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Children at Mass: Integrating gesture and movement

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Liturgical Movement as an integral part of the Mass

The *Directory for Masses with Children* (1973) includes, as one of the human values present in the Eucharistic Celebration, the experience of symbolic actions (DMC, 9). Children are particularly adept at using symbolic actions from the very tiny child who plays “boo!” with un-scary people to pre-adolescent children who are capable of complex symbolic actions. To incorporate enriching symbolic actions into liturgy celebrated with children certainly supports this important value but must be achieved in a manner which does not reduce the actions to entertainment which then seems to deserve applause. Liturgical movement has deserved criticism when it has drawn the focus away from liturgy towards personal performance.

Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963) called for provisions to be made for “legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions, and peoples” (SC, 38). Among the norms presented for the reform of the sacred liturgy, there was a call to “promote active participation” where the “people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions; gestures, and bearing. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence” (SC, 30). A result of this call for adaptation was for the provision of the Children’s Eucharistic Prayers where the specific needs of children were taken into account in an unprecedented way. Recent musical settings of the responses of these Children’s Eucharistic Prayers have greatly assisted children in responding during this important part of the Mass (e.g. Michael Mangan’s *Mass of Jubilee* and Patricia Spencer’s *Mass of Spirited Praise*).

To be faithful to the directives of the Second Vatican Council, any development of the use of gestures and bearing needs to be prepared with some sound liturgical principles.

Firstly, the liturgical movement needs to be fully integrated into the ritual itself. The gestures and bearing of the children need to be appropriate to the ritual moment. The Eucharistic acclamations are appropriate moments. The *Holy Holy* is a moment of high praise and can be enhanced for the community through sung responses and movements by the whole congregation or by a leading group.

Secondly, the music must be appropriate to the age and experience of the children so that they can respond with complete confidence. Patricia Spencer’s *Mass of Spirited Praise* integrates clapping into the sung responses for the Children’s Eucharistic Prayer II. The entire congregation of children and adults are enlivened by this action.

Thirdly, the gestures used for liturgical movement need to be dignified and relevant. For example, for the Eucharistic response *Jesus has given his life for us*, the gesture of hands

reaching forward as if receiving communion is a known, accessible and relevant movement that can be done with great dignity.

Fourthly, the symbols used must be accessible and worthy. While gestures themselves are symbolic, they can also involve other symbols and an example is described below.

Fifthly, liturgical movement should never be viewed as 'performance' so must always find a place within the ritual itself, not where there is meant to be silence or stillness. This strongly suggests that there is a need to avoid presenting any liturgical movement after communion when there is no ritual action into which it can be integrated.

The *Directory for Masses with Children* also declares that the "catechesis preparing children for first communion calls for special mention" (DMC, 12). In order to develop these ideas in 2008 our parish First Communicants engaged in a liturgical movement which assured that the central focus for them during the Eucharistic Prayer was of Jesus' saving act. In the catechesis for the communicants prior to their celebration there was an emphasis on their place in the saving act of Jesus and primacy of the Eucharistic Prayer. The sung responses in the CEP II begin during the Preface. The children involved in the movement began to process down the aisle at this time only moving when the responses were being sung so that they were standing silently while the priest said the prayer. They reached the sanctuary when the *Holy Holy* began and while the entire congregation sang and clapped the music, the children moved onto the sanctuary carrying a long piece of white fabric. They also sang and clapped and at appropriate moments lifted the cloth in high praise.

In his book *A Sense of the Sacred*, Kevin Seasoltz (2005) talks about liturgical language and gestures not being executed to accomplish a task but rather being meant to reveal meanings and express dispositions. This certainly is emphasised when children use gestures and music together. As the children processed towards the sanctuary they expressed the movement of the community towards God's saving action. They came from the community, linked together by the white cloth, and moving only when the congregation sang with them.

The white fabric, the colour of resurrection, was held by all children in the movement denoting a unity of all Christians. It was presented in an open ended circle that was completed by the altar itself showing that Christ's sacrifice completes our relationship with God and with each other so that we become the presence of Christ in the world through our relationship with each other. The purpose of the presence of Christ in the sacred bread and wine is for that to become the presence of Christ in us. While this articulated theology might well be beyond the reach of children, the image is powerful and well integrated and hence is absorbed in a symbolic manner. As the Liturgy itself always exerts its own inherent power to instruct we can never deny the capacity of symbols to move us, in the words of Aquinas, from things we know to things we don't know.

The gestures clearly embodied the praise given to God within the Eucharistic prayer, all are gathered around the Lord's table as full members of Christ's Body taking part actively with the people of God in the Eucharist. For the final section of the CEP II, the response, *We praise you, we bless you, we thank you*, is repeated four times. At this point the children had placed the cloth on the floor and used a gesture for each statement. For praise they lifted their arms and faces upwards in the gesture of prayerful praise, for blessing they placed their hands across their chest and bowed as we bow our heads for blessing, and in thanks they offered a wide gesture of open hands as we do when we thank people in a general group. At the Great Amen, they lifted the cloth again in high praise as well as singing and clapping with the whole congregation. They processed from the sanctuary back to their places during the Our Father as it was being sung by the whole congregation.

The *General Catechetical Directory* issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1971 says that "catechesis must promote an active, conscious, genuine participation in the liturgy of the Church, not merely by explaining the meaning of the ceremonies, but also by forming the minds of the faithful for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for a community spirit, and for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds. All these things are necessary for a true liturgical life" (25). In this particular example, the First Communicants embodied an understanding of the meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer and in that they have been formed in a different understanding of prayer. For their final thanksgiving Mass at the end of the year the liturgical movement was repeated by those who had participated previously and the way in which they remembered it and engaged in a dignified, thoughtful and joyous manner indicated that they had embraced this aspect of their catechesis in a profound way. Through such an in-depth experience the symbols invited the children to interpret and participate at a heightened level.



This experience of liturgical movement is removed from the idea of liturgical dance which has become a difficult issue in recent years. While liturgical dance is considered totally appropriate in some cultures, in our Western cultural experience it is associated more with the profane rather than the sacred. *Varietates legitimate* states that “among some people, singing is instinctively accompanied by handclapping, rhythmic swaying and dance movements on the part of the participants. Such forms of external expression can have a place in the liturgical actions of these peoples on condition that they are always the expression of true communal prayer of adoration, praise, offering and supplication, and not simply a performance” (42). Children, however, are naturally moved to sway and clap while singing and that can bring them to a greater expression of liturgical celebration than remaining silent and still. As a cantor in a vibrant parish I am always lifted higher in praise when a small body comes to the front simply to dance joyously to the music that the community offers in praise of God.

Liturgical movement, when it is a natural and Spirit filled form of response and a true communal embodiment of praise and adoration, can be a powerful way in which to engage children more deeply in the moments of highest praise of God for Jesus’ saving act.

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