

2.10 Drama and Dance in the Liturgy

Aim

- To encourage students to animate the liturgy through drama and dance.

Materials Required

- Vatican II Documents, worksheets for the queries below each topic

: Input

: Introduction

- Vatican II in its Constitution, “Sacrosanctum Concilium”, has opened the door anew to a liturgy in which the whole person, mind and heart and body is actively taking part. Adaptation to different cultures especially in mission countries is called for.
- Local tradition will determine which gestures are appropriate for showing reverence, offering gifts, receiving gifts, humble listening or service. In some countries, people sit during the gospel as a sign of reverence for the word of God.
- The point is that the gestures the whole community enacts, can lead people to a deeper awareness of their worship as one body in one Body, the temple of God in which the Spirit dwells. It is the community which determines the gestures in liturgy and which gives the meaning. They must come from the heart before they become visible.
- Drama and dance in liturgy is therefore not a mere performance of some rehearsed steps. It is and should always be the communication of our inner invisible being with the mystery of Life itself through the medium of our bodies. It is the communion of the local church, expressing its prayer and worship through its cultural richness and symbolism.

1. Drama in the Liturgy

- When using drama as a medium for communication (as explained in 1.9), the presentation happens first. Then follows the reflection on the meaning and message as for example in a street play. In the Liturgy however, this order is reversed.
- Here the process of reflection and group prayer must precede the presentation. In this way the presentation will have that prayer quality demanded of a liturgical act. Instead of being a performance to be watched, it will be an invitation to worship. To avoid the impression of giving a performance, it is best to prepare a dramatic presentation for a small community with the whole group involved in it, so that there are no spectators but only worshippers. If several communities in a parish have had the experience, then a celebration will present no problem.
- Role-play, mime, shadow-play and drama are forms of acting which lend themselves very well for liturgical purposes. Reading a gospel text in parts is the simplest form of dramatisation. Miming a gospel scene whilst one narrator relates the story is also often done. If drama can bring out the application of the gospel to life, it is a powerful sermon.

Creating Drama from a Biblical Passage

- Take a gospel passage you want to enact. The actors are assigned roles and must pause for reflection on the passage. They must try to get into the shoes of the characters they are acting and experience life from within. What words and gestures accompanied the role he is playing? How did Jesus’ response affect him and change him?
- The actors are asked to reflect on their own life. Is there any situation which in some way resembles the gospel scene? Ask questions like: “If you had the chance to meet Jesus, how would you express your helplessness or joy?”
- Together work out a script and rehearse the acting before you are ready to perform in front of the assembly.
- This kind of preparation can form a very meaningful community – sharing, so that when finally the drama is part of the Eucharistic celebration, the presence of Christ in the community is truly experienced as healing, forgiving and strengthening. It is this element which distinguishes liturgical drama from all

other performances. It leads people to the person of Jesus Christ, whereas in ordinary theatre the attention is on the actor.

2. Movement and Symbolic Gestures

- Familiarity with prayer formulas can at times lead to thoughtless recitation of words. Interpretative movement of the body is one way of allowing the words to affect the body and make the body speak them. Not for nothing has the term body-language been coined.
- Explore with the group how we can express with our bodies that “we adore the Father who is in heaven.” How can my body say, “Thy will be done.” In exploring possibilities, the group will also rediscover the depth and meaning of prayer, both as community and as individuals.
- As these movements capture and express our attitudes before God, we will be solemn and joyful in a liturgy. It is good if the entire group follows the movements, any getting out of step does not matter.
- In a big congregation, a group may accompany the congregation’s prayer with movement, but here the movement can run the risk of easily becoming a spectacle.

3. Dance in Liturgy

- Dance in tribal cultures (and among most eastern societies), is said to be the primordial art form of expression and is considered a true ritual. Tribals are usually innocent of the dichotomy between soul and body which characterised western religiosity in the past. Here the body truly is an instrument of communication. In the body a person is in communion with the world of nature, breathing air, eating animals land plants, but also with the world of spirits and with the Supreme Being through the mediatorship of the ancestors.
- Communion is centred in the body and is expressed in dance. It always has a communication character and is for the healing of a person. Hence it has a place in the liturgy. Rhythmical movement in dance signifies contact with the spiritual world and with the whole cosmos.
- What has in practice been integrated into the liturgy is not so much this or that particular dance, but the value of dancing, expressed in various ways. There is a great variety of movement in dances. Many of these are quite specific to a particular context and may not be performed in any other.
- Liturgical dance is distinct from any other. It is characterised by controlled rhythmic movements of the whole body. In tribal societies dance in liturgy should always be a community action, never a solo performance. African liturgy is unique in its blend of dance and liturgy where the whole community sways while it participates in the rhythmic singing.

At what Moments in the Liturgy is Dancing Allowed?

- The entrance and recession processions are obvious occasions for dancing. So are the Gloria and Sanctus. Other parts of the liturgy may equally well be highlighted by a dance. However, be clear what you want to emphasise, when the whole congregation is joining in, and when it is best for a group to dance alone. A group needs some kind of choreography and rehearsal while the congregational dance is usually very spontaneous.
- A gospel procession is a way of honouring Christ, the living words of God. The Bible is carried aloft by the priest who moves behind the dancers towards the lectern. When it has been placed on the lectern, the celebrant is led by the dancers across the sanctuary.
- In response to a reading, a psalm may be danced. Many psalms in fact make direct reference to music and dance; the words could be enacted while the congregation sings the psalm.
- The Easter Vigil provides many suitable moments for dance. So does any of the major feasts of the church. Apart from Eucharistic celebrations, there are other services of the Word, Penitential Services, Thanks Rituals, etc., which are occasions for building community through dance.

Review

1. Vatican II in its Constitution “Sacrosanctum Concillium” has opened the door anew to a liturgy in which the whole person, mind and heart and body is actively taking part.
2. Local tradition determines the gestures that are appropriate for showing reverence, for offering gifts, for receiving gifts, for humble listening and for service.
3. The gestures that the whole community enacts, can lead people to a deeper awareness of their worship as one body in one Body - the temple of God in which the Spirit dwells.
4. Drama and dance in liturgy is not a mere performance of some rehearsed steps. It is and should always be the communication of our inner invisible being with the mystery of Life itself through the medium of our bodies.
5. In liturgical drama, the process of reflection and group prayer must precede the presentation. In this way the presentation will have that prayer quality demanded of a liturgical act. Instead of being a performance to be watched, it will be an invitation to worship.
6. Familiarity with prayer formulas can at times lead to thoughtless recitation of words. Interpretative movement of the body is one way of allowing the words to affect the body and make the body speak them.
7. As these movements capture and express our attitudes before God, they will be solemn and joyful in a liturgy.
8. Communion is centred in the body and is expressed in dance. It always has a communication character and is for the healing of a person.



9. Dancing in the liturgy can be done during: entrance and recession processions, in response to a reading, during Penitential Services and Thanks rituals. You should however check in each case with the norms of the Diocese.

Reflection

1. “Drama and dance in liturgy is not a mere performance of some rehearsed steps. It is and should always be the communication of our inner invisible being with the mystery of Life itself through the medium of our bodies. It is the communion of the local church, expressing its prayer and worship through its cultural richness and symbolism.” Reflect on this and write a half-page essay on your thoughts and conclusions.
2. In what ways can we transform drama and dance in our local churches to be more in tune with the teachings of the church? How can we best direct the youth to be more sensitive to the centrality of God in drama and dance in the liturgy?

Relevant Skills

Do a selection of songs for any Para-liturgical celebration e.g. a prayer meeting, or adoration service. However, keep in mind the fundamental obligatory observances.

Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. ‘SHEPHERDS’ FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

References

Wagner Nick. Modern Liturgy Answers the 101 Most-Asked Questions about Liturgy. California: Resource Publications Inc., 1996.