



## Liturgy and Community

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Reform and renewal are in the air and nowhere is it seen more clearly now than in the liturgy. Our venerable and time-honored ways of worship are being called into question, the rites themselves reexamined in terms of their sign-function, and many changes that seem new and startling result. Actually most of these "changes" are simply restorations of ancient practices which are not reintroduced out of a love of liturgical antiquity but because it is felt that pastorally they will make the liturgy more understandable and meaningful to the People of God. Yet often, laymen and clergy alike are shocked and somewhat scandalized by the changes, and this, primarily be-

cause they do not understand the nature of the liturgy, especially the concept of communal celebration.

The Church now is rediscovering that She is the *community* of the saved, all of those who love and serve Jesus, who are so closely united to Him as to be called His Body, and so closely joined to each other that they may be said to be members of that same Body. Thus, this realization of our unity in Christ, when focused on the liturgy of the Church, demands community worship, communal celebration, an actual physical manifestation in the Incarnational order, of the inner bond of spiritual union. Yet so frequently very devout and good Catholics are heard to complain that all this participation—dialogue Mass with responses aloud, the singing of hymns, offertory processions, vernacular readings of the Epistle and Gospel, to name only a few of the current practices—are distracting and hindering them from their prayers, their union with the Lord. While one can sympathize with this reaction to this seeming disturbance to their piety, such an attitude reveals a complete lack of understanding and awareness of the communitarian nature of the liturgy, and more basically the very notion of the Church.

Since the liturgy is performed by men and is to save men, a brief consideration of human experience immediately highlights the fact that man is social, and tends, even in the most primitive conditions, to form some sort of society. With his basic insight into human nature, Aristotle described man as a *social animal*, a term we hear frequently, but what is the reality it hides? Put simply, people need people, and St. Thomas, in commenting on the text<sup>1</sup> shows the utter dependency of us all on our parents for generation, nourishment, and instruction. Then he points out that to live *well*, not simply to exist, it is necessary that man live in a society—with other people. Modern psychologists show us how important it is for a person to be accepted by others for psychological health. People's well being and balance depend on their recognition of the fact that they are "People who need People" as a song in the new musical *Funny Girl* goes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Commentary On The Nichomachean Ethics*. By St. Thomas Aquinas. Trans. by C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Regnery, Chicago, 1964), L.I.:C.4.

## **The Church as a Community**

Now how does all of this apply to the Church? Here we can't delve profoundly into the question of the nature of the Church—the Mystical Body—but we can examine one aspect of it—its community structure. Of course the Church is a supernatural reality, but it is human for it is Christ among men, an extension of the Incarnation in time. Apologetically, the Church has been described as a "perfect society" and though this precise manner of delineating its constitution may be improved, yet it does focus our attention on the fact that it is a *social* body—a group of men. The Christian is saved only in association with fellow men, for he must be incorporated into Christ—i.e. the whole Christ, Head and members—for his salvation. Christ is the way to the Father and all who are joined to Him by faith, hope, and love, are joined to each other in the Church, for He wants to gather all men into His Kingdom which He describes as the "vine and branches" and the "shepherd and the flock", a union with Him and therefore with one another. The Ecclesial Mystery, then, is a social entity and this shows again the Divine Condescension in utilizing and transforming nature—man's desire and tendency towards sociality—for Grace perfects nature and does not destroy it. So man is led to God personally and yet in the community, not *individualistically*, by his brothers whom he helps—"Bear you one another's burdens, for thus you fulfill the Law of Christ" (Gal. 6, 2). Consequently each Christian is Christ to the other, and man is to go to God through and with other men as they aid one another in the community. This is the meaning of the Communion of Saints, for the Saints (in the Pauline sense) are members of Christ—Christians—and their helping one another continues after death.

St. Paul brings this home strikingly in his treatment of the mystical Body of Christ in I Corinthians. In comparing us, the members of Christ's Body, to members of a physical body, the Apostle says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you'; nor the head to the feet, 'I do not need you,'" (II. 12: 21-22). Later in that passage, he points out that because of our unity, "if one organ suffers, they all suffer together. If one flourishes, they all rejoice." Again, in Ephesians where he stresses our unity in the "one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism" (6:2), he also says "speak the truth to each other, for all of us are the parts of one body (6:25). Truly the Church as a com-

munity of people needing people, a communion of love in Christ, is the "Sign raised for all the nations to see". (Is. 11:12).

### **The People of God**

The Church is also described more frequently today as the People of God and rightly so. This term is used because ecclesiologists are becoming more fully aware that to adequately realize a true understanding of the Church, she must be seen in the light of the Old Testament. God has intervened in history and seemingly with one purpose in mind: "the formation, out of common and fallen humanity, of a people which should eventually be God's Own People."<sup>2</sup> The divine action gradually prepared His chosen people of the Old Covenant for the coming of the Holy and Just One—Christ—Who was to fulfill all and to form a new people, drawn from all those who would serve Him in love, rather than just the Hebrews. Yet there is continuity here as the Church is the fulfillment and culmination of the People of God in the old dispensation—in fact, through the course of history, God had been creating this people, Israel, the Spouse of Yahweh, to flower into the Bride of Christ, the Church. This is not mystical imagery, for recent research has shown that the Church—*Ecclesia*—of the New Testament is the final perfection of the *Qahal Yaweh*—"the Assembly of Yaweh"—of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup>

The Greek word *ecclesia* which means an "assembly duly summoned" comes from the word meaning "to call to a convocation" and was used to denote the purely secular assembly at Athens, called or summoned by heralds, which was gathered together to listen to official notices concerning the welfare of the state and to respond to that information. This term was applied by the authors of the *Septuagint* to describe similar gatherings in Jerusalem for there too the people assembled to hear the official word of the king and to respond to it. There are many examples of the *Qahal Yaweh* in the Old Testament, but three are especially informative: the convocation on Mount Sinai as described in Exodus, 19, the assembly called by

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete handling of the term *People of God*, consult Louis Bouyer's *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame, Ind., University Press, 1955) pp. 23-37, of which this treatment is an adaptation and distillation.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



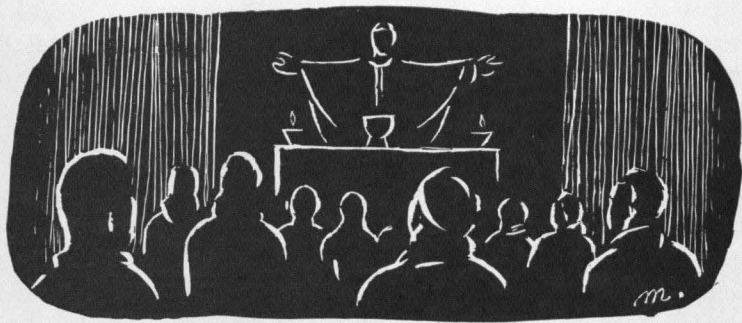
King Josiah in II Kings, 23, and that summoned by the scribe Esdras (II Esdras 8, 17, 13) after the Exile.

This first gathering was of the Hebrews who had escaped Egypt and were called to encounter Yaweh. After a common preparation of fast and purification, and after community actions of praise, adoration and supplication, the Word was solemnly proclaimed. Then the Word was accepted and agreed to by those present and this formed the very Covenant between Yaweh and His People, which was not considered ratified until the sacrificial offering had concluded the meeting. The Covenant was sealed by this sacrifice, and, with the free response and obedient agreement of those present, a people was created, actually *formed* as a *people*. In the account of pious King Josiah rededicating the race of Israel, we have the same basic structure of proclamation of the Word, praise expressed and the people's acceptance—the renewal of the Covenant or Alliance with Yaweh. In the third example we again find this basic pattern, but instead of the concluding sacrifice which is omitted, Esdras, the scribe, offers a solemn eucharistic prayer. The Hebrews, returning from the Exile, find Jerusalem devastated and consequently cannot sacrifice as the Temple has been utterly destroyed. At this juncture, synagogue worship develops as primarily a service of the Word. The Eucharistic Prayer (the Greek word *eucharist* means thanksgiving), commemorating the great things God has done for His People as a pledge of His love in the future, became associated with the familial celebrations of small pious communities rather than with the nation as a whole. These groups, on the eves of Sabbaths and festivals, met for a communal meal at which the breaking of the bread and the solemn eucharistic prayer of the cup of blessing were the important ritual elements. It is apparent already how the various rites described above are fulfilled in the Christian liturgy, but the point of emphasis now is that the Covenant was made with the people as a whole, as a unity, as a community. This was initially accomplished through their liturgy and renewed through the liturgical celebration of the assembly. As has been said before, they were created as a people in the proclamation of the Word of God, their acceptance of it, and its ratification.

### **The Apostolic Community**

Salvation History would see all this just described as a preparation for the new dispensation in which the Word of God which is pro-

claimed, accepted, and ratified in His very own Son. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian community is characterized as "persevering in the doctrine of the Apostles and in the communication of the breaking of the bread and prayers." (Acts 2,24). The doctrine of the Apostles mentioned is the proclamation of the Word and the response of the worshippers much as in the synagogue service, while the breaking of the bread is the Eucharistic celebration. Now however, the Word of God is incarnate in Jesus as He is the One sent by God to save His People, all mankind rather than just a chosen people as before. The



Apostolic community does not merely listen to God's Word proclaimed in Christ. It invokes that Word in prayer and pledges itself to the Word in the Eucharistic Prayer. Christ seals the New Covenant in His Blood and creates a new people through the proclamation of the Good News, and in the power of the apostolate (the Apostles are sent by Christ as He was sent by the Father) the words of the president of the assembly become Christ's word, and actually bring down Christ, the Word of God for men. So the new and everlasting Covenant is proclaimed in the death of Christ: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show forth the Lord's death until He comes." (I Cor. 11:26). By His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, the Paschal Mystery, Christ brought about a new creation of light, love, and life in which His people, His Mystical Body, participate. His People are His new creation as they are "re-created" in grace, and thus become participants of the ecclesial mystery, "for it was from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the cross, that there came forth the wonderous sacrament of the Church."

(*Const. on the Liturgy*, N. 5). As in the old dispensation, the Hebrews were made God's People by the Covenant into which they were initiated by circumcision and which was renewed by ritual sacrifice, so in the New Law, men are brought into the New Covenant through Baptism and made Christ's People and this is renewed in the sacrificial meal of the Eucharist. This is the Mystery that is proclaimed. It is a call from God to which men respond and so the *ecclesia* is gathered, not spontaneously drawn together by men's own volition (although they act freely), but by the Will of God. The community, then, is convoked not by human considerations of convenience or sociability, not on its own initiative, but on God's.

### **The Worship of the Community**

Now perhaps we might ask how does all this ecclesiology apply to the liturgy and especially to participation in it? Hasn't our consideration taken us far afield of our topic? By no means, for unless the Church is seen as a community of love, gathered around Jesus Christ in worship of the Father, communal participation makes no sense. If, however, the Church is seen in her communitarian nature, as the Mystical Body of Christ, as the People of God, called together by the Father in Christ, then our whole focus changes. No longer is the participation of the whole community in the Mass thought of as an "extra", something "nice to have, if it's not too much trouble", rather than a real necessity. It might be argued that as long as interior participation is obtained, this is sufficient. Now it is certainly true that interior participation is the most important consideration, for as Pope Pius XII says in *Mediator Dei* (N. 24), "the chief element of divine worship must be interior". However, just before that statement, he points out that external actions not only flow from man's nature as a social composite (body—soul), but also are "designed to rouse the heart, like signals of a sort, to veneration of sacred realities, and to raise the mind to meditation on the supernatural" (N. 23). The whole *Constitution on the Liturgy* presupposes active participation:

Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, 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 (N. 48).

The worship of the Church must manifest "the Mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Christ" (Const. N. 28), for as the Church is, so she must pray. The Church is a great sign of unity insofar as she is a community of love, and this must be shown visibly. Man must go to the invisible through the visible, to the spiritual through the material, for "while we recognize God visibly, we may be drawn by Him to the love of things unseen" (Christmas Preface). This principle of all Catholic sacramentalism also corresponds to man's natural inclination towards the expression of his interior life through speech, gestures, and bodily movements if there is to be any sort of communication. So Christ communicates Himself to man in the Church through visible signs and symbols, and man responds in kind through external activity.

Another objection one often hears voiced in one form or other is that communitarian worship leaves no time for personal prayer and that the individual is swallowed up in the community. The Christian must "enter into his chamber to pray to the Father in secret" (Matt. 6:6). Consequently, a personal prayer life is a necessity for the Christian life, but this is nourished by the liturgy and prepares the worshipper for the Liturgical Action which, in itself, is never a time for strictly private prayers and devotions. In the Christian notion of personality, there is no dicotomy between the individual and the community. The individual is formed by the community of the family and grows in this environment. He is enriched by his association with the community of the parish, and in community becomes more profoundly a person. In turn, the community is richer to the degree that it is composed of truly individual people—well rounded persons. As Father Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., has recently stated:

Personality in the face of God means that one learns from his fellow man who are visible, to receive kindness, goodness, love, and to make him a sharer of his own personal experience of goodness and kindness, because one cannot in the deepest sense love God, the invisible Father, if he doesn't love his visible neighbor. . . . The Christian personalism is likeness of Christ, Who gave his life and was raised by the Father. It is essentially an openness to the call of God and to the appealing needs and the appealing kindness of the neighbor. And therefore personal and communal are by no means contradictions or oppositions. They are a synthesis.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The quotation is from Fr. Häring's lecture *A Catholic Approach to Existentialism and Personalism* given at the summer worship in Moral Theology at Catholic University, June, 1964.



Once this is understood, the Christian cannot but joyfully worship with his brother around the common table, singing the Lord's praises with him, processing with him, listening to the proclamation of the Good News, with him, and embracing him in the Kiss of Peace, for they are one in Christ yet never so much individuals—not independently individualistic—as through Him, with Him, and in Him.

### **Recent Directives of the Church**

The Church is recovering a truly apostolic notion now of her own communitarian nature. Recently two documents have been issued which are designed to implement in a practical way the *Constitution on the Liturgy* and its many community-minded decrees on participation in the Mass. The first is the *Instruction* published by the Sacred Congregation of Rites on October 16, and the other is the directive of the American Bishops' Commission on the Liturgical Apostolate issued November 6 of this year. Both of these statements clarify and make explicit many general liturgical principles and prescriptions laid down in the conciliar decree. Several of these emphases might be briefly examined here as they make congregational worship more than a vague possibility.

In the *Instruction*, the liturgical formation of seminarians is treated at length and it is not surprising to find the community aspect of the liturgy high-lighted. On Sundays and major feast days all priests and students are to participate in the community Mass and on solemn feast days the priests may concelebrate—after this rite has been worked out and approved (N. 15). Also, it is suggested that even those seminarians not obliged to recite the Divine Office, should each day celebrate in common lauds and vespers or compline as the morning and evening prayer of the community (16). The *Instruction* further lays down many changes with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist. Among those changes that concern us here, the most revealing is that at solemn and sung Masses the parts of the proper and the ordinary that are sung by the choir or the people are not said privately by the celebrant, but are sung with the people (N. 48). The congregation really has a part to play and so the priest does not ignore them and celebrate his own Mass, as it were. The old rubric of the celebrant's going on ahead, privately reciting these parts, seemed to imply this. Lessons, Epistles, and Gospels must be proclaimed

facing the people (N. 49) and the first two are to be read by lay lectors, thus removing the proclamation of the Word from being strictly a clerical preserve alone. The People of God must be instructed in His Word by means of a homily on the Gospel every Sunday and holy day (N. 53). Churches are to be so constructed to allow for Mass facing the people (N. 19) and the advantage of this practice in drawing attention to the communal meal aspect of the Holy Sacrifice is obvious. The choir is to be placed so that it is clear that these special singers form a part of the community (N. 97) and can fulfill their role of leading the congregation in song, and the place of the faithful is to be so arranged that they can "participate in the sacred celebrations visually" (N. 98). Finally, the baptistry is to be built so it is suitable for community celebration of this sacrament (N. 99). All of these minute and detailed changes are permeated with the Church's awareness of and concern for the communal nature of her worship.

The American bishops are no less concerned and in their new statement they emphasize the practical aspects of worship in the vernacular which is a real "must" for any degree of full participation. The decree draws attention to lay lectors, and decrees that hymns and psalms should be sung by the assembly at suitable times during the Mass, especially on Sundays and holidays when the community gathers to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord. Although the Church has always insisted that "he who sings prays twice," Catholics since the Reformation have tended to identify the singing of hymns with Protestantism and have come to view the "silent Mass" as a sign of orthodoxy. Our separated brethren have a great tradition of community singing and we could learn much from them in this regard. This emphasis by the bishops may do much to encourage good Catholic hymn singing in our parishes. Also this statement has revised the rubrics for the participants in the Liturgical Action, hoping to make the postures more meaningful so that the action being performed will show more clearly its sign-function in the whole group activity.

### ***The Christian Response***

Really then, it is our view of the Church that determines our response to the renewed liturgy. When we see the Church as a com-

munity of those who love Jesus and each other in Him, as His very own Mystical Body prepared for by the Old Testament concept of the People of God, our reaction to the new wider sharing in the sacred actions of the Whole Christ, both Head and members, will be one of joyful enthusiasm. We'll further realize that we are formed as a people in liturgical action—we are unified, become one. The liturgy actually forges this unity in us and intensifies it, for our Baptism incorporates us into the Mystical Body of Christ and makes us members of one another. The celebration of the Eucharist strengthens our union for does not St. Paul say, "when we break this bread is it not a means of sharing in the Body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one; for it is one loaf of which we all partake" (I Cor. 10:16-17). Consequently, seeing the Eucharist as "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity", (*Const.* N. 47), which makes "the faithful one in holiness" (N. 10) and realizing that this union must be expressed if man is to respond and be deeply moved by it, we can understand the emphasis on the forms of active, external participation which in themselves are to lead directly to that interior awareness of Christ and our union with Him. We begin to understand that we are saved in the community and want to express this in our prayer. Each one of us becomes aware that:

as a member of this Body, the Church, then, I have social commitments. I cannot love God and hate my neighbor. I cannot be so absorbed in my own salvation that I ignore the salvation of my neighbor. I cannot establish a personal relationship with Christ while denying the social aspects of Christ's Church. As long as there is natural life in me, I cannot resign from the human race. As long as there is supernatural life in me, I cannot resign from membership in a commitment to Christ's Mystical Body.<sup>5</sup>

And so this truly Christian approach characterizes our loving worship of the Father through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and prepares us for the liturgy of the heavenly Jerusalem which is ever offered by the Church Triumphant to the Trinity of Love.

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<sup>5</sup> James W. King, S.J. *The Liturgy and the Laity* (Newman, Westminster, Maryland, 1963) p. 56.