

The Science of the Liturgy vis-à-vis the Role, Task and Function of the Afro-Nigerian Liturgist in the 21st Century

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Abstract

In the course of the evolution of liturgy, there seemed to be some confusion between what constitutes liturgy and “The Science of the Liturgy”. The result of this has been immense especially for us in Nigeria where the injunction of SC 16 that the science of the Liturgy should rank as one of the principal disciplines on theological faculties, has hardly been implemented. The result of this is a seeming confusion in what constitutes the real calling of the trained liturgist: is he an MC? Is he a “creator of liturgies”? What is he? This is the crux of the matter in this article.

1. Introduction

Contrary to what most people think, there is a difference between “Liturgy” and “Study of Liturgy”. While the latter has to do with scientific reflection on ritual, the former has to do with the ritual itself. Although the liturgy could be traced back to the pronouncement by Jesus of the *berakah* over the bread and wine at the last supper—in other words, to the very beginnings—the study of the liturgy, the science of the liturgy or the reflection on the liturgy, is relatively a new discipline, especially in the west. What this means is that prior to this, the Church was more content with the development that was taking place in the liturgy rather than the systematic study of it (Chupungco, 1997). It was only after the Second Vatican Council, following the injunction of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 16 (Henceforth SC) that the study of the liturgy should be made “*disciplina principalis*” on theological faculties, that some faculties created room for this study. On most theological faculties today, however, the science of the liturgy still has no department of its own but falls under others, either as a part of pastoral theology (together with homiletics, catechetics and canon law) or as a part of history which makes one wonder whether its proposed status as “*disciplina principalis*” is being taken seriously. The result of this, most times, is an unclear disposition and

understanding regarding the real responsibilities, duties and calling of the trained liturgist, or of the science of the liturgy. Sometimes the work of a liturgist is mistaken for that of the pastoral theologian or even reduced and streamlined to that of a Master of Ceremonies (MC) all of which are unfortunate.

This article tries to examine the functions of the science of the liturgy and conversely what the liturgist, especially the Afro-Nigerian liturgist, is called to do by his training in the 21st century. To do this, we shall first of all see how the science of Liturgy came to birth, since this determines, to a large extent, the *usus* of the discipline. We shall also examine how it operates and why it has to operate the way it does.

2. The Evolution of the Science of the Liturgy

2.1 The Birth of Liturgical Science or the “Study of Liturgy”

Although the origins of liturgical science could effectively be traced to the action of Prosper Guarenger (d. 1875) of the abbey of Solesmes in France, the science of liturgy quickly went beyond his initial spark. Amidst the threat of Gallicanism, Guarenger had sought to promote liturgical piety centered on the Roman rite, promoting it as *the real expression* of Christian and Catholic belief such that Christian life was equal to liturgical life. Later, as a fruit of this effort of the abbey of Solesmes, the Dictionary of Christian Archaeology and Liturgy was published in 1903 by monks Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq all in an effort to teach the faithful that to be Christian was to be liturgical. I have argued elsewhere that this was also the approach of the early Christians to which we must return. (Jamahh, 2015) By the time, however, that the 20th century Liturgical Movement began with Pius X and Dom Lambert Beauduin, understanding what is taking place in the liturgy became the heart of this study. People were to be led to live the liturgical life by leading them to an understanding of its nature and benefits. This was done through the promotion of scientific study of the liturgy and the publication of these findings in various reviews and giving lectures to various groups (Reid, 2005). Enforcing liturgical piety through making the liturgy understood is the origin of this science.

2.1.1 The Era or view of the Study of Liturgy as History

One of the first ways used to create this understanding, was to take the liturgy back to its roots. As such, Messner (2001) sees the field of Church History as the mother-discipline of the liturgical science (p. 19). Although this research into the history of the liturgy began sometime in the 16th century, it received a real

momentum only in the second half of the 19th century and was particularly common only in French and English circles. It was called “liturgiology” in English and *Liturgiegeschitsforschung* in German. Its object, like it is to be seen in the works of scholars of the “Henry Bradshaw Society” like Edmund Bishop (d. 1917) who published the book “Liturgica Historica” in 1917; Aidan Gasquet (d. 1929) and Dom Gregory Dix (d. 1952) who published the book, “The Shape of the Liturgy”, was purely an effort to run somewhat of commentaries on the various liturgical formulas or rites that were available, in other words, to explain what is taking place in the liturgy. The definition of what constituted this *Liturgiegeschitsforschung* as given by Kunibert Mohlberg in 1919 demonstrates the object of this new field clearly. According to him, the highest and last aim of all research into the history of the liturgy is to summarise the processes of development of the liturgy through the history supplied by the experience of centuries. (Angenendt, 2001) However, this was not the only view or approach.

2.1.2 The Era or view of the Study of Liturgy as Rubrics

Another era or view of what the study of liturgy or the science of liturgy entails had nothing to do with history. This was the one which saw the science of the liturgy or the study of the liturgy as a system of rubrics to be taught and memorised so that conduct is “right”. There is nothing particularly wrong with the knowledge of rules and regulations; it is just that limiting the science of the liturgy and the work of a liturgist to this empties the field of its essence. Dom Bernard Botte (1998), within the context of demonstrating how the 20th century Liturgical Movement had to confront such anomaly, describes this rubricist view in these words, “At the turn of the century, the seminary liturgy course was purely and simply a course in rubrics.” (p. 6) Elsewhere he would write, that the study of liturgy, “was the ceremonial part of worship emptied of its content” because, “The goal was to prepare clerics for correctly carrying out ritual act” (Botte, 86-88). What this means is that the aim of studying liturgy as well as the goal of teaching it, was just to make sure that rules and regulations of celebrating were adhered to. No one ever thought of explaining the liturgical texts and showing the spiritual riches that they contain. This was evident from the way the texts were read: hurriedly and without attention or devotion—something that is still happening at our own times. The situation was so bad that a seminary liturgy professor after teaching liturgy for 20 years exclaimed at the sight of Leitzman's edition of the Gregorian Sacramentary, “Oh, so this is what a sacramentary is”. In other words, he did not know the most elementary of sources of the liturgy (Botte, 87). It was soon to be discovered that the study of the liturgy or the science of the liturgy, while it had to do with rubrics cannot be reduced to it alone.

2.1.3 The Era and view of the Study of Liturgy as “Spirit of the Liturgy”

The era and view of the study of liturgy as “Sprit of the Liturgy”, although it has its roots in the *Liturgiegeschichtsforschung* mentioned above, began effectively with the Liturgical Movement whose aim was to bring the faithful to the consciousness of what really takes place in the liturgy, so that they come to know it, appreciate it and participate in it in the way that is proper to each of them. Very pivotal in the transition from these other views of the study of liturgy mentioned above to the “Spirit of the liturgy”, apart from the publication of his pamphlet, *Vom Geist der Liturgie*—The Spirit of the Liturgy—in 1918, was an article by Romano Guardini published in the very first edition of the 'Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft' (Year-Book for the science of Liturgy) with the title, “On the systematic method in the science of the Liturgy”. (The Original German reads, “Über die systematische Methode in der Liturgiewissenschaft”) It is in this article that the designation, “science of the Liturgy” in German, *Liturgiewissenschaft*, was used for the first time. Messner (2001) suggests that the coining of this word and term was done by both Guardini and Kunibert Mohlberg who coined it in a conscious analogy (*bewusster analogie*) to the humanities. This is very important to note because the humanities often study human culture, behaviour, religion and general practices. The humanities also make a significant use of historical data and the object of the humanities is principally to understand human culture, religion and practices. In an analogous manner, then, one could say that the aim of the study of Liturgy is actually to create an understanding—an understanding of the human behaviour or culture of worship. This requires not only some knowledge of history, but also that of anthropology and phenomenology of religion. This is probably why, in a paper, Cardinal George, while stating that there are a number of areas to be researched with regard to the liturgy after SC goes on to approach the problem of the subject of liturgy from the philosophical, theological as well as cultural-anthropological points of view, which I consider as very instructive (Cardinal George, 2005). As such, the study of liturgy is not just historical—although this remains the foundation of the discipline, it is also not juridical—having to do with rubrics alone, the science of the liturgy is systematic because it seeks to answer the question of what the meaning of liturgical actions are. Guardini's definition of the object of the science of the liturgy is to be considered as axiomatic: the object of the science of the liturgy is the living, sacrificial and prayerful Church as it celebrates the mysteries of faith (Guardini, 1921). Messner goes on to amplify this in a succinct manner: Although the science of liturgy deals with understanding the liturgy, especially in the way it evolved, in the way it is structured today, and possibilities for the future, the real object is the Church and how she presents herself in the liturgy as a praying Church; in other words, the

object of the science of liturgy is the faith of the Church and how it is reflected in the liturgy. What this means for the Nigerian liturgist is immense: The task is not only to explain the “how” of the liturgy, it is also not only to explain the “what” of the liturgy; the task is also to exhume the “why” of the liturgy because, most times, it is only when we know “why” that we know “how” and “what”. The principal job of a liturgist is to know “why”; the other issues of the “how” and “what” can only flow from this point. This is probably why our efforts at having indigenous liturgies have hardly been successful; we seem to dwell more on the “hows” and the “whats” rather than the “why”.

3. Current Dimensions of the Study of liturgy

As a result of this, liturgical science today cannot be said to be limited to either of these areas. It is also not limited—like it is often thought of among many—to the planning and execution of liturgies, or the training for priests and priests-to-be in the right celebration of the rites; rather, it is the theologico-scientific reflection on our faith—on the faith of the Church as *ekklesia tou theou* (The Church of God), but with particular reference to how this faith has been expressed in liturgical forms in the past and is still being expressed in the forms of today. To this effect, two complementary dimensions of the study of the liturgy should be identified:

3.1 The Historical Dimension

A science of the liturgy without the foundation of historical research is completely impossible. As has been noted before, the science of liturgy emanates directly from Church history. In fact, this is where an investigation into the “why” of ritual starts. The historical science of the liturgy, therefore, includes the reconstruction of the various traditions of worship from the beginnings of the Church to the present time. This is no small task. The material objects of this reconstruction are all the various forms in which liturgical life is expressed like written documents: liturgical books, texts, written formularies and regulations, records of ecclesiastical proceedings and descriptive or didactic treatises. Added to this are the ritual actions, music and songs, ancient places of worship, cult furnishings, ancient artistic depictions of the liturgy in mosaics, frescoes, sculptures, engravings and miniatures. The aim of studying these is to get to know the religious mentality which gave birth to such forms and thus the real function of the forms as they have been used and are still being used. This way the organic character and development of what constitutes liturgy today is demonstrated in a way which keeps the quest for undue creation or creativity in check, bringing out the truth that liturgy is not simply constructed but received. One cannot set out to interpret a particular ritual form in a particular context

without first knowing—in as complete a way as possible—the development, forms and function of the ritual form in question. This is why the task of the liturgist is actually no small one.

3.2 *The Systematic Dimension*

The result gained from the historical science of the liturgy does not and should not remain at the level of history. In fact, historical study of the liturgy should be a means to an end. This is so because the liturgy is not to be regarded as an archeological masterpiece without life, whether it is in the area of dealing with ancient liturgical forms, or in the area of seeking for forms in cultures, which should express the truths of the Christian faith. This is why the result gained from historical research must become an object of theological study and this is the responsibility of the systematic science of the liturgy. The main function of the systematic study of the liturgy, therefore, is to answer the following questions: What is the liturgy and what does it mean in the here and now? What is the significance of the facts that have been observed from the historical research? From the historical research, when do we have an unimpeachable tradition and when do we have simple abnormalities? Should the evolution that has been traced or the reconstruction made by historical research be regarded as progress or regression? What is the value, in terms of the supernatural realities, of the signs and symbols that have been analysed? What elements are thus, immutable to the liturgy or ritual and what elements are not? How could this or these be given credible but relevant expression in the here and now? Answers to such questions require a broad knowledge of theology and an understanding of the nature of the Church and the sacraments. Also needed is a keen sense of pastoral responsibilities and this is where the question of adaptation or inculturation comes in. For this reason therefore, the systematic study of the liturgy, given its quest to reflect on the state and function of the liturgy in the here and now, can profit immensely from the results of the sciences established in our era for the study of the human person. In fact, there is an extent to which one could say that a viable study of the liturgy today would be deficient without them. These could be considered as ancillary to the systematic science of the liturgy. They include: cultural and theological anthropology, phenomenology of religion, religious psychology, sociology, linguistics and the comparative history of religions.

4. *But why does this have to be so?*

The reason why this has to be so is obvious. Our world of today, especially considering the secularism and the desacralization of culture which have become pervasive, is probably at the verge of reinterpreting what constitutes worship.

This is why most scholars are now of the opinion that the science of liturgy cannot be ignorant of the function of religion in society (Phenomenology of Religion) and the fields of cultural and theological anthropology all of which point to the indelible religious qualities of the human being, regardless of the tendency to replacement which is taking place today. While we are to delve into historical study of the liturgy in order to ensure that we do not veer of course, we deal with the proceeds from historical study systematically relating it to findings from other areas of the humanities which try to study change of behavior and other pointers that are common to the modern age. By doing this, we would be able to strike a balance between what constitutes “essence” and what constitutes “accidents” when it comes to human worship and the changing ways of expression of this worship from place to place and from epoch to epoch. As Ronald Sequeira (1990) would say that the liturgy is not only an “action” but also as expression (*Ausdruck*) and expression always involves personhood, that is, the entire person. As such, the entire person should be taken up by it so that true expression which leads to self-transcendence is realized. This represents one of the teachings of SC (Art. 2) that the liturgy is the place where we encounter the true picture of who we are: getting in touch with our essence and origin and this origin is God. What this means is that the whole person is the one taken up by and in the liturgy: his idiosyncrasies, his dispositions, his world-view because in essence, it is what he has that he gives as an expression of the worship to the Father. The liturgist must, therefore, seek to lead people to expression rather than mere action; and there is a difference here.

5. Some Trends in the Liturgical Science in Nigeria and Africa

5.1 The First Efforts

The Vatican II era saw “a leap in the right direction” take place in the field of liturgy and the science of liturgy in Africa. Like we have said before, liturgy in this era, since the definition of Guardini above, has been seen as impossible without a grasp of the human sciences. In this regard, it suffices to note that the first works in this area were in done in the area of ethnology and comparative religion but with liturgical bases and implication. Worthy of note here are the works of Stephen Ezeanya whose 1956 doctoral thesis entitled *The Method of Adaptation in the Evangelization of the Igbo-speaking of southern Nigeria* together with the article “From Igbo sacrifice to the Mass”, co-authored with Mkpuefune M. Maduka. Both of these were strong ethnographic studies proffering contrast and comparison between the Igbo religio-cultural reality and similar elements in Christianity. What is particularly important to us from these

works is that they postulated the Igbo spiritual vision by examining the destination of sacrifices in Igbo traditional religion: The ends and grades of sacrifices is God and it was clear which sacrifices could be offered to God and which could not. The Igbo concept of “victimhood” in the traditional sacrifices, could serve as a “stepping-stone” for the understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist among the Ibos.

Arinze (1970) substantially improved on some of the insights of Ezeanya. In his doctoral dissertation entitled, *Ibo Sacrifice as an introduction to the catechesis of the Holy Mass* (Pontifical Urban University Rome, 1960) he tried to demonstrate how sacrificial elements in Igbo traditional religion could serve as a stepping stone to the understanding of the sacrifice of the Mass. The central point that he makes which is in the area of phenomenology of religion, is the fact that the genesis of Igbo sacrifice springs from the fact that the Igbo never crowns himself head of the universe; that sacrifice emanates from the fact that the Igbo know that they have superiors, a pertinent ritual idea without which any ritual act would be empty. Sacrifices are offered then because of the insufficiency of man and his consequent inability to live uprightly; in other words, they also have a sense of sin. Since they believe that their lives are being directed from above, there is simply no question of celebrating their independence from the invisible spirits and ancestors. (Arinze, 1970, p.45) In other words, the urge to sacrifice comes from the feeling of a total dependence on higher beings and the need to be submissive to them.

5.2 The More Recent Efforts

Patrick Chibuko (2003) has proposed a Eucharistic liturgy for the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. While this effort is praiseworthy, there are, however, some problems which the Order of Mass as presented by him presents. For example, the “breaking of kolanut” in the beginning seems to conflict with the “breaking of bread” which is the central rite of the Eucharistic liturgy. Moreover, it would seem that the very relevant ethnological and phenomenological study made by Arinze and Ezeanya in the direction of the Eucharist for the Igbo which places the act of sacrifice at the centre of their worship was not given due consideration. The result of this is that the information supplied by the phenomenology of religion among the Igbo in the here and now is not reflected in the proposal which would make the liturgy impracticable among the people with time. This was also a major deficiency in the Zairean rite approved for the diocese of Zaire in 1988 such that Egbulem (1996) in an evaluation would state that there should be more reflection on the nature of African rituals, of assembly, offerings, and sacrifices so

that the rite becomes closer to the aspirations of the people. The point here is a dichotomy between what ritual portends for the people and what is interpreted, or an utter disregard for ethnological data and data arising from the phenomenology of religion.

In a more recent study on the Kadara of northern Nigeria (Jamahh 2013), this same attitude to sacrifice is displayed. With the Kadara, it is clear that all ritual acts stem from the idea of the **Ohwu**. **Ohwu** here is spirit; sometimes of the dead, and it is the centre of the *Ada* religion and worship with a high spiritualisation of causes and effects in the lives of the people. Life and Life-force is governed by the **Ohwu**, and this idea could be said to be the source of the ritual acts which are external ceremonies by which the living seek to maintain their connection to the **Ohwu** or demonstrate their dependence on it. Earlier, Tempels (1965) had significantly reported how the people look to their ancestors to help them in this life and to intercede for them in the next to the extent that food and drinks are offered at the graves of the dead. One could effectively say that there would be no need for these people to carry out any religious function or sacrifice, if it would not bring about an effect in their lives.

Titianma Anselme Sanon (1983) seems to have made one of the best suggestions regarding what the science of liturgy should concern itself with. Rather than just interpret forms and historical data, whether from the point of view of the universal Church or from the point of view of culture, he goes beyond to deal with liturgy from the point of view of anthropology and phenomenology of religion. Here, rather than being concerned merely with the forms of the rituals performed, he talks more about the spirit and ideas behind the ritual such that these eventually determine what forms are tenable. As such, rather than talk of liturgical creativity which uses either corn for bread or palm wine for wine, he talks of elements that bother on the religious mentality of the people: The sense of spontaneity, the sense of dialogue, the mechanism of repetition, the sense of giving and receiving and a liturgy which has its basis in the oral style rather than a mere “book-liturgy” (p.143); these determine how ritual will be meaningful. In fact, he specifically regards the liturgy more as an action when it has the elements of repetition, spontaneity and dialogue.

6. New Direction in the Task of the Liturgist

From what we have said above, the new direction for liturgists and the science of liturgy in general, but particularly for the Nigerian Church, is to integrate data from ethnological studies with that from the historical study of liturgy and that of

the phenomenology of religion. It is the duty of the liturgist to ensure that the liturgy is celebrated according to the prescribed rules and regulations, yes, but his function is not limited to this; neither should the quest to enforce this be arbitrary. It is also the duty of the liturgist to reflect on the possibility of better forms of ritual expression but this is also not supposed to be arbitrary. Both these should be done through a conscious effort to lead those involved in the celebration—clergy as well as lay faithful alike—into an understanding of the mystery being celebrated. Here, it is quite important to note that the principle of active participation upon which the post Vatican II reforms are built has this understanding of the liturgy at its root: the concessions for the vernacular, the concessions for adaptations, all these are pivoted on getting the faithful to participate in the liturgy through their understanding. (Jamahh, 2013) As Francis Cardinal George (2005) puts it, “First of all, the Christian people must understand, and then they will be able to participate” (p.55).

6.1 To Help Foster Participation through Understanding

The chief duty of the liturgist, therefore, is to help the people to understand what they are celebrating. As such, the liturgist, rather than just enforce, for example, that the celebrant of the Mass does not, at consecration, break the bread at the words, “He broke the bread”, should demonstrate why it has to be so, using data gleaned from the historical science of the liturgy to explain to those concerned how the Eucharistic Prayer forms one unit from the preface dialogue to the final doxology—and, in fact, how the act of the Eucharistic Prayer, based on its Jewish origins in the prayer of the *berakah* extends to the communion rite. This should also explain why the singing at the elevations of the host and chalice is superfluous even where it is done in the spirit of adaptation or inculturation. Furthermore, the Ceremonial of Bishops (1989) provides for something like a “Mass in the presence of a greater prelate” (pp.175-186) where the bishop presides over the Liturgy of the Word and gives the final blessing, while a priest celebrates the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgist should not only enforce such, he should be able to explain why. This goes also for so many other practices.

6.2 Realistic Inculturation

The other task of the liturgist flows from the above. And this is where the Afro-Nigerian liturgist is actually challenged. It has to do with the task of the interpretation of liturgy for the here and now. To interpret the liturgy for the here and now, we do not limit ourselves only to “what” should be done or “how” it should be done; the foundation of our quest to interpret, in fact, should be “why” what has to be done has to be done. This involves a lot. First, it involves knowing

the function of a particular rite “as it has come to us”, that is, the “spirit” behind the rite. Secondly, it involves an understanding of the person or people involved in the rite, that is, the personal subjects of the liturgy—the human beings that are involved here and now. What is their history? While this involves their past, it is their present state that we should seek to understand in the light of the past and not the past in the light of the present. In other words, the practice of dealing with dead and fossilized cultural forms should be avoided. After this we then ask, what are their preferences now? What is their culture now? It is true, for example, that the human person understands the liturgy by means of reason, but at the same time, the human person experiences the liturgy through emotion, through feeling, through aesthetic appreciation of beauty, through the intuitive making of connection, through associations which take place at the subliminal level and lastly and very importantly, through the five senses and these often vary in significance depending on the caliber of persons involved. All these must be taken into account where the right interpretation must take place. The question to ask here is this: given the function of the rite as it has been transmitted, would it be understood and thus evoke the right participation when it is interpreted in the way it is interpreted? This is so because, like I have said before, what we bear in mind is not so much the “what” and the “how” of ritual but the “why”. If, for example, breaking of kolanut were to be introduced into the liturgy, given the meaning of the Eucharist and the function of the breaking of kolanut in the culture of those involved in the here and now, will it enhance an understanding of the Eucharist or becloud it? Not dealing with such questions has been part of the problem during the implementation of the resolutions of SC in the post-conciliar liturgy. In the name of adaptation, in the name of bringing about a liturgy that is understandable and simple, the quest to abbreviate and innovate became the order of the day. This has been deplored in many quarters. Francis Cardinal George (2005), for example, writing in retrospect of the abbreviations of the rites and the quest to abbreviate in the name of “bringing the liturgy closer to the people” has observed that

From the point of view of social anthropology, it is not self-evident that simplicity in ritual form is more effective than complexity. It is not clear that a sign which is immediately intelligible will be more effective than a multifaceted symbol which reveals meaning only over time. In short, simplifying ritual action will not necessarily bring about the greater understanding and more active participation desired by the Council (p..55)

Incidentally, there are so many of our African and Nigerian liturgists and theologians who still follow the categories of thought from the West without critical assessment to the extent that some practices which have been tested and have failed in the West are still being christened as valid for us. This brings me to the last point.

6.3 *Don't just Copy!*

The Afro-Nigerian liturgist should not read or study historical data only on the basis of the fact that at some time there was such and such a form for such and such reasons; they must go further to evaluate the success or failure of such and such forms in the milieu in which it was used within the context of the phenomenology of religion. In other words, from the point of view of religious expression, did the form express religiosity? If it did, did it embody the religious aspirations and yearnings of the people involved? If it did not, why did it fail? What was the reaction or result generated by or from certain religious practices? All these must be the product, not just of archeological history or historical archeology which demonstrates facts but that of a critical evaluation of history which questions the facts. Let us be wise!

7. Conclusion: See, Judge and Act

The above ejaculation actually captures, in very practical terms, the work of the 21st century liturgist. He or she is to see: to see the liturgy as it is: knowing how it was and why it is the way it is. He or she is also to judge: to judge how the people in the here and now respond to it and why they respond so. Sometimes, this judgment could be helped by quantitative and qualitative analysis where necessary. This would help reveal the current state of affairs with regard to the functionality of what has to be done. Since the liturgy is not some “play thing” where experiments should take place and where undue innovations should be practiced but where organic development should be allowed, acting is the last step to be taken—and in a very careful manner. The reason for this is not far-fetched: Like the Burning Bush of Moses in Ex 3:1-15 we dare not tread with misguided certitude because what we are dealing with, more than anything else, is “holy ground”!

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