

# Notes and Guidelines for Children’s Liturgy of the Word

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## Introduction

Firstly, it is good to understand the deep and awesome meaning of ‘Liturgy’ in the Catholic Church.

Then one can see how ‘Liturgy of the Word’ is placed in the context of the whole Liturgy of the Mass.

That leads us to the elements of the Liturgy of the Word that need to be considered for children.

**The key** is to remain liturgical and biblical throughout, following therefore, the Church's understanding and instructions on Liturgy and on Scripture.

We need to know how to act liturgically as lay faithful, and how to read and explain the Scriptures in accordance with the mind and heart of the Church.

## Official Texts

- 1. Liturgy of the Word with Children**  
by Liturgy Office, *Bishops' Conference of England & Wales*,  
© 1996 Bishops' Conference of England and Wales  
Published by *Liturgy Office* 39 Eccleston Square London SW1V 1PL
- 2. Directory for Masses with Children**  
Official Roman document produced in 1973
- 3. Lectionary for Masses with Children** (complete edition for Years A,B & C)  
National Conference of US Catholic Bishops 1997
- 4. General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)**  
Excerpts from the English translation of *The Roman Missal* © 2010, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.  
Particular adaptations for England and Wales © 2011 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.
- 5. Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass** (revised 1981)  
Bishops' Conference of England and Wales  
Published by *Liturgy Office* 39 Eccleston Square London SW1V 1PL
- 6. The Catechism of the Catholic Church** (1997 definitive edition)  
Most recent edition published by the CTS (2016)

## The Liturgy of the Church

We enter into Liturgy in each of the sacraments, in Benediction and in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Church describes her Liturgy in various ways:

“Christ manifests, makes present, and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, ‘until he comes’.” CCC1076.

“The liturgy is the work of the whole Christ, head and body.” CCC1187

“Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others” (SC 7).

## Liturgy is for Salvation

The Liturgy, especially of the Eucharist, is for our salvation, accomplished by Christ on the cross and made present for us at the altar. This is why Catholic liturgy is not the same as rituals of any other religion, even if they might look similar, because it is the action of Christ, the whole Christ, Christ the head and his body the Church together.

To understand salvation by Christ, it may be helpful to keep in mind the difference between *what we are* – created by God and ‘very good’, and *what we do* – which is by our own actions and not always good. Salvation by Christ means that he, the Son of God, became man out of love for *what we are*, to save us from *what we do, or have done, badly*, which is called ‘sin’.

A sense of sin is about *what we do*, not about *what we are*. It is about wanting *what we do* to be in accordance with the wonder and beauty of *what we are*. Without a sense of our sin, or our destiny in eternal glory, the message of salvation in Christ, the very message of the Mass, can be meaningless.

## The Liturgy of the Mass

There is a two-fold movement in the Liturgy of the Mass.

Christ (because he is man) offers up all that we are to his heavenly Father and

Christ (because he is God) brings all that God is to us in sanctifying grace and blessing.

The role of the priest is essential; he ‘presides’ in persona Christi, that is, he acts as Christ made visible for us.

We respond with thanksgiving and worship of our heavenly Father, in Christ, by the Spirit.

The liturgy of the Mass has 4 parts:

Introductory rite: This begins with the sign of the cross of the priest and ends with the opening prayer or ‘collect’, that collects or gathers the eucharistic assembly into one.

Liturgy of the Word: This begins with the first reading and ends with the intercessory prayers.

Liturgy of the Eucharist: This begins with the offertory procession and ends with the prayer after communion.

Concluding rite: This begins after Holy Communion and ends with the final Blessing.

## **The Liturgy of the Word**

“The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and end of all blessings of creation and salvation. In his Word, who became incarnate, died and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.” CCC1081

Liturgy of the Word at Mass begins *after* the ‘Collect’ or Opening Prayer.

At Mass, the ‘Liturgy of the Word’ has 8 parts to it – fewer can be chosen for children.

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Proclaiming the Word of God: | 1. Old Testament reading and response           |
|                                 | 2. The psalm and antiphon                       |
|                                 | 3. New Testament reading and response           |
|                                 | 4. Gospel acclamation                           |
|                                 | <b>5. Gospel (mandatory)</b>                    |
| 2. Explaining the Word of God:  | 6. (Homily for adults) Explanation for children |
| 3. Response of an act of Faith: | 7. Creed  |
| 4. Prayers of Intercession:     | 8. Prayers of intercession                      |

## **The Liturgy of the Word for Children**

Sometimes, moreover, if the place itself and the nature of the community permit, it will be appropriate to celebrate the liturgy of the word, including a homily, with the children in a separate, but not too distant, room. Then, before the eucharistic liturgy begins, the children are led to the place where the adults have meanwhile celebrated their own liturgy of the word. (Directory for Masses with Children [DMC], 17)

## **General Considerations**

- Participation in the liturgy is the right and duty of all the baptised both children and adults;
- The liturgy builds up the members of Christ’s body, the Church;
- Liturgy includes action and symbol, it speaks to the whole person, it involves all the senses: sight, touch, sound, taste and smell;

- Participating in the liturgy forms our habits because we are ritual people and learn through imitation and repetition;
- In liturgy we discover the riches of prayer through word, gesture, silence and stillness;
- The purpose of adapting the liturgy for children is to lead them into full conscious and active participation in the liturgy of the parish;
- Liturgy with children as with adults demands dignity, clarity and simplicity.<sup>1</sup>

## Venue and Environment

Prepare the ‘separate’ place to be as suitable as possible for the ‘sacred action’ of the Liturgy. This helps to maintain the dignity of the liturgy of the word.

Firstly, a liturgical space should always have a crucifix displayed to remind us of the greatest act of love, from God, in Christ, for our salvation. This needs to be visible by the children, so, placed in front of them rather than behind, either on the wall or a standing crucifix on a cloth-covered table.

We all take things in with our eyes and children are especially perceptive. There is a ‘message’ that they will be receiving from the room and décor around them, especially in front of them. So, it is best to make the environment of the room complement, or at least not distract from, the words that are being proclaimed.

Piles of chairs and other stored items give the message that sacred liturgy is no more important than a place of storage. If they have to be in the room, they need to be *behind* the children not in front of them.

The places available for children’s liturgy are often a church hall, parish room or even a hallway or sacristy. These places are not designed for liturgy and often have no visual imagery suitable for liturgy, or they have all sorts of other distracting posters and pictures. Therefore, forethought needs to be given to the setting up of the place for the sacred action of the proclamation of the Word.

### A Focal Table

‘A focal point for the liturgy is essential, in this case a place for the proclamation of God’s word rather than an altar, a place of honour for the lectionary or other book of the scriptures.’<sup>2</sup>

These are some suggestions. The ones in bold are crucial.

- **Children should be able to see a crucifix** (or a picture of Christ on the cross)

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from ‘*Liturgy of the Word with Children*’, Liturgy Office, *Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales*, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> *Liturgy of the Word with Children*, Liturgy Office, *Bishops’ Conference of England & Wales*, 1996.

- (A cross with no figure, or the figure of the risen Christ, on the cross are not the best as Christ's suffering on the Cross is the source of our salvation and Holy Mass is his sacrifice on the cross for us.)
- **Ideally a focal table** should be set up with:
  - **White cloth** (to point to the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice)
  - **Candle(s)** (for the light of Christ)
  - **Bible or other sacred text** (e.g. Missal, Lectionary) open
  - **The crucifix** if there isn't one visible nearby.
- You could also have, for example:
  - The colour of the season of the liturgical year, such as in cloth or ribbon;
  - A visual aid for the gospel: images, pictures or statues of Christ, of Our Lady and/or saints and so forth.
  - A dish of holy water for the children to practice and become familiar with blessing themselves with the sign of the cross to remind them that they were baptized in this way, 'into Christ';
  - Rosary beads on certain feast days;
  - An Advent wreath in the appropriate season;

**Be aware of items which can mislead:**

- Such as stones, pebbles, leaves, sandals, etc. which could lead people to think of their summer holiday!
- Items from other religions such as Hindu diwali lamps; (Jewish items are acceptable since Christ was a Jew)
- Consecrated or unconsecrated hosts and/or wine is very confusing as on entering people may not know whether or not to reverence them, so avoid these completely.

**It is essential to be well prepared:**

- Ensure that chairs or mats (and tables if needed) are put out, a place of honour for the Holy Scriptures such as a lectern of some kind, and a crucifix.
- Be sure that there is a bible or Lectionary ready.
- It's a good idea to begin to gather appropriate items and store them in a cupboard, bag or suitcase so that you are ready for any occasion. The least you

will need is a spare bible, a clean, ironed white cloth, cloths or ribbons for the liturgical seasons: green, gold, purple, blue for Our Lady, a candle, candle holder and candle lighter.

- Make sure that setting up the room is done before participants arrive so that they enter a warm and welcoming space rather than see someone bustling about fixing the chairs or focal point.

## **Safeguarding, Health and Safety**

At this point it is good to call to mind the health and safety aspects of the parish premises. Fire exits and fire extinguishers must be known as well as first aid kit locations. Formation in the Diocesan safeguarding programme is important and the parish safeguarding officer known by at least one person amongst the children's liturgy team present.

## **Movement to and from the main Church**

So that the departure of the children keeps a liturgical form for the Liturgy of the Word, the children would normally:

- *leave* the main body of the church *after* the opening prayer and just before the first reading and
- *return* to the main body of the church just *before* the offertory procession.
- Forming a liturgical procession to leave the main body of the Church is appropriate but not essential: liturgical forms for this would include: following the processional crucifix, being led by an acolyte with a lighted candle to the door of the Church, or following the Gospel Book, held up solemnly at the head of the procession.
- It is less relevant to use a procession on return to the church. Children can return before or at the front of the offertory procession (not in it or behind it), preferably leaving a short gap between the return of the children to their parents and the offertory procession that begins the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

## **Frequency**

A separate Liturgy of the Word for children is always aimed at forming a habit of full participation at Mass. Mirroring the adult liturgy of the word (at a child's level) should help to do this. Regular children's masses on a Sunday would be another way.

To form the *habit* of attending the whole of Mass, it is usually considered better *not* to hold Children's liturgy of the word every week, but either once a month or, for example, in term time only, so that a habitual norm for the child is to be present and not separated.

### Age Range

- Generally, children under the age of 4 are less able to appreciate liturgy in a conscious manner and are best staying with their parents in the main church. However, they often attend along with an older sibling or a parent. In this case a quiet activity can be prepared for them while the Children's liturgy is taking place.
- Children from 4 years onwards are able to engage with the words of the Scriptures at their level and can usually come without their parents. Children's liturgy is best aimed at the 4-8 year olds present.
- Parents may want to accompany their children, in which case it is important to help the parents remember that they too are participating in the Liturgy of the word and are not free to chat, smoke, eat or drink and so forth where the liturgy of the word is taking place.
- Children who have received their first Holy Communion would normally have been so instructed to be able for full active participation in the Mass and would not normally attend Children's liturgy. However, they often come to help or accompany younger siblings. Like the parents present, this is a time of liturgy for them and not a time for looking after a creche of toddlers, for example.

### Outline of a session

- Brief welcome of the children
- Penitential Rite - if the children leave the Church before the penitential rite is said.
- Brief introduction to the time in the Liturgical year, or the Word of God
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel read from the Bible or Lectionary
- Explanation, reflection, discussion
- Creed or Creed extract
- Intercessions
- Activity if there is time
- Closing prayer



- \*\* Liturgical actions & gestures - explanations

## Reading the Sacred Text

“In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them’ CCC104.

- Reading the word of God to the children takes precedence over all other activity and no other texts are to be read in place of the Scriptures.
- The readings should always be from a bible, or a lectionary or children’s lectionary and not from a piece of paper or from any other kind of book. This indicates to the children that the source of this reading is sacred, the bible, and this book is treated respectfully, differently to any other book because it is the word of God.
- Relevant bible passages are read to the children. An official version approved by the Church for children, or a shortened version of the readings, including the gospel, are allowed by the Church but a paraphrase of the divine word is not. Some part of the gospel must always be read even when the Old Testament reading is used because more suitable for children.
- Liturgical norms require an ‘ordinary minister of the word’ to read the Gospel at Mass, that is a Bishop, priest, or deacon. If these are not available, an extraordinary minister of the word (such as the Children’s Liturgy catechist) may read for the children. This means that if there is a deacon or a second priest present at the Mass in addition to the one presiding, it would be appropriate that this person be invited to read the Gospel to the children.
- This is the moment for *listening and receiving* the wisdom, love and blessing of God the Father, through his Word, the Son, given to us in the divinely inspired Scriptures.
- Since this is Liturgy ‘of the Word’, not the Liturgy of the Eucharist, for the children to bring drawings or other objects to the sanctuary at this point would not normally be in accordance with the liturgical moment.
- To take drawings, pictures, prayers, objects or tasks home, is in keeping with carrying the word of God home with us in our minds and memories.

## Activity

- Activity- this is to be designed, either as part of the *explanation* of the Gospel to reinforce its message, or part of the *response* in faith. Be wary of replacing explanation purely with activity. The activity is to increase receptivity of, and

reflection on, the word of God. This moment is not a containment exercise, club activity or Sunday School, it is the moment for receiving God's very word.

- This will need to be adapted to the age of the children
- Colouring/cutting out & sticking are distracting & time consuming
- It can be useful to give each child a picture or prayer to take with them to share with their parents and reflect upon after the liturgy.
- Utilise any other adults present
- Be prepared for the unexpected & be flexible
- Ideas that have proved prayerful include:
  - Each child lighting a candle for a prayer intention
  - Each child being given a prayer card with picture to take home and pray with their family

## The Place for Music and Silence

Music is a wonderful means of re-enforcing, repeating and memorizing the message. It helps people take the message home and return to it when occasions in life can benefit from it. Music is not to fill every spare moment but must cease at times, to ensure that some silence for prayer is also included.

Simple, prayerful chant is especially suitable, in Latin or English. This links to the ancient tradition of the Church, especially for praying the psalms, liturgical responses and antiphons.

The liturgical priority for a musical setting is the Alleluia (or Lenten acclamation) to greet the gospel. The next priority would be to sing the psalm refrain. A response following the gospel can be sung and 'other responses can help express intercession and prayer. Particular songs and acclamations can be repeated throughout a liturgical season.'<sup>3</sup>

## The Place for Sacred Art

"Genuine sacred art draws man to adoration, to prayer, and to the love of God, Creator and Saviour, the Holy One and Sanctifier" CCC 2502.

It is extremely valuable to find ways of visualizing the reality and beauty of the spiritual world which is otherwise invisible. Make use of beautiful Sacred Art to nourish a Catholic imagination, especially scenes from the bible, of heaven, angels, Our Lady and saints.

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<sup>3</sup> Liturgy of the Word with Children, Liturgy Office, *Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, 1996.*

Scenes from the natural world would be rarely recommended. We see the natural world all the time. What we need in the liturgy is reminders of the wonderful reality and 'otherness' of all that is divine – which is in the world but 'not of this world'.

### **Additional Tips for Helpers**

Children's Liturgy helpers need to be practicing Catholics. Their service to the children is founded on their own Catholic faith, their love and respect for the Catholic liturgy and their appreciation of the precept of the Church to attend Mass on Sundays.

#### **Additional tips:**

*Sign of the Cross* - to begin and end prayers with this & the Trinitarian formula.

*The Trinity* - to speak regularly of God our heavenly Father, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as well as using the term 'God'.

*Christ* - be attentive to him, to what he is doing and his grace for us.

*Equal dignity of every human person* - to keep this in mind for every person, child, dignity which is because we are each made in the image of God.

*Good News* – always to speak of the word of God as truly good for everyone.

*Liturgical year* - reflect this in your session (Lent, Advent, Ordinary time, etc.).

*The words and gestures of the liturgy* - explain these so that the children watch out for them on other occasions.

*Christus totus* – remember the 'whole Christ', that is, Christ and his Church are one.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church* – is helpful when preparing, since it is a sure guide for the content of what to say and explain.

### **Material Resources**

ESSENTIAL for the Liturgy of the Word

- A Catholic Bible or Lectionary

ESSENTIAL for the Focal Table

- Crucifix
- Candles (and matches)
- Table cloths in white and where possible, appropriate liturgical colours i.e. gold, green, purple, red, blue and rose,

USEFUL

- Visual Aids for the Scriptures

- Music (piano / CD player / words and music for the children)
- Notice/pin board & pins, Marker pens
- **Take home** picture, prayer, symbol etc.