



People are instructed in the truths of faith and brought to appreciate the inner joys of religion far more effectually by the annual celebration of our sacred mysteries than by any pronouncement, however weighty, of the teaching of the Church. . . . The Church's teaching affects the mind primarily; her feasts affect both mind and heart, and have a salutary effect upon the whole of man's nature.

PIUS XI, *Quas Primas*

Learning from Liturgy

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More than thirty years ago, Pope Pius XI taught that liturgy instructs. Today, the Second Vatican Council says the same thing. It is for us to be studious.

The souls whom the Church is anxious to save are the souls of men, and after the separation at death they will be reunited to the bodies of the same men on the last day. Because the Church's members are men, and

because God speaks both through and to His Church, He must speak through and to men. If men are to understand the communications, these must be intelligible and receivable by men. On the other hand, men can only know them in the same ways they know other things and truths.

Now, liturgy is "the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the Heavenly Father," as Pius XII teaches in *Mediator Dei*.

Liturgy, as the prayer of the Church has a peculiar efficacy. Christ, whose bride is the Church, takes the prayer and presents it to the Father as His own. So all liturgical prayer reaches the Father as the prayer of Christ, and is no longer merely that of ordinary men. And the Father responds to Christ's prayer by loving Him, and through Him, us. (This, by the way, is why we pray "through Christ our Lord.") Liturgy is the activity of the Mystical Christ Who is composed of Christ Himself as Head, and of living men as members. The liturgical activity of these members must flow from their very being, as indeed must all their activity. If this activity is to be truly human, it must be thought out and actually intended; it must come from the intellect and will because these are the action-sources rooted in the soul. Man's actions must conform to what he thinks, and loves, and wants. If it were only the normal and routine activity of life which required roots in knowledge and desire, then man's actions of rendering to God the service befitting His excellence would be reduced to the level of superstition. Religion would truly be the opiate of the people, and man would engage himself in one of the greatest wastes of time and effort conceivable. Without interior thought and love, religion is only formalism, without meaning and lacking content. And this is what the Ecumenical Council has in mind when it says:

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects; it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. . . . [The faithful should] take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 11).

Liturgy is a two-way affair; it is at the same time both ascending and descending, and this is of its essence. By liturgy, men offer up worship to the Father, and He by accepting the pleasing gift, sanctifies and graces

men by loving them. Because man is both spiritual and physical, both soul and body, the complete expression of his knowledge and love must be both spiritual and physical. To offer homage to God properly he must acknowledge and actually express his dependence and love. The manner in which this is to be done has been specified by God and requires a response from both sides of man, mind and body.

Obviously, if man is to offer intelligent worship to God, the principle and conservator of all things, he must know what he is offering and why. By divine wisdom, this necessary knowledge is made readily available to all believers, and not merely to the erudite and scholarly, for Christ has given a liturgy which teaches while it honors God and sanctifies men by the activity of Christ. The Council says:

Although the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God speaks to His people and Christ is still proclaiming His gospel. And the people reply to God both by song and prayer.

Moreover, the prayers addressed to God by the priest who presides over the assembly in the person of Christ are said in the name of the entire holy people and of all present. And the visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or the Church. Thus not only when things are read "which were written for our instruction" (Rom. 15:4), but also when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive his grace (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 33).

Quite obviously, liturgy is designed to honor God on account of His excellence and to acknowledge man's dependence on Him. These goals can easily be seen as motivating the panoply of prescriptions and statutes of the Old Testament legislating in great detail the ceremonies and furnishings of the sanctuary of Yahweh. In the New Testament, we have the mandate to confect the Eucharist given by Christ Himself the night before He died. Granted that the details of the New Testament mandate are not as specific as those of the old dispensation, this lack of detailed specification does not lessen the validity or the authenticity of the sacrament and sacrifice. Christ entrusted to His Church the care and regulation of the ac-

companying ceremonies, and the presence of the abiding Spirit insures the perpetual integrity of the essentials of sacrifice. In addition to her role as guardian and transmitter, the Church has faithfully responded to the charge of Christ to "pray always," by deputing certain of her members who freely assume the obligation and the office of offering her official liturgical prayer every day. All these official acts of the worshipping Church have the one evident and primary end of honoring God who is excellent beyond our ability to classify, and worthy of all adoration and praise. The official acts of the Church include all the goals of prayer, for the Church is the whole Christ whose needs and moods are multiple.

In speaking of the sacraments, the Constitution on the Liturgy declares:

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs, they also instruct. . . . It is therefore of the highest importance that the faithful should easily understand the sacramental signs, and should frequent with great eagerness those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life (n. 59).

So, liturgical action has the double effect of honoring God and at the same time enlightening men. This secondary aspect of liturgical activity may be seen by considering what happens when we honor God. No one can worship God without simultaneously subjecting himself (the one implies the other). To acknowledge his dependence on God is to perfect man, because this acknowledgment expresses the reality of creation which is total dependence. But "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" (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 7). The liturgy in its activity as legislated by the Church (and thus by Christ) illumines the mind by faith, and strengthens the will by inculcating the Christian virtues. Thus, the liturgical action of the Church has other purposes than the direct worship of God, even though these are subordinated.

Liturgy is intimately connected with the faith of the Church of God. This connection can be seen easily in the reluctance of heretics to surrender their claim to orthodoxy on the ground that they are worshipping in the manner prescribed by the Spouse of Christ. Not only are liturgy and faith connected, but faith is a cause and principle of religion. This is in no way to say that liturgy creates faith or dogma as some latter day religionists

have alleged, but it does bring us to consider a fundamental point: the liturgy expresses the faith of the Church. We do not mean to say by this that all the statements contained there are definitions and demand our firmest assent under threat of losing orthodoxy, or even less that every single word in the breviary is literally true. This is not even to say that every word in the liturgy is intended to teach (although every word is intended to honor God), but in honoring God, the liturgy expresses what and how the Church believes, and the fundamental concepts according to which God is to be worshipped publicly. Therefore liturgy is a witness to the faith of the Church. It is a good instrument of tradition, and even a theological place in the classical acceptance of that term.

Not only does the liturgy express the faith of the Church, then, but it also proves dogmas of faith. Thus it is that from the way the Church tells



us to pray, we can sometimes deduce with full certitude what we must believe, as Pius XII observes in *Mediator Dei*.

The liturgy also teaches us the doctrines of the Church. In the liturgical rites, readings from Sacred Scripture and Tradition are proposed to us for meditation and instruction. A sign of this intent and of man's desire to learn and profit is the current dissatisfaction with the present cycle of readings during Mass and the desire for an even more varied cycle. Place is allotted for explanations of the texts by homilies in several parts of the liturgy, and, in addition, the antiphons of the Office serve as thematic indicators. The principal mysteries of our faith are presented to us in their liturgical accoutrements every year, and we come to a greater knowledge and love of such mysteries as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Redemptive activity of Christ. Moreover, the example of the saints is given to us. All these elements of the liturgy offer us the matter and the occasion for preaching, for arousing interest and studiousness, for stimulating attention and memory. There is little in the life of the Church that is not proposed to us. As a matter of fact, Pius XII goes so far as to say, "It would be diffi-

cult to find a truth of the Christian faith which is not expressed in some manner in the liturgy" (*Mediator Dei*). He goes on to add that the ceremonies of the liturgy are a profession of faith in action, that they give concrete expression to the great truths of the faith which concern God's generosity, love, mercy, and a number of other divine attributes.

But not only is the liturgy a source of doctrinal education, it is also an influence on the morals of the members of the Church. It exercises their virtue of religion; it exhorts them to the exercise of other virtues both explicitly and by the examples it proposes. Christ is given to us liturgically as an example, not just to be known, but to be imitated. And if we are not prepared to follow Him, we ought not praise Him whom we will not imitate. St. Augustine says that the peak of religion is to imitate Him whom you worship. And Pius XII, speaking of the value of the liturgy for the moral life of the people, adds:

Through the liturgy also are diffused the riches of the *depositum gratiae* which the Savior has transmitted to His Apostles: sanctifying grace, the virtues and gifts, the power to baptize, to confer the Holy Spirit . . . (*Mediator Dei*)

and this brings in the whole realm of the sacraments and the Sacrifice as life-giving and life-sustaining means for the faithful believer.

When we examine the meaning of certain activities performed during a liturgical action, we find ourselves in greater dependence on the teaching of the Church regarding their meaning. Certain elements are, however, quite evident even to a casual observer. There is hardly anyone who will not appreciate that bread and wine are used in the Eucharist to show that Christ is our food and drink to strengthen and sustain us on our journey to the heavenly Jerusalem; the consumption of the consecrated Species indicates to us the consummation of the Sacrifice. Also the use of water in baptism evidently signifies a washing of some kind. The dependence on the teaching of the Church for their understanding in no way minimizes the didactic role of the various elements of the Sacrifice, for these signs used by the Church are either taken from natural significations of the things and then transferred to the supernatural, or they are accompanied by words which explain the significance of the action. Rather, this need for guidance should stimulate a research into the earlier customs of the Church's activity to find the origin and development of the rites and signs. With this in mind, the Constitution on the Liturgy declares that in the current restoration,

both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community (n. 21).

What does all this mean for the participants in the liturgical activity of Christ's Spouse? Simply this: if we will pay more attention to what we are doing, to the meaning of our actions, our liturgical activity will have effects not simply because it is the prayer of the Church itself, but also because we will be contributing to the deepening of our own faith and to our sharing in the divine mysteries. This should, in turn, lead to increased fruitfulness in our apostolic activity. The liturgy of sacrifice will be the Sacrifice of Christ, but it will also be the sacrifice of the minister. The very sacrifice the priest offers (and this is his principal duty) devotes him as completely to God as Our Lord Himself. Although the value of the Mass for the Church is quite independent of the dispositions of the minister, its value as applied to the priest and individual Christians can be very dependent on their own dispositions.

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith [i.e. the Eucharist], should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body; they should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all (Constitution on the Liturgy, n. 48).

To fail to learn from the liturgy is to ignore a master pedagogue; it is to be but half-formed and half-taught in the mysteries of God's love.