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SHOULD THE MASS BE TELEVISED?

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An article written by Karl Rahner in 1952 articulated strong opposition to televising the Mass. This article remains the focus of current debate. What the United States brings to the discussion is the reality of over 35 years' experience in televising the Mass. The question is even more relevant as the church in Eastern Europe is given the opportunity to televise the Mass and theologians, liturgists and communicators argue over its validity and rationale.

In February 1992 I received a telephone call from The Chicago Tribune and the Associated Press. The call was precipitated by a decision of WGN, a local Chicago television station, to discontinue televising the Catholic Mass on Sunday. The WGN decision in an archdiocese with a very large Catholic ethnic population created a major flare-up. The news media wondered if the Chicago situation did not signal a major emerging dilemma for the Catholic Church across the United States. "Is this the trend?" they asked. "Will all Catholic dioceses now airing the Mass lose their air time?" As I pondered the questions, I began to make connections with a variety of conversations I had with diocesan communication directors from around the country and was aware of certain trends emerging:

Most dioceses are producing their Masses in television studios at no cost. Masses are pre-taped because television studios may not be available for airing the Mass live on Sunday. Also, producing a Mass on the week-end would involve overtime expenses for the television station. Only a few dioceses have their cathedral or a parish electronically equipped to televise the Sunday Mass live. The only time most local television stations might send out a production van to telecast a Mass live from a parish would be for a special liturgical celebration like Christmas, Easter, the ordination of a bishop or the presence of the Pope.

A number of dioceses inform me that television stations are shifting the standard time for broadcasting the Mass. Dioceses that once had good air time on Sunday morning around 8:00, 9:30 or 10:00 are being moved to 5:30, 6:00 or 6:30 A.M. slots. The question dioceses are facing is, who will be viewing the Mass at the earlier hour?

The Chicago Archdiocese found WGBO-TV, Channel 66, willing to televise the Mass for free at 6:30 A.M. The archdiocese felt that was a less desirable time and so a later time was chosen with WGBO offering a "reasonable deal." "I'm delighted to resume this important service to the Archdiocese so quickly after the unprecedented number of calls and letters I've received from literally thousands of devoted viewers of the televised Mass. Their response has helped me to experience the importance of our larger, yet unseen parish," said Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago. The response of the audience cannot be ignored by those of us asking the question, "Is anyone out there watching" of "Should the Mass be aired regularly or occasionally on television?"

John Geaney, a national Paulist communicator, has written: "Good television is intimate, and Eucharistic liturgy offers television cameras the possibility of intimacy at many points in the action. Television offers liturgical actions in close-up form that are difficult to see even in a well-built and well-lighted sacred space. When a homily is shot with an eye to intimacy, for example, television offers preachers the chance to use the power of their eyes and the expressions of their face that are often missed in a large church. The intimacy of liturgy as seen by television is, therefore, a plus."

During the past year I have been collecting samples of televised Masses aired either live or pre-taped. Many of these Masses reflect the advantages identified by Father Geaney. These are benefits especially for infirm or elderly who could not see or hear the Eucharistic liturgy in the parish. Even if the celebrant performs poorly, however, have we gained nothing by televising the Mass? Alice Laurich, executive director of communications of the Diocese of Greensburg, Pa., thinks not: "I question whether we would apply that same criterion to the liturgies that vary greatly from parish to parish. Do we say, 'If the parish does not have a good liturgy nothing is accomplished by having Sunday Mass?'"

Consider another perspective on the issue based on a recent discussion I had with a group of senior Catholic citizens (aged 75-98) whom I regularly engage in theological discussion. These are persons who have experienced much theological and liturgical change in their lives. They are well-read and informed Catholics. I approached this group with the question: "Do you think the Mass should be televised?" Agnes Keller was most passionate about the topic: "What theologian or liturgist is asking the question?" she asked. I explained the concerns being raised in some circles today. Agnes continued: "You know I wish more people would consult us - the members of the church. The question is why should it not be? Also, if not, what are the alternatives?"

Following her comment, all those around the living room proceeded to articulate how the televised Mass supported their spiritual life. Individuals shared how they light their prayer candles, follow along in their hymnal and missalettes. It is a profound religious experience for them.

To determine what type of reaction dioceses televising the Mass receive from viewers. I contacted 10 dioceses and asked them to send me a sampling from their letters. Here are a few: "I'm a shut-in, and it helps me get through another lonely Sunday; 6:00 A.M. is very early, but I enjoy the songs and the sermon so much." "I watch the Sunday Mass each Sunday. I am 71 years old and cannot get to Mass. I feel so much part of the faith community." "I enjoy watching the Sunday morning Mass for shut-ins. I even set my VCR so I can re-play it weekdays too."

What are the concerns of liturgists? Liturgists express reservations about the integrity of the televised Mass and about lack of active participation. Each liturgist I spoke with felt the televised Mass did not develop a "sense of communion" with the local faith community. Several went so far as to indicate that they felt people abstained from actively participating in the Sunday Mass in the parish, opting for "watching" at home. It could be that the concerns of liturgists stem from the fact that Catholicism in America, which traditionally sustained a vigorously communal and public character, has within the past 25 years entered into the American cultural mainstream and in the process taken on "individualistic" characteristics, with a negative impact on participation in liturgical worship, and Sunday observance in particular. A more profound theological problem presents itself if we agree with theologians and liturgists who believe our culture has lost a "sense of mystery." The conviction appears essentially to be that the Mass today lacks a sense of importance, depth, reverence and worthiness and that when the Mass is televised - especially poorly - the situation is aggravated.

One of the primary aims of liturgy is the promotion of "that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (Vatican II's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," N^o 14). Many liturgists express grave concern that the televised Mass reflects a pre-Vatican II theology. It encourages persons to be passive in the liturgical setting and, more importantly, to be isolated rather than in "communio," the key to quality liturgy. In light of this fact, the question is raised whether the nature of liturgy indicates that it may not belong weekly in the mass media. Liturgists also indicate frustration with communicators who attempt to edit special effects into the taping of the Mass. They feel the special effects are distractions and sometimes theologically inaccurate. An example is the superimposing of the crucifix on the host during consecration.

I asked the liturgists what alternatives the church should explore. Several recommendations emerged:

- 1)** Only the Liturgy of the Word should be broadcast on television. This is in harmony with the catechumenate tradition of the church. Prior to their baptism the catechumens were permitted to celebrate only the Liturgy of the Word. Since many in our viewing audience may not be Catholic, we should adapt a media position like that of the current adult catechumenate process.
- 2)** The church should consider televising the Mass only for special events. This Mass should be broadcast live in "real time." This approach would enable liturgists, diocesan communicators and television stations to plan an effective televised experience for the local community.
- 3)** The Liturgy of the Hours and creative Scripture prayer experiences can offer a broader context for the ecumenical viewing audience.

Any investigation of this question is not complete without spending time with bishops and diocesan communicators. In almost every diocese where the Mass is televised, these pastors and officials are firmly convinced of its value and significance for the mission of the local church.

I designed a questionnaire with 22 questions and sent it to the diocesan

communications director in 179 dioceses. I received 123 returns. The response to the questionnaire offers a general understanding of the present reality of televising Mass in this country. A few highlights of the study:

Seventy percent of the dioceses responding televise the Sunday Mass. Of this number 25 percent acquire the Mass from outside sources, e.g., the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA), a religious community or another diocese. Over 60 percent of the Masses are pre-taped, 50 percent of the Masses are 30 minutes long and approximately 10 percent are 45-60 minutes in length. A quarter of these dioceses air the Mass in more than one language. In most situations a pastor or a parish priest is the main celebrant. A very few bishops celebrate the Sunday televised Mass on a regular basis, but most frequently on Christmas, Easter or special events. Sixty percent indicated that airing the Mass is part of their overall pastoral communications plan. Over 60 percent indicate there is little or no direct collaboration with the diocesan liturgy office in planning the televised Mass. The key sources for funding are the annual diocesan communications collection and contributions from the viewers.

Bishops and diocesan communications directors convinced of the value of televising the Mass offer the following support for their position:

- 1)** The televised Mass is important to the faith life of a great number of Catholics within our community. This is demonstrated by the number of letters and telephone calls received at the chancery. The number of persons in the viewing audience is calculated in many cases by requests for monthly missalettes from nursing homes or retirement communities that indicate large groups view the Mass in a common room.
- 2)** This is an excellent presence of the Catholic Church within our secular culture, offering the local church an opportunity to support evangelization efforts. Non-Catholics have indicated that viewing the Mass has enabled them to feel comfortable in visiting a Catholic church.
- 3)** Televising the Mass is perceived as a corporal work of mercy, since most of the viewers are the elderly and infirm.
- 4)** In a number of dioceses, parishes alternate in planning the liturgy for the televised Mass each week. This experience offers an educational opportunity for liturgical planning and evaluation of how the minister and parish celebrates the liturgy.
- 5)** In dioceses such as San Antonio, Tex., where the Mass is televised live each week with the same celebrant and worshiping community, there is a strong sense of "communio" that emerges within the entire diocese.

Vatican II stated that care must be taken that mass media programs created by church agencies be "out-standing for their standards of excellence and achievement." The demand for excellence is clear. That the Eucharistic liturgy is presented on television today is a fact. It is critical that liturgy presented on television should be both good liturgy and good television.

To those who would eliminate the weekly televised Mass from the media, I would recommend that they reserve judgment and consider how we can take advantage of the power and potentialities of the electronic media to celebrate the liturgy more

faithfully on television. There are times when we may miss the reality of how God can work through the media. Grace comes in a variety of ways. We must be open to all those opportunities. I believe we must trust the graceful encounters of the faithful who view the televised Mass weekly and find consolation and a sense of identity and belonging in the experience.

If the televised religious experience is to have impact and meaning, there should be a direct correlation between the practiced liturgical life of the parish and the televising of liturgical celebrations. Unfortunately, I think that in most of our parishes the televised Mass is seen as an insignificant part of our parish outreach rather than as an important dimension of it. I have found very few regular viewers who regard the televised Mass as equivalent to physical presence with the faith community. The conversations I have had with these people indicate that their religious background has imbedded within them a deep appreciation for the significance of the Eucharistic celebration of their faith life, for what they call "praying the Mass," since they cannot be physically present. Are there others who believe the televised Mass is the actual Eucharistic celebration? I am sure there may be some. But where the Eucharistic or alternative form of prayer service is televised, a distinct pastoral outreach from parishes should be made to the viewing audience. Then there would be a requisite "sense of communio." •