals who seem to believe the politics of Benito Mussolini were enlightened and progressive because he made the Italian trains run on time. Now, as always, religion is freshest among people willing to re-imagine it, people willing to dream, people willing to think the unthinkable, people willing to love life’s dangerous places, people willing to move toward the edge of the raft. In his book *How the Other Half Worships* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), photographer and writer Camilio José Vergara describes his experience, over four years, of visiting and worshipping in retrofitted storefront churches in blighted urban neighborhoods across the United States. “I searched for places,” writes Vergara, “where the homeless, the drug addicted, and those recently released from prison go for food, shelter, and clothing, and get those things plus religion.” (*How the Other Half Worships*, 281). From a Roman Catholic point of view, the religion these hustlers and ex-cons get may seem too simplistic, emotional, or

theologically naive; yet, as Vergara tells us, they all found one thing in abundance at those clapboard parishes: viz., people who care; people willing to listen and make a difference; people who aren't ashamed to hand "a few sheets of toilet paper . . . to those who need to use the bathroom" (ibid.). "In these houses of worship," Vergara concludes, "I found an oasis from a world obsessed with celebrity, youth, possessions, and status. If I had felt it in me, I would have repented, become a believer, and perhaps I would have walked with God." (ibid.)

So what about us? Can we old liturgical warriors—we dangerous Mohawk wannabes—still learn new ways to walk with God in worship? Can we renew our faith and hope in people at a time when pundits tell us that "reform" is over and that "liturgical renewal" is a fading fantasy? I think we can, if we remember that it's not we who are preoccupied with God; it's God who is preoccupied with us. God has given us the blessed and dangerous memory of bread to light our way, to ease our journey, to feed our bodies, to comfort our spirits.

And bread remembers.

It remembers the seed-kernel—sown in the golden heaviness of autumn, nested under fertile loam, buried in the long sleep of winter as high overhead, in the frozen sky, bright morning stars dance at the coming of their Creator.

It remembers the sudden sprouting of spring, the rush of sap through root and trunk of trees, the young sun's slow return.

It remembers the chirping ebullience of summer, the merciful rains, and growth steady as tides pushing the waters of the sea.

Bread remembers.

It remembers the harvesters' songs, the sharp sickle and the mill's agony, the crushing of seed against stone.

It remembers meal ground and sifted, filtered to fine flour.

It remembers the pressure of a woman's hand—the baker's kneading, mixing, churning; the pungent yeast's ferment; the rising warmth in the dark silence of the oven.

It remembers being lifted on wood to cool in the slanting light of late afternoon.

It remembers the knife's edge, the sacrificial surrender, the blissful balm of butter.

It remembers reaching its destiny by being broken, torn, passed, and shared—food to fuel grateful bodies.

Bread remembers.

It remembers the One who ate and drink with sinners—the despised, the unclean and the unwanted.

It remembers that God welcomes the hungry and homeless; the chorus of crying children, the hurt, the hunted, the have-nots; the “little ones” who are shut up or shut out.

It remembers that God’s reign belongs to the poor, the mourning, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, folk with a fire in their belly for justice.

It remembers the desperate prayer of a single mom or an addict, the sobs of a Chilean mother mourning the child who “disappeared.”

It remembers our cancers and chemotherapies, our beautiful children and sputtering marriages, the promises we kept—and the ones that kept us.

Bread remembers, and if it could talk, it would say, “Come to me and taste God—salty as the river of our blood, sweet as honey and apricots, smoother than oil, stronger than death.” (This section on “bread remembers” has been adapted from a short piece I wrote in January, 2002, for *Eucharistic Minister*.)

As Emily Dickinson once wrote, “Hope is the thing with feathers . . . that sings.”

So let’s get going. We have songs to sing. We have work to do. Thank you.