

## How sociology can help liturgical scholars navigate the impact of the pandemic on public worship

Catholic liturgy, like all aspects of organised human activity, is undergoing a serious reset in the aftermath of the global pandemic, as virtual forms of public worship and Christian connection become a reality across the globe.

In a public lecture hosted by the ACU Centre for Liturgy on May 9, liturgical studies expert and Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Parramatta, Fr Peter Williams suggested liturgical scholars need to be more attentive of the social sciences when attempting to answer the ongoing questions about proper celebration of the Roman rite.

The online lecture was attended by more than 80 people from Australian, New Zealand and the United States.

Fr Williams proposed a new way of approaching the *ars celebrandi*, a relatively modern term popularised by Pope Benedict XVI that translates to “the art of proper celebration of the liturgy”.

“How do we define the proper celebration of the rite? In light of pandemic, might be helpful to use analytical tools that come from outside our normal context,” Fr Williams said during his public lecture.

Fr Williams suggested that the discipline of sociology offered valuable insights into the history of liturgical reform, particularly the cultural concept of high culture and pop culture.

High culture is a subculture that appreciates cultural artefacts and activities stressing aesthetic value and is normally associated with an elite class.

Contrastingly, pop culture arises from the people, and is consumed by a majority of society.

From these subcultures also arises a third culture, the taste culture, or subcultures that align themselves with specific personal preferences.

“What does this have to do with Christian liturgy?” Fr Williams asked.

“Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the church had at least since the Council of Trent, and perhaps from Medieval times, developed its own unique taste culture.

This ‘taste culture’ also adhered to a particular liturgy, the Missal of Pius V, which largely reflected the 16<sup>th</sup> century high renaissance era it grew out of.

“That form and liturgical culture became affixed and immutable for almost 500 years,” Fr Williams said.

“Having been shaped by a unique and highly stylised liturgical culture for centuries, there would at least be some degree of antipathy towards a new form of worship that disconnected it from a previous culture.

“I believe such antipathy was largely a reaction to a substantial and comprehensive change to the cultural idiom.

“The liturgical reforms and the renewal called for a change of liturgical culture, not just of a change of words, structure and language. And to that end, little serious attention has been given to the question of culture by those responsible for the reform and its implementation.”

The influence of the individual’s taste culture means the liturgy “has become a ‘user’s market’ that is driven by whatever ‘appeals’ as the best liturgical ‘product’ that suits the worshipper and the liturgical practitioners who make it happen”.

In other words, culture permeates the liturgy in so far as directing a person’s liturgical preference and supporting the reality of liturgical plurality.

“Liturgical scholars should have perhaps been more attentive to the social sciences, and the omnipresence of taste cultures, and the hegemony of popular culture in its lurking dominance in the way people express themselves in the ordinary living of their lives,” Fr Williams said.

Fr Williams proposed three ways to engage with the reset following the pandemic, with respect to the social sciences: to ensure proper formation and liturgical training of seminarians, improved liturgical catechesis and formation of the laity, which have largely “been inconsistent” for some time; and “in a spirit of mutual respect” the necessity to dialogue with those who feel alienated from reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

“I remain optimistic, that with good will, humility and an openness to admitting we haven’t always gotten it right, we might see this as a ‘Kairos’ moment,” he concluded.

**Fr Peter Williams AM is available for interview.**

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