

THE LITURGY: A SCHOOL OF FAITH

THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT has been increasing in momentum during the past half century, but a new impetus came to it on September 3, 1958 when the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued the Instruction, *Sacred Music and Liturgy*. This Instruction recalled the liturgical pronouncements of St. Pius X, Pius XI, and Pius XII, and provided the parish priest with a practical norm for putting the teaching of these popes into practice. It imposed an obligation on pastors to establish a program which will lead the faithful towards intelligent participation in the liturgy.

Unless we understand the reasons for this insistence on intelligent participation, the liturgical movement will mean no more in our lives than a blind coining of new slogans and a sudden burst of enthusiasm in keeping with a new fad. The liturgical movement is a God-sent answer to the needs of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, who depend for their spiritual existence on the truth of Christ and on the graces which flow from Him, giving them life and uniting them to one another and to their Head. Christ promised, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself" (*John*, 12:32); He draws men to Him especially in the liturgy. "The liturgy is the public worship of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, Head and members" (*Mediator Dei*). Hence in the Sacrifice of the altar the members of Christ's Mystical Body are nailed to the Cross with Him and the grace and truth which flow from the Head to the members in the liturgy reproduce the image of the Divine Redeemer in our hearts. In accord with these truths about the needs of the Mystical Body, Pius XII visualized the liturgical movement as "a sign . . . of the movement of the Holy Ghost in the Church, to draw men more closely to the mysteries of the faith and the riches of graces which flow from the active participation of the faithful in the liturgical life."

Let us consider the liturgy as a two way street that goes God-ward and returns man-ward. God-ward—it is worship, the

action of the Mystical Body, Head and members, united in prayer and sacrifice. Man-ward—it is the sanctification of the members by the grace of the sacraments and the truths of faith. Besides sending man's thoughts and affections to God, the liturgy also brings the riches of Christ's grace and revelation to men. Thus Pope St. Pius X taught that "the active participation in the public and solemn prayer of the Church is the primary source and font of the Christian spirit."

That the Church uses the liturgy to communicate the grace of Christ is well known to all of us, but not everyone is as aware of the role of the liturgy in communicating the truth of Christ. It will profit us to stop for a moment and reflect on this latter aspect of the liturgy, which, though secondary, is intimately bound up with the former. If the liturgy is the Church's school of faith it is for us to recognize the divinely revealed truths taught there, to give them whole-hearted consent and to translate them into values for everyday life. From the reflections that follow it will also become clear why the Instruction of the Holy See puts so much emphasis on intelligent participation.

The apostles and their successors, the bishops, are the official teachers of the Church, appointed and commissioned by Christ to teach all nations. "He that heareth you, heareth Me" (*Luke*, 10:16). The Hierarchy does not hide these truths of Christ in books to be stored on dusty shelves, but from Scripture and Tradition it draws the great mysteries of the faith, especially the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Redemption, and makes them live again in the liturgy. Pope Pius XI expressed the importance of this function of the liturgy when he called it "the most important organ of the Church's *ordinary* teaching office." The liturgy warrants such a noble tribute because, of all the organs that express the less formal teaching of the Church such as symbols, creeds, catechisms, and papal instructions, the liturgy reaches the most people and influences men's hearts most effectively.

However, the Hierarchy does not store the truths of faith in the liturgy merely because it is a channel close at hand and easily accessible. By its nature the liturgy is related to doctrine. The whole purpose of worship is to acknowledge God's supreme sovereignty and our dependence upon Him. This presupposes recognition of the fact that God is the beginning and end of all creation, but knowledge of this kind comes only after thought and meditation. This was the truth that moved Bossuet to place his principle: "To adore well we must know well."

History has eloquent examples of what happens when worship is not nourished by intelligence. Even a casual glance through the pages of the Old Testament reveals repeated accounts of what happened when Israel lost the inner spirit and faith demanded by its alliance with Yahweh. Whenever they hardened their hearts to his word their worship corrupted into a formalism that was legalistic and external. Often this amounted to nothing better than idolatry. For such lip service God had no ears. "This people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips glorify me, but their heart is far from me" (*Is.*, 29:13). Their sacrifices, ritual observances and prayers were a scandal to him. "To what purpose do you offer me your victims . . . Offer sacrifice no more in vain . . . My soul hateth your solemnities: they are become troublesome to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you; when you multiply prayer, I will not hear . . ." (*Is.*, 1:10-14). They thought He was a god whose demands were satisfied by a show of ritual, as the pagans thought of their gods. But in their empty festivals, meaningless sacred chants and holocausts, they had forgotten how to worship in the spirit of Yahweh, "He that declareth his word to man" (*Amos*, 4:13).

The situation was never as bad in the history of the Catholic Church. She saw that the separation of doctrine from worship is worse than a shameful divorce; it makes a deathly skeleton of actions that were once meaningful; the dry bones of externalism alone remain. When there were abuses in Catholic history, reforms were introduced to guarantee that teaching would never again be cast out of the sanctuary or removed from the altar. The goal of the present day liturgical reform is intelligent participation. Throughout the centuries the Church strove to keep the spirit of the first Christians, who learned to know and love the truths of faith in the Mass. St. Luke says of the first disciples that "they persevered in the teaching of the apostles and the breaking of bread." The two were never separate.

However it is not enough to say that some doctrines are present in our worship. The teaching in the liturgy extends to all the truths revealed by Christ. "It would be difficult to find a truth of the Christian faith which is not expressed in some manner in the liturgy," says Pope Pius XII. The Church year with its Sundays and feast days is a living catechism which dramatically passes in review all the truths of our faith. Throughout the year, the Mass and the Divine Office center around the person of Jesus

Christ. The faithful are invited to enter with Him on His path of sorrow so as to enjoy with Him the glories of His triumph. We can exemplify this with the most important event in the liturgy, the Easter celebration.

The story that is told from Palm Sunday to Easter summarizes the doctrine of human redemption. The drama is acted out against a threefold background of honor, sorrow, and triumph. Palm Sunday is a day of honor; we behold the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, just a few days before His shameful death. He is acclaimed by the multitudes as a prophet, and invoked as King; greeted by upright men as their Messiah; worshipped by His intimate circle as the Christ, Son of God. The shout is that of the Jewish children, "Hosanna! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord." The hymn is one of joy: "All glory, praise, and honor be to Thee, O King, Christ the Redeemer. . . . Thou art the king of Israel."

The second scene depicted in Holy Week is one of sorrow, a sharp contrast to the scene at Jerusalem; we behold the countenance of the suffering Christ. The liturgy teaches us that the Passion of Christ, symbolized by the Cross, is our sacrament and our example. "Let us adore the sign of the cross; through which we have received the sacrament of salvation" (antiphon, Good Friday).

These few texts cited from the liturgy of Holy Week and Easter only hint at the depth of the teaching contained in the ceremonies. We could cite many more texts and still fail to penetrate this teaching fully because we must experience the liturgy to be taught by it. The liturgy is not a solemn catechism class; it does not only cite texts for us, but it has ways of making the texts live. The transforming power of music gives wings to the words and makes them penetrate to the innermost parts of our soul. The liturgy also teaches by action and symbol and by the sacraments. For instance, in the liturgical action of Good Friday, Christ is presented as our Redeemer. At first this is taught in words taken from the prophet, the Law, and the gospel account of the passion; then it is taught by action and symbol in the unveiling and adoration of the Cross; finally it is taught by the Sacrament in the Communion service. Another example of the liturgy's peculiar teaching style is the Easter Vigil. It makes us pass from Holy Week to Easter Sunday with no noticeable break, and so it teaches by its position and the time of its celebration that the Cross and Resurrection are inseparable; that Christ's

redemptive work did not end with His death and that we must regard the Cross as the way to Easter victory.

One final observation is that the liturgy is a popular teacher. The truths are not presented in theses, propositions, and corollaries, but in hymns and prayers, epistles and gospels. They are not the cold abstractions of a scholar, but the concrete and living words of inspired texts. This is not a cowardly escape from the challenge of scholarship, but a recognition of the fact that most men are not philosophers and therefore feel uncomfortable among abstractions. Word pictures, symbols, and stories are concrete and direct, yet they lead one to deeper meanings and higher realities. The Church does not attempt to lead men to the heights of philosophy in her liturgy, but she wants to make the truths of faith accessible to both the simple and the learned.

To show the contrast between the popular language of the liturgy and the terminology of theological conclusions and papal definitions, let us take the doctrine of the beatific vision. A common tendency is to reduce the state of the blessed in heaven to a state of perfect rest. However St. Thomas states in his *Summa Theologiae* that "man's happiness must of necessity consist in an operation (I-II, q. 3, a. 2). "In the state of perfect happiness, man's mind will be united to God by one, continuous, everlasting operation" (*Ibid.*, ad 4um). The papal edict, *Benedictus Deus*, defines that the saints "see the divine essence by an intuitive vision, and even face to face . . . the divine essence immediately revealing itself plainly, clearly, and openly to them, and seeing thus they enjoy the same divine essence, and also from such vision and enjoyment their souls . . . are truly blessed and they have eternal life and rest."

In the Feast of All Saints this ceaseless activity of the blessed is presented dramatically in a scene from the Apocalypse: "I saw a great multitude which no man could number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and with palms in their hands. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.' . . . and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, 'Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength to our God forever and ever. Amen'" (Epistle).

Pope Pius XI paid tribute to this popularity of the liturgy when he said, "The annual celebration of the sacred mysteries is

more effective for instructing the faithful in the truths of our faith and for elevating their hearts to the joys of an interior life than all the solemn documents of the teaching Church. Our decrees reach only a few learned men, but feasts reach all the faithful. . . . The former act on the intellect; the latter influence the whole man, heart and mind."

By way of summary, we must say that the liturgy is an effective teacher of the truths of faith. By its nature worship depends on doctrine and consequently the liturgy is subject to the vigilant eye of the Hierarchy, the custodian of the truths of faith. Since the Church in her prayer is faithful to the truth of Christ, the liturgy is, as the schools say, a theological source of the highest degree, but more especially it is a good practical norm of belief for the faithful. In short, it is the Church's common school of faith. Because of this St. Thomas could say that the faithful must believe explicitly such articles of faith as the Church commemorates in her feasts (*de Ver.*, q. 14, a. 11). The close connection between worship and belief is perhaps best expressed in the age-old maxim that has come down from Pope St. Clement: "Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi"—let the law of prayer establish the law of belief.

This interplay between faith and prayer is of such moment to the life of every Christian that it is impossible to exaggerate its importance. It means that the liturgy has the answer to the needs of every Christian. By the waters of baptism we are made members of the Mystical Body of Christ and we are born to a new life, but this supernatural life depends on the mysteries of Christ for its continued nourishment. "As newborn babes, desire the rational milk (of Christian doctrine) that by it you may grow to salvation" (*Introit*, Low Sunday). Another need of every Christian is to profess his faith. If the truths of faith are not to become empty words they must be confessed in prayer and thereby forever impressed on the soul. In the liturgy we can do this, for there the faith is prayed, confessed, sung.

If in the past the liturgy has been a book closed to us, we must now open it no matter what it costs us to change our habits. We must learn how to assist at Mass and to take part in the ceremonies intelligently, for the mysteries of faith professed in the liturgy are the primary font of the Christian spirit. "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (*Epistle*, Low Sunday). Often we will not participate intelligently without the use of a missal, while one of the many available commentaries on the

liturgy will help us to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of each feast.

A Christian who acquires the habit of intelligent participation in the prayer life of the Church will continually breathe in the atmosphere of divine truth. He will be conscious of the glorious life of the Trinity, the efficacy of the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ; he will be aware of the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, the communion of saints, and the brotherhood of all in Christ; he will always feel inclined to judge the happenings of the present moment according to the eternal values he has learned from the liturgy. Such a Christian will be disposed for a life of virtue and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and will ever strive to die to self so as to rise to a new life.

—Daniel Hickey, O.P.