

# God's people need time to unwind mystery of liturgy

CHESTNUT HILL, Mass. – God's people need time to unwind the mystery of the liturgy, both during Mass and over time, said Cardinal Godfried Danneels during a lecture at Boston College April 17.

Cardinal Danneels, the archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Belgium, was co-author of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy ("Sacrosanctum Concilium"), approved by the Second Vatican Council. It called for the translation of the Mass from Latin to the vernacular.

The document, promulgated Dec. 4, 1963, ordered an extensive revision of worship so that people would have a clearer sense of their own involvement in the Mass and other rites.

The cardinal spoke at the annual Canisius Lecture, sponsored by the university's Jesuit Institute. His talk was titled "The Sacred Liturgy: Revisiting 'Sacrosanctum Concilium' Forty Years After Vatican II."

"The liturgy needs time to deliver its riches," he said to students, faculty and priests.

The faithful need time and space to enter into the event and to leave the chaos of the world behind, and to do that they also need silence, according to the cardinal. The current length of the Mass makes the liturgy an "unstoppable succession of words" with little time for reflection, he said.

If the liturgy is too focused on the intellectual, it will fail to reach many of the people who participate in it, he said.

The liturgy also calls for repetition because it reveals its significance over time, Cardinal Danneels said.

"Our contemporaries often conceive understanding as the ability to grasp something at first hearing," he said. "Many changes in the liturgy in order to make it understandable have been inefficient because they focus too much on the immediate cognitive informative aspect of understanding."

“They wanted to explain everything immediately to provide the commentary and to analyze. They never lead to the reality of the liturgy,” he said.

What can be grasped immediately is cognitive understanding, he said, but the divine reality cannot be realized so easily. The realities of love, death and joy cannot be understood all at once upon first inspection, he said.

Cardinal Danneels also spoke about the major changes the liturgy has undergone in the last 40 years.

“It must be very difficult to imagine for those who have not experienced it for themselves, just how much liturgical practice has changed in the last half century,” he said.

Prior to the renewal of Vatican II, there was a divide between the priest celebrating the Mass and the faithful gathered, he added.

“It being frequently the case that priests celebrated official liturgy while at one and the same time, the people set about their personal devotions,” he said. “The people assisted, of course, but took little time or little or no part in the liturgy itself.”

The aim of the liturgical movement, which originated in Belgium, was to initiate active participation for laypeople. With the use of the vernacular, the Mass became more transparent, but problems still existed, he said.

The Bible uses language from a “bygone era,” the cardinal said, and verses speak of shepherds and their flocks, which are no longer the realities of daily life.

Rather than change the symbols used in texts, the symbols must be explained within their historical context, he said, and in the same way words like Easter, Resurrection and the Eucharist cannot be replaced. They, like some words in the liturgy, must be learned, he said.

Since Christian liturgy cannot be known from human experience alone, it demands catechesis, he said. The instruction must be done outside of the liturgy so that participants can experience the liturgy and then have it explained to them in greater depth, he said.

Although reform was needed to invite the laity into full participation in the liturgy, there can be a “shadow side,” the cardinal added. The changes can lead to a “taking possession of the liturgy,” he said.

“In some cases, this can lead to a sort of liturgical coup in which the sacred is eliminated, the language trivialized and the cult turned into a social event or a piece of theater,” he said.

In these situations, the real subject of liturgy is no longer Christ, he said. Participants at Mass need to be oriented toward God with an attitude of receptivity, self-giving, praise and prayer. The liturgy is a “loving entering in,” he said.

At the liturgy’s core is a mystery that must be accepted through openness and faith, he said, a mystery that God, through the Catholic Church, offers all people.

“I see even in the secularized world we live in, the attention for liturgy and for symbols is growing and growing and growing,” he said. “Many people are looking for something more profound.”