

Liturgy of Love – Encountering Christ in the Mass

by Rev Timothy Finigan

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St Teresa said that prayer was frequent solitary “conversation with Christ”, not in the sense merely of talking but of an encounter in which the soul spent time in the presence of Christ. To encounter Christ is the goal of all Christian prayer – and this is true particularly of the Liturgy of the Mass. The title which I have been given for this paper makes an important point by speaking of a “Liturgy of Love”. The goal of the liturgy, and particularly of our own participation in the Church’s Liturgy, is to be united with our Lord and to encounter him as he lives and acts within our soul.

However, the Liturgy is not private prayer. Of its essence, it is the public worship of the whole Church. We therefore need to understand how the Liturgy is both the work of Christ and the work of the Church. By understanding the nature of the Liturgy, we can then draw out some consequences for the nature of our participation in it, and for how we actually participate in practice. It is not my intention to focus on controversial topics but it will be useful to reflect on some issues that have been addressed by our Holy Father as they bear directly on the true understanding of the Liturgy.

The Liturgy the work of Jesus Christ

The Liturgical Movement

The second Vatican Council drew on the development of the “Liturgical Movement” which had grown in influence during the previous hundred years. The Liturgical Movement came to be associated with some external changes to the Liturgy such as the use of the vernacular, Mass “facing the people” and the use of missals in order to follow the text. This was true particularly after 1948 but there were indications before that time.¹

However the more important contribution theologically was the development of the idea, proposed by Odo Casel, of the presence of the mysteries of Christ in the Liturgy. This idea

formed an important principle in the teaching of Vatican II:

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He accomplished this work principally by the Paschal mystery of his blessed Passion, Resurrection from the dead, and glorious Ascension, whereby ‘dying he destroyed our death, rising he restored our life.’ For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth ‘the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.’”² For this reason, the Church celebrates in the liturgy above all the Paschal mystery by which Christ accomplished the work of our salvation.²

The Council’s use of the term “Paschal Mystery” to refer to the Passion, Resurrection and Ascension has now become commonplace and is a confirmation of the insight of the Liturgical Movement that the Liturgy can be understood as making the mysteries of Christ effectively present.

The presence of Christ

Vatican II spoke of the different ways in which Christ is present in the liturgy.

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, “the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross”, but especially under the eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”.³

This passage is often misused as though it was intended somehow to play down or dilute the importance of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species. On the contrary, the text is not an explanation simply of the presence of Christ but of the manner in which he is active in the liturgy, offering, baptising, speaking.

¹ For a detailed study of the Liturgical Movement in relation to the development of the Liturgy, I refer the reader Alcuin Read’s *The Organic Development of the Liturgy*.

² Vatican II *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.5

³ Vatican II *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.7

The priestly work of Christ

The Council went on to specify the manner in which Christ is active in his presence, reflecting on the liturgy as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.

Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members.⁴

The Liturgy is not primarily what we do but what Christ does for us. Even our own part in liturgical worship is carried out by us as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. The Council also teaches here the important principle that the Liturgy is concerned with our sanctification. It is for this reason that it is not merely cerebral or “spiritual” if that expression is used to downplay the use of material elements. The use of signs perceptible to the senses is suited to the sanctification of us as human persons with body and soul.

The Liturgy the work of the Church

The most important work of the Church

The Liturgy is the work of Christ truly present and active; it is also the work of the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

No other work of the Church is more important than the liturgy.

From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.⁵

What we are doing is to anticipate heaven through the veil of signs and symbols. The earthly liturgy is a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy.

Source and summit of the Church’s activity

Sacrosanctum Concilium, (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II) said that the Liturgy is the source and summit of the Church’s activity. It explains that the aim of apostolic works is to bring people together to praise God and take part in the sacrifice. It then speaks of what the liturgy does as “source”:

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 man draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire. From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way.⁶

Even the “private Mass” is ecclesial

In every celebration of the Liturgy, the paschal mystery of Christ is made present. We celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ every time we celebrate the Liturgy, even if it is a “private” celebration.

In the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which priests fulfill their greatest task, the work of our redemption is being constantly carried on; and hence its daily celebration is strongly urged, since even if the faithful cannot be present, it is still an act of Christ and of the Church.⁷

Pope Paul VI quoted these words from *Presbyterorum Ordinis* when he addressed the Minister General of the Carthusians and spoke of the value of Mass offered daily by one who lived an eremitical life.⁸

Priority of the Liturgy

The Council’s teaching on the Liturgy as the source and summit of the Church’s activity means that in practice our other activities should be underpinned by the celebration of the Liturgy. All of our activities for social justice, for the pro-life cause, for the building of the family and community, depend on the Liturgy as the source of their power.

(For those who are active in the apostolate, there the book *The Soul of the Apostolate* by Dom Chautard is excellent spiritual reading on the priority of the interior life.)

Participating in the Liturgy

Communion-participation

One of the early indications of the Church’s understanding of the Liturgy is found in St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

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?

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.10

⁷ Vatican II *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n.13

⁸ AAS Vol 63 (1971) p447-450

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.
(1 Cor 10.16-17)

The word translated here (in the RSV) by “participation” is *koinonia*. The vulgate translates it first as *communicatio* and secondly as *participatio*. By sharing in the Eucharist, we are being brought into communion with Christ. St Paul goes on to warn the Corinthians not to partake of the food offered to idols because that would involve communion with the demons.

For St Paul, participation is essentially a matter of being “one body, one spirit in Christ.” This union with Christ is at the heart of any understanding of liturgical participation.

Participating in the work of God

In explaining how the word “Liturgy” acquired a special meaning within Christian culture, the *Catechism* speaks of what liturgical participation means,

The word “liturgy” originally meant “public work” or “service in the name of/on behalf of the people.” In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in “the work of God.” Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church.⁹

Cardinal Ratzinger took up this point in his study on the Liturgy:

This *oratio* – the Eucharistic Prayer, the “Canon” – is really more than speech; it is *actio* in the highest sense of the word. For what happens in it is that the human *actio* (as performed hitherto by the priests in the various religions of the world) steps back and makes way for the *actio divina*, the action of God. In this *oratio* the priest speaks with the I of the Lord – “This is my Body”, “This is my Blood.” He knows that he is not now speaking from his own resources but in virtue of the Sacrament that he has received, he has become the voice of Someone Else, who is now speaking and acting. This action of God, which takes place through human speech, is the real “action” for which all of creation is in expectation. The elements of the earth are transubstantiated, pulled, so to speak, from their creaturely anchorage, grasped at the deepest ground of their being, and changed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. The New Heaven and the New Earth are anticipated. The real “action” in the liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate is the action of God himself.¹⁰

External participation

External actions will always be a part of the Liturgical celebration because, as we have seen,

⁹ Catechism n.1069

¹⁰ Cardinal Ratzinger *The Spirit of the Liturgy* p173

the Liturgy responds to our human nature by using sensible signs. In order for these signs to be presented to the senses, they must be carried out externally by those who are responsible for the different functions within the Liturgical act. It follows also that the person who is participating in the Liturgy must apprehend these material things with the senses. However the central point of participation, the whole purpose of this apprehending the external acts with the senses, is in order to participate spiritually in the *actio Dei*, the action of God.

Practical consequences

External activity not necessary for all

One of the practical consequences of understanding liturgical participation as being participation in the work of God is that external activity is neither necessary nor sufficient for true participation on the part of every person who is present. Cardinal Ratzinger commented on the way in which the word “participation” was misunderstood after Vatican II:

Unfortunately, the word was very quickly misunderstood to mean something external, entailing a need for general activity, as if as many people as possible, as often as possible, should be visibly engaged in action.¹¹

The instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* reflected the same concern:

Nevertheless, from the fact that the liturgical celebration obviously entails activity, it does not follow that everyone must necessarily have something concrete to do beyond the actions and gestures, as if a certain specific liturgical ministry must necessarily be given to the individuals to be carried out by them.¹²

The Choir as an example

The use of the office of cantor from earliest days of the Church, probably as an organic development from Jewish worship, is an example of how people may participate by listening while someone does something external on their behalf. As Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out, the same applies in the case where a choir sings on behalf of the congregation.¹³

The same point could be made with regard to the person who reads the scriptures at Mass. As the

¹¹ Cardinal Ratzinger *The Spirit of the Liturgy* p.171

¹² *Redemptionis Sacramentum* n.40

¹³ Cf the article “In the Presence of the Angels I Will Sing Your Praise” The Regensburg Tradition and the Reform of the Liturgy at www.adoremus.org/10-12-96-Ratzi.html (Accessed 2/7/06)

word of God is read, the people participate by listening in silence.

Offering in union with the priest

If we are then to ask “What should a person do in order to participate in this Liturgy of Love?”, it is helpful to look at the encyclical *Mediator Dei* of Pope Pius XII. He focuses particularly on the manner in which the faithful themselves offer the divine victim:

Now it is clear that the faithful offer the sacrifice by the hands of the priest from the fact that the minister at the altar, in offering a sacrifice in the name of all His members, represents Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body. Hence the whole Church can rightly be said to offer up the victim through Christ. But the conclusion that the people offer the sacrifice with the priest himself is not based on the fact that, being members of the Church no less than the priest himself, they perform a visible liturgical rite; for this is the privilege only of the minister who has been divinely appointed to this office: rather it is based on the fact that the people unite their hearts in praise, impetration, expiation and thanksgiving with prayers or intention of the priest, even of the High Priest himself, so that in the one and same offering of the victim and according to a visible sacerdotal rite, they may be presented to God the Father.¹⁴

It might be asked how many people have been instructed according to this teaching of Pope Pius XII, which may be regarded as being squarely within the Liturgical Movement, leading to the second Vatican Council. For so many people, participating properly in the Mass is a matter of finding the right page in the book, hearing every word that is said, joining in with everything that is sung. This attitude is now so entrenched that the singing of a polyphonic Mass, the lack of a booklet with the day’s texts, or the subdued recitation of some of the texts of the Liturgy causes surprise and discomfort.

It is difficult now to persuade people that without these external activities they can participate in the Liturgy, perhaps even more effectively at times because there is some space available to them to “unite their hearts in praise, impetration, expiation and thanksgiving” and to offer the divine victim in union with the priest.

The Liturgy today

We have now begun to touch upon matters that are under serious consideration within the Church today. I will briefly consider two areas which seem to me of particular importance.

¹⁴ Pius XII *Mediator Dei* n.93

The “hermeneutic of continuity”

Pope Benedict spoke of two principles of the interpretation of Vatican II that “came face to face and quarrelled with each other.”¹⁵ The “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” sees a fundamental break with the past

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.

The Holy Father taught that the correct interpretation of the Council, on the other hand, is according to

the “hermeneutic of reform”, of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.

With regard to the Liturgy, the interpretation of the Council as being in continuity with the past means that we do not need to see such things as polyphony, the use of Latin, or the re-establishment of some silence and reverence within the Liturgy as “going back” but as a part of the Church’s continued journey towards the fullness of the Kingdom. Above all, we do not need to see the reforms of Vatican II in terms of a prohibition of anything that happened in the “old days”.

The “Reform of the Reform”

Writing in 1975, the then Professor Ratzinger said,

We must be far more resolute than heretofore in opposing rationalistic relativism, confusing claptrap and pastoral infantilism. These things degrade the liturgy to the level of a parish tea party and the intelligibility of the popular newspaper. With this in mind we shall also have to examine the reforms already carried out, particularly in the area of the *Rituale*.¹⁶

Ten years later, in an interview with Vittorio Messori, he emphatically affirmed that this was still his view and that indeed by then some further treasures of the Church had been “squandered away”.

¹⁵ Address to the Roman Curia 22 December 2005

¹⁶ Quoted in Vittorio Messori’s *The Ratzinger Report* page 121

When introducing the Italian version of Fr Michael Lang's book "Turning Towards the Lord", Archbishop Ranjith, the secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship, said,

Both in the process of reform preceding the Council and after it, as the Council itself intended, liturgical changes were supposed to emerge organically, and not in sudden haste. But, unfortunately, not everything went as it should have. And now some are speaking of corrections, or of a reform of the reform.¹⁷

The Holy Father has been associated with this call for a "reform of the reform" and his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* can be understood as providing the principles for such a reform. The changes that he has already introduced into the Papal Liturgy, expertly observed by Sandro Magister, indicate that the principles will be gradually and sensitively put into practice.

The consciousness of the need for a reform of the *Novus Ordo* has gone side by side with the wider celebration of the Classical Roman Liturgy which can provide a point of reference for this reform.

The consequences of such a movement would be felt not only in the ceremonies of the rite but also in the revival of sacred music, especially Gregorian chant and the Church's tradition of sacred polyphony.

Taken together, the "hermeneutic of continuity" and the "reform of the reform" make it possible to see a way forward from the present poor celebration of many parish liturgies. It is likely to be the younger clergy who will carry this reform through with the greatest enthusiasm and commitment.

The Liturgical Spirit

In the Church today, everyone has something to say about the Liturgy. I wish to conclude this paper by offering three reflections which I believe can help us to focus on what is of most importance when we participate in the "Liturgy of Love."

Encountering Christ

The Liturgy is intended for our sanctification. We are called to encounter Christ. This is more than simply to think about him or be reminded of him. Through our devout reflection on the word of God and by actively offering our own lives in

union with the Divine Victim, we are invited to live the Christian life more fully. As a source of grace, the Liturgy is the most important source of grace for us, where Christ, living, present and active, touches our spirit. If we are aware of this, we will not see "active" participation as the only important aspect of what happens to us in the Liturgy. Where it is Christ who is active, we may be grateful to be "passive" at times, to open our hearts to his grace and to receive from him.

The objective nature of the Liturgy

If we understand the Liturgy as the *actio Dei*, the action of God in which we are called to participate, we will never again be tempted to complain that the Mass is boring. Certainly, we may have a legitimate concern if the ritual of the Mass is not celebrated according to the Liturgical norms, or if the manner of celebrating the Liturgy leads to disrespect for the mysteries of Christ that are made present. However, we will be consoled by the teaching of St Augustine, alluded to in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

When Peter baptises, it is Christ who baptises; when Paul baptises, it is Christ who baptises; when Judas baptises, it is Christ who baptises.¹⁸

It is "right and fitting" that the Liturgy should reflect the greatness of the mysteries that are made present. However, whenever the Liturgy is validly celebrated, God chooses to be present and to bestow his grace upon us. St John Chrysostom reflects on the greatness of this mystery:

The chalice of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion with the blood of Christ? He spoke with great faithfulness, inspiring terror. This is what he wants to convey: this thing, which is in the chalice, is that very thing which flowed from his side; and we are sharers of it. He called it the chalice of blessing because holding it in our hands, we thus celebrate it, wondering, struck with terror from the ineffable gift, blessing him that he poured it out so that we should not remain in error. And he not only poured it out, but he has imparted that very thing to each one of us. Therefore, he says, if you desire blood, do not redden the altar of idols with the death of beasts, but redden my altar with my blood. What is more terrible than this? What, I say, more loving?¹⁹

A Liturgy of Love

Therefore, according to the "Little Way" of St Thérèse of Lisieux, we try to do everything with love. The Liturgy, seen as a gift from God who chooses to be present and active, is an act of his

¹⁷ The full text of his speech is available online at <http://thenewliturgicalmovement.blogspot.com/2006/05/archbishop-ranjith-on-fr-lang-and-ad.html> (Accessed 2/7/06)

¹⁸ Augustine *Tractatus in Ioannem* 6.7

¹⁹ John Chrysostom *Hom in 1 Cor* 24.1 (PG 61.199-200)

infinite love. The response we are called to make is also an act of love. The *nota devotio* of the Christian people at the liturgy speaks of the passionate loyalty which is called for in the face of such a tremendous mystery. St Edmund Campion, St Margaret Clitherow and many others among our English martyrs saw this so clearly that the Mass was more important to them than life itself. May their prayers assist us to participate fruitfully in the Mass.

Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1066-1206

Vatican II constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
Sacrosanctum Concilium.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.

In addition, the introductions to the liturgical books all contain excellent background material on the Mass, the Sacraments, the Divine Office and the Lectionary.

Given to the London Faith in Focus group, St Vincent's, Carlisle Place, 3 July 2006.