

# Preparing and celebrating religious rituals with children

*Anne Musso and Di-Anne Rowan*

## Principles, planning process and ritual structure – *Anne Musso*

When preparing and celebrating religious rituals with children in Catholic schools, learning managers need to reflect thoughtfully and prayerfully on the planning process and ritual structure to be used. In choosing the ritual's theme and its specific elements (prayers, readings, songs etc), and in arranging the environment and involving the participants, there are theological, liturgical, pastoral and practical principles that need to be taken into consideration. Some of these will be addressed below.

## Theological principles underpinning sacraments and other religious rituals

Tad Guzie offers what he calls a 'workable definition' of what a sacrament is. This workable definition highlights what I consider to be the main theological principles underscoring the church's understanding of the nature and function of the sacraments.

Guzie (1981, p. 53) says:

A sacrament is a festive action—in which Christians assemble to celebrate their lived experience, and to call to heart their common story. The action is a symbol of God's care for us in Christ. Enacting the symbol brings us closer to one another in the church and to [God] who is there for us.

I have drawn five theological principles from this definition by Tad Guzie. *Though these apply especially to the sacraments, similar principles also apply to Christian rituals such as paraliturgies, prayer celebrations or non-eucharistic rituals that are not sacraments.*

### **1. Sacraments are celebrations of lived experience.**

Sacramental liturgies are grounded in real-life experience. Christians bring who they are and what they have experienced to one another and to God so as to celebrate these together. We have already noted the way sacramental rituals met the pastoral needs experienced by people. Christianity itself began because people responded to the lived experience of their encounter with Jesus or some of his followers.

Importantly, Tad Guzie notes that **lived** experience is not the same as raw experience. Lived experience requires **reflection** about what has happened or is happening. Guzie (1981, p. 55) says: 'Sacraments celebrate the love of God **experienced and related to**

**one's own story.** If reflection on experience is absent, there is real danger that only magic is left—and communal magic is no better than individual magic.' Here, Guzie also implies that while an element of mystery—of the sacred and the inexplicable—imbues the sacraments, they are not magical events.

## **2. Sacraments are communal—they are celebrated by the Christian assembly.**

Sacraments are not celebrated by individuals. They are communal actions/events. Crichton (1992, p. 20) emphatically states: 'Liturgy is celebrated **with** others and the relationships between the members of the worshipping community are of the highest importance. **Private** acts of **public** worship are a contradiction in terms.'

Gabe Huck (1984, pp. 2-3) expresses it this way:

The liturgy is the various rituals of the assembled church. It is the deed of the assembled church. It is what we who are baptized need to do: the songs we need to sing, the words we need to hear, the gestures we need to make. 'Need' because without them we cannot give our lives their gospel shape. In liturgy, we are what we mean to be.

If Christians take these words seriously, they will recognize their own important role in celebrating the sacraments: it is not something that is done by someone else. Sometimes in the Catholic Church, one hears people asking which priest is 'celebrating Mass'. While the priest may be the presider at the eucharistic ritual, the whole gathered assembly is the celebrant!

## **3. Sacraments tell the Christian story**

Without a common heritage—a shared story—there would be no sacraments. Those who have gathered to celebrate the sacraments share a belief in the gospel proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. The sacraments are responses to the Christian story as well as the means whereby the story is made present and reclaimed in the ongoing traditioning process. This of course happens in conversation with the lived experience of the people assembled.

The telling of the Christian story takes place not only in the proclamation of the scriptures as God's Word and in the breaking open of the word by the homilist, but also in the ritual symbolic action that is enacted in the Rite. Guzie (1981, p. 6) says:

We tell our stories not just in words and narratives, but even more basically in signs and actions, 'charged' actions like a warm embrace, or giving a gift, or sharing a meal. In just this way, baptism was a most basic way in which the disciples of Jesus told their story. It was a story of how when they went into the water, they went into the tomb with Jesus and joined him in death, in order to be raised with him and live a new life (Rom 6). What more 'basic' way could there be of telling the 'basic' story?

## **4. Sacraments are symbolic actions**

The sacraments are signs/symbols: they signify something other than or beyond what is seen, heard or touched. The sacraments use very ordinary, familiar elements—water, bread, wine, oil, ring, hands—that, in the context of the ritual, mean something more than what is there physically. What needs to be stressed is that the elements themselves are **not** really the symbols. The signs/symbols are the actions and accompanying words that are done and said using these elements. The symbol of

baptism is not the water, but rather the **action** of immersion in the water as words are pronounced. Gabe Huck (1984, p. 4) gives this example in relation to marriage:

Consider the wedding. Any society evolves ways to express what the union of a man and a woman means. In some cases, the expressions may live longer than the meanings which gave rise to them (do you know what carrying the bride across the threshold meant to the people who first did it?). Generally there will be a whole series of activities—words, songs, actions, objects—which convey beyond any philosophical or legal or religious or sociological language all that this group wants marriage to mean. In themselves, these things are just elements from life—a ring, a kiss, a dance, hands joined together—but in the context of this community they have all kinds of meanings which express beyond any words what marriage is about. These ritual actions can strengthen that meaning for the particular couples and for all who witness them.

... When it is done wholeheartedly and well, ritual touches many layers of ourselves at once. It is barely right, for example, to say that the wedding ring means that the union is to last forever (the circle), or that it is sign that these two are bound together. It is really not the ring at all that is the symbol used in this ritual: it is the giving of the ring, the putting on of the ring, the wearing of the ring. Who would dare to try to exhaust the meaning of that in words? Rituals are never one dimensional, never just an object, just a word. Within a community of persons who share some vision of themselves and of what life is about, rituals have many dimensions, are always actions inseparable from human beings doing the action. They are always ambiguous, defying us to neatly classify or explain them.

## 5. Sacraments have an effect

The Christian churches agree that the sacraments are **efficacious**, that is, they effect something (cause it to happen), but exactly what happens and how this happens is not fully agreed. Both the Protestant and Catholic traditions proclaim that sacraments are efficacious through faith, though this statement is understood somewhat differently within the two traditions (Lawler, 1995, p. 44). However, in general terms, it is agreed that God acts in/through the sacraments and that the sacraments strengthen one's relationship both with God and with one another in the worshipping community.

## Liturgical, pastoral and practical considerations

### Planning process

Prayerful thought and collaboration with others are needed in preparing ritual celebrations. Here is one possible process you could use when planning a ritual to celebrate with children:

1. Identify what is being celebrated: ask what the ritual is wanting to achieve.
2. Spend some time in prayer or reflection on this in the context of your life experience and the experiences of the participants.
3. Select suitable texts from the scriptures and/or other stories that are appropriate for the ritual's purpose.
4. Decide on a key symbolic action.
5. Choose gathering and dismissal components.
6. Consider the use of space, how to make the ritual welcoming and inclusive, and other factors relating to the environment (such as decor).
7. Organize who does what.

8. Enjoy the celebration!

## **Ritual structure**

Non-eucharistic rituals (paraliturgies) are modelled on the structure of Eucharist so we will consider each of these types of rituals in turn.

### **The ritual structure of Eucharist**

There are four main parts of each eucharistic celebration. These are:

1. Gathering
2. Word Service or Liturgy of the Word
3. Table Service or Liturgy of the Eucharist
4. Dismissal.

### **Gathering and dismissal**

These are the secondary or minor rites of the eucharistic celebration. They are not as important as the other two rites and are usually shorter.

The *gathering rite* serves two purposes: it brings the people together establishing a community of worship, and it prepares this community for what is to come. The gathering or introductory rite may include:

- an appropriate song (hymn)
- a greeting from the presider and/or a call to worship
- an acknowledgement of God's mercy and forgiveness (sometimes called the penitential rite)
- a prayer of praise ('Glory to God' or other doxology)
- an opening prayer.

The *dismissal rite* serves as a conclusion to the celebration and as a 'sending forth' of participants on a mission of Christian service in the world. The dismissal rite may include:

- a final prayer
- a message or word of dismissal
- a sending of communion (or other gift) to the sick, absent or needy
- a blessing
- a recessional or 'sending forth' song (hymn).

### **Liturgy of the Word (or Word Service)**

This is the first of the major rites and it holds equal importance with the table service which follows it. This rite offers 'nourishment' to the participants through the 'food' of God's Word—proclaimed and broken open (explained in light of contemporary life experience). Here the focus is on proclaiming and listening to the spoken word.

The most important parts of this rite are:

- proclamation of a text from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)
- there may be a text from the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) that is not a gospel text
- Gospel proclamation (a text from one of the four gospels)

- homily or sermon (preaching) delivered by the presider or another person (making God's word more accessible to the gathered community).

The Liturgy of the Word may also include a sung response to the readings (often a psalm sung in response to the first reading), acclamations (e.g. sung alleluia verse before the Gospel), reflective times of silence, the recitation of the Nicene Creed and prayers of intercession.

### **Liturgy of the Eucharist (or Table Service)**

After being 'fed' at the table of the word, the assembly is 'fed' at the table of the eucharist. Here the focus is on the ritual blessing of the elements/symbols of bread and wine, the thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) and the communion (eating and drinking). Within this rite, there are actually four key actions: take, bless, break, give.

- The presider *takes* the bread and wine,
- *blesses* the bread and wine giving thanks to God,
- *breaks* the bread and *pours* the wine, and
- *gives* this communion to those present.

Prayers (including the Lord's Prayer), acclamations and songs also accompany these ritual gestures.

### **The structure of non-eucharistic rituals**

You may be given responsibility for preparing a ritual that is non-eucharistic, that is, that does not involve the fourfold ritual eucharistic action in relation to the elements of bread and wine. If this is the case, you are not likely to have a set structure to follow. This offers you a lot more freedom, because you do not have to follow prescribed prayers, scripture texts and symbolic actions. However, you may feel a bit lost as to where to start. It has been found that the overall structure of the eucharistic celebration offers an appropriate model for other rituals, providing a suitable starting point for planners.

Any religious ritual can be planned using this model:

- gathering                      *Come!*
- word                              *Listen!*
- symbolic action              *Do!*
- dismissal                        *Go!*

The four stages of a paraliturgy serve similar purposes to those named in relation to eucharist (see above). However, you may be as creative as you like in what you include.

For example:

- The gathering may involve a procession of all participants from the location of assembly to the location of the ritual. It may involve song and even dance. It should include some type of welcome or greeting and an opening prayer.
- The 'story' may include proclamations of scripture texts and/or story-telling of religious experiences other than those included in the scriptures: the story of a significant role-model or the challenges/experiences of someone known

to the participants. The assembly may be involved in discussing this story and in sharing insights about it with one another (instead of a 'formal' homily).

- The symbolic gesture may involve a symbol or element related to the story told: blessing and sprinkling of water, rubbing oil onto hands or feet, exchanging a symbol of peace, lighting of candles, writing something to be given to someone, signing of a cross on the forehead or hands of another person etc. It would probably be good not to use bread and wine in case this becomes confused with eucharist.
- The dismissal draws the ritual to a close and may include a litany, blessing, prayers of intercession or other prayers, song, procession back to the place of initial assembly or any other suitable words/actions.

## **Helpful hints – *Di-Anne Rowan***

Di-Anne Rowan will now provide you with some helpful hints from her vast experience as a liturgist. These hints apply to both eucharistic and non-eucharistic rituals.

I have been involved as a participant in Christian rituals since I was two weeks old, when my parents took me to the local Catholic Church and I was baptised. Since then I have participated in other ceremonies which were labelled 'First Confession', 'First Communion' and 'Confirmation' and which were one-off events. I have participated in more masses or celebrations of eucharist than I have had baked dinners. Since I began teaching in 1978, I have also helped numerous groups to prepare for many sacramental rituals. But I must admit that I find it hard to gather all the fragments of my experience and condense it into a definitive list of guiding principles that would be of any use to those of you who might have to prepare a ritual to celebrate with children.

However, this is what I will try to do for you now, by jotting down several key hints/ideas. Follow these and you're sure to be remembered as a teacher or liturgist who is professional, organised and well prepared!

### **1. Highlight what is most significant**

It is a good idea to highlight **two aspects** of the liturgy or ritual: the **scriptures** being proclaimed, and the **symbolic gesture** being enacted (for example, the exchange of vows and the blessing and exchange of rings in a marriage liturgy, or the immersion in water within a baptismal liturgy). And remember to keep it simple! If you try to do too much, or make a ceremony too complex, you will have a nervous breakdown. Your stress will be the most memorable part of the ceremony. Simple does not mean bland or boring.

### **2. 'Know your stuff'**

If you are preparing for a baptism, eucharist or a wedding, then read about it. Read the ritual, the notes before it, the documents about it, the commentaries on it. There are many lectures, workshops and books available on all the Christian rituals. Many magazines provide up-to-date insights into liturgies and sound liturgical practices.

### **3. Consult at least one experienced person**

There are usually people in the community with lots of experience in liturgy who will be more than happy to lend a hand, but you need to be very discriminating as there are many people with lots of experience but little insight. (Isn't it true that there are people who have been teaching for decades but they might not be the ones you choose to imitate?) Nor is youthful enthusiasm any substitute for wisdom.

#### **4. Don't row the boat single-handed**

A team of people can be the best resource: wisdom can be pooled and lots of jobs can be shared. It will take quite a load off your shoulders to know someone else is there to lend a hand or to share an insight.

#### **5. Don't forget the presider**

A crucial member of the team is the person who will preside at the ceremony. If it is a priest/minister with very definite ideas about what can be done, you need to know that. It will save you a lot of heartache if you know what he/she likes and expects in liturgies. For example, in the Catholic Church, *The General Instruction to the Roman Missal* asserts that the focus of the presider is the 'general spiritual good of the assembly rather than his [sic] personal outlook' and 'He [sic] should be mindful that the choice of texts is to be made in consultation with the ministers and others who have a function in the celebration' (#313).

However, there are many times when this does not happen. Most priests/ministers have many demands on their time and they find it difficult to give time to discuss particular liturgies, but the presider's role cannot be underestimated. John Fitz-Herbert, a priest himself, states this quite emphatically:

It is realistic to say the style and attitude of the presider are decisive factors in the assembly's worship. Attitudes such as anger, disinterest, or 'a star is born' will affect the assembly. At this stage in our liturgical history, assemblies need presiders who understand the rites, who know the people, and who are prepared to engage with others in preparing the ... liturgy. Presiders are wise to share this responsibility with other members of the assembly who are prepared to learn what it means to enact the rites (1995, p. 4).

If you are preparing a paraliturgy with children, consider being the presider yourself or inviting another teacher, parent of visitor to fulfil this role.

#### **6. Give yourself plenty of time to prepare well**

It will take you a long time to know your subject. There are many discussions to take place before decisions can be made about scripture, texts, music etc., and each facet requires thought and reflection. All the participants in the ritual need to be prepared for their particular role. This requires discussion and rehearsal. Readers, musicians and singers, especially, need to prepare and to learn from the feedback they are given so they can contribute their best.

#### **7. Learn from experience**

As in everything we do, it is important to review actions to see what we were happy with and what improvements or changes would be advisable in the future. In this way, we are continually evaluating the effectiveness of our liturgies. If you are interested, I recommend the article by David Scotchie (1997) which looks at reviewing a liturgy by considering the question: how did it flow?

I'm happy now that I have **seven** hints, as this number has many religious associations, including seven sacraments, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, seven deadly sins etc. Meanwhile, this kind of practical advice would apply to many activities that you undertake: it is good to know your subject, consult others, work as a team, give yourself plenty of time to prepare, aim for simplicity and try to improve.

### **Further insights and hints**

So you prepare a liturgical celebration and you follow these hints religiously. How will you know if it was a 'success'? Will there be complaints and criticisms of your work and how should you respond?

Paul Walton, a minister of the Uniting Church of Australia in the parish of Indooroopilly, made some interesting and insightful remarks about worship from his own experience:

I hear a number of complaints about the liturgies of the Uniting Church through being a member of the Commission on Liturgy. Much of the discussion about worship in the Uniting Church today centres upon types of music ... , or whether an alb is worn, ... or how everyone should be excited and clapping all the time. Yet really, anywhere in our Church, whatever the style, worship can be overly wordy, moralistic, didactic and worst of all, alienating ...

Worship services are usually judged on the effect they have on the person in the pew. That is a major problem. How do we tend to assess a service? (1996, p. 9)

So, I invite you to reflect on a sacramental or ritual celebration that you have been to: it may have been a christening, a wedding, an ordination, or eucharist. If you haven't been to one recently, perhaps you've seen one on television or at the movies.

- What do you remember about the ceremony?
- What was good or impressive?
- What could have been different or better?
- How would you rate it and why?

According to Paul Walton (1996, p. 9), many people assess a liturgy or ritual using these criteria:

- entertainment—'I really enjoyed the children's singing.'
- or nostalgia—'Why don't we have any of the really good old hymns these days?'
- or education—'I learned something new today.'
- or self-fulfilment—'I never get anything out of worship.'

Nevertheless, according to Paul Walton (1996, p. 9), that is not the way to evaluate liturgy.

... a worship service is not a means to an end. It is not really Christian education. It doesn't only 'mean something' if people go home having learned something. Worship is not mainly about moral exhortation. And neither is it about advancing any particular political ideology, and it isn't meant to tell people how they should feel toward Jesus Christ. Rather, *Christian* worship proclaims a Christ whose attractiveness will win us over and make us feel as we ought.

The heart of worship is really quite simple. It is this: when we gather to worship God, we gather to give God thanks and praise. Christian worship exists to glorify God, the holy and hidden God, whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, whose weakness is stronger than human strength, the God whose hands are dirty



with the mud of Galilee, whose hands smell like fish and splinters from carrying the cross. If our worship glorifies this God, then it can make real connections between faith and life and it can send forth God's people renewed in faith and love.

Tom Driver is even more emphatic when he speaks of sacramental liturgies and God: 'Christian sacraments ... are rituals designed, as all Christian rituals should be, to summon and welcome the presence of God into a gathered company of worshippers' (1991, p. 206).

Now take a few moments to think about how you feel when you read these words of Tom Driver:

In speaking of a Christian sacrament as *an action of God and the people of God*, I imply more than an action *about* God. I mean to say that a Christian sacrament is performed not only by the people present but by God collaborating with them. A liturgy in which deity is not active is no sacrament (1991, p. 207).

These words suggest to me that I need to add another unit for would-be liturgists:

## **8. Don't forget God**

Have you ever been to a ceremony where the guest of honour is forgotten because there is so much else happening or so much that needs to be done or the other guests are so distracted having a good time? This can easily happen in liturgy especially because God is invisible. To be a good liturgist you need a good relationship with God—to know God as you grow to know other people, as you become familiar with someone unique and incomparable, with an amazing power to change people and things.

One of the ways that God will speak to the community is through the scriptures, so great care needs to be taken with the way that the scriptures are read/proclaimed and then 'broken open' so that all may hear and understand the words that will give them food for thought. David Hofman (1997, p. 6) adds a further dimension by referring to the **actions** we perform when we proclaim the scriptures and not just the **words** we say:

... if the Liturgy of the Word is rushed, with readers stumbling over words, with each reading or response following 'hot on the heels' of the one before, the Book of the Word shut and put aside so that the celebrant can have somewhere to put his homily notes, then it is unlikely that people will ever be formed in understanding the richness of the Word of God. Everything they have seen and heard has already told them to switch off—that this action is not important for it does not command the time, energy or preparation of the ministers.

On the other hand, if the readings are well proclaimed and clearly articulated, if the book as a symbol of the Word is respectfully carried, revered by the [presider], if the people have time to savour the meaning of the Word, then they are open to being formed by it as the living Word of God. Everything about the proclamation then says that something important is happening.

Closely connected to the previous principle is its corollary:

## **9. Don't forget the people**

One of the theological principles that Anne Musso has introduced (above) is that 'sacraments are communal—they are celebrated by the Christian assembly'. If you know the people who will assemble, and if they feel welcome and happy to come together, you have a key ingredient of good liturgies or rituals. A priest once

remarked to me that good liturgy is 90% community and 10% liturgy, but you might have a different perspective.

There are several practical issues to consider if you decide you want to help the people become part of a community. One of these is the space where the ritual will take place, because the seating for the assembly is of paramount importance. Tom Driver (1991, pp. 213-214) is highly critical of most church architecture:

[T]he space in churches is very poorly designed ... One of the main problems is the presence of church pews, which I have long regarded as an invention of the Devil to keep the people of God apart ... The design of church space usually separates laity from clergy, fixes attention upon a pulpit or altar (usually presided over by a male, not a female), and regiments the seating of the people in a manner far more alienating than what they experience in most other gatherings, whether in the sports arena or the theatre.

You may be limited by what you can achieve, but it is important to reflect on the constraints imposed on a group because of the way the worship space is used. Try to think of ways to make the liturgical space as welcoming and inclusive as possible.

Another factor not to be overlooked if you want to help people feel welcome and part of the community is the texts that are used. Many times they are not inclusive of all people. The following comment is typical of many women:

I do sometimes attend churches, but I usually get so offended by the exclusion of women and the references to a male God that I do not enjoy my visits, so I go as seldom as possible. (Winter et al. 1995, p. 160).

Again there are many constraints such as approved texts and scriptural translations, but the most difficult ones to overcome are simply ignorance and apathy.

The choice of music is another element which helps people to feel part of the group. Monica Brown asserts that: 'Liturgical music is integral to liturgy in its special ability to energise, enliven and unite the worshipping community' (1998, p. 5).

One further comment that Walton makes in his article is that worship should not only glorify God but it should send 'the Church out renewed and restored' (1996, p. 9). Tom Driver maintains that all rituals should 'change' or 'transform' something, as this excerpt from his book *The Magic of Ritual* (1991, p. 93) illustrates:

Rituals are primarily instruments designed to change a situation: They are more like washing machines than books. A book may be *about* washing, but the machine takes in dirty clothes and, if all goes well, transforms them into cleaner ones.

Rites of passage ... offer the clearest examples of rituals effecting change. Take marriage ceremonies for instance. Common law marriages aside, there is no way in our society to get married except through a rite. The marriage licence does not create a marriage but simply grants permission for a wedding to take place. The marriage does not exist until the ceremony, religious or civil, makes it so. The ceremony may be as elaborate as the Polish Catholic one that lasted all day and night in the movie *The Deer Hunter* or it may be as brief as the one in the film version of *Out of Africa*, thrown together on the spot and finished in less than a minute; but the point is that it must be performed, else the couple do not pass from the unwed to the married state.

Driver goes on to discuss other transformations that rituals effect:

We have already taken note of rites of passage, in which there is a change of status and/or identity. ... There are many other kinds of transference. ... They may occur repeatedly in a lifetime—rituals of spiritual and moral cleansing, for example, and, closely related to those, rituals of healing. ... According to Roman Catholic doctrine, the Mass accomplishes the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (1991, p. 95).

Driver then utters this pronouncement: 'I believe that a rite that has lost its power to transform runs a strong risk of becoming mere show' (1991, p. 95).

Whilst Driver's work is challenging, it also provides insights. Perhaps it is necessary then to add this last principle:

#### **10. Notice the changes effected by a ritual**

If there are no changes, perhaps there is no sacrament. But, don't forget that the person who changes most might be you. This could sound like an impossible challenge but I derive some hope from these words of Tom Driver:

The baker ... does not have to know the biology of the yeast organisms but does have to know the techniques of bread-making. Likewise, the performers of a sacrament do not need to know ritual theory nor even sacramental theology but must know the ways of justice, freedom, and love within a gathered community. Still, ritual techniques themselves are not the principal effective agents. They serve only to facilitate a collaboration between the people and God, who, to the extent that they encounter one another sacramentally, generate transforming power together. (1991, pp. 207-208).

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