

OVERVIEW OF THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF BLESSINGS

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In very special way *The Book of Blessings* is the fruit not only of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL) but also of the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* (DV) and the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium* (LG). *The Book of Blessings* underscores three interrelated realities: blessings are liturgies, they flow from the proclamation of the inspired Word of God, and they are celebrated by and for those who share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ both on behalf of themselves and also on behalf of the world for which he died and rose. This overview will concentrate on the first reality but will also reflect the other two, especially in the following summary:

—Blessings are liturgies. Blessings are public praise of God and prayer to God, especially in the form of epiclesis, asking for the gift of the Holy Spirit. As liturgies they presume an assembly. As liturgies they presume song, proclamation, psalmody, intercession, gesture, and ritual activity.

—Blessings flow from the proclamation of the inspired Word of God. The “bottom line” of this proclamation is always the renewal of the promise contained in the Name of God: “I will be with you as Who I am shall I be there for you”; and the deepest meaning of the ritual *delivers* on this promise. Blessings make available to the senses the fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit, desire to communicate themselves to every human being. Indeed, as the General Introduction points out, Christ, the incarnate Word of God, is God’s “supreme blessing” (Article 3). Blessings presume faith, a faith awakened by the Word in the hearts of the assembly, particularly in those who will benefit most directly from the blessing being

celebrated. In aid of the awakening of this faith, the ordained may preach a homily and the lay minister may instruct. Unlike the sacraments in which their fruitfulness depends only in part on the faith of those who receive them, blessings as sacramentals do not work without this lively faith. As we shall see, all magic and superstition have been ruled out in the revised *Book of Blessings*.

—Blessings are celebrated by and for those who share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ on behalf of the world for which he died and rose. In the teaching of the Council as it has been reinforced by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, the whole people of the new covenant is established as “a spiritual house,” “a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5) The new priestly people which is the church not only has its authentic image in Christ, but also receives from him a real ontological share in his one eternal priesthood, to which she must conform every aspect of her life. A share in Christ’s priesthood is bestowed in the sacrament of baptism whereby the one baptized takes her/his unique place in the body of the worshipping Christ. This share matures in the sacrament of confirmation whereby the one confirmed is empowered by the Spirit to consecrate the world to God and to lay down one’s life, in all ways—ordinary and extraordinary—all one’s days. The priesthood of bishops and priests, as well as the ministry of deacons, is not an institution that exists “alongside” the laity or “above” it; they are “for” the laity and precisely for this reason the sacrament of orders possesses a “ministerial” character, that is to say, one “of service.” Moreover, it highlights the “baptismal priesthood,” the priesthood common to all the faithful. It highlights this priesthood and at the same time helps it to be realized in the sacramental life. Thus the whole people lay and ordained exercise Christ’s priesthood in their use of the *Book of Blessings*.

WHAT THE *BOOK OF BLESSINGS* IS

As the Foreword indicates, the 1989 *Book of Blessings* is an interim collection which

contains the entire Roman volume *De benedictionibus* (1985) as well as forty-two orders and prayers of blessing prepared by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy and approved both by the U.S. Bishops and by Rome. Sometime in the future it will be revised based on the comments sent to the Bishops' Committee. All of us who use or experience the blessings should not hesitate to submit reflections to the committee.

Obviously there are many blessings which are not in the *Book of Blessings*. In addition to those which are part of or connected to the celebration of the eucharist and other sacraments, the rites of consecrating chrism and of dedicating churches and altars, and the blessing of persons (abbots and abbesses, consecration of virgins, and the like), the most significant collection is *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (1985). If this treasury were used in every home, the goal of the liturgical renewal would be close to achievement. And in the less familiar words of the paragraph which follows the justly famous "summit and source" description of the liturgy:

The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with "the paschal sacraments," to be "one in holiness"; it prays that "they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith"; the renewal in the eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and his people *draw the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire*. From the liturgy, therefore, particularly the eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain; the liturgy is the source for achieving in the most effective way possible human sanctification and God's glorification, the end to which all the Church's other activities are directed. [CSL 10, emphasis added]

Like the 1981 Introduction to the Lectionary, the 1984 General Introduction to the *Book of Blessings* is one of the most mature and passionate of our liturgical documents. It must be noted however that there are many

more introductions to orders and prayers of blessing than just the General Introduction to the *Book of Blessings*; in fact, one-fifth of the book is introductory in character, perhaps a greater percentage than in any other liturgical book. To understand and use this collection properly, you must also read the 100 particular introductions to the various sections and subsections throughout the volume. Although it is vital to be in control of the thirty-nine paragraphs of the General Introduction, you need also be cognizant of the 392 paragraphs in these particular introductions. The first paragraphs in each of these 100 sections contain the theological and liturgical rationale for the blessings which follow these paragraphs.

THE PLAN OF THE GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The General Introduction has five parts. The first, "Blessings in the History of Salvation," is theological and trinitarian. The second and third parts, "Blessings in the Life of the Church" and "Offices and Ministries," are ecclesiological and sacramental. The fourth part, "Celebration of a Blessing," is liturgical; and the last part is canonical, "Adaptations Belonging to the Conferences of Bishops." (The prerogative of making such adaptations was used in the U.S. edition, as mentioned previously. I take up a brief discussion of the first three parts next and reserve comments on Part IV for the following section of this Overview.)

The seven articles in "Blessings in the History of Salvation" are a masterpiece of concision. In every blessing there is a confession of the goodness of God, a "blessing" of God, Father, Son, and Spirit. And in the Incarnation the goodness of all that God has made is underscored. "Blessings therefore refer first and foremost to God, whose majesty and goodness they extol, and, since they indicate the communication of God's favor, they also involve human beings, whom he governs and in his providence protects. Further, blessings apply to other created things through which, in their abundance and variety, God blesses human beings" (Article 7).

The ecclesiological and sacramental observations in the next twelve articles remind us of the fundamentally eucharistic nature and mission of the Church. In the following definition from Article 10 I emphasize words which are themes in modern ecclesiology and sacramental theology: “Blessings are signs that have God’s word as their *basis* and that are celebrated from motives of *faith*. They are therefore meant to *declare* and to *manifest* the newness of life in Christ that has its origin and growth in the sacraments of the New Covenant established by the Lord. In addition, since they have been established as *a kind of imitation of the sacraments*, blessings are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church’s *intercession*.”

One can see in this definition echoes of the GI and the LMIN. Two statements from the latter come to mind: “. . . the liturgical celebration, founded primarily on the word of God and sustained by it, becomes a new event and enriches the word itself with new meaning and power” (LMIN 3) and “. . . the word of God unceasingly calls to mind and extends the economy of salvation, which achieves its fullest expression in the Liturgy. The liturgical celebration becomes therefore the continuing, complete, and effective presentation of God’s word” (LMIN 4). Since blessings are liturgical celebrations, this ecclesiology and sacramentology of the Word of God applies to them too.

Articles 12 and 13 stress that blessings are for people in the events of their lives, in the objects they use, and in the places where they work and live. (Later, Article 31 spells out that “people” in the foregoing sentence includes catechumens and non-Catholics.) Here the General Introduction makes two cautions. First, with respect to blessing objects and places, it states that “such blessings are invoked always with a view to the people who use the object to be blessed and frequent the places to be blessed.” So, throughout the *Book of Blessings* we are told not to bless anything or any place without the presence of the persons who use or live in them. Here we can anticipate

the liturgical point made in Article 17: “The celebration of the blessing of things or places according to custom should not take place without the participation of at least some of the faithful.”

The second caution—“every celebration of a blessing must be weighed beforehand with pastoral prudence”—is perhaps more clearly expressed in the particular introduction to the last blessing in the book. This blessing, “Chapter 71: Order for a Blessing to be Used in Various Circumstances,” is meant to be an exemplar for situations not already provided for. Paragraph 1985 states: “The present order is in no sense meant to violate principles concerning blessings; it is not fitting to turn every object or situation into an occasion for celebrating a blessing (for example, every monument erected no matter what its theme, the installation of military weapons, frivolous events). Rather every celebration must be considered with balanced pastoral judgment, particularly when there is any foreseeable danger of shocking the faithful or other people.”

The last two articles in Part II so admirably summarize the theology of blessings that no overview can substitute for a prayerful pondering of the texts themselves, along with the full texts of the biblical references in notes twenty through twenty-four.

All of Part III, “Offices and Ministries,” underscore the fact that blessings, as liturgies, presume the liturgical assembly, hierarchically arranged. Article 16 describes the ideal and Article 17 prescribes the minimum, both in personnel and in interior disposition. Because CSL 79 ordered, “Let provision be made that some sacramentals . . . may be administered by qualified laypersons, Article 18 describes the roles of the ordained and the baptized in presiding at the celebration of blessings and expresses the general preference that the presiding task be given to the person present who has received the fuller share of the sacrament of orders. Finally Article 19 reminds the ordained and lay presiders that “[d]uring the celebration of a blessing and in preaching and

catechesis beforehand, [they] should therefore explain to the faithful the meaning and power of blessings.” The stage has now been set to look at the standard shape of a blessing.

THE TYPICAL STRUCTURE OF A BLESSING

Like the eucharistic liturgy itself, blessings have two central parts—a liturgy of the word and a praise/petition of God with its accompanying proper outward sign—as well as an introduction and a conclusion (Articles 20–22). So important are the central parts that Article 23 lays down the rule that they “may never be omitted even when the shorter form of a rite is used” and Article 27 more strictly says, “. . . it is ordinarily not permissible to impart the blessing of any article or place merely through a sign of blessing and without either the word of God or any sort of prayer being spoken.” That one would always plan a blessing celebration is presumed by and described in Article 24 and in Articles 28 through 38. (The latter includes the manner in which you may join blessings with Mass or other rites, pastoral planning, and vesture of ministers.) Articles 25 and 26 summarizes the theology and list of signs to be used in blessings, emphasizing “the outstretching, raising, or joining of the hands, the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, sprinkling with holy water, and incensation,” giving a brief explanation of each sign. (Dennis Smolarski’s Q&A Column about these signs, particularly incense and holy water, in the August–September 1998 issue of *Liturgy 90* is very helpful.)

However, a close inspection of the approximately 100 orders of blessing in the *Book of Blessings* reveals that clear (perhaps too clear) distinctions are made between the ways in which a lay minister uses some of these signs and the ways the ordained use these signs.

—A lay minister does not make any greeting that would normally elicit the response, “And also with you.”

—A lay minister does not stretch her hands

in the *orans* gesture but keeps her hands folded.

—A lay minister does not stretch her hands in blessing nor trace the sign of the cross in the air; rather she signs herself with the sign of the cross and thus leads the assembly in doing likewise.

The General Introduction does not offer an explanation for these differences but they are not hard to find in the tradition. The late Cardinal Yves Congar, O.P., in his three-volume *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* draws his reader’s attention to W.C. Van Unnik’s article, “*Dominus Vobiscum: the Background of a Liturgical Formula*,” in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of T.W. Manson 1893–1958* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959). The greeting, “The Lord be with you” “And also with you,” is actually a prayer and was once so sacred that it was used only once during the Mass, at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer. In that position it is a prayer to the Holy Spirit poised, so to speak, between the presider and the assembly for the rekindling of the gift given all in baptism and the gift given the presider in ordination in order that what was about to be done could be done and could be fruitful. Awareness of this history brings alive the warning Pope St. Gregory the Great gave many times: “the ministers of the Church cannot legitimately consecrate the Eucharist without a People who offer it with them.” Or, in the case of blessings, the ministers of the Church cannot legitimately bless without a People who invoke the Spirit together with them.