

Liturgy and the Human Community

By Michael M. Burke, O.P.

When the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy stressed the importance of participation in the Eucharistic celebration, no one at that time could predict exactly what course this directive would take or what far reaching demands it would make on our understanding of the liturgy. Two years later we find such things as guitars and dialogue homilies, offertory processions and prayers of the faithful as an important part of our Mass. Even more significant is the stress on being relevant and forming community. Some people see all these "new things" as a threat to their relationship with God and extremely disturbing to their peace of mind. Formerly, the time spent with God at Mass had been a peaceful respite from the noise, cares and demands of the world. Now, the world is being brought into the Church and disrupting the entire experience. It seems like so much humanism and naturalism to many. From my point of view as a part time student of the liturgy and a priest who has had some limited experience both with religious communities and people in the parish situation, I would like to offer an explanation for the present emphasis on the importance of relating the human community to the liturgy and to show that we are definitely on the right track in bringing out of our "storeroom of liturgy" things both new and old.

To understand the relationship between the liturgy and community, we must first introduce a few fundamental notes about the nature of liturgy, especially as a communal form of worship. Then I hope to show that the social orientation of the liturgy demands relevance to the contemporary human community. Finally, I will offer a suggestion

for restoring a sense of authentic community within the liturgy. Throughout the discussion I will limit myself to the liturgy of the Eucharist, or the Mass, for it is in this act of communal and public worship that the People of God find their identity and interpersonal dependence on one another in the most fundamental way. However, what is said about the Eucharist as the center of community can be applied to the other sacraments and liturgical prayer insofar as the Eucharist is the apex of the entire prayer of the Church. We read in the encyclical "Mysterium Fidei":

For if the sacred liturgy holds the first place in the life of the Church, the mystery of the Eucharist stands at the heart and center of the sacred liturgy because it is in fact the font of life; purified and strengthened by it we live not for ourselves, but for God and are joined together by the strongest bond of love. (Par. #3)

From man's point of view the significant and essential qualities of the liturgy are those of community, unity and love. If liturgy is the public prayer, prayer offered in fellowship with our brothers with whom we are joined by the common waters of baptism, it is as well communal and characterized by a loving gift of self in union with the Son who offered His life to the Father on our behalf. In the Eucharist we celebrate the liturgy in its fullness, for in it we become most unified, we become one bread. In the words of the Apostle:

Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:17)

When we are given such a sign of love, community and unity, we also have a tremendous challenge given to us to make this sign genuine and sincere. Though we can convince ourselves that we are united to Christ in His union with the Father, we may deceive ourselves about our honest commitment to our brother who prays in a dirty ghetto or shattered hut to our common Father. Not only must we be united to Christ and His Father, but to one another unless we wish our sign of Eucharist to be meaningless. It is one thing to understand the liturgy theologically, and quite another to live it, to experience it within the human community, so that what we do together in the name of Christ is truly our loving response to one another in Him. Commenting on the social nature of the liturgy, J. H. Miller writes:

All liturgical acts, by reason of the Church's participation in Christ's priesthood, possess a truly communal, social, public character . . . Liturgy, therefore, is *essentially* social in that it involves and effects all the members of the Church.¹ (emphasis added)

I think that it is this stress on the social dimension of the liturgy of the Eucharist that is disturbing many people today. They are being asked to become more aware of all their brothers who are in need throughout the world—in Vietnam, Biafra, Czechoslovakia and on and on. Slowly but surely it is beginning to come to the surface of consciousness that one cannot in good conscience divorce the liturgy inside from the world outside. Christ beckons to us in the eyes of the starving Biafran and the homeless Vietnamese and says, “Here I am.”

Christ died for all men. He died for the poor and the rich; for the lonely and the homeless; for the black and for the white. He died for all men living today. We must be His heart, hands, feet and eyes visibly manifesting His love to our brothers throughout the world. Then the Eucharist will be a sign of our love not only in the celebration itself, but of our love expressed in action in the world. Of its very nature it must express itself in loving action, it must diffuse its power into mankind, otherwise it will be a sterile celebration of pomp and ceremony. In “*Mysterium Fidei*” we read:

From this it follows that the worship paid to the Divine Eucharist strongly impels the soul to cultivate a “social” love, by which we place the common good before the good of the individual, we make the interests of the community, of the parish, of the entire church, our own and extend our charity to the whole world because we know that everywhere there are members of Christ. (Par. #69).

It is unfortunate that concern for social problems has led some qualified liturgists to an unsympathetic attitude about them in regard to their relationship to the liturgy as such. This was recently verified by the negative reaction of several liturgists at the 1968 Convention held in Washington, D.C. this August. The emphasis on social problems at a liturgical forum seemed out of place to them. I do not intend to adequately answer their objection, but I do feel that though the Convention took a very revolutionary approach to the liturgy, it was an attempt to bring the liturgy up to date and into contact with the pressing human problems that involve the people who daily celebrate the liturgy. On the other hand, many liturgists who are more theoretically concerned with the nature of worship could not see the need to relate so closely the liturgy and the community. Yet, to take an extreme position, the best liturgy in terms of ritual perfection may well be an ineffective catalyst in forming and building the human community. This often happens when the Eucharist is isolated from the needs of the people for whom it is celebrated. It is possible for a few qualified liturgists and musicians to present a magnificent “pro-

duction" that expresses their needs, but not those of the people.

Both the liturgical conventions of 1967 and 1968 addressed themselves to this problem of relating the liturgy to the human condition. Racism and materialism were key topics on the agenda. Daniel Callahan in an editorial in *Commonweal* just before the 1967 Convention wrote:

The man who is truly concerned about the liturgy must also be deeply concerned about Vietnam, about hunger in China and India and Mississippi, about the chasm that separates rich and poor, whether between wealthy and impoverished nations or suburban and inner-city parishes. Pastors and people must regard the creation of a sense of community as their most important task, achieved through a liturgy that is a meaningful experience, but this experience in turn should lead to a deep and abiding commitment to social justice. It is to promote this sense of Christian community-building that the liturgical movement should work.²

It is noteworthy that this past year's liturgical convention was deliberately held in Washington, D.C. where the center of the racial disturbances was localized in the "Poor People's Campaign", in order to sensitize the participants to the needs and the cry of the poor in our nation. Floyd McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality spoke to the clergy of their role in reconciling the black and white people in the American Church:

As individuals and as groups, clergymen must preach and work against racism. They must preach and work against materialism in all forms—domestic and foreign. When the church accepts this responsibility, only then will black Americans be able to welcome their Christian brothers home.³

At this point it is necessary to make it clear that the liturgy as cause of community, i.e., as able by its very nature to form the people who share in it into a community, has not been forgotten nor jeopardized by emphasizing the liturgy as sign of community. The two dimensions of the sacrament of the liturgy are so related that it is questionable whether one should try to distinguish between the liturgy as cause and as sign. To conclude that the liturgy precedes the community can lead one to a veritable cyclic argument. Were it not for a community of people gathered together we would never celebrate a liturgy! This realization in itself indicates the difficulty in answering this question. The best answer, I think, is to realize that we want to make our liturgy more and more authentic, in touch with reality and the human situation as much as possible, so that it can be truly said of our prayer

that it is, indeed, "ours." To the degree that it is ours, we will benefit from it more and it will be a much more effective instrument in conforming us into the image of Christ. What is more, it will be more effective in forming us as a community into the image of Christ. When we are aware that our brother has the same desires, needs and hopes for life as we do, we will begin to see our participation in the liturgy not as so much activity, but as a mutual response to one another. If we approach the liturgy with this attitude, it will be at once sign and continual cause of our love for one another.

Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem., spoke very eloquently on the interaction and relationship of liturgical prayer to the human condition two years ago at a liturgical symposium held in Washington, D. C., November 1966. He said.

Liturgy, after all, is a form of prayer. It is a form of contemplation; contemplation only of God? It should also be a serious contemplation of the problem of man. Liturgy should be a theological reflection on the dilemma of the human condition. And this dilemma as it is specified by the human predicament in which you find yourselves.⁴

The import of this statement can be put in somewhat popular terminology by saying that liturgy is not only a personal experience, but essentially a communal experience. It is not just Jesus and I going to the Father, but I and my brothers with Jesus. We've heard this before, but for the most part many have accepted it only intellectually. Recently, I attended a State Newman Convention in Tennessee which addressed itself to the problem of the racial injustices in America. During the period of the three day discussion the Eucharist (in the ciborium) was placed on the mantle of the fireplace. The retreat-master was a negro layman, Allen McNeely, from Detroit. He formed the young college students and a few older laymen and priests into a real community during the course of the weekend. Not until the last conference did he mention the word "negro" or racial disturbance. By this time we had come to know and love him as a person, as one of us with the same desires and hopes as any other man. By this time it had also become an experiential reality in my life that there was no dichotomy between Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Allen McNeely! I shall always be able to find my brothers and sisters who shared this weekend with me in Jesus in the Eucharist. Though I can not explain how, yet I know that we are one in Jesus. "Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body . . ." (1 Cor. 10:17)

In an article entitled, "Worship in East Harlem," George W. Webber describes his experience with the poor in his Harlem Parish.

He has been with them long enough to realize that what is needed is some kind of personal contact with the parishioners outside of the Church service which enables them to know him and themselves. When they come together to worship their prayer is really "their own." They are open with each other and feel close to one another, enough to reveal even their personal and intimate problems and fears. Their prayer flows from their human and social situation. Knowing one another and sharing their hopes and fears with each other gives them a sense of belonging and being cared for by the community. This is what I mean by authentic community. Webber can write from experience when he describes the need for authentic community:

When men and women do not know in their own lives the meaning of human brotherhood and family love, there is little reality in the symbol of the table where we gather in fellowship to celebrate the mighty acts of God. In a word, integrity in communion demands that those who gather at the table must be a family, united in Christ, not as a theological fact alone, but as a reality that is expressed in the common life of the community.⁵

What Webber is saying can cut deeply into those Christian communities today that do not experience the sense of brotherhood and family life of which he is speaking. It explains why many religious communities are having real vocation crises. There is definitely hope for these communities, but there is need to adapt to sound psychological and theological principles of human love if these communities are to be real signs of Christian love. There is no chance for survival if we cannot say of every religious community, "see how they love one another."

In the past, celibacy and chastity were protected by protecting religious from one another. Today it is realized that the greatest protection and insurance to chastity is fraternal love. Not the kind of fraternal love that is "professionally" kind, but distant, but fraternal love that is human, warm and believable, convincing—the kind of love Christ expressed to his disciples. There is only one kind of love which all men must give to one another, especially if they are disciples of Christ. There is no place for a special brand reserved for religious that loses its vitality in its restrictions and safeguards.

The significance of the reference to religious communities is that any lack of real human love shows up in their liturgy. This is especially crucial considering the obligation that religious have to manifest authentic community. It would be well for religious communities to examine the possibility of permitting a period of re-forming their

community. The experience of coming together in prayer in a more natural way than by being obliged to pray because it is the "time" and everybody in the community prays together, might be effective in re-building communities and providing them with authentic liturgical prayer. There is always the caution that if small groups are permitted to pray together it might work against community. This is a remote danger, I feel, and one that has to be risked in order to meet the urgent need for religious to experience authentic community.

What the people in Webber's Harlem parish experienced should be made available to religious who often have a much less tangible encounter with the world. If we proceed in the spirit of a sound theology of Christian friendship, I see no reason why religious who feel this bond of friendship should not offer it to the Father in thanksgiving at a Mass in which they share openly and humanly with one another. The small group Mass gives one an opportunity to experience the intimacy that is legitimate within the liturgy and which is something to which every Christian is entitled. Many religious have stood day after day in choir stalls that somehow separate them from their brothers and convey, at least psychologically, a sense of "structure" that is as unbending as the wood of which they are made.

The problem cannot really be discussed at length here, for it deserves a special study in itself. Be it sufficient to say here that though the Eucharist does form and effect community, it is as well the sign and expression of it. If the people who gather for prayer are not really a community of Christians joined together and bringing with them an experience of belonging and solidarity with one another, then the sign is falsified or at least, weakened. But what is even more crucial is that without an experience of community "at home" they are less sensitive to the needs of the human community that surrounds them. Authentic liturgy must begin at home before one will be aware and sensitive to the community of the world. And so, we have guitars, and dialogue homilies, offertory processions and prayers of the faithful. We have all these things not only to bring in the world, but to give us an opportunity to respond to one another within the liturgy; to show us that the most natural thing to do when we hear God's word is to listen and then respond as a community. My brother next to me in my pew is really no different than my brother several thousand miles away or hidden behind the walls of a dirty tenement house. But we must discover this, experience it and realize it in the presence of God. In Christ's presence we are bound honestly to say, "Lord, he is my brother, Your Father is *our* Father."

FOOTNOTES

¹ Rev. John H. Miller, C.S.C., S.T.D., *Fundamentals of the Liturgy*, (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers Assoc., 1959, p. 34.

² Daniel Callahan, "Liturgy and Community," *Commonweal*, p. 508.

³ Coghlan Cook, Special to the NCR, "Liturgy Week Probes the World," NCR Aug. 28, 1968, p. 3.

⁴ Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem., "Liturgical Relevance," Washington, D.C.: Conference of Clerics and Religious, 1967, p. 31.

⁵ George W. Webber, "Worship in East Harlem," *Liturgical Renewal in the Christian Churches*, Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967, p. 71.

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