

LITURGY, TIMELESS AND ENDLESS*

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1. *Contemporary Problems*

Sounds and smells play such an important part in daily life. Often unnoticed, they help us shape the patterns of the day - the hum of the motor car, siren of police vehicles, smell of baking bread or coffee freshly roasted, the chime of the clock; all convey an impression which forms a basis for our cultural activity as a people in a place. In the Christian tradition one non-verbal sound that resonated throughout our history and formed a very important link with liturgical life was, and possibly still is, the bell. It is said that Islam deliberately chose the human voice as a call to prayer against the Christian bronze and metal-tongued voice. Throughout Christian culture, bells, and humankind, have linked together to proclaim national events of joy and sorrow, weekly assemblies for worship, tolling the dead, healing a marriage, structuring the day. Even in contemporary society, the sounds of church bells still carry out a task of remembering the presence of God and God's people at work in the world. The sonorous call to a time for prayer reminds us, the hearer, of the timelessness of God's presence and perhaps also the endless nature of Christian faith.

This brings me to the first point I would wish to consider, that of the contemporary problems which we face in liturgy, especially (but not exclusively) in the Western Christian tradition. Various circumstances have led to vast changes within culture over the past 90 years. As we move into the 21st century, the issues of nationalism, warfare, exploitation of peoples, and resources and environment, the gulf between poor and rich, remain as obstacles to progress and future survival. Our churches have their problems too. I cannot speak for our Eastern brother and sister, but I assume that belief now is less a question of uniform allegiance but more 'pick and choose'; a consumer mentality revealed by the many problems we find in the youth cultures around us. Liturgical reforms have also caused ecclesiastical warfare. From the viewpoint of my own tradition (Roman Catholic),

* A paper read at *The Third Encounter of Monks East and West*, Canterbury Aylesford May 24-27, 1996.

the present state of affairs seems to resemble a well worn battlefield, with forces of revisionism and triumphalism claiming a small kind of victory. One also senses that the real lessons of the Liturgical Movement and the underlying pastoral theology of worship have been hijacked and replaced with a preoccupation on validity of form, concern with tradition and exclusivity of cult. There is also another tendency to discard traditional ritual and formal worship as irrelevant, replacement ritual being charismatic and evangelistic in flavour.¹ This bi-polarity is noted by some liturgists who comment on the fact that liturgy has become a scapegoat for all kinds of unresolved tensions.² Liturgy cannot be seen as either a panacea for, or an originator of, all ills in the Church. If the Body of Christ is suffering in its members then the immediacy and position of worship in its life will only serve to highlight what is already present. Cultic demonstrations of loyalty to one form of service or another (a phenomenon in all our tradition) mask a deeper sense of insecurity and unease which has possibly more to do with wider society than purity of ecclesial vision. In evaluating any current situation, we have to acknowledge the debt to liturgists and theologians of the past 100 years who have reawakened a connection not only with liturgy and Church life, but liturgy as life itself.³ The liturgy is the true work of the 'Holy People' where theology is first experienced and encountered. The true worship 'in spirit and truth' gives a temporal people a rootedness in the Kingdom of God, present and eternal.⁴

The orthodox theologian and liturgist, Alexander Schmemmann, puts it succinctly, "liturgical tradition is not an 'authority' or a locus theologicus, it is the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of Kerygma, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the leitourgia is the expression and life, that the sources of theology are functioning precisely as 'sources'".⁵ Ultimately, as Schmemmann puts it, the liturgy and its tradition are realisation of "the new aeon of the Kingdom".⁶

It is this quality of source, like the source of the sound of our call to worship, the bell, that rings true. The voice of the liturgy is the voice of the Body of Christ.

1 See B. Spurr, *The Word in the Desert*, (The Lutterworth Press 1995)

2 B. Spinks, *Liturgy and Culture in Liturgy and Dialogue*, (Ed. P. Bradshaw) (1993)

3 See J. Fenwick & B. Spinks, *Worship in Transition (1984)*, (T & T Clark 1995)

4 See A. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, (Pueblo 1984), 116-118; see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, vol 14, 41.

5 T. Fisch (ed.) *Liturgy and Tradition*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1990) 18

6 T. Fisch (ed.) 1990. *Liturgy and Tradition*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1990) 19

2. *Monasticism and the liturgical Church*

If liturgy is seen as praxis, reform of the liturgy will always be a necessary component of the pastoral and theological dynamic of growth. Enough has been written about the essential determinants of worship to show that the history of rite and cult is not a static line, nor a steady progression of form from seed to full plant, but rather a series of plateaus, hills and valleys. The liturgy of the Christian community has always had its good and bad points. Monasticism has had an uneasy link with leitourgia and as scholars such as Schmemann show, the development of liturgical life suffered some setbacks, especially in the context of people and participation, due to a monastic ethos within the liturgical tradition.⁷ We can assume that monasticism has also made a positive contributive factor in both east and west, but there is a mythology (especially in the west) which equates monastic life with 'good liturgy', seeing what is done in the monastery as a paradigm for the Church. However, the 20th century liturgists such as Doms Odo Casel, Lambert Beauduin, and Virgil Michel saw their contribution as pastoral, reaching beyond the antiquarian interests of Dom Guèranger and his followers in the 19th century. The liturgy is not a prerogative of any one group in the Church; it belongs to the whole community and therefore must be of service to that community and their journey with God. The early monastic tradition, counter-cultural though it may have been, joined the wider ecclesia for Eucharist and major liturgies, then our domestic liturgy formed a diverse response to the situation of their own need and the particular rituals of their monastic life.⁸

What then of today? In the East, the traditions of the Churches see structures of liturgy that have either been taken over or adapted by Monks and Nuns. There are a number of different Christian families with their own traditions of worship and each has its own history. In the west, the monastic experience had largely been confined to the Roman Catholic tradition, with some interesting variants. In recent years the Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed traditions have experienced a renewal of monasticism, hence the liturgical forms have tended to pattern themselves on mainly existing structures. In all forms of this life there is a distinction between the sacramental and ecclesial dimension of liturgy and the rhythm of the monastic office with its particular rituals. There is also another point to be made.

7 A. Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966).

8 The story of Nikon and his act of communal penance illustrates this ecclesial dimensions. See Benedicta Ward (Trans.), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (Cistercian Publications 1975) 156.

The famous story of the Russian Envoys reaching Constantinople and finding in the worship there “Heaven on Earth”, presupposes a level of cultural and ritual experience that involves images and a highly visible use of symbol. Though we can associate this with a perception of monasticism and its involvement in worship, there is nevertheless the alternative pattern of ‘aniconic’ liturgy. The ancient Desert Monks and Nuns stressed the ‘Word’, the western monastic reforms, such as Citeaux and the Carthusians, rejected the iconic formula associated with Cluny and the Black monks.⁹ This reflects the tension between the immanent and transcendent presence of God. Both are valued, both are expressions of the human yearning and desire for God, both are connected intimately with the experience of ‘knowing’ or ‘unknowing’ faith. The Incarnation itself means respect for all varieties of human experience. As Leo the Great puts it, “For that ‘emptying of himself’, by which the invisible God chose to become visible, and the Creator and Lord of all willed to be a mortal, has an inclination of comparison.”¹⁰ If monastic culture has any witness for liturgical tradition, then perhaps the legacy is the timeless quality of the Incarnation which is seen in the life of the Christian who receives life through baptism.¹¹

The daily, weekly rhythm of monastic prayer provides a link between the inner and outer experience of what it means to be a Christian. True mystery is not unfathomability, but as the poet T.S. Eliot put it in his *Four Quartets*, “the half remembered” event, or perhaps, as Paul illustrates in his first letter to the Corinthians that “not quite yet”, the “glass darkly” image (1 Cor 13, 12). The daily office is the focused expression of the unceasing prayer at the heart of the Christian pattern of life. Benedict of Nursia takes a theology of sacredness and enables us to link mystery to the mundane. Like Karl Rahner, Benedict’s vision is essentially a graced nature, the chapter on the community cellerar places sacred and profane in a Christian place, “let him look upon all the utensils of the monastery and its whole property as upon the sacred vessels of the altar” (*RSB*, Ch.XXXI). The work of God (*leitourgia*) is as much domestically as formally ecclesial. It is performed as an act of love, an act of work,¹² whether gathered in the community oratory, the work place or at the

9 For an interesting approach to this, see S. Stiegman, “The Light Imagery of St. Bernard’s Spirituality”, in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God*, (Cistercian Studies 1995)

10 Leo, “Letter to Flavian” in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 54. 758B-760 A.

11 *RSB*, Ch. 31, “What Kind of Man the Cellerar ought to be.”

12 *RSB*, Ch. 43.

table of the Lord. As monastic culture has evolved and reformed, it cannot claim a 'counter culture' to any particular view of the world. Most of its history has been an uneasy truce and the ancient tradition of sacred versus secular is perhaps in need of true revisionism. Perhaps the task is to 'counter' false culture, to work within that baptised, holy people, where true sacredness is found in the gathered community and hearts of the believer. The transcendent witness of monasticism balances the imminent patterns of the pastoral work of Church. Dom Gregory Freeman, one of the Abbots of Douai once wrote that, "Monastic life was a failure, but a worthwhile failure".

This image of failure is not that of disaster, rather the failure implicit in Christianity where sin abounds but God abounds the more; in the same way the failure of the Cross, the scandal and stumbling block¹³ eventually leads to the new life in the Resurrection. We have to work in history, "The narrative character of Christian faith roots it in history: in the history of God's people, in the story of Jesus, and in the saga of the Church".¹⁴ The way of the Christian demands a confrontation with the risen Christ as lord and God, and in Him discovering that the Holy Spirit and the intuitive perception of faith comes first, the praxis of liturgy normally reveals the theology then understood.

3. Timeless and Endless

The witness of our liturgy is partially that of attunement to the rhythm of the heart of God. If God is love, as St. John put it (1 Jn 4,7) and the voice of that love is incarnate now, present to us through the gift of the Spirit (1 Jn 4,13-16), then the dynamic of love will be found in all areas of human existence. That is part of the witness and legacy of the Christian (and monastic) community. The historical picture of the early gatherings as portrayed in Acts sees fidelity to the prayers and to the breaking of the bread, not so much as a monastic but as a Church charism. The addition to this from the monastic ethos is the evaluative witness of the transcendent within the context of the ordinary at all times. The division, historically rooted, of a monastic life superior to, and distinct from, the main ecclesia might have held particular attraction for those who see ascesis as the total Christian renunciation,

13 1 Corinthians 1, 20-24.

14 D. Gelpi, *Committed Worship*, Vol.1, (The Liturgical Press 1993).

but it does not provide the balance of a God who, in blessing this world, sees it as essentially good (Gen 1). The 21st century calls us to another encounter. St. Anselm's dictum, 'faith seeking understanding' is in present terms the consciousness of a faith community seeking dialogue with its world. The vocation of the Christian is to be in reality the living locus of the Spirit (1 Peter 2,9,10), God dwells with us. A connection between what is now and the eternal quality of the Divine finds meaning within the context of the liturgy.

This understanding of the abiding place of God tabernacled amongst the people gives us a locus of sacredness within life. Here the eschatological dimension of time, the proclamation of the Lord's coming, is seen in the witness and life of the Church. The liturgy with its intersection of *chronos* and *Kairos*¹⁵ provides the 'culture' in which the sacred can be brought into human life. Immanence and transcendence are two halves of a whole and our traditions from east and west reflect the richness and possibilities inherent in the wider theological understanding of Church.¹⁶ God, who is unknowable in one sense, can be glimpsed and known within the dynamic of Christian liturgy and life. This is the Pauline image of things half known, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love," (1 Cor 13, 12-13). Through the participatory activity of liturgy we are grounded in God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, which is why the Paschal Mystery is at the heart of our celebrations; it is as Donald Gelpi puts it, "when, therefore, the historical self-revelation of God in human history occurs, one symbolic reality, human experience, is transformed in another symbolic reality, divine experience. Through that symbolic transformation God communicates with his creatures."¹⁷

In pastoral and practical terms, how does this transformation enable the liturgy to form, strengthen and give vision to our present and future? In the life of the Church, how do the various forms of community and their relationships interact and strengthen the bonds of unity? These questions can only be answered in a spirit of trust and hope, but they give directional pointers which I would like to consider.

15 D-W Fagerberg, *What is Liturgical Theology?* (Pueblo. 1992) 76-117. Ch. 3 "Two Theologies from Worship."

16 See A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*. New York 1974. A work which others have followed up, reflecting the richness and possibilities inherent in the ecclesiology of Christianity.

17 D. Gelpi, *Committed Worship*, 178 (Conversion).

4. *The Future*

The monastic community, whether cenobitical or eremetical, is not '*contra ecclesiam*', nor '*contra mundum*', it is part of the *ecclesia*. In this respect it forms a valuable witness to one aspect of the life of Christ; proclaiming the Lord's death and resurrection, it also waits for the coming of the Lord, especially in the pursuit of the journey into self to find God. The tools and structures of their life are really the same as any Christian; it is the way and what we can call the environment, that marks out a different experience. The regularity of the common hours of daily prayer have, in the monastic setting, an emphasis that is cyclical and timeless, slightly distinct from the 'people's office' which reflects the rhythm of the day. All these concerns, office, spirituality, *lectio divina*, mark the contribution of monasticism to the *ecclesia*, but in other concerns, Eucharist, sacramental rites, the occasional offices, we see a wider pastoral and ecclesiological dimension at work.

These are underlying problems with a tendency to 'isolate' monastic culture especially in worship. The use of psalmody might indicate an area of concern. Perhaps the key to our future is to discern and evaluate some of the insights of our liturgists. Alexander Schmemmann points to the ecclesial consciousness of the Eucharist as the central act in liturgy (what the Second Vatican Council called the 'Source and Summit of Christian life')¹⁸ "... And the act by which the Church fulfils that presence, actualises herself as the new people of God and the Body of Christ, is "the breaking of the bread", the Eucharist by which she ascends to Christ's table in His Kingdom. This belief....constitutes the very heart of the early Christian experience and faith, thus implies a tension; the tension between this world and the world to come."¹⁹

Through our signs and symbols in the rich diversity of our traditions, the liturgy bridges the gap between heaven and earth. The liturgical year is itself sacramental, the unfolding of the Christ mystery as we celebrate it, the source and climax. In gathering together as Church, reading the Scriptures, celebrating the Eucharist and our other acts of prayer, the year and the work of salvation are brought together,²⁰ in the cycle of Sunday and Easter we enter the eschatological dimensions of the

18 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10 (afterwards SC)

19 Fisch, *Liturgy and Traditions*, 126

20 SC, Art 102. 106

sign and pledge of the Day to come,²¹ and in patristic understanding enter the eighth day of eternity. Perhaps the best way to move forward is to suggest that the notionality of Church as perceived in the magnificent theology of the assembly; “the liturgical assembly itself is the primary and most fundamental celebrant of liturgy. It is called together in order to carry out, in faith and praise, its baptismal priestly ministry. When it is duly constituted, the assembly is the outstanding sign of the presence of Christ to his Church.”²²

It is in this spirit of awareness that we approach the future, as servants and as heralds, to find in the liturgy “the outward sign of God’s reawakening of the Church.”²³

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21 SC, Art 106.

22 Association of National Liturgy Secretaries of Europe, 1991, “Leading the prayer of God’s people,” 1.

23 J. Fenwick & B. Spinkers, *Worship in Transition*, 197.