

## **The Liturgy: How Do We Gather?**

Everything that happens before the first scripture reading is meant to help us assemble. That means gathering together many individuals as one community at prayer. This building called a "church" is a kind of living room of the family of God – it is our room when we assemble as the church.

The common focus of the church is the altar, and near it the chair of the presider, and the Ambo where the scriptures are proclaimed. However, Liturgy is not a performance, and we are not an audience. The liturgy itself calls for the full, conscious, and active participation of the whole assembly. While we are gathered in a holy place, around sacred art and objects, we, the gathered assembly, have a duty, an obligation to enter fully into prayer with the whole church! There are times for praying alone, for Eucharist Adoration, for praying the devotions of the church. The Sunday liturgy is not such a time.

Members of the community have gathered during the week to make sure our church is clean and beautiful for our celebrations together. The sacristy is cared for and cleaned, and the whole church space is prepared for our gathering. We greet one another at the church entrances, and ushers help us find places to sit. Greeters and Ushers are truly servants of the assembly. They are models of the hospitality we should all have as we greet one another.

As members of the assembly, we should be there – we should be assembled – before the liturgy begins. Coming late or at the last minute says we are only spectators dropping in to see a performance. But the liturgy is ours. To come late or leave early breaks the very spirit of the assembly. Come early, greet others, pray quietly, center your thoughts on the Lord to whose table you have been invited!

Singing within the entrance rite is a wonderful way for us to realize that we are a community at prayer. Cantors and those who play musical instruments lead us in our first act of prayer together, sung prayer. Here and through-out the liturgy, music is not a decoration but part of the central action itself. What we do in liturgy is too vast and too deep to be left to our speaking voices. We need music so that we can fully express what we are about.

As the one who presides over the assembly, the priest has an important service to render during the Introductory Rite. Standing by his chair, he gives us his full attention as he greets us and leads us in the sign of the cross. We pray together the "Lord, have mercy" and sing "Glory to God." The priest then invites us to join in the opening prayer.

If we gather as we ought – singing together, being silent together, responding together – we will be a community praying, and know that we are such.

*Taken in part from Guide for the Assembly by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.*