

Three Resources for Ministry

Those who are familiar with the radio programme “Desert Island Discs” will know that guests are asked, on the basis that they are cast away alone on a desert island, to select eight pieces of music that they would want to take with them – assuming they would also have the means to play them. At the end of the programme they are also asked to choose a favourite book in addition to the works of Shakespeare and the Bible which it is taken for granted would be automatic choices (possibly an incorrect assumption these days in the case of the Bible).

When it comes to the major resources which every priest needs to draw upon in his ministry, again the Bible should be taken for granted – in the nicest sense of those words. Three other resources are central: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The Code of Canon Law*, and the rites - the texts - that he uses in his celebration of the Mass and the sacraments. These are so important that they form a central part of the course work that students for the priesthood study in the seminary. In terms of ministry, however, they serve separate, though not entirely unrelated, functions.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is, of course, a “must” for every Catholic. It is certainly a more substantial publication than the old “penny catechism” that traditionally provided knowledge of the Faith to so many generations. The questions and answers, rote learning, method that it employed may not stand up to scrutiny in today’s educational system, but we accumulated a fairly impressive knowledge base despite what today’s critics might say. There may not necessarily have been a great depth to what we learned about our faith through the catechism, but at least we knew where we stood. We learned all the dos and don’ts, the rights and wrongs, and we memorised all the lists. It wasn’t exactly a degree in theology, but at least our churches were full.

By comparison the current catechism would, as they say, choke a mule! It’s big, it’s bulky - and it isn’t exactly a cover-to-cover read. However, there is a lot more substance in it than in the old catechism. It will satisfy the enquiring mind because it invites and makes possible a more informed practice of the faith and what it means to be a Catholic, compared to the somewhat superficial familiarity we may have had before.

The Catechism is, therefore, the obvious reference point for Church teaching whoever we are. And when it comes to ministry and to the celebration of the Mass and sacraments, it will answer the whys – though not necessarily the hows. For that we have to turn to the texts of our celebrations, but more of that in a moment.

As children we learned from the catechism the basic rules and laws that governed our relationship with God – and we still can (and should) as adults, because nothing has changed. In particular we knew about sin – in fact as Catholics we possibly had an unhelpful preoccupation with sin - and we knew the things we shouldn't do if we wanted to stay sin-free. What we didn't know, although many of those things were governed by it, was the existence of Canon Law – the Law of the Church. Most adult Catholics didn't need to concern themselves directly with Canon Law and still don't; it is only made known to them by their priests on a “need to know” basis. But priests themselves do need to know because *The Code of Canon Law* is one of the three important resources for their ministry.

At 1,752 Canons (laws) in length, many of them with multiple subsections, it would be impossible for priests to know the Code by heart - that's why we have canon lawyers. But as, in a sense, the “rule book” for our ministry, we need to have more than just a passing acquaintance with the Code. In the seminary we had to have our own copy in preparation for our study of Canon Law and it made eminent sense to read it from beginning to end, not just because we'd paid for it(!), but in order to acquire at least a basic familiarity. A referee needs to know the rules he is expected to apply and the very least he should do, therefore, is to read the book. A priest can leave the more complex issues of Church Law to the experts, but he should at least have a working knowledge of those aspects of the law that govern his ministry in the practical sense, and which may influence the pastoral teachings he may have to impart. The book should always be to hand for reference.

So, as we have seen, the Catechism tells us what the Church teaches on particular subjects and is, therefore, our spiritual and theological reference. The Code gives us the law, the guidelines on how to validly carry out our ministry. The third resource, then, is the texts of the rites we celebrate. I'm tempted to say that it may be the more important of those resources simply because of the number of people we may negatively influence if we do things poorly or even wrongly - the effect can be cumulative like a rolling snowball. The people of our parishes deserve better than that and so do the priests who have to take over from us.

Again, in the seminary, we had to have our own copies of the ritual texts and they formed the basis of our studies of liturgy and the celebration of the sacraments. All the texts we currently use contain a “General Introduction” (in the case of Baptism and for funerals)(or simply an “Introduction” in the case of the Rite of Penance). It's the first thing you come to when you open the book. It explains, usually at some length, how that particular rite is to be celebrated from a liturgical point of view. And the most daunting of them, if I can put it like that, is the “General Instruction of the Roman Missal”, 399 guideline

paragraphs as to how the Mass is to be celebrated. It is perhaps noteworthy that it is specifically called an *instruction* and not an *introduction* as in the other texts, although its purpose is the same.

In the seminary we worked our way through the “General Instruction”, studying and discussing it in all its detail, and discovering that while we thought we knew how to celebrate Mass, we really didn’t – often because the priests we had experienced over the years weren’t always following the guidelines. The “G.I.” makes the particularly important point that *the priest must remember that he is the servant of the sacred Liturgy and therefore is not permitted, on his own initiative, to add, to remove, or to change anything in the celebration of Mass.*¹ Surely a familiarity with the guidelines on how Mass is to be celebrated is basic and essential to that.

Having spent as much time as we did studying the “G.I.” as part of our training, and in my case that was as recently as the early 1990s, Rome issued a revised set of guidelines in 2005, confirmed in a document from our own Bishops’ Conference that same year. While the bulk of the text was basically the same, there were a number of significant changes and yet, four years later (as I write) many parishes have yet to experience their introduction, or even to receive any explanation in light of those documents ahead of their introduction. They have simply been ignored.

I’m not advocating a rigid, legalistic approach to the celebration of liturgy, but one of the things that people often cite when they reminisce about the Latin Mass is the uniformity of practice which meant that wherever they went at home or abroad, the Mass was the same. What happens when instructions from Rome or our Bishops’ Conference are not implemented, is that things end up being done in different ways from parish to parish and this can be very confusing for people going to Mass elsewhere.

It also undermines the credibility of their priest when people see that things are not done the same way in other parishes. The obvious question arises that if the catechesis was correct, then how come that other parish isn’t doing it? Or, conversely, if it wasn’t important enough that that parish isn’t doing it, was what their priest said just his personal liturgical whim? People have a right to experience best practice; and for that matter why would a priest be content with anything less? It’s difficult to argue against being familiar with, and having respect for, current liturgical and sacramental guidelines issued by the Church. Surely they are the “bread and butter” of a priest’s ministry.

What I have written here has probably prompted the reflection that the liturgical and sacramental ministry of a priest isn’t quite as straight-forward as perhaps

¹ *G.I.R.M.* para 24

you thought. The starting point for him, always, should be best practice as established by the theological teaching of the Church, the legal requirements of Church Law, and the liturgical and pastoral guidelines authorised by the Church for that particular celebration. Otherwise, to return to my earlier analogy, he will be like a referee who doesn't understand something as important as the offside rule or who runs out on the field without his whistle or his watch!

And just some final thoughts for those involvement in the lay ministry of the Church. What resources are basic to *your* ministry? How familiar are you with the Church's guidelines and teaching as they apply to what you do? How do all these things empower your ministry? What difference does it make to be commissioned? How does that influence commitment and responsibility as a minister?

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