

Time on the Slopes

PARALITURGY IN THE LIFE OF THE SCHOOL

The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.

In order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace.

[Vatican II. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10, 11]

INTRODUCTION

The two quotes given above not only invite us to prize the activity we call liturgy, but also to take a closer look at our liturgical practice in the school community.

The mountain as a meeting place with God is a well-known biblical symbol. It is, according to Xavier Leon-Dufour, "the place of revelation beyond others", and "the special place of worship".¹ But reaching the summit, which is liturgy, is not instantaneous. Furthermore, the time spent at the summit is limited. The mountaineer, to pursue the image, spends most time on the slopes. In the context of worship, we call the slopes 'paraliturgy'.

WHAT IS PARALITURGY

To answer this question, we must first look at 'liturgy' itself. Liturgy is "what the people of God do when they come together to worship God and celebrate the mystery of Christ and their story of salvation."² Liturgy is an official, common and universal activity. Paraliturgy, on the other hand, exists alongside liturgy as an unofficial mode of worship that is easily adapted to particular concerns and situations. The following table illustrates the relationship between liturgy and paraliturgy.

	Liturgy	Paraliturgy
Word	Sacred Scripture The Word of God	Scripture and/or Our own words
Action	Sacramental action	Symbolic action or gesture
Pattern	Fixed structure	No set structure

WHY PARALITURGY

The greater flexibility and scope of paraliturgy make it an activity far more open to educational possibilities and initiatives than is liturgy. The summit is a restricted space. There is not much room for movement there, whereas the slopes are varied, allowing for choice of terrain that is suited to trainee climbers.

¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. 1988. London: Geoffrey Chapman, p 372

² Eoin Farrelly sdb. 1992. *Life Witness* workshop notes

We can enumerate a number of advantages that a practice of paraliturgy affords us in developing the outcomes of a process in liturgical education.

- Paraliturgy in class groups provides more opportunity for intimate, personal participation and interaction.
- Paraliturgy makes space for a wider choice in its structural elements, such as informal prayer, shared reflections, inspirational readings, silence, recorded music, icons, symbolic gestures and objects, and movement.
- Paraliturgy more easily lends itself to celebration in a variety settings.
- Paraliturgy is open to experimentation. Its structure can be determined by those who will participate in it. It provides therefore greater scope for inculturation and contextualisation.
- Planning and celebrating paraliturgy is an ideal activity for developing participatory skills.
- Paraliturgy provides an educational alternative to the routine use of Mass, and can serve to heighten the experience of special Eucharistic celebrations by way of contrast. Indeed, sensitively planned paraliturgy can give a foretaste of what good liturgy can be.
- Paraliturgy provides a passage between personal devotion and communal worship. It can serve to acclimatise the climber to the summit, and help the climber to appreciate it.
- Paraliturgy lends itself to celebration across the divides of faith identity. It illustrates the school's intention to make all feel welcome and have something to contribute.

OCCASIONS FOR PARALITURGY

When would paraliturgy be recommended? Here are some suggestions.

- It could be used regularly to draw together a series of RE lessons in personal ways, thus helping learners to internalise what they have interacted with in the classroom.
- Another regular use would be within school assemblies.
- Marking the significance of special days in the calendar, such as World Environment Day, Women's Day
- Marking special days of other religions present in the school.
- Celebration of saints' days that have a special significance to members of the class.
- Marking events of significance to members of the class.

CONCLUSION

In this short article, I have certainly not exhausted the discussion on paraliturgy. But I hope I have opened up the topic sufficiently to invite your serious consideration of its merits. The practice of paraliturgy is intended in part as a worthwhile activity in itself, but also as a development of readiness so that "the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects".

Paul Faller
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION