

# Liturgy in a University

I don't want to go over the well-trodden ground of principles familiar to everyone from Council documents and the like. The task of a Chaplain in a University is much the same as the task of any Parish Priest: but the first line of the *Ordo Missae* pointedly reads:

Populo congregato, sacerdos...ad altare accedit  
*The people being gathered, the priest goes to the altar*

This points up a specific need. Most parishes have a stable resident community – however small – which can be relied on to assemble for Mass. In a University setting, the task of congregating the *populus* is often “throwing a six to start”. It's a delicate business of contacting and encouraging new students each year as they arrive, offering them a much-needed welcome, without railroading or ghettoising. This is the task, not of the lone Chaplain, but of the community. The vital engine of pastorate in the University is the community itself. Students look after each other, and have a great concern for one another's faith. One of my jobs is to make them actively conscious of it.

It's never been of the essence of Christianity that it should engender a community of attractive, friendly people. But students are mostly that, and newcomers finding their way to the Eucharist respond with profound relief. Their real dread was of finding a cloistered assembly of oddball misfits to which they couldn't wish to belong. With notable exceptions, students have an instinct for creating community, so there is a readiness in people to be gathered. But the setting of the right tone is still delicate. Young people leaving home can undergo sheer turmoil within (despite the calm exterior), and the time favours the setting of new relationships. Anything that looks like artificially prolonging the parent-child model into this brave new world is doomed. An eirenic, flexible attitude on the part of the priest is quietly central to the survival of the Church, at least in its liturgical form.

A Chaplain needs a sincere and unselfish love for students, and a longing for their good; he must nurture the realism of their prayer, their intellectual grasp of the faith, their moral vision, and the depth of their friendship. How are they to encounter Christ at the University, unless these vital areas are open to Him? A Chaplain shows this love by simple presence. He must be there, listening attentively to all he hears. Part-time visiting firemen aren't going to be a lot of help, because life moves very fast for students, and moments of grace have a way of passing ungrasped by absentees, however sincere. Our duty as a Church is to show how seriously we regard this ministry by giving it our time. It may feel sometimes that this isn't appreciated. But after eleven years I'm convinced that it is one thing that comes across as vital: *our priest is for us*. Diocesan planners, please note: and for all our sakes, look after your Church's future leaders.

Universities lose a third of themselves every June, so the community is perennially being beheaded. Disaster can escalate very quickly. You could lose a good Chaplaincy in about twelve months of neglect or *faux pas*. In Nottingham we have a Campus university, and about 5,000 - mostly first-year - students are resident. This is a great help since, if first-years find the community, there's a good chance that second- and third-years will belong to it too. We celebrate Mass on Sunday in the Great Hall at 10 30: that is, at prime time. If I weren't also a parish priest - three miles away in a district totally beyond the reach of student rents - I might have an evening Mass too. As it is, there is one Mass, and about 200 students attend it weekly (perhaps 350 are

reasonably regular members of the congregation). So it's an effort to get to Mass, and many surprisingly make it.

Participation is a slowly-nurtured reality. Students aren't always happy to be recruited to the draughty tasks of ministry. But there are some victories. They have truly "owned" the music, and to my annual relief a fresh and lively group of about twenty musicians reforms itself each October as the tide comes back in. They brave the elements across our spacious parkland, lugging with them guitars, bags of music, and 'cellos (and once a bass guitar amplifier identified by a German student who had to lift it into my car as "the Pain in the Boot"). They know they're good, and they meet by themselves to plan the Sunday music each week; a small group, postgraduates or medics, turns up in the vacations to accompany the liturgy in the thin weeks, when the congregation falls to about fifty. So there's a musical continuity which keeps records and passes on wisdom; it is rarely that I have to hint a fault with their choices, and usually what is wrong is that the repertoire is run ragged by occasions like Ash Wednesday. I fear much modern music is poor at coping with sombre or devastating themes. Music-group leaders are well used to the task of identifying Lectionary themes, and sometimes astonish me by their marrying of Scripture to music. They readily accept the ditching of trite or weak material, and are on the lookout for new items. They recruit members and provide for their continuity themselves.

One of the features of University life that surprised me (as a returning arts graduate from the class of '68) was the sheer hard grind the present generation accepts. There is not the leisure we took for granted, and options like choral singing are not realistic for us. A small number each year develop the role of cantor, and the students hold a Taizé service once a month, which has become appropriately interdenominational.

I don't think the chief value of the music-group is in the quality of music or performance, but in the obvious enthusiasm and effort they give to the community at large. They fill the place with energetic harmony, sometimes singing with great conviction and "heart". That message is communicated with perfect clarity.

Students can be magnificent readers, although, I've found, difficult to recruit to the business of composing intercessions. They give great example to each other in the reverence with which they deliver the Word. They carry out the Eucharistic ministry with similar attention, receiving in the process great insights into the meaning of the Eucharist.

We have to live our liturgical life without the great festivals. Terms ended this year on the second Thursday in Advent, and in the second week of Lent, resuming the day after Epiphany and on Easter Tuesday. This takes a great deal of getting-used-to. We have our high spots in two weekend Retreats, in November and in February, where between 50 – 60 students will go away together. I think they feel very close to God at those times. Again, though supply-priests get harder to find, it's vital that I go too. It means the retreats are truly community events, not a private extra.

Preaching is hard to talk about. It has to be intelligent without opacity. The balance between explaining yourself properly and talking-down to people is a nice one. The habit of sincerity, I guess, is the cardinal point; passion is allowed, histrionics not. Falsity will be sensed, and punished. The endless search for relevance can lead us astray into areas where we aren't competent to speak; we mustn't think an audience like this won't notice if we've begun to lecture them on their day of rest. On the other hand, we have to build bridges for these determinedly modern young people to cross into the world of the Scriptures, and to hear the challenge, as well as the tenderness,

of Christ for themselves without barriers of religiosity and cultural distance. Ideals, even counter-cultural ones, can be humbly advanced, and the unmistakable atmosphere of listening will tell if the right note is being struck.

Despite living in a top-ten British University, our church is a church of the poor. We turn the Great Hall into liturgical space from a small cupboard sacristy, and reverse the process immediately afterwards. The things we have are largely lacking in “noble simplicity”, and we have no funding to turn to. But we celebrate the Resurrection every Sunday of the year, and gather a large congregation of genuinely committed young people to do so. Nothing else comparable happens on Campus on Sunday morning. We’re only together with most students for three years, thirty weeks each year, after which they graduate and leave. We have, thus, the character of a pilgrim church, a provisional quality; here everyone has a brief and precious window of opportunity. That we, as a community, try to be aware of this vital moment in the lives of our young members does, I think, come across in our liturgy. It is wonderful how many of our alumni spontaneously return to visit.