

THE LITURGY VACUUM: A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT

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All these years after the reforms of the council, the liturgy is still a problematic and controversial area of the Church's life. The pro-Tridentine party has not withered in the wake of the Lefebvre schism; indeed Rome's recent wider permission for the old rite's celebration has conferred greater respectability on the non-schismatic Tridentinists. Within the mainstream of the Church, a certain liturgical stalemate seems to have set in. The days of the wilder experiments by the progressives seem to be over. There are a few centers of excellence in England, notably Birmingham and Brompton Oratories, but genuinely ambitious liturgy appears mostly to have been abandoned. A certain liturgy-fatigue has set in, the years of constant innovation having taken their toll.

What I want to suggest is that in the present stasis there is a serious malaise. The liturgy has settled down into a certain style and ethos which is fundamentally unhealthy. We are taking for granted things in our celebrations which are unliturgical and non-sacred. Mostly we are too close to what is happening to recognize this. I want to make some radical criticisms from the detachment of the layman in the pew. I have no Tridentine axe to grind; for my generation it is only a childhood memory; and Lefebvre showed us all only too clearly the truth of Newman's maxim that an obsolete discipline may be a present heresy. But the way liturgy is generally celebrated at present is so very unsatisfactory that I make no apology for treading heavily on some modern liturgists' toes.

One of the features of the liturgical reform which followed the council was the enormous amount of explanation and commentary which accompanied it. Today, pastoral suggestions, commentaries on the lectionary, advice about music, and other liturgical guides abound. The sheer volume of words which have been written on these subjects in the last twenty-five years must surely exceed anything similar written in former ages. We all now also have our own individual views on how the liturgy should or should not be celebrated. At parish level, the principal impact a new priest makes is in his particular style of celebrating Mass, with parishioners being quick to sniff out his liturgical churchmanship. And a priest will often set his style in a new appointment by making liturgical changes or re-ordering the church.

The effect of this is to have made the liturgy into something very self-conscious. Indeed, such consciousness is continually fostered by the stress on "preparing the liturgy" which especially characterizes youth events, schools and catechetical centers. There are constant choices to be made: themes, readings, hymns, special events inserted into the liturgy for particular occasions and so on.

The liturgy, as it is experienced today, is thus essentially something which starts from a theoretical basis; it begins as a concept and is then fleshed out into the activity. It is not difficult to trace the origin of this approach. The council itself in *Sacrosanctum concilium* approached the subject theoretically. This document is often spoken of as being the fruit of the many preceding years of the liturgical movement, and it clearly has the characteristics of that movement: it presupposes historical research and it enunciates carefully worked out principles. The liturgy is spoken of in abstract terms, as what ought to be, according to the best theoretical model; and, as one would expect of a conciliar statement, its tone is juridical and prescriptive. Whether all the subsequent liturgical changes were justified by the decree has

been debated. But whether they were or not, the mandate for change was certainly there in the whole theory-based approach. In this respect, although all sorts of quite unauthorized aberrations have occurred in "the spirit of Vatican II," their proponents do have a point in that they share an essentially theoretical outlook towards liturgy—that it is something which can be designed and then validated by explanations. The debate between the experimenters and the orthodox thus has to be carried out on essentially the same ground—it is just a question of whose liturgical model is to be judged to be correct.

This approach is the unrealized assumption that now underlies our liturgical life. We assume that the liturgy is a construct— either according to our individual ideas, or according to the authors who have explained to us how it ought to be constructed. Either way, it needs constant explanation: the celebrant is not doing his duty if he does not "introduce" the Mass, for instance. The priest will, typically, highlight what he feels is the "theme of the Mass," usually also detailing the current phase of the liturgical cycle; thus he might say, "Today is the 15th Sunday of the year in ordinary time and we are on year B of the lectionary when we are following St. Mark's gospel, and you will remember that last week. . ." Often he will try to dovetail this into the "to prepare ourselves to celebrate. . ." wording. A frequent method of doing this is to lead into saying ". . .and so, for the times when we have failed to (whatever the 'theme' is), let us now. . ." (I'm afraid the tortuously artificial way some priests try to make this connection sometimes creates unconscious humour; the congregation, who know what is coming next anyway, listen helplessly as the celebrant flounders his way from the "theme" to our sins.)

In this approach, explanation of the liturgy becomes a major activity of itself. The celebrant who has become fixated on this will take pride in adapting the wording of the liturgy wherever possible in order to include exhortatory or explanatory words. For instance, the tropes of the longer version of the "Lord have mercy" are sometimes similarly brought into the pattern, in order to continue the congregation's consciousness of the "theme." At one time it was fashionable among some priests even to adapt the opening sign of the cross itself: "We are met together this morning in the name of the Father. . ." It is characteristic of this approach that the ICEL missal's opening prayer actually incorporates words which tell the congregation what they are going to be praying for before the prayer is said.

Similarly, it is now considered good liturgical practice to precede each reading with its own explanation as to historical origin, type of work, place in a wider context and so on. (This can result in a longer "introduction" than the reading itself.) The bidding prayers, being home-grown rather than official liturgical texts, give the widest scope for "explanation." They frequently abandon the intercessory format altogether and become homiletic or exhortatory in character, not making specific requests of God but instead instructing the congregation what they ought to be feeling: "May we realize that. . ." or "May we never forget that. . ."

At other points in the Mass there are exhortations which "explain" the activity; for instance, before the Our Father, where the official introduction is often replaced by a longer one in which the celebrant will continue the "theme" of the Mass; sometimes there is a similar introduction to the sign of peace. Even the preface or the Eucharistic prayer may themselves be prefaced by brief mentions of which option is about to be said. The silence after communion may be preceded by the celebrant telling the congregation what they should be reflecting on. The dismissal will be preceded by a few final words, rounding off the theme; this seems to be the spot most favored for light-hearted comments—what has been called "the postcommunion joke." And of course, there has been the sermon.

No doubt, all these "explanations" are intended to be helpful. Official publications advise careful preparation, but it has to be said that this rarely seems to have been

done, indeed practicably it could not be. And there is a problem of sheer prolixity; some celebrants are apparently unaware just how much their own comments are dominating the time available for the liturgy.

But even brief comments are comments. They assume a need to comment. The liturgy has become an activity which is no longer self-explanatory. It is not something which it is natural just to do. It has become an artificial activity—something which doesn't come naturally. Contrast it, for instance, with the natural rituals of daily life. When we shake hands, we do not feel the need to explain, "By this gesture I am establishing contact with you." Even more, when we express affection by an embrace or tousling a child's hair, this needs no explanation. The rituals of family life—singing "Happy birthday to you," putting up a Christmas tree, cutting a wedding cake—need no explanation and would of course be killed by one.

Communal worship, however, has apparently ceased to be something we can do without constant explanatory comment. This is a most extraordinary state of affairs. One only has to contrast it with biblical times to realize the state we have got into. For Jesus and the disciples there was the natural form of worship of the temple and local synagogue. The early Christian communities seem to have taken over these Jewish forms perfectly naturally and adapted them in Christian worship. Indeed, there is some evidence that the oldest forms of plain chant come from the ancient Jewish liturgical tradition. And when St. Paul instructs his fledgling churches to sing psalms there is evidently an unspoken consensus between him and his readers about what this means. But we equally have lost evidently this naturalness; for us the liturgy is no longer a natural activity which we have inherited. Instead, we start with a blank sheet of paper, as it were, and, with the best of intentions, try to work out what we ought to be doing.

But liturgy, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Into that blank space there rush all sorts of other activities and modes of behavior that we have learned from elsewhere. You cannot summon "liturgy" out of the air. If it doesn't exist, as a living tradition, actually and continuously being celebrated, you can't call it into being with a few printed sheets and hymn books. You may think you are doing so—you have a model inside your head of what you think you are doing. But in practice you will unconsciously be borrowing other activities and "languages," which of course will bring with them their own associations and meaning which they have from their original context.

Let us take a musical example. As the liturgy developed, both Roman and Byzantine, singing was intrinsic to it. Music wasn't added; the liturgical prayer was, by its nature, chanted or sung. (This is the case in all religions and can be seen also in the common roots of liturgy and drama.) And so there arose the music proper to the Latin rite: plain chant and the developed tradition of polyphony. When the liturgical revolution happened in the 1960's, this was dropped. In its place there was to be vernacular music. But there was no such thing as vernacular Catholic liturgical music, only popular hymns associated with Marian devotions and the Blessed Sacrament, and Christmas carols.

None of these was liturgical. They were imported into the liturgy but were massively supplemented, indeed soon swamped by, the Protestant hymnody. Many of these are very splendid hymns— but they necessarily brought with them their contexts of Anglican or evangelical worship. Their melodies, rhythms, vocabulary, diction, sometimes even theology and certainly spirituality, were non-native to the Catholic liturgy. (Even those which are translations of ancient hymns from the divine office had never existed in their vernacular form as such.) It is significant that the most progressive liturgists quickly found them unsatisfactory— they were old-fashioned and formal. What was wanted was something friendlier and more informal. And so 1960's "folk" music was imported into the new liturgy. This, of course,

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did not even have a religious origin, much less a liturgical one. It was part of the cultural upheaval of the 1960's; its language and rhythm was that of American liberalism: freedom, the peace movement, and the flower children. Musically, it is the "soft" end of pop music. We have become so used to these songs in our modern hymn books that we can forget their cultural origin. But sometimes it is strikingly obvious. Take an enormously popular "folk hymn" like "Colours of Day." The language is pure sixties psychedelic: "Colours of day dawn into my mind. . ."

There is a similar problem with the music of the charismatic movement. Historically, Pentecostalism owes its origin to turn-of-the-century Protestant groups in North America. In the 1960's Catholics in American universities came into contact with it and "Catholic Pentecostalism" was born. With the merits of charismaticism or the genuineness of charismatic phenomena, I am not concerned. Its adherents would not deny that its worship has a very distinctive style—indeed the exuberance and emotional "release" of charismatic worship is well-known. What Pentecostalism does not have—could not, historically—was any sacramental tradition. Pentecostalism gives the worshiper a direct experience of God—the Spirit comes down freely without the use of rituals and materials, water, chrism, bread or wine. The only "real presence" of historic Pentecostalism is the Spirit as experienced subjectively by the worshiper and as evidenced by ecstatic behavior, tongues etc. This clearly gives a very different feel to hymns which come from this tradition. When they are imported into the Catholic liturgy, they inevitably affect the nature of the worship going on. In fact, they alter it from being a liturgical event to a Pentecostal worship one.

And here we come to a central problem with the use of all such non-liturgical singing in the liturgy. In non-sacramental worship, the singing of hymns is very important—in fact it is the worship. But historically, hymns have only had a very limited role in the Mass. Until the recent reforms, hymns occurred only rarely. They are not native to the primitive form of the Eucharistic liturgy. And in the new liturgy, their function is clear in each case: they just replace the introit or whatever. They are very much secondary elements in the liturgy. An "offertory hymn," for instance, is simply an appropriate accompaniment to the bringing up of the gifts. It is not a primary piece of worship in itself. It is not of equal significance to the "hymn" of the *Sanctus*, for instance, or the acclamation of the "Great Amen." Yet how many Masses have we all attended where these key elements of the Eucharistic prayer are merely said, while lots of verses of a hymn have been sung at other points?

These musical anomalies have arisen because, in such a church service, there are really two different activities going on: a liturgy, printed on bits of paper, is being read through; and some hymns, not actually part of it, are being sung. Not for nothing have these services been called "hymn sandwiches." When the hymns are rousing (or appeal to a particular type of congregation, such as a charismatic one), the congregation may feel thoroughly uplifted and so on. The central problem is: has it been the Eucharistic liturgy itself which has generated the emotion? Is the experience actually a sacramental one?

The point may seem a petty one. But the pastoral and catechetical implications have to be faced. Think how much stress is laid on "choosing the hymns" for school Masses—it is an activity only equalled by the writing of bidding prayers. What passions are evoked in congregations by controversial choices of hymns! How strongly antipathetic are the various styles of hymn music now used in Catholic churches: a habitué of the "folk Mass" will feel very unhappy if Victorian hymnody is all that's available. Priests have their own favorites, choirs others. Harmless bickering perhaps—but none of it is actually to do with the celebration of the liturgy itself.

The phenomenon we are seeing is that of the liturgy actually being replaced, quite unwittingly, by other kinds of activity, such as hymn-singing. The problem over

music is only one example. Let us look now at the behavior and actions of the personnel involved in church services, especially the priest.

Typically today, a priest sees his role as one of “presiding” and introducing. It will be important that his chair is facing the congregation; he will have his own microphone stand, sometimes a mini-lectern on which he will have papers and booklets; his tone of voice will be modulated to be friendly, making contact with his congregation, establishing the appropriate atmosphere. All this will have an impeccable theoretical justification: there is any amount of liturgical literature on the “presidential” role of the priest in the liturgy and so on.

In reality, many priests are unconsciously acting out a quite different role, one which they and their congregations see very frequently and which is a well-established part of popular culture: the television presenter. Consider what actually happens; detach yourself from the liturgical theory and look at what an outside observer might make of what goes on in our Masses. There is the great importance of the entrance hymn—the theme music; then the presenter-priest must warm up the audience-congregation with “Hello and welcome to. . .” The whole opening rites are “introductory” to the performances of the readings. The ambiance is friendly, the viewers must be kept involved, but the presenter actually sets the pace and delivers the program content. There are guest appearances by the lay readers; every action is introduced and explained; and at the end of Mass, there is a signing-off and some closing music. (It’s interesting to note how *de rigueur* the “final hymn” is, although it has no strictly liturgical function at all.)

Such an interpretation may seem far-fetched or even irreverent. But I suggest that today’s prevailing liturgical style is heavily influenced by, indeed is unconsciously modeled on, our constant experience of television. Television characteristically explains things to us. Whether we are watching the news or a chat show, it is dominated by the central figure of the anchorman, the commentator. He is on our side of course; his job is to mediate the program content to the viewers, and so his style is persuasive, authoritative and friendly. It is noticeable how celebrants now feel that jokes are appropriate in the liturgy; the face is smiling, rather than solemn. And of course, in any age when we have women newsreaders, surely women can “present” the liturgy just as well.

(Expecting to be ridiculed for such a far-fetched theory, I suggested all this to a priest friend, who assured me that in one English seminary students are solemnly recommended to model themselves on Terry Wogan, the “great communicator.”)

Church decor has undergone a radical change of style which makes many sanctuaries approximate to a television studio: surfaces are smooth rather than shiny, warm rather than cold, and the lighting is very bright. This latter is an interesting example of something which evokes strong passions. A modern liturgist will be very hostile to any lighting which smacks of a cultic gloom or remote light in holy darkness. Everything must be evenly lit. Priests who insist on this might like to ask themselves what model they are unconsciously re-creating with such effects.

The prominent use of the microphone has also often been remarked upon in modern liturgy. It is so important to many celebrants that they find their role impossible to carry out when the amplification system is inoperative. Very large sums of money are spent on such systems, and a suggestion that a church doesn’t need one is met by sheer incomprehension. Clearly, the microphone plays a vital psychological role for such priests; it is part of their image which they feel “undressed” without. The role model again comes from television here: on the screen, control and use of the microphone is the prerogative of the presenter, especially in any program involving a live audience.

We must also consider an even greater shibboleth of modern liturgy: the *versus populum* position of the celebrant. This is the great unchallengeable orthodoxy of

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modern liturgy. Almost anything else might, at a pinch, be negotiable except this. And it is taken as an article of faith that this was the way Mass was celebrated "in the early church."

Now, anybody who has actually read any serious history of the liturgy knows that this is simply not the case. The great liturgical scholar Jungmann explained, years ago, the reality of the matter: that the crucial thing for the early church was that during the Eucharistic prayer everyone, celebrant and people, faced east, from whence the coming of Our Lord was to be expected. And since altars were at the west end of early basilicas, this meant the priest standing at the western side of the altar in order to face east over it. But remember that the people faced east too, so that they actually had their backs to the altar during the canon of the Mass. Because of the obvious inconvenience of this, churches soon changed their orientation, with the altar being placed at the eastern end so that the priest and people could both face east, without the latter having their backs to the altar (see J. A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, Darton Longman & Todd, 1959, pp.137-8).

This was the origin of the so-called *versus populum* altar. No genuine liturgical scholar would dispute this. Yet, ever since the 1960's we have all had to accept the completely false belief that it is more "primitive" for the people and the priest to look at each other across the altar—and of course a whole "explanation" about "being gathered around the table of the Lord" has been developed to validate it. Rational discussion of the true position is completely impossible, so prejudiced are the vast majority of clergy about this.

There is clearly something more at stake here than inaccurate liturgical history. I can remember very vividly as a youngster when the liturgical changes were introduced in the 1960's how self-evidently correct and necessary it seemed for the priest to be facing us. Even though my earliest experience of the Mass had obviously been in the old rite, it now seemed quite dreadful that the priest should "have his back to us." What had changed? And why was my youthful feeling so universal? Once again, I suggest that an enormously powerful model, which had spread throughout the western world with great speed in the late 50's and early 60's, was in fact responsible: television. Every home was now dominated by the all-powerful screen from which the new leaders of our culture addressed us. Program presenters, newsreaders, broadcasting politicians, disc jockeys—they all stood or sat behind desks ("altars") and addressed us.

I realize that what I am suggesting will annoy many and may even appear frivolous. I at least ask that the question be raised: why does facing the people now seem so absolutely necessary to priests? Why are they positively uncomfortable with the idea that they should face the same way as the people as we all celebrate Mass together? The question matters for two reasons. The first is the appalling violence done to so many fine churches by the wrecking of their internal architecture. Gothic churches have suffered particularly painfully; future ages will regard our vandalism with horror.

The other reason is perhaps more immediately urgent. It is true that Mass can be celebrated *versus populum* perfectly reverently. If the priest concentrates on what he is doing and saves his eye-contact with the congregation for the times when he is supposed to be addressing them (only a few times in the liturgy, actually), genuine liturgy can take place. But in so many cases, the celebrant facing his congregation adopts the manner and style of a presenter with an audience. He is constantly looking at them, even when he is addressing God. The prayers are being said, not as if God can hear them, but as if we, the congregation, are being addressed. The celebrant has become an actor, sometimes playing to the gallery, always aware of his audience. The Mass has become his "show," and increasingly his personality dominates the event. He puts in his own special little emphasis on words, chips in his explanatory phrases, little jokes and special smiles.

This is fundamentally unhealthy for the liturgy. It turns what should be a sacral action by the whole people into something done by the celebrant which we watch. Priests, by definition, never see themselves doing this. Therefore, they are unaware, I suppose, of just how much they, as personalities, are the dominant feature in such a liturgy. When Father has a cult following, this will be all part of the cosy atmosphere. But we are all human; Father may actually have some very irritating habits. We all have idiosyncrasies, but it has to be said that some clergy have developed a style of liturgy by which they inflict these on their people, indeed give them the highest possible profile.

Such are some of the problems which bedevil our present liturgy. Perhaps I have exaggerated some of them—readers may think there are others which I have omitted. I would be delighted to have stimulated debate, especially among the clergy, about the issues I have raised. I want finally to suggest some solutions.

If the new liturgy is to be a sacral experience, there is one fundamental principle to be born in mind: the liturgy must be allowed to work for itself. Celebrants must have more faith that by simply celebrating the liturgy, it will do its work (*leitourgia* means work). It doesn't need explanation, especially now that it is in the vernacular. I make a heartfelt plea for priests to concentrate on carrying out the rites themselves, not telling us what they mean or what comes next or what happened last week. The homily is the place for explanation. The rites themselves are "mysteries" into which we enter. Of course, we don't all "understand" them all the time; that is why we repeat them. After years of hearing the same prayer, a phrase (or gesture) can suddenly be transfigured with meaning. Have faith in the liturgy. It doesn't need any celebrant's "help." The liturgy is something much greater than any celebrant or congregation; it is a glimmer, indeed, of the heavenly liturgy, which is beyond all words.

Celebrants should strive to lose themselves in the liturgy. The priest's personality should be less evident in Mass than at any other time—most especially in the Eucharistic prayer. This, he can be sure, is actually what enables us in the congregation to lose ourselves in the liturgy too. Don't look at us all the time—and don't make us look at you. We all want to be looking at God in the liturgy, through the rites in which you are leading us.

As to the vexed question of music, I have no pat solutions. I suspect that, having ditched one heritage, the Church will probably have to bide her time and wait while a new liturgical music grows. I doubt whether much that has been either hastily adopted or newly produced will last as long as the old did. And I think we need a continued use of the chants and liturgical music of the Latin rite as the soil from which worthy vernacular chants and music will grow. One can also state one principle: it is the liturgy itself which should be sung. We should have no more hymn sandwiches, with the Eucharistic prayer itself, from preface dialogue to great Amen, being baldly said. Let us stop saying what should be chanted and singing what is not even part of the liturgy.

And while the old Latin liturgy has now, sadly, become a symbol of controversy, perhaps modern liturgists might consider turning their eyes east. As our eastern rite and Orthodox brothers emerge from persecution, let's look at what has sustained their faith during the years of oppression: a liturgy of great solemnity and splendor, with music of enormous spiritual depth. No chatty explanations, even when explanation and catechesis outside the liturgy was forbidden. A liturgy of gesture and chant. And a tradition much more primitive and ancient than 1960's "folk." Of course, I'm not suggesting the adoption of the Byzantine rite, but perhaps its increased familiarity through our television screens might make us ask ourselves some hard questions about our current state of liturgy. Would our "celebrations" sustain us in persecution tomorrow? Do they sustain us now?

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