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With the practice of religious rites as its primary subject matter, liturgical theology has long been on a methodological quest to do theology as an argument not only concerning ideas but also drawn from the historically situated praxis of Christian faith. This places liturgical theology in the age-old problem of the relationship between theory and practice.

Given the faith perspective within which liturgical theology operates, theory has a normative dimension and practice, a pastoral character, and an ecclesial nature. This, at times, makes for a volatile mix of ingredients. In attempting to move beyond the study of texts to the actual performance of rites in contexts, the liturgical theologian does not approach the ritual practices of the faithful as an external observer-analyst but, rather, as very much a member-participant. The liturgical theologian's scholarly work includes a faith commitment to the observed tradition being analyzed, a vocation to promoting the tradition of the church's sacramental worship.

To teach and write in this way in the contemporary academy poses unavoidable questions: What are the ethical boundaries of this type of academic endeavor, given the pastoral situation of the actual subject matter? What responsibility does the theologian have to orthodoxy, given

the normative dimension of the theoretical pursuit? How can and does the liturgical theologian's work include a constructive dimension, an effort to make the tradition a living reality by drawing on resources from history to meet the pastoral needs of today? No mere quest for relevance, the liturgical theologian's passionate desire, as a scholar and believer, to study and theorize about actual practice has required methodological experimentation. Here I shall briefly describe two approaches I have taken as a professor, one with undergraduates and the other in pastoral ministry courses.

For "Exploring Catholicism," a two-semester course meeting a core requirement for undergraduates at Boston College (a Jesuit-sponsored, Catholic university), I have always structured the second semester in terms of liturgy and ethics. Starting from a study of the Catholic notion of sacramentality, human experience interpreted in terms of the person and mission of Jesus the Christ, we turn to a close examination of the Mass — its current ritual texts, cultural contexts, and historical tradition — as the paradigmatic practice framing such a Roman Catholic interpretation of life. This opens into a sizable term paper project, in which I assign groups of students to attend Sunday liturgies at various pairs of churches (one Roman Catholic, one another Christian denomination) whose specific practices of liturgy, social, ethnic, and economic contexts, and architectural spaces promise plenty for comparison and contrast. I contact staff at all the churches, informing them that some of my students plan on joining their services on certain dates. All have consistently responded warmly. Staff members or greeters are often watching out for the students to welcome them on those mornings, and in some places congregants take the students right into their pews with them.

The overarching theological principle governing the fieldwork and subsequent term paper is the Second Vatican Council's teaching that in the liturgy Christ is present in the assembled people, the presiding minister, the proclaimed word, and the sacramental elements. The students are to participate in the two different Sunday worship services, observing how they do or do not find that fourfold presence of Christ to be evident in the performances of the rituals. Having written field notes in the wake of each visit, the students draw upon the history, contemporary theology, and ritual theory we have studied in the course in order to analyze theologically the two services they describe in their papers. I provide extensive preparatory guidelines for both their trips and the subsequent writing of the formal papers. A class session is devoted to students sharing their observations and initial attempts at analysis.

I make it clear that I do not presume what levels or types of faith commitments the students possess but, nonetheless, am asking them to be participant-observers (a concept we explore in detail). Students regularly describe themselves as never having attended a church other than their own and how the comparative experience brings not only a heightened knowledge of liturgy but also a deeper awareness and, often, critical evaluation of their own religious assumptions and convictions. In course evaluations, students regularly note the project as the

highlight of the course. I believe it is a type of knowledge that can only be garnered through engagement with actual performance.

In conceiving and then refining that practice-oriented project over the years, I have kept in mind ethical questions about teaching and learning, including the awareness that the students possess a range of levels of religious commitment (Roman Catholic or otherwise). The students know from the outset of the course (with its syllabus) that they will be asked to undertake this theological project. It is up to them to decide the extent to which they want their own faith commitment to function in the writing of the paper. I have found over several years only rare instances (two or three, total) of students not wanting to do the fieldwork for the project, and in no case has a student mentioned the actual participation in religious worship to be the problem (except for getting up before noon on Sunday morning!). I believe that the clarity of their roles, as well as the extensive preparation, make the assignment not only viable but rewarding.

The other ethical consideration I always revisit in this project is the status of the worshipping communities as subjects for study. I consider it important to inform the staffs that my students will be observing and participating in one of their public worship services. I share with the ministers the theological framework of the study and the guidelines for participant-observation, and these, I have found, met the concern of the one pastor who said he had in the past been leery of people coming to study his parish's liturgy. Over the years, his community and several others have expressed delight in the appearance of another group of Boston College theology students.

Graduate courses in pastoral ministry entail different questions of what the teacher can expect from the students. The students are committed to the practice of the faith and moreover in a public way, insofar as they are preparing to become or already are public ministers or religious educators in the church. They are not skittish about their religious commitment or identity, nor are they embarrassed to explore these openly in class, as can sometimes be the case with undergraduates. In my masters-level liturgical theology courses, then, I am able to pursue a different method for studying Roman Catholicism's rite of Christian initiation of adults, order of Christian funerals, rite of penance, or pastoral care of the sick as fundamentally ritual-performance events.

I form the students into subgroups that are responsible, with my mentoring, for enacting specific rites with and for the class. These students take on the various ministerial roles, as well as those who are the key subjects of the ritual action (e.g., neophytes, or a sick person to be anointed, or bereaved family of the deceased). They stage the given ritual completely with music, vestments, preaching, requisite liturgical equipment and decoration, usually doing all of

this in one of the chapels on the campus. The rest of the class members take the role of the worshipping assembly. All enter into the event as if it were an actual pastoral occurrence. Indeed, students often report that in the enactment they have what for the more genuine faith experiences, moments of deepened awareness of the importance of scriptures and tradition in relation to their lives in the doing of the rites. Such performative work in class, I believe, makes all the difference between students struggling to grasp the histories, theologies, and ritual forms of the rites, as studied through books and lectures, and their being grasped by the power and pastoral promise of the rites in action.

Such a performative approach to the academic study of liturgy is not unlike the classroom work of the late Victor Turner, who had graduate students in his courses at the University of Chicago and the University of Virginia assume roles in rituals so that the class members might acquire a certain type of knowledge of the rituals — their cognitive and affective impact on various participants and on the social group as a whole; the mutual influence of ritual performance and its wider environment; the ritual experience of time and memory; the necessity of narrative in the doing and recounting of ritual, etc. — that could not be obtained by means of words about them. Turner laid out a methodological rationale for such performance — activity within anthropology courses, arriving at a theory of concentric frames delimiting the social field of the performance practiced, one of which articulates the action being undertaken as play. The latter, far from being a pejorative term indicating a lack of seriousness or academic rigor, establishes the agreed upon boundaries in which the exercise takes place, affording the possibility for insight into the ritual to emerge freely. I consider my own goals for performing rites within my liturgical theology courses to be similar.