

2019 Southwest Liturgical Conference Study Week
Plenum Address, January 24, 2019

Most Rev. Steven J. Lopes, STD

It is a joy and an honor for me to join you for this plenum address during the 2019 Southwest Liturgical Conference Study Week. Thank you, Rebecca, for that kind introduction! There is a privileged relationship between the Ordinariate of the Chair of Saint Peter and the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, so let me echo the welcome to each of you given by Cardinal DiNardo. Our theme for the week, as you know, is *Encountering the Sacred: Beauty and the Sacred Liturgy*. It is an auspicious, if broad, theme! Beauty is a multi-faceted lens not only through which we might view the sacred liturgy, but a lens through which the rays of God's self-revelation and the life-giving streams of sacramental grace can be reflected and refracted back to us. The blessed Trinity, who is both the origin and goal of all liturgical action—of all life in the Church, for that matter—is himself all good, the source of all truth, and beauty itself to be contemplated for eternity with all the blessed.

My task this morning is to address the “beauty of God revealed in the spoken word and ministerial action.” Ostensibly this is meant to look at the liturgical action of the Church, at a beauty co-created and shared by men and women who serve the Body of Christ as lectors, musicians, servers, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. And, too, the action of these “do-ers” at Mass is supported by a host of others who acquire and arrange the flowers, who clean the church and prepare the liturgical environment, who care for the candles and print the bulletins and worship aids. Parish churches are veritable hives of activity, throughout the week but perhaps especially on a Sunday morning—activity by many with but one goal: to lead the Christian faithful present at Mass to a deeper encounter with the living God who reveals himself to us in Christ.

With this specific theme I have been given, it seems I am supposed to make some sense of all this activity, perhaps give some context to our varied liturgical ministries, weaving them together like threads into a unified fabric of beauty. We will see about that! First, however, we need to begin with some theology. You see, this is what happens when you invite a theologian to speak, *and* give me a microphone *and* fill me with caffeine! Starting with theological reflection is important, but perhaps all the more so when we are supposed to talk about word and action—human language, and human activity that somehow reflects the divine. Frankly, it makes no sense whatsoever to talk about what *we do* in the sacred liturgy without a clear understanding of what *God does*, in the Eucharist and in every sacramental celebration. Only in that light does the inherently responsive character of our own liturgical action begin to take shape and derive meaning.

Jesus, Revealer of the Father's Beauty

Liturgy is revelation. This is the key theological insight that unlocks our reflection on beauty in the spoken word and liturgical action. Our God and Father is not content with remaining in the background of human existence; he is not the divine watchmaker that sets the world in motion and leaves it to spin contentedly on its own. From the very foundations of the world, he has sought a relationship with the men and women he fashioned in his own image and likeness. And not just any relationship: master and slave is a relationship! No, God reveals himself to man and, in revealing himself, discloses his desire for a relationship of love, for divine friendship. Do you remember the beginning of the old Baltimore Catechism? *Who made us? God made us. Why did God make us? God made us to show his goodness and to share with his his everlasting happiness in heaven. How do we gain the happiness of heaven? To gain the happiness of heaven, we must know, love, and serve God.* To know, and in that knowing to love, and out of that love to spend yourself in joyful service. Every revelation of God in the Old Testament, every theophany, is ordered to this knowing God's love and fidelity, and to loving him faithfully in return. And in the fullness of time, the Father sent his only Son as the fullness of divine revelation. Pope Benedict XVI, perhaps the most significant theologian of the modern age, said it this way: "God, the Revealer, did not want to stay as *solus Deus, solus Christus* (God alone, Christ alone). No, he wanted to create a body for himself, to find a Bride—he sought a response. It was really for her that the Word went forth."¹

Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word uttered by the Father before the foundation of the world, became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Word was with God, the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the perfect revelation of the Father. This is not something Jesus did; this is who he is. And so as we encounter Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Gospels, we encounter him who has spoken that Word from eternity.

"When Christ speaks, his listeners hear the man Jesus, and at the same time the Father utters himself in his incarnate Word...When Jesus acts, even the least and most human of his reactions, and not only his 'astonishing deeds' express some reflection of the of the mystery of the Father. If Jesus is humble, it is not a 'pretense' or an effort to make us comfortable with his holiness; no, it is authentic, with a truth that is not only human but divine, for our Father is humble beyond anything we can possibly grasp. When Jesus weeps, the mysterious suffering of this most loving Father has truly entered into our [human] flesh."²

One of my favorite theologians, Jean Corbon, calls this reading the Gospel through a theophanic lens. Every word, action, and detail of the sacred page is revelation, disclosing some facet of the mystery. Christ Jesus is not an actor on a stage. Every word and action reveals the burning love of the Father to be in relationship with his people, the desire of the Father that we be liberated from sin and death, the consequence of sin, so as to share with him his everlasting happiness in heaven.

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 208.

² Jean Corbon, *Wellspring of Worship*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 23.

This is why the Gospel is always new in every age, fresh in all of life's circumstances, and read often and with great reverence in the community of disciples, the Church. It is a word that strikes us differently at different moments, because it is a word that communicates the reality of divine friendship. God's word is alive, piercing the human heart more deeply than a two-edged sword (cf. Hebrews 4:12). It comforts and challenges; it stirs us to action and reduces us to silence. To read the Gospel theophanically means that we take seriously the fact that Christ came not to give us ideas about God, but to give us God himself. The burning bush and the mountain of Sinai are but figures that have passed into our collective sacred memory. But the ever-true and all-beautiful Word of God spoken once for all in Christ continues to resound in Christ's body, the Church, having lost none of its power to summon, to transform, and to save.

So the liturgy, that privileged place of encounter with Christ truly present in Word and Sacrament, is revelation: revelation of the Father's desire for our eternal happiness, revelation of the Father's ineffable beauty! This is the next theological step we need to take together, if you will, to approach every sacramental celebration with our sandals removed like Moses before the burning bush. The liturgy is God's initiative long before it is ours. It is holy ground, where we encounter truth, goodness and beauty *in person*.

Let me quote again Father Jean Corbon: "The primary tragedy of history is that the Word comes among human beings as their light and life and they do not recognize him...The reason is that he cannot be known from outside, since exteriority is the wound afflicting our mortal knowledge. The miracle that the Spirit works is to reveal him to us from within."³ The Church, that bride that God has sought from the beginning, becomes a reality at Pentecost. The Spirit, the nuptial gift of the Father to his bride, manifests Jesus to those who are open enough to receive him. This is the primary work of the Holy Spirit: to make Christ present. The Spirit does not descend upon us to give us thoughts or ideas about Christ, nor by affecting some superficial conformity of our human will with his. The Spirit does not wear a "What would Jesus do" bracelet! The Spirit purifies our hearts *for* Christ. The Spirit fills our hearts *with* Christ. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our vision is transfigured by the sacramental outpouring of the Spirit so that we might recognize Christ truly present in the breaking of the bread. Trying to apprehend or understand Christ Jesus from a safe distance, from "outside" we might say, is like looking at a stained glass window from outside the Church. Sure, you might get some sense of its shape and form, an idea of the figures it contains. But it remains darkened, obscure, and altogether dull. The brilliance of the window can be known only from within, as the rays of sunlight pass through the panes of glass to reveal color, intricacy, and figure. So too the rays of the Spirit pass through the Body of Christ, the Church, incorporating new members and enabling the members already present to see all things in his light...to see themselves not something other than Christ, but as indispensable members of his own Body.

Dear friends, this is what happens at Mass, and in the celebration of the Sacraments. The liturgy is the outpouring of the Spirit, which makes the Body of Christ present, in relation to the Father, for the salvation of the world. It is a divine act, a special intervention of God in our

³ Corbon, 67.

human history. It is therefore not reducible to the content of our particular celebrations of the liturgy. But our particular celebrations are moments, glimpses, of the one liturgy of Christ. It is his Word which resounds. It is his self-sacrifice to the Father which is offered and accepted. There is but one liturgist, and he is the Holy Spirit; one principal “actor,” and he is Christ. But as Christ is made truly present (in his Word, in the sacrifice of the altar, in the priest sacramentally configured to Christ, in the gathered assembly which is the Body of Christ), he cannot remain an abstraction, an ideal or idea. He comes as a Person, taking to himself the personality of the local community of disciples, and the particularity of their worship. We, each of us, and the Church which together we constitute, exist in a certain place, at a certain time. We bring to it our culture, our language, our ways—both learned and those that simply well up from within—for expressing faith, love, and desire. And since Christ, whom we encounter in the sacred liturgy, is a real Person, he interacts with us in and through that culture, language, and manner of expression. He has assumed it all to himself in the Incarnation, the totality of our humanity so as to bring us into the total embrace of divinity.

The revelation, the theophany at the heart of the liturgy is Christ’s own relationship to the Father. It is the Father’s love and salvific will he discloses in his Word. It is to the Father that Christ offers himself as Priest and Victim on the altar of the Cross, a self-sacrifice made present by the power of the Holy Spirit at each and every Eucharistic celebration. And why? So that the world can be saved by it? So that sin can be absolved and death defeated? So that human alienation from God can finally be overcome? Yes, in the grand scheme, yes. But also more! So that you, and I, and each and every person drawn into the liturgy by the Spirit’s tether, can be made Christ, and share in his relationship to the Father. That, my friends, is communion. That is happiness. That is the ultimate source of our dignity and our beauty: to share not in just some relationship with the Father, but in Christ Jesus’ own relationship with the Father.

The eternity of heaven for which you and I long is not a place. It’s an embrace. It is the embrace of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. And, because of the mystery of the Ascension, wherein Christ returns to the embrace of the Father in his human body, we already know that humanity’s place—our place—is there, in the eternal embrace of the Blessed Trinity. And this great work of our salvation and our happiness is the sacred liturgy.

Have you ever wondered why the Lord’s Prayer is where it is during the celebration of Mass? Why does it appear just after the great Eucharistic Prayer and before Holy Communion? I mean, sure, it’s the prayer that Jesus himself has taught us, so it has to appear somewhere in the liturgy. But why there particularly?

The Eucharistic liturgy not only reveals who we are in God in the prophetic sense of pointing to it. It is a true theophany—a making God present—in that it effects what it reveals. In that prayer, the Holy Spirit is called down upon the gifts presented. The creating, transforming fire of the Spirit makes Christ present by transforming all that it touches into the Body of Christ. *All* that it touches. It touches the simple gifts of bread and wine, and so these are transfigured into the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ Jesus. This is the Eucharistic

heart of the Church's faith. But what about the gifts of you and me, the assembly of believers gathered for that celebration? Have we not prepared ourselves for the offering by calling to mind our sins? Have we not been called and chosen as the elect of the Lord by the proclamation of his Word? Have we not offered ourselves, our own needs, desires, intentions, wounds, and joys as we symbolically bring forward the gifts of bread and wine? We have. And the Spirit is called down upon that gathered Church as well. All that the creative, transforming fire of the Holy Spirit touches, he transforms into Christ. The Church, born at Pentecost, is forever constituted as the Body of Christ in the Pentecost that is the sacramental epiclesis. And so at the doxology of that great prayer we rise, no longer many, but one body, one spirit in Christ. We rise in the truth of what we have become by the Spirit's power: CHRIST. And so at that moment, and precisely at that moment, we say to God the only words that make sense: Our Father. Christ's form of address has become ours.

There's our bit of theology to get the day started! It's a lot, I admit, but it's important. How else can we talk about beauty without acknowledging its origin in the adorable face of the Most High God, a face which Jesus makes so real, so present in our midst? How can we talk about the spoken word without talking about *the* Word, that was from the beginning, that was with God and was God? How can we talk about ministerial action without acknowledging that the actor *par excellence* throughout the entire sacred liturgy is Christ in the Spirit? Just for the record, I don't think we can! Now, standing together on this foundation, we can proceed more directly to the task at hand.

The Beauty of God Revealed in the Spoken Word and Ministerial Action

To talk about beauty rightly, we must begin by acknowledging the essential distinction between objective and subjective beauty. Most people hear the word beauty and think immediately of the subjective, that which I find attractive, pleasing, well proportioned, or felicitous. It is what excites me, enamors me, or fascinates me on some level. Beauty in the sacred liturgy, however, must be more, otherwise liturgy itself becomes simply a matter of personal taste or preference. Objective beauty, transcendental beauty, the beauty that is revealed in the sacred liturgy: that is God. Our theological excursus was a meditation on the Triune God who is at the center of every liturgy, its initiator, its principal actor, and its ultimate goal. God, who is in himself true, good, and beautiful, reveals himself by giving himself to us in relationship. This "given-ness" of his Person is the objective principal that underpins and furthers our subjective apprehension of his beauty. In other words, objective beauty and its subjective appreciation are intertwined. When we appreciate something beautiful in another person or in a film or piece of literature, that can be just a subjective experience or interpretation. But when we appreciate something beautiful in the sacred liturgy, it is a real coming into contact with the One who is eternally beautiful.

Perhaps an example would be helpful. If you were to ask me to identify solely my personal preferences about music during Mass, I would choose chant and polyphony every time over, say, "praise and worship" songs. The one I find uplifting and transcending, and I would

describe using the word beautiful. The other, not so much. And yet, I have been at Mass filled with chant and polyphonic music that was good and well butchered (I am thinking of an Easter Sunday morning in particular where the Sequence *Victime Paschali Laudes* went so far off the rails I switched on the microphone and took it over from the cantor). I have also celebrated Mass not long ago up here in the Woodlands with a full praise and worship band where the music was so well done that it made for a joyful, Spirit-filled, and transcendent celebration. There's the interaction. My subjective sense of beauty was both challenged and exceeded by an encounter with something—someone—true, and beautiful. Now I am not going to install a praise and worship band at my cathedral! My subjective tastes have not changed. But the objective beauty which informs our sacramental liturgy is not about personal preferences. Indeed, our personal preferences are a two-edged sword. In a moment of consonance they can make us more attune to the contours and movements of divine revelation. They can just as easily blind us to the subtle movements of the Spirit.

For us who serve and support the celebration of the Mass and other Sacraments in our parishes, the question is not how do we make our liturgies more beautiful, but rather: how can our individual celebrations of the liturgy be more transparent to the truth, goodness, and beauty of God? How can we ensure that the personal revelation that God desires for us and for our salvation be given free reign in our parishes and in our communities? These are big questions, and there are no prepackaged answers. I will propose three approaches to these questions.

The first we can call the “Genesis approach” to the revealed beauty of God. In the beginning, God does not simply do this or that. “Rather, he gives himself in everything that is, and whatever is, is because he gives himself. He speaks, and the being is; he loves, and it is good; he gives himself, and it is beautiful.”⁴ The Genesis approach means first and foremost that our liturgical celebrations respect the beauty inherent in creation. Real flowers, lovingly arranged, are always to be preferred to artificial arrangements, precisely because *they are real*, as is the action of our Father and Creator in the liturgy. This preference for the beauty of creation should extend throughout our preparations for Mass, from the choice of materials for vessels and vestments to decisions about space, light, art, and environment. We should be perplexed and instinctively disturbed by those devotional machines growing in popularity where you put your money in and a light bulb atop a plastic cylinder lights up for a time. In my home parish growing up, the Paschal Candle, the Church's most ancient and central image of the Risen Lord to the extent that it goes through a quasi-sacramental preparation at the beginning of the Easter Vigil, was plastic. Even as a theologically precocious teenager I saw the terrible irony in this. Expediency and convenience are not part of the Genesis approach to the sacred liturgy.

But Genesis is more than the fact of creation, it is the revelation of a loving God who in acting as Creator brings order (cosmos) out of chaos and then says to man “Have dominion over all the earth.” Dominion. Be lord to the earth as I am Lord (*Dominus*). Co-create by bringing

⁴ Corbon, 17.

order out of chaos. This aspect is essential to perceiving the beauty of God revealed in our liturgical action. Carelessness, servers who have no idea what they are doing, music that is poorly chosen or not well rehearsed, prayers of the faithful hastily written or so long that by the time we reach the end we have forgotten that for which we ought to be praying—these things and many others, which admittedly we all experience regularly, add to the chaos! They are not creative and therefore that cannot but obscure the beauty of God’s revelation. A certain decorum; not formality, but calm, fosters the liturgical movement because it is faithful to the order of creation. If the experience of Mass prior to the Second Vatican Council can be rightly criticized for rigidity and an overreliance on rubrical precision, the experience of Mass in the post-Conciliar period can be criticized in the opposite sense. An overly casual affect has not enhanced the liturgical experience by making it more “approachable,” because it too often gives way to banality and makes it forgettable.

A second approach to the objective beauty of God revealed in the liturgical action concerns the spoken word and the grammar of salvation. God’s Word is alive! When it calls out to the bride in the liturgical proclamation, it demands a response. The Germans have a fun word play on the nouns word and response: *Wort und Antwort*. And so naturally the great German theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, would have something to say about what happens at that theophany, when the Word of God is proclaimed at Mass. He says: “Then there is the response to the Word [*Ant-Wort*], by which the assembled congregation takes up and accepts the Word. This structure of Word and response, which is essential to the liturgy, is modeled on the basic structure of the process of revelation, in which Word and response, the speech of God and the receptive hearing of the Bride, the Church, go together.”⁵

Every word that we speak during Mass should be responsive, characteristic of that “receptive hearing” that Ratzinger describes. The implications of this are many and important. Our speaking responds to a person, Christ, who speaks first to us. Christ is a Person, the incarnate Word of God, not an idea, not a proposition, not a moral code, and certainly not a philosophy. Now persons are who they are. This “given-ness” of a person dictates how we approach and interact with them. This is true of all our human relationships, and it must be so with God as well. Again, let me defer to Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI: “When we talk of the living God, it means: This God shows himself to us...we cannot define him in whatever way we like. He has ‘defined’ himself and now stands before us as our Lord, over us and in our midst.”⁶ Practically, at the very minimum this “given-ness” of a personal Lord means that we are not at liberty to change his word or replace it with our own. Human eloquence cannot surpass the Word the Father uttered over the swirling mists of chaos to bring forth creation! You may recall the liturgical experimentalism of the period following the Second Vatican Council—I certainly do. It was very much in vogue to replace one (or all!) of the Scriptural readings at Mass with another text from literature, or a song, or poetry, or a drama, or a slide

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 208.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, The Heart of Life*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 11-12.

show, etc. This is not just bad or in poor taste because it replaces the beauty of the divine Word with a lesser substitute. Consider the violence this does to the dynamic of revelation! The Word of God is muted, and its transforming power is simply denied to the assembly of the faithful. I think we've learned that lesson, but it was a hard lesson.

But here is a thing that does still happen, rather often I fear in parish life. Think of the various musical offerings for the responsorial psalm. Often a cantor or music minister will choose one based on understandable criteria such as familiarity, singability, and so forth, or use the same psalm setting for an entire month or season. But the first question must be: is it the psalm appointed for that given Sunday. Seasonality is appropriate motive for the choice of hymns and songs, but not as a replacement for Scripture. A second question: is this musical setting the actual psalm, or a text "based on" the psalm? Before the creative Word of God, the same Word that spoke over the chaos and separated darkness from light, human language sometimes feels inadequate as a response. The psalms are the inspired Word of God given precisely as that answering word. They contain and express every human emotion and so give voice to the whole Church in its depth and breadth. The psalms are the clearest expression of "receptive hearing" because it is the Spirit who inspires these words, who plumbs the depths of human experience and brings forth an answering word or phrase that nevertheless contains within itself, because of its divine origin, the power to transform and liberate.

Allow me to step on my soapbox for a moment, because I love the language of the psalms and yet I think they become the all-too-easy casualties of a liturgical planning that underestimates the revelatory power of the sacramental celebration. The Church in her liturgical law and guiding documents gives us many options for how to pray the psalms. They can be prayed in a responsorial format, as a whole text or unified canticle, antiphonally, in music or in meter. I would venture, however, that the vast majority of our parish communities only use a responsorial setting for the psalm at Mass. The net effect is that the vast majority of our parishioners do not ever pray the psalm, but only a phrase lifted or abstracted from it. The psalm is uniquely both *Wort* and *Antwort*, Word and response. Between the reduction to the responsorial approach and given the lack of the robust praying of the Liturgy of the Hours publicly in most parishes, I would propose that the psalm is a thing whose power remains largely untapped.

A third approach to the beauty of God contained in our liturgy is one I would call an "artistic" approach. Artists, be they musicians, painters, sculptors, architects, designers, dancers, actors, are in the business of creating beauty. I would go further and say that artists are in the business of revelation. Artists communicate something bigger than themselves, some truth that cannot be contained to just the canvas or score or stage. Pope Saint John Paul II in his Letter to Artists, said: "In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible, attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable."⁷ This communication of a transcendent truth by translating it into

⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 12.

image, voice, texture, color so that it can be perceptible to human persons as beautiful is both the essence of human creativity and sacramental action. Creativity expresses the spiritual in physical form. The sacramental liturgy expresses many spiritual realities in physical form, in time and space. Sacred music, vestments, church architecture, even the way the minister carries his or her person (demeanor), is all meant to make present and accessible the beauty of God.

Now this is perhaps the context in which to address creativity as it applies to our work. Plenty of liturgists, clergy and lay alike, misunderstand the artistic principle, and therefore approach the liturgy as a blank canvas that is theirs to innovate. As a matter of principle, I do not like the phrase “liturgy planning.” It starts us immediately on the wrong foot by forgetting who the principal actor or artist is. Creativity is not novelty. As JRR Tolkien would argue from a literary perspective, human creativity is a sub-creation or a participatory creation. We do not create *ex nihilo*; God does. We cannot make something truly new. If that is our goal when it comes to Mass and the Sacraments, we risk further obscuring the divine action and the divine actor. In other words, we are no longer revealing God but our own pride. What am I saying here? At the heart of the sacramental celebration is, as we know, the presence and action of God and we are in service to that action. It is not up to us to spice up Mass up to make it more interesting. It’s not up to us to add things, or subtract things, or reword things. The Creator Spirit moving in and through the Church is the principle liturgist, and we should not snatch the initiative from him. We are translators, not authors. Flee, therefore, from the suggestion that we make liturgy more “relevant.” If the history of God’s relationship with his people recorded in the Bible tells us anything, it is that divine revelation will always shatter the plane of the expected. As soon as liturgy becomes normal, relevant, or commonplace, well, we simply stop paying attention.

Conclusion

I have attempted this morning to give us a common schema for thinking about God’s beauty as it is received and translated in the concrete words and actions of liturgical ministers. If I have done my job reasonably well in this reflection, we can together begin to draw some conclusions or raise some questions about beauty in the spoken word and ministerial action, and how we might better reflect and even reveal the infinite beauty of the Blessed Trinity present and active in the Church’s liturgy. And while I will end here, this might be a place to begin in the discussion period or later this afternoon in the plenum reprisal. There is a lot I have not touched in this address. Any conclusions we draw can and must be augmented and amplified by the wisdom of your own experience as people who serve the Church’s corporate prayer. And the Church’s prayer has been a multicultural tapestry since the very morning of Pentecost, and so the wisdom of many ethnic communities who have to adapt and worship in the culture of the American Southwest certainly must be given voice.

I will end where we began, with the “theophanic lens” of Father Jean Corbon. It’s an usual word articulating a tremendous concept: every line of Sacred Scripture must be read in the knowledge that God is communicating himself personally in and through it. Every word and

gesture in the sacred liturgy must also be viewed through this lens. It is sacred ground, sacred space. It is where God shows us the beauty of his truth and goodness, and draws us into the everlasting happiness of heaven.