

BOOK REVIEW

The Church at Worship: Theology, Spirituality, and Practice of Parish Liturgy. By Joseph DeGrocco. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2013. 212 pp. \$21.95. ISBN 978-1-61671-103-0.

What could be timelier during this, the *Year of Faith*, than a book that provides practical guidance for good liturgical celebrations that nourish the faith? From the very first page, Monsignor Joseph DeGrocco proclaims the task he has set for himself in the writing of his latest book, *The Church at Worship: Theology, Spirituality, and Practice of Parish Liturgy*. That task is to empower liturgical ministers and pastoral leaders everywhere with the tools they need to protect the faithful from being “victimized by “bad” liturgy” (1). DeGrocco presents the basic framework for liturgy in a manner that is engaging and easily referenced in an effort to stop the tragedy of liturgy that is poorly celebrated. He raises thought-provoking questions and quickly provides constructive answers to those questions which can immediately be applied to individual parish settings. This, his second book, continues his no-nonsense yet genial approach to the study and celebration of the liturgy.

From beginning to end, DeGrocco’s entertaining style belies the importance of his topic. Early on in his discussion of the internals and externals of liturgy, he rightly points out that “our postures, movements, and spoken and sung words should not be stilted or phony...nor should they be somber” because, “after all, Christ is Risen!” (20). This succinctly sums up what the celebration of liturgy is, Christ’s dying and rising, and he challenges the reader to comport themselves in a manner that reflects that meaning through their joyful song and stance.

DeGrocco asks the leading questions we all want answered. For example, “Why do we settle for the casual and minimal when it comes to the most important thing we are to be about, namely, the sacramental expressions of our faith?” (35). Obviously this is a question for the “new evangelization” we Catholics are about during this, the *Year of Faith*, and the author is intent on leading the reader to search within themselves and their participation in liturgical celebrations for the answer. He bluntly questions our actions during the celebration of the sacraments. “Parents need not worry about snapping a picture at the instant of a child’s first communion when they make Mass attendance and receiving Holy Communion a priority every week in that child’s life” (88).

DeGrocco piques one’s interest immediately and continually throughout the book. His plain talk (example: “the church is not a service provider”) and readability make the book perfectly suited to the average reader as well as the practiced liturgist, enabling it to reach many of the languishing faithful (74). The manner in which he smoothly discusses the dynamic of the liturgy and its obvious connection to the

dynamic of the everyday is clear and concise. He points to the challenge of silence during liturgy and compares it to the similar challenge of silence in our lives.

DeGrocco writes as he preaches, forwardly, pointedly and laced with just the right balance of humor and familiarity so that the reader is drawn further and further into his book (and into the mystery and beauty of the liturgy). Before you know it, you have read the book cover to cover and are left wondering where he went; wasn't he just discussing this with you at your table over a cup of coffee? Fr. Joe has, in fact, been guiding you, shaping your understanding of the liturgy for years. He was the unnamed partner in your formation as the author of many columns in the *Long Island Catholic Newspaper* on the liturgy.

The liturgy has the power to change us if we allow it. "We want to tame the liturgy, because liturgy, in all of its depth and richness, does the same thing to us as does the Christian life: it makes incredible demands; it scares us; it challenges us to lose our life in order to find it and to walk with Christ through the Paschal Mystery" (50). We are called to live this life and DeGrocco calls us out on it, reminding us of the "halfhearted and truncated living" that we do, all the while encouraging us to look for more.

With people searching for some kind of spiritual renewal, DeGrocco's chapter on Liturgy of the Hours is a must read. How better to grow closer to God than by forming the habit of the Liturgy of the Hours (79). He raises this and challenges the reader to look into it, to propose it to their parish members. This is where his books tugs at the readers' heart, uniting the ancient Mass with today's Mass, the then and the now, his weaving together of the 'already and not yet' of the liturgy and one's daily life. He leaves each chapter with discussion questions that have the potential to generate hours of conversation.

The faithful and not so faithful can sit with this book, one chapter each week, read it in advance of Sunday Mass and then approach Mass with a new sense of enlightenment. It should be on the shelves in every parish, Catholic school and office. We should casually leave it on coffee tables and conference room tables, everywhere our liturgy planners and preachers gather to prepare homilies and liturgies. Anyone who skims through it will immediately be drawn to the friendly style of writing and the familiar manner in which Fr. Joe writes with his reader in mind. It can also be used as a catechetical tool. Pick any chapter and use it as the base for a lesson within the parish adult faith formation program or the RCIA process. I would recommend this book to those whose interest lies in growing their faith and in forming the faith of another.

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