

# In Communion with Christ

Programme Introduction  
& materials for homilist

**I**n Communion With Christ is an all-parish resource designed to complement *With Hearts and Minds*. It is intended to assist participants to a deeper appreciation of the nature and role of the Liturgy in the life of the Christian community; to participate more deeply in the Liturgy.

Like *With Hearts and Minds* it is based on a six week programme. It follows the same broad themes, but it is a resource that can be shared with the whole parish, both through Sunday preaching on those broad themes and through take-away A4 sheets to help people continue to reflect on what has been preached about in the homily.

It is not usually practical for all parishioners to commit themselves to take part in a six week formation course based on house-groups. In Communion with Christ means that they can still engage in the formation opportunity being offered by those groups.

*In Communion with Christ* is intended as a complement to, not a substitute for *With Hearts and Minds*. However it is also able to be used as a stand-alone programme where that is judged the better way to proceed.

## Overview

Session 1	<b>Introduction</b>	
Session 2	<b>Gathering</b>	Introductory Rites
Session 3	<b>Word</b>	Liturgy of the Word
Session 4	<b>Thanksgiving</b>	Liturgy of the Eucharist — Eucharistic Prayer
Session 5	<b>Communion</b>	Communion Rite
Session 6	<b>Mission</b>	Concluding Rite

*In Communion with Christ* is one a series of resources produced by the Liturgy Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales to assist parishes reflect on their celebration of the Eucharist in the light of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Other resources are available from [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk)

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**Liturgy  
Office**  
ENGLAND  
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# Introduction

For Catholics today, as in the past, the Mass is the source and summit of the whole Christian life. It is the vital centre of all that the Church is and does, because at its heart is the real presence of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord, continuing and making available his saving work among us. The Second Vatican Council reminded us: 'the most holy Eucharist holds within itself the whole spiritual treasure of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Passover and our living bread'.

Yet for an increasing number of Roman Catholics today there appears to be a certain discontinuity between everyday experience and the Sunday Mass. For many a discernible gulf has opened up between the spiritual journey of the individual and the communal, liturgical acts of worship. (*Celebrating the Mass*, 2)

In his letter *Spiritus et Sponsa* published in 2003 to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council that Pope John Paul II asked the Church to consider how it might address such matters.

*In Communion with Christ* is a resource of the Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales to assist parish communities with:

- their understanding of the celebration of the Mass;
- their participation in its celebration;
- more firmly establishing the Mass as a source for faithful Christian living.

It is part of a wide range of materials that accompany the publication of the English translation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (GIRM) and the Bishops' Conference's own *Celebrating the Mass* (CTM) – a pastoral guide to the celebration of the Mass.

The principal publication to assist the wider parish community engage with these documents is *With Hearts and Minds*. It is a resource for use by small groups, helping familiarise them with the basic teaching about the celebration of the Mass, and to help promote the formation of a deeper liturgical spirituality.

*With Hearts and Minds* has been prepared in response to declared need for such a resource. It will be found most suitable for those parishes that already have experience of organising small groups for prayer and reflection. Where parishes do not already have that experience they will find detailed practical assistance in the Leader's booklet and in the additional Parish Leader's material which can be freely downloaded from [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk).

Using *With Hearts and Minds* will assist the development of liturgical understanding and participation skills across the parish. However it is not usually practical for all parishioners to commit themselves to take part in a six week formation course. The need therefore arises to help those who cannot join a group to also engage in the formation opportunity being offered.

*In Communion with Christ* is a supplementary resource which seeks to do just that. Like *With Hearts and Minds* it is based on a six week programme. It follows the same broad themes, but it is a resource that can be shared with the whole parish, both through Sunday preaching on those broad themes and through take-away A4 sheets to help people continue to reflect on what has been preached about in the homily.

*In Communion with Christ* is intended as a complement to, and not a substitute for *With Hearts and Minds*. However it is also able to be used as a stand-alone programme where that is judged the better way to proceed.

## *Preaching at Sunday Mass*

One of the fruits of the renewal of the liturgy since Vatican II has been the development of liturgical preaching. Once the preaching was commonly on topics somewhat independent of the liturgy being celebrated. Now it is widely appreciated that the homily is an integral part of the liturgy, and that in consequence its theme should be drawn from the liturgy itself. Most commonly the homily will be directly related to the readings of the day. Yet there are alternative subjects that the homilist might legitimately explore:

‘The homily (is to be) firmly based upon the mysteries of salvation, expounding the mysteries of Faith and the norms of Christian life from the biblical readings **and liturgical texts throughout the course of the liturgical year and providing commentary on the texts of the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass, or of some other rite of the Church.**’

*Redemptionis Sacramentum* 67, (Emphasis added) See also GIRM 65

*In Communion with Christ* proposes a series of six Sunday homilies each of which explore different aspects of the mystery of the Eucharist, the Mass, which is being celebrated.

These six Sundays might be consecutive Sundays. If so, they should be six Sundays in Ordinary Time, or in the seasons of Lent or Easter to avoid obscuring the transition from one season of the Church year to another. However sometimes it will be thought better to have the six Sundays more spread out, perhaps a fixed Sunday each month for six months. Thought should be given as to what arrangement will best suit a particular parish, and care taken to ensure that following the programme does not obscure any particularly important features of the liturgical year.

It is probably better for the Sunday preaching on a particular theme to take place on the Sunday after the *With Hearts and Minds* groups have reflected on that same theme. That way the preaching can reinforce the learning done in the group sessions. It also will give additional matter for those groups to reflect on at the beginning of their meeting when next they meet.

## *Mystagogy*

In *Spiritus et Sponsa* Pope John Paul writes of the thirst for God that exists even in the most secularised society. He notes that the most profound response to this longing is provided by the liturgy, and especially the Eucharist. However for this response to be effective it requires that Pastors minister the liturgy in such a way that ‘the meaning of the mystery penetrates in consciences, rediscovering and practicing the “mystagogic” art, so dear to the Fathers of the Church’. *Spiritus et Sponsa* 12.

Mystagogy is a mode of formation in the faith that has its origins in the preaching and catechesis which assists those seeking to be initiated into the life of Christ in the Church. It is exemplified in the mystagogical homilies of St Cyril of Jerusalem, St John Chrysostom, St Theodore of Mopsuestia, St Ambrose, and St Augustine. In the 4th and 5th Centuries preaching and catechesis intended for the unbaptised was typically confined to preaching on the scriptures. They were offered mystagogical preaching, preaching on the Mysteries – the sacraments – after they had celebrated the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. The focus of the preaching was their experience of the sacraments and the meaning mediated by this experience.

In later centuries when adult baptism was rare and infant baptism the norm, the practice of mystagogy declined. With it declined the ease with which the Church did its sacramental theology with reference to people’s experience of the liturgy.

The mystagogic arts of which Pope John Paul speaks in *Spiritus et Sponsa* were widely neglected. A more systematic theology took its place, and people's ability to understand the meaning of the liturgy they celebrated was compromised.

The language and practice of mystagogy has begun to find a new home in the Church as a consequence of the restoration of the Rites for Adult Initiation – the RCIA.

'The period of postbaptismal catechesis or mystagogy... is a time for the community and the neophytes to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist and doing the works of charity...

The neophytes are, as the term 'mystagogy' suggests, introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received.'

*RCIA 234f*

Mystagogy is a form of preaching that does not simply speak of the rites, and their history and theology. Rather it opens up the very heart of the liturgy, leading men and women to cherish it and understand its inner dynamic – how the liturgy expresses our faith in what we sing and say and do; in what we hear and what we pray; in how things taste and smell and feel; how the rites connect us with the love and the power of God, and how their meaningfulness echoes in our lives.

Perhaps a couple of examples will serve. The first is from the preaching of Cyril of Jerusalem. The second from St Augustine. Both relate to the reception of Holy Communion:

When you come forward, do not come with arm extended or fingers parted. Make your left hand a throne for your right, since your right hand is about to welcome a king. Cup your palm and receive in it Christ's body, saying in response: Amen. ...Consume it, being careful not to drop a particle of it. For to lose any of it is clearly like losing part of your own body. Tell me me, if anyone gave you some gold dust, would you not keep it with the greatest care, ensuring that you did not lost by dropping any of it? So you should surely take still greater care not to drop a fragment of what is more valuable than gold and precious stones.

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogic Catechesis, Sermon V*

'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.' If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond 'Amen' ('yes, it is true!') and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, 'the Body of Christ' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true.

St. Augustine, *Sermons*, 272

If some forms of theology can seem impersonal, mystagogy wears its heart on its sleeve. It is pre-eminently a confessional theology – an understanding of the Church's tradition as it is manifested in the Church's first theology, her liturgy. *Lex orandi lex credendi*.

Though prompted by the initiation of new members, mystagogic preaching is not only for them, or just for a season but is something needed by the whole community, and as a regular feature of their continuing formation. It is just this sort of formation that progressively enables the assembly to develop its ability to fruitfully participate in the liturgy, 'to probe more deeply the word of God and the mystery being celebrated.' (*Redemptionis Sacramentum* 39)

# Homilist's Introduction

This section does not offer an 'Introduction to Homiletics'. There are details of some excellent Introductions in the Bibliography that concludes this section. Instead it is simply a guide to resources provided for the homilist who will preach at Sunday Mass during the weeks that the parish uses the *In Communion with Christ* materials.

There are many ways in which a homily can be prepared. The books in the bibliography offer discussions of the pros and cons of a variety of methods. However the expectation of the homily is always going to be the same - that it will 'lead (the assembly)... to profound appropriation of the mystery of Christ and his Sacrifice in a more wholehearted celebration of the Eucharist and in their daily lives.' (*Celebrating the Mass* 168)

## Listening

The homily is to serve the participation of the whole assembly. It therefore needs to make a connection between the liturgy and their daily lives. If the homily is to do this then before he preaches to the assembly the homilist needs to listen to it. He needs to know its situation, its concerns and preoccupations, what is giving its members life, and what is stifling their lives.

This listening by the homilist can take place in many settings – while offering pastoral care to individuals and families; while helping people prepare for their wedding or the baptism of their children; during the time of catechesis for first communions and confirmation; during the meetings of adult catechumens; during the ministering of the sacrament of reconciliation, of ministry to the sick and to the bereaved. It can go on during visits to the school, and to the homes of parishioners; and through involvement in the life of the local civic community – and of course through personal friendships.

Increasingly homilists are realising the value of supplementing this 'individual' listening to the community with a more formal listening together with the community to the scriptures and the liturgical texts. This is accomplished by meeting together with a small group of other members of the parish. Such a group helps them to hear how these 'sound' in the hearts and minds of others in their community. A group might include the other full-time members of the parish team, the readers of the week, and those serving in the parish's catechetical and liturgy preparation teams. Simple processes have been developed to facilitate the listening and the reflection.

So far as the homily is concerned the role of the group is to listen to the scriptures together and to reflect. It does not write the homily – that task remains with the homilist, but the reflections of the group provide the homilist with a rich resource to draw from.

Before you read any further, do take a moment to reflect on the following questions about your present practice.

- What do you feel makes for a good homily? Or makes for a poor one?
- What is your present practice concerning homily preparation? What do you see as its strengths? And its weaknesses?
- What opportunities for feedback on your homilies do you have? How reliable and helpful are the comments you receive?

## *Preaching on the Liturgy*

The particular challenge of the preaching during *In Communion with Christ* is that its main focus is not on the scriptures of the day but on the various moments of the celebration of the Mass. And this is a practice that many homilists are not very familiar with.

As you preach on these topics you will hopefully find that some of the things that you are preaching on are aspects of the liturgy that your community does well – and the challenge then is mostly about helping people to a deeper participation in them.

However it is possible that as you read through the revised *General Instruction* and *Celebrating the Mass* and the other materials provided you will recognise certain weaknesses in your parish celebrations, and identify where current practice would benefit from being worked on. How then to preach about the opportunities for development and growth? The prospect of ‘change’ will be disturbing for some, challenging to others, and perhaps welcome to yet others. An important principle would seem to be to focus on the values that each element of the liturgy manifests, and the opportunity each offers of prayerful encounter with the Lord in the communion of the Church.

It is important that the liturgy be celebrated as well as it can be. No minister or parish should allow themselves to become complacent. Even so if there is need for the way a parish celebrates to be changed or developed this change or development will take time. It needs to be prepared for by good catechesis; precisely what needs to be addressed and how must be carefully agreed; and then the ‘new way’ introduced and reviewed. Taking care to manage change, so that it is introduced only after formation and is introduced after it has been considered by the parish community, witnesses to not only the importance of the liturgy itself, but also of the community that celebrates it.

## *Resources*

Homilists will come to *In Communion with Christ* in different states of preparedness for what is asked of them. Some will have already read and reflected on the revised *General Instruction* and/or *Celebrating the Mass*. Others will not have.

Before leading the parish into a process of liturgical catechesis and renewal it is important to have read *Celebrating the Mass*, and desirable to have read the *General Instruction*. These documents express a vision of liturgy which is authentic to the teaching of the Church at Vatican II, and towards which the Church continues to work. The documents urge local communities to achieve a quality of celebration which is not commonly experienced in our parishes at the present time. There is no shame in that – great progress has been made in responding to the call to renewal of the liturgy since the time of the Council. But there is more that we can accomplish. That is the reason for which these various documents have been produced – and presumably also for your interest in them. So be sure to build on firm foundations and be familiar with the content of these two core documents.

If you have not already read the *General Instruction* and *Celebrating the Mass* then you will find reference to the most relevant sections of both noted in the sheets for each week. Reading these sections week by week will mean that by the end of the six weeks you will have read virtually the whole of each document. If you are pressed for time and have not already read either document you will probably find it more fruitful simply to focus on the passages from *Celebrating the Mass*.

If you are already familiar with the documents then choose what you wish to re-read. You may find the People's leaflets for *In Communion with Christ* will suggest particular matters to re-visit. Additional texts from the Catechism and the writings of Pope John Paul have been provided in this present resource as further 'refreshers' for those who are already familiar with the main texts.

Work sheets are provided so that you can note down and continue to work with the challenges and opportunities you identify in your reading of the documentation, and to assist your reflecting on the liturgical texts and context of the celebration of the liturgy at which you will preach.

### *What is not provided*

It has not been thought useful to provide so-called 'model homilies'. Model homilies produced by people in a different place and at a different time cannot serve your parish assembly so well as a homily you prepare yourself. Hopefully the various materials provided will feed your reflection, but the homily you deliver will be all the better for being your own work, coming from your own reflection on the general principles of liturgy and on the circumstances and experiences of your own community.

That said it will perhaps be helpful to indicate the sort of structural elements that your homily might contain.

#### **A. Describing** the Rite

This might be in terms of words used or actions performed. The focus should be on what people hear, see, say or do - the externals. Two examples might be: 'Let us pray' - the invitation to pray before the Opening Prayer; and the Sign of Peace.

#### **B. Reflecting** on the liturgical/theological meaning of the Rite

With the first example meanings that might be explored are the significance of the word 'us' - our prayer is as a community; or that prayer is something we are invited to, it can't be forced from us; or that what we are invited to is first prayer in silence together, which is then gathered together into the prayer said on behalf of all by the priest and to which all then assent with the 'Amen'.

With the second example the focus might be on how the sign of peace is not the opportunity for us to be distracted from our prayerful preparation for Holy Communion by going to greet all and sundry, but is a quiet and simple gesture where we remind ourselves that communion with Christ is enjoyed not by each one alone, but in communion with those others who are members of Christ's Body, the Church.

#### **C. Encouraging** Participation

Here the challenge is to indicate how the assembly might participate in this element of the liturgy - not simply in terms of 'doing' it but of living it. We know the difference between a sign of peace that is a token and one that engages us. It is not a question of what is done, but how it is done. A fulsome gesture might be more empty of significance than a simple grasp of the hand. Why is it important that we do this? Not just for the liturgy but also for the way that the liturgy rehearses us in the ways we might live as Christian people outside the liturgy. To take the simple phrase 'let us pray' - what a difference it makes when we do, and experience our solidarity with each other, our seeking together to be in communion with the Lord. It not only gives us a clearer experience of sharing in common prayer, but it should make a difference to the way we relate to one another outside of the Mass too.

Put like that our task as homilists might sound daunting, but when it comes down to it surely all this amounts to is doing what all pastors were urged to by the Fathers



of Vatican Council II: 'ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 11)

May your work as homilist prove to be fruitful in helping the people of God recognise the saving presence of God in the mysteries they celebrate, and to turn to him still more eagerly, to offer him the spiritual offering of their prayer and their lives re-made in Christ.

### *Prayer for those with responsibility for presiding at the Church's prayer*

**G**racious God, eternal Shepherd,  
We thank you for the gift of Communion with Christ,  
and for calling us to serve your Church  
by leading your people in worship.

Guide and inspire us by your Holy Spirit  
that we may fulfil this ministry,  
to the glory and honour of your name.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

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