

Liturgy and ritual processes during the directed retreat

Janet K. Ruffing

LITURGY AND RITUAL PROCESSES DURING THE DIRECTED RETREAT are, in my view, an extremely important aspect of the directed retreat within a communal context.¹ Careful attention to ritual can profoundly enhance the experience of the retreatants within their individual retreat processes. Because retreatants and directors are gathered in a communal setting for the directed retreat, more flexible liturgical norms can apply to this kind of gathering than to public liturgies in parish contexts which attract a broader spectrum of participants.² However, this dimension can also be the most problematic to develop and negotiate within the retreat staff group, the sponsoring retreat centre, and, at times, with the retreatants themselves. In many instances, both retreatants and retreat directors operate from an impoverished understanding and experience of liturgy, and of the evocative potential of symbol and ritual enactment for the participants.

Ritual at the service of the retreat process

The central principle at work for teams of directors on the directed retreat is that everything is done in the service of the retreatants' retreat. That means directors supporting and resourcing one another so that they are at their best for each retreat interview. Rituals developed for the retreat should relate to the retreat process itself, both supporting and challenging the retreatants' experience of God within the retreat. Directors may need to rely on musicians and a liturgist to develop the liturgical events if their spiritual direction focus would suffer from their personal involvement in preparing homilies or liturgical planning. For directors who are able to work creatively with the liturgy, it is helpful to have their responsibilities for specific celebrations assigned to them prior to the retreat itself. This gives the time necessary to develop relevant aspects such as the form of liturgy, the music, and the choice of aesthetic objects to make the liturgical environments pleasing, helpful and evocative.

It is a sad commentary on the contemporary Church that many retreatants, especially women, arrive on retreat from a situation of

liturgical famine. For the most part, women who make the directed retreat are either church professionals themselves, women religious, full-time lay ministers, or lay people who are deeply committed to the Church and participate in spiritual direction during the course of the rest of the year. For many of them, their experience of ritual is one of being rather passive. Silently they listen to readings and prayers rendered in deliberately exclusive language, speak minimal set responses, and participate from a distance in a ritual largely performed by clergy. Only if music is integral to the celebration – and that is usually restricted to Sundays – will the singing offer a more fully embodied role for the congregation. Yet the theology they espouse causes them to identify themselves with the Church as the people of God as it enacts itself in the works of mercy, continues to be Christ's presence in the world and offers the pastoral ministries these retreatants exercise in and for the community of faith. Too often this experience of the Christian mysteries of the non-ordained members of the community is not allowed to come to ritual expression, especially at eucharist. Mary Collins aptly raises this question in terms of current liturgical practice, which has become fixated at the socio-political level to the neglect of the theological core of liturgy.

What is necessary for the eschatological mystery to break through in liturgical epiphany so that the Church realizes and recognizes itself? At a minimum, the Church must remember the story of Jesus and the relationships manifest there. There are various tellings; but, the narrative outline is firm. There is the created world that God loves in its woundedness and alienation; God's enfleshment in human history, especially in the history of suffering embraced by Jesus; God's resolute forgiveness of human blindness and obtuseness even in the face of love; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Christ Jesus on those who recognize God in Jesus; the enlistment of these Spirit-filled disciples who, with grateful hearts, continue Jesus' mission of showing God's face to the world.

When the spiritual compass of the Church's liturgy is directed to remembering its own participation in the relationships revealed in Christ, the liturgy has the power to transform the human spirit of those who participate. The power rises from the core Christian identity of the baptized, who press to understand more fully the meaning of their lives.³

Many retreatants long for ritual communal opportunities in which their desires and yearnings for such transformation are given image and

expression rather than negated and silenced by the manner of celebrating. This, I believe, is one of the possibilities of eucharistic liturgies in the retreat context. But even more than that, I believe the entire experience of a retreat is a larger ritual process. This process can be brought more fully into symbolic awareness broadly in two ways: by the creation of rituals other than eucharist which are enacted by the whole community, and by private rituals enacted by the individual retreatant within her or his unique process.

The retreat as a ritual process

The proposal that a directed retreat is a ritual process follows Victor Turner's analysis of the stages of a rite of passage: the retreat is a time of deliberately chosen liminality for the purpose of transformation. The retreatant separates from ordinary life and community and journeys to a special and sacred place, seeking an experience of solitude and intimacy with God. In the group retreat, this experience of deliberately sought solitude with God occurs within an alternative community which may become an experience of *communitas* – everyone on the retreat assuming roles different from those in ordinary life, more fully egalitarian and supportive of the transformative spiritual process of the retreat. When this happens, a profound spiritual connection may occur, even in the midst of silence.

The individual direction sessions are themselves a dyadic ritual involving the director and the retreatant. This ritual takes place in a sacred and private interview space where there is often a display of some kind of sacred or natural symbols – flowers, images, a candle, a Bible, arranged by the director. The retreatant enters the room and leaves it at a set time; directors and directees create their own rituals for beginning and ending sessions. The narrative of sacred experience is honoured by the director's responses and, one hopes, expert guidance or accompaniment of the retreatant. The daily schedule has set times for meals and may be punctuated by communal prayer – morning prayer or morning body praise, eucharist or an alternative ritual, and night prayer. The final stage of the retreat process is savouring or assimilating the particular graces of the retreat and anticipating or preparing for the return back to ordinary life. The communal prayer and ritual throughout the retreat needs to be integral in the service of each retreatant's process.

The beginning

It is important to support the beginning and ending of the retreat with a ritual appropriate to the particular retreat house and its schedule. In my experience, a ritual which opens the retreat best takes place after all the preliminaries of arrival, room assignments, assignment of directors, and orientation to the retreat and the centre have taken place. This opening service needs to help retreatants arrive, get some sense of who else is on retreat with them and help them shift into the quieter, slower rhythm of the retreat. This ritual, whether a eucharist, compline or another simple prayer service, helps the retreatants individually and as a group to settle into the retreat, entering into the silence of the sacred time and space of retreat. Some teams have adapted a Sunday eucharist for this purpose when a retreat has had to begin on a Sunday and most of the retreatants would have been travelling to reach the retreat centre. For instance, one Sunday the Elijah story of the miraculous feeding became the promise of 'food for the journey' for the entire retreat. Another eucharist opened the retreat on the Vigil of the Assumption. It focused on the contemplative mystery of Mary's total transformation as a promise of our own destiny, using rich visual icons from a Sieneese painting of the life of Mary for environment, and meditative music in the service. Retreatants gathered around the altar in the chapel for a eucharist prayer punctuated with their sung acclamations. One of the directors gave a brief homily, ending with lines from a Rilke poem.

When neither a Sunday nor feastday made a eucharist necessary at the opening, we have often preferred a simpler mood-setting ritual. We have used a series of slide projections matched by reflective texts from Scripture; compline with a walking meditation on a labyrinth emphasizing the first phase of the retreat: the journeying to one's own centre. Another time the symbolic focus was on an arrangement of the shoes of the gathered community in the centre of the room. The shoes were contemplated and incensed, evoking the sense of holy ground which caused Moses to take off his shoes before the burning bush. The retreatants were then blessed as they began their retreat.

Such ritual, or one on the first full day of retreat, needs to set the tone for the entire retreat, inviting retreatants consciously to embrace the opportunity of the retreat, evoke their desire for God and for spiritual growth. Ritual can facilitate each aspect of this arrival and beginning process in both verbal and richly symbolic ways.

Sacramental liturgies

One reason retreatants choose to make a retreat in a group context may be not only the availability of a competent director but also the opportunity for a daily eucharist and a reconciliation service related to the retreat process. Some retreatants approach the sacrament of reconciliation only within the context of their annual retreat. The eucharistic liturgies are important to the retreat process for a number of reasons; they make present the reality of Church beyond this particular gathered community. The retreat liturgies can be an expression of the retreat group's intentional connection to the larger Church, a way to pray for its needs and those of the world, and a way for participants themselves to be more deeply nourished by the sacraments.

We usually follow the cycle of readings and feasts established by the universal Church. Whoever prepares the liturgy either chooses to keep the daily reading from the lectionary or selects from the options related to a particular feast day. The planners then focus the celebration through a particular thematic or symbolic lens appropriate to the dynamics of the retreat process. This focusing is celebrated through music, the preached reflections of the director on the readings, and the use of appropriate symbol in the liturgical environment. In the planning, it is important to remember that music, with or without words, touches into feelings among the participants of which they may not be entirely conscious. So, too, an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of the room, the table for celebration, colour and central symbol richly nourish the senses and evoke responses of delight and reverence.

The retreat reflections on the Word often support retreatants in their individual process and also challenge them. For instance, the eucharist itself, as well as the lectionary readings, presents the mystery of Christ, the gathered community, the dynamics of life in Christ such as conversion, call, repentance, suffering, gratitude, praise, discipleship, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is primarily through the liturgy that the Christian story is evoked and the individual retreatant powerfully encounters these mysteries which theologically form the larger context in which the individual retreat takes place. With its word and ritual the eucharistic liturgy can be an important input and voice from the tradition beyond the individualized experience of the retreatant. The eucharist makes present the larger story, mystery and community to which we belong and which inhabits us. Liturgy is one of the privileged loci of religious experience and should be deliberately cultivated through taking great care with liturgical celebration during the retreat.⁴

In most retreat houses, the team of directors has shared responsibility for preparing the reflections on the Word for more than twenty years. The directors have a sense of where their own group of retreatants are in their retreat process and therefore know how to bring this into the content of their comments. Less frequently, and depending on the size of the total group, reflection on the readings may also include some form of faith-sharing by retreatants themselves, in addition to the brief reflection of one of the directors. This common voluntary *meditatio* on the Word is often very moving as the gathered community expresses its faith. It is a given that retreatants often are, and may remain, in quite different places. Some welcome this fuller participation by giving voice to the graced awareness they bring to liturgy, while others may prefer to be silent. The various perspectives and responses to the Christian mystery encoded in the word of Scripture may invite a retreatant to consider a content or theme she or he may be avoiding in prayer. Other insights emerge as confirming grace supporting the present movement in the retreat. There remains something grounding and stabilizing within the retreat when retreatants choose to participate in a eucharistic liturgy carefully adapted to the retreat context. As retreatants return year after year, their ritual vocabulary increases and they become more comfortable with the varied ways the gathered community of retreatants and directors embody the liturgy with carefully chosen gestures, ritual action and sensually pleasing environments. All who wish take specific roles in the ritual; all who wish speak their reflections in varied contexts. All sing; all participate in the ritual movement.⁵

Sometimes a given liturgy suggests a location other than the usual one. One very powerful eucharist on the Vigil of the Assumption began at the edge of the cemetery where deceased members of the religious community who ran the retreat house were buried. Gathering at the graveyard afforded us a visual reflection on the reality and inevitability of death and, in a gentle way, evoked considerable grief in a number of the retreatants. The gathered community then moved to celebrate resurrection at a eucharistic table installed for that purpose at an outdoor Marian shrine almost adjacent to the cemetery.

Sometimes directors have dared to stay with the readings of the day even when they did not seem particularly consoling. In response to a very challenging set of readings, one director invited us all to confront the mystery of real and objective evil in our world as part of the spiritual journey. Another time, the feast of Jane Frances de Chantal became an opportunity for reflecting on the experience of darkness in prayer, an experience de Chantal knew; this profoundly affirmed

retreatants who were struggling with the felt absence of God in their prayer. In another retreat house, the feast of Monica became an occasion for a small group of retreatants to reflect together on the way women had mediated faith in their lives. The memories of faith-filled mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters filled the room with the feminine embodiment of the Christ mystery in these remembered women. Thus the eucharistic liturgy with its close connection between word and sacrament often became epiphany in these retreat liturgies in ways that more fully expressed the way Christ lives in all of us, women as well as men. The echoes reverberated beyond the liturgy if the retreatants were attracted to pursue something further in their personal prayer and retreat interviews, or else they simply faded away as a different movement of God's Spirit continued to unfold in their particular experience.

Reconciliation

The liturgies of reconciliation have taken different themes and symbolic emphases. One of them connected social sin and personal sin through a prayer of lamentation which created a 'wailing wall' which retreatants approached, naming social situations and sins they wished to lament. The group responded with noise-makers, movement and vocalizations if they wished, interspersed with sung responses. The second half of the service moved toward personal sinfulness and healing, ending with an anointing. Another lovely service employed the symbol of a broken pot which was reconstructed in the course of the service. Each of these services richly evoked the reality of sin and its effects in ways which facilitated both reflection and the opportunity to respond to material that was bubbling up in the retreat process itself. In most of these services, the retreatants blessed one another in an anointing, or some other gesture, after those who wished to had approached the people hearing their admissions of sinfulness. In this way, the entire community was both acknowledging sin and participating in its reconciling.

Ritual related to time, place and season

A final aspect of the ritual process relates to the time of day or season of the year as well as to the natural environment of the retreat centre. In one retreat house, the daily eucharist was just prior to the midday meal. Some retreatants found the afternoon and evening very long without some other communal prayer service. Thus began an evolving custom of ending the day with compline after nightfall. These compline

services were conceived as very simple contemplative experiences which brought the graced day to a close in the chapel. Darkness and candlelight prevailed and few words were used. The structure included a ritual candle-lighting with instrumental music in the background, and lighting of incense with a simple repeated phrase each night. After a period of silent prayer, there would follow a piece of poetry or brief reading, a hymn, usually recorded, and a closing collect. Simplicity was the key. In the larger chapel of a different centre, we kept the basic structure and mood of this service but elaborated the incensing, sometimes including sacred dance or some other more embodied gesture such as approaching a bowl of water in blessing. When a rooftop area became available, the compline service was moved there, under the starry sky where all the sounds of the night could be heard. Thus the naturally contemplative quality of night-time, and the cycle of nature characteristic of the night, became more closely connected to the liturgical form of compline.

In addition to the rituals based on sacraments and the Divine Office, we also developed some new rituals connected to both the process of the retreat and the natural beauty and physical features of the location. Toward the end of the retreat week, we began closure with a non-eucharistic liturgy at the riverside, in which directees were invited to bring their artwork or some other symbol of their retreat. In a simple process retreatants began to recapitulate the movements of the retreat and to share one of the important graces of this time. This liturgy evolved into a 'Four Directions Prayer' based on a Native American form, celebrating harmony with creation as well as the closure process of the retreat. Another year this closure ritual took the form of a 'Celebration of the Creation of the Earth' and our relationship to it. It evoked reflections on the earth as seen from the moon. In the course of the ritual each retreatant was invited to let one of the rocks collected from the grounds 'choose' them, together with a line from Scripture which spoke of rock or earth.

One retreat house in the Hudson River Valley fronts this magnificent river, offering most retreatants a spectacular view from their rooms. Many retreatants spend their early mornings or afternoons right on the bank of the river. We developed rituals which we eventually called the 'Sacrament of the River'. One version evoked the geological history of the river and the history of the various peoples who lived near or on the river, and included a litany of the river in sung response. The other version was baptismal in focus, using symbols from the Easter Vigil, and invited a baptismal re-commitment at the riverside. The paschal

candle was swirled and plunged into the river. As the candle was brought to each member of the community, another placed their hands in blessing on their shoulders and read a verse from Scripture related to water or baptism. These river rituals were held before the middle of the retreat, making retreatants more conscious of the river's already accumulating symbolic presence in their experiences.⁶

A ritual related to the time of year in which the retreat takes place can be equally helpful. Summer lends itself to an outdoor service related to creation, the summer solstice, or any other summer festival or feast. Each season of the year naturally evokes important memories and life experiences as well as phases within a retreatant's life cycle or spiritual journey. Different seasons of the year may evoke different aspects for retreatants and may become part of the group ritual as well. There are also important feasts during these other seasons: Advent, Christmas and New Year in winter; Lent and Easter in the spring; Samhain (Halloween), All Saints and harvest feasts in the fall.

Ritual ending of the retreat

We created three ritual processes for the total group as a gradual process to facilitate closing the retreat and easing the return to daily life. It worked, too, for the few who came for a six- or eight-day retreat and had to leave early. The process within the group began with the non-eucharistic liturgy described above. Within the direction interview, directors naturally attended to summarizing the primary movements of the retreat and assisting the retreatant in bridging the retreat experience to daily life in ways particular and helpful to each one. The compline service on the final night of the retreat has taken various forms. In retreats which opened with a ritual on the labyrinth, the final compline also took place on the labyrinth, focusing on the phase of the return from the centre. If a retreatant had composed a song related to the labyrinth she was invited to share it; when another retreatant had choreographed a dance on the labyrinth using votive lights, an adaptation of the Filipino light dance, she performed it for this compline. Following the dance, other elements of the compline form completed the ritual. If the labyrinth had been a significant part of their retreat experience, retreatants were invited to walk it again as part of their individual closure. The next morning, after all the individual interviews were completed, the retreat ended with a eucharist of thanksgiving, usually quite simple in form but joyous in tone.

Conclusion

The careful attention to ritual and liturgy related to the retreat experience described above profoundly enhances the experience of the directed retreat. These liturgies maintain connection and continuity with the larger faith community while at the same time expressing some of the particularity of this group gathered for retreat. They offer a valuable, multivalent input in a process which can otherwise be highly individualized and individualistic. The same service can evoke a wide range of responses and associations in the retreatants. The liturgies and rituals offer contemplative and solid group support for the individual process of each retreatant. They may be richly evocative of feelings, insights and memories through sensual, aesthetic experiences – singing, gesture, speech – all expressive modes of contemplative practice. Rituals which are integral to the retreat also encourage retreatants to make connections in daily life between their experience and the liturgical cycle of prayer, as well as to create new rituals for important events in their lives.

Janet K. Ruffing RSM is a member of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Burlingame, and Associate Professor in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction at the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University, Bronx, NY. She has extensive experience in mentoring spiritual directors, authored *Uncovering stories of faith: spiritual direction and narrative* (Paulist) and is currently researching contemporary experience of kataphatic mysticism.

NOTES

1 Ways of celebrating liturgy vary dramatically within the English-speaking world. The experience this article is drawn from is clearly North American, but would also be quite applicable to Australia. Many women's groups have been experimenting for more than two decades with more fully embodied rituals of different kinds as well. In the UK and Ireland, it is often quite effective to draw on the rich Celtic traditions of ritual, including their elements within public rituals. The *caim*, or 'encircling prayer', is one which works very well in liturgical settings, as do blessings of every kind.

2 For instance, the US bishops developed 'Guidelines for lay preaching', *Origins* 18 (December 1988), which explicitly mention the appropriateness of preaching by 'lay persons and religious when this would prove beneficial or necessary according to Canon 766'. The document identifies 'other forms of preaching in various settings, e.g., celebrations of various types, retreats, revivals, other spiritual exercises, missions, gatherings of the faithful for prayer and reflection, and public assemblies. Preaching in whatever form is always from faith to faith and looks to the continual conversion and sanctification of Christian life' (p 403).

3 Mary Collins, 'The form of liturgical prayer' in *Teach us to pray*, ed Francis A. Eigo OSA, Proceedings of the Theology Institute of Villanova University (Villanova, 1996), p 97.

4 In my research, I discovered that people who experienced a variety of mediated experiences of God reported that many significant religious experiences occurred during eucharistic celebrations. See 'The world transfigured: kataphatic religious experience' in *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995), pp 232–259.

5 In my research cited above, the most common mediations of religious experience were nature, music or songs, symbols and imagery. By deliberately making all of this part of the retreat in the group prayer, individuals often find themselves deeply moved by a particular song or an image which opens further in the retreat. Their experience of God in nature becomes more intimately linked with the entire Christian mystery of creation as sacrament and the sacraments as rooted in creation and human experience. For further elaboration on the role of nature see my '“To have been one with the earth”: nature in contemporary Christian mystical experience' in *Presence* 3 (January 1997), pp 40–45. The part on music has been presented to spiritual directors but not yet published.

6 Richard Fragomeni and John Pawlikowski, in *The ecological challenge: ethical, liturgical and spiritual responses* (Collegeville, 1995), make the point that the medieval liturgical sensibility had a strong relationship to cosmology. It was common for cosmological symbols to be placed in prominent locations in sacred spaces and the natural cycle of creation was more explicit within the worshipping community.