A Plea for the Restoration of Baroque and Theatrical Elements in the Liturgy

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Let me begin by making it absolutely clear that I think that the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council was overdue and, on the whole, was an excellent achievement. I am in no way in favour of a return to the liturgy of Pope Pius V, although (as a person born, resident, and intending to die in Valletta, the city which is very indebted to him for its coming into existence) I have reason to be grateful to that Pope.

There are, however, some aspects of the liturgy which have been greatly impoverished by Vatican reforms, in consequence, I suspect, of the desire to eliminate from it anything that smacked of the theatrical and the baroque. The positive motivation of this anti-baroque and anti-theatrical purge was the greater involvement and participation of the people. Today, thirty years afterwards, it is clear that the opposite result has come about the certain crucially important instances.

The best illustration of what I mean is provided perhaps by the Easter Vigil. Let me just read to you a description of the central rite as it was and as it became before and after 1970. I quote from Herbert McCabe. Before 1970,

> the baptismal font was seen in essentially sexual terms. It was seen as the womb of Mother Church, fertilised by the entry of the Holy Spirit, and this was seen in the phallic form of the lighted candle entering the waters. Christ's fertilisation of the Virgin Mother Church by bringing her the Holy Spirit was compared in this liturgy to the fertilising of the primeval waters, the waters of Chaos, by the breath of the Spirit, in the reading from Genesis 1. So the bringing to new birth of believers in the womb of the Church was united with the bringing to birth of the Universe.
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> In the rubrics, the priest was instructed to lower the lighted candle into the baptismal water in three stages, penetrating more deeply each time, and each time singing on a higher note: *Descendant in hanc plenitudinem fontis virtus Spiritus Sancti.* It is quite plain that an impression of mounting excitement is meant to be visibly, factually felt. It was a very strange (baroque) and theatrical (primitive) ceremony in the middle of the night.
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> Finally, when the candle has reached its deepest point, the priest was to blow three times on the surface of the water in the form of the letter Ψ (a reference to the cross, but Ψ is also the initial of the word *psyche*, soul, life). The priest then continued: *totamque huius acquae substantiam regenerandi fecundet effectu*; the Latin brings out the full resonance of '*regenerandi*' and '*fecundet*'.
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> As the candle penetrates the water, it was said to be entering *hanc plenitudinem fontis*; this feminine word '*plenitudo*' suggests the fullness of mother earth, the coming pregnancy of the womb of Mother Church, and this womb is to be fertilised by the '*virtus*' of the Holy Spirit – the word '*virtus*' comes, of course, from '*vir*, man. The Holy Spirit is the virility through which the fullness of the womb is pregnant with new life, - the liturgy said – 'in order that the whole substance of this water may become fecund for rebirth'.
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> Now contrast this pre-1970 version with the 1970 one. The English missal says: 'The priest *may* lower the Paschal Candle into the water one or three times' (He does not even have to!). He says: "We ask you, Father, with your Son, send your Holy Spirit on the waters of this font". It's a nice little reference to the Trinity; but all that rich fertility symbolism is gone. The rubrics go on: 'The priest holds the candle in the water and says: "May All who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life".' This is an unexceptionable bit of theology – but it seems as if the same people who once covered the sexual parts of the figures in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel have been at work on the text of the central liturgical rite of Christianity.

I have cited this one example at some length and it will have to suffice. Other examples, I am sure, will readily occur to some of you; for instance, such elements as the play with candlelight and darkness, which gave a powerful dramatic meaning to those offices of Holy Week that were once known precisely as *Tenebrae*. Alas, they have now disappeared from the liturgy, without as far as I can see at all enhancing its popularity. I will not analyse the significance of these particular losses. Instead I will discuss briefly the three factors which I suspect are the main motivation for their disappearance.

The first is what might be called puritanism, that is, the objection to anything that seems erotic or sexual in the liturgy. Perhaps the classical manifestation of this prejudice is the often repeated criticism of Bernini's archfamous *Ecstasy of St Theresa*. Bernini is accused of representing the mystical experience of the saint of Avila in too erotic a fashion. There is an abundance of such remarks as: "the Angel has too pretty a foot" – as if sexual overtones were not already very much present both in the saint's own account of her religious experiences *and* in the Biblical model which Theresa used, the *Song of Songs*. I will not dwell any more for the present on this topic.

The other two factors are objections to the elements of theatricality on the one hand, and the baroque as a style, on the other. I have, I fear, at this point to give in briefly to the philosopher's professional temptation of giving a working definition of what I mean by 'theatricality' – I do not think that in this context I need spend time on what I mean by 'baroque'. With regard to the first of these terms, I follow those authorities who distinguish theatre from liturgy in the following way: Liturgy supposes that all participants are actors, in the sense that they are all believers that the

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rite has the power to transcend time and make present the past or mythical event re-enacted in the rite (the creation of the world and its recreation in Christ, in the Easter baptismal liturgy I referred to). There is no audience.

The role of an audience may be quite active, but it is distinct from that of the actors, in that their attitude as auditors and spectators is critical and searching, not believing and immersive. If a performance is being done not because all the participants in it believe in the efficacy of its claims to transcend time and space, but at most for this claim to be presented to the critical attention of an audience, then it is theatre, not liturgy.

There is, moreover, a formal feature, at least in a Christian context, that enables one to distinguish fairly easily between liturgy and theatre – namely impersonation. The liturgy eschews impersonation: at Mass, for instance, the priest does not perform the part of Christ, but narrates the account of the last supper in the third person.

I mention this example because it enables me to point out an important and relevant distinction. A lot of the anti-theatrical polemic of the Vatican II liturgical reformers was justified because their bogey were usually certainly mistaken interpretations of the Mass, as if the priest were performing in it the part of Christ in a passion-play. This is quite certainly not what the priest is supposed to be doing at any time – and it must be said that he does do quite a large variety of things, such as welcoming, saluting, presiding over collective acts, summing up, praising, preaching, washing his hands, narrating the story of the Last Supper, and so on. But, at no stage, I repeat, does he impersonate anybody.

Interior of the Conventual Church of St John, Valletta

One must, however, sharply distinguish between the erroneous misinterpretation of moments of the liturgy as if they were impersonations, and the performance outside or even within the framework of the Mass of actions involving impersonation. In other words, it is certainly a mistake to interpret or perform the Mass as if it were theatre, but there is nothing either theologically or aesthetically wrong in introducing theatrical elements or parts either in the liturgy itself or outside it, as what is sometimes called paraliturgies.

There is, indeed, a possible objection that comes to mind against the practice of juxtaposing within the celebrative framework performances which are liturgical (without impersonation) and others which are theatrical (with impersonation). The objection is that such juxtaposition may confuse the congregation as to its supposed role.

Are the members of the congregation supposed to be participant and believing actors or critically minded auditors and spectators? The answer to this objection is, in my opinion, that most members in most congregations will find that such an unresolved and quizzical status is precisely the standpoint they wish to assume.

This generalisation probably became true for the first time in the Western world in the baroque age. The liturgists of the time found themselves confronted with a world which was conceived as "all a stage". Their reaction appears to us to have been that they converted their churches into theatres. At the back of their minds there may well have been an idea that was centuries later well-expressed by none other than Gordon Craig when he was promoting a dramaturgical revolution in the first part of last century.

Gordon Craig was arguing for a form of drama "which *says* less yet *shows* more than all other art forms". There is a clear resemblance between Craig's slogan and Wittgenstein's characterisation of the "mystical" as "that which cannot be said but can be shown". This probably unintended coincidence of language prepares for Craig's successive statement, which might otherwise have surprised us. Referring to the new theatrical art form which he was pleading for, Craig added: "a religion will be found contained in it. That religion will preach no more, but it will reveal … It will unveil thought to our eyes – silently – by movement – in visions".

It seems to me that Craig's notion of the mode of communication of the religion of which he anticipated the appearance was not all that different, at least from a formal point of view, from the aims of such artists as the Jesuit Dubrenil, in the baroque age, in his

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designs of church interiors. They are designed to provide at once responses to two needs. The first is an appropriate setting for the technical implementation of a primarily visual theatre.

This is the presentation of the Christian world-view in the sort of non-dogmatic but subtly suggestive language which is most appropriate for the searcher and questioner rather than the full-blooded believer. A different formulation of the objection to juxtaposing liturgy and theatre within the same framework is often provoked by such art-forms. Already in the baroque age itself, there were many critics (several quoted, for instance, in Gino Stefani's book *Musica Barocca (2)*, who complained that more people went to Church to enjoy art – music and theatre – than out of piety.

Such critics are, however, in the first place ignoring the consideration, at least in the Thomist tradition of theology, of artistic performance as a natural sacrament. Music, for instance, is the combination of divine gifts (the natural conditions of sound production including by the human voice) and human reordering skills (inventing tunes and musical instruments) which makes it conform to the account of a sacrament as an outward sign of inward grace.

More specifically, account has to be taken of what has been called the 'iconic' quality of Baroque music. The word 'iconic' is being used here with the meaning which Pierce gave it – that is, a sign the meaning of which is determined by a resemblance to the object signified by it. I myself prefer to call this kind of music theatrical rather than iconic.

A typical example would be, say, the *O Sacrum Convivium* by the English composer Thomas Tallis. He sets to music a text which talks of the Eucharist as a pledge of future glory, and the music itself sounds as if it were reaching out to grasp something outside itself. Such music effectively makes the veil between heaven and earth appear thin.

There are, obviously, hundreds of other examples I could have taken. I have chosen this particular one because in its entirety it also illustrates a specifically baroque treatment of a theme – the Eucharist. Another of my suspicions is that the allergy to the baroque elements in the liturgy is also partly due to its favoured treatment of the Eucharist as the true fertility rite – of which pagan practices of a similar nature were imperfect and sometimes corrupt foreshadowings.

That consideration brings me to the hypothesis that the real ground of the objection to having both liturgical and theatrical elements or parts within the same framework is in the last analysis merely a negative aesthetic reaction to the Baroque style. Such reactions often go beyond a mere classical distaste for the *"mirabile composte"* principle enunciated by Bernini. Their roots lie more generally in the belief that there is only one style of art which is liturgical.

In Malta, we have had a most remarkable expression of this belief at the time of the Nazareners. In his hatred of the baroque, Giuseppe Hyzler had reached the point where he succeeded in getting one chapel of St. John's Co-Cathedral despoiled of the baroque decoration carved in its stone walls. Happily the Nazareners were not allowed to proceed with their work of destruction. But the belief that there is only one style of art which befits the liturgy is still rampant. At one time it was held even by such a luminary as Nicola Zammit that only the Gothic was suited to church architecture. At other times, here in Malta, it was held that only the Baroque was suitable for church art; and this in spite of official pronouncements to the contrary.

The clearest case is that of music. In the baroque age, it is plain that it is not even possible to distinguish sacred from profane music in stylistic terms. The same is equally true today. But there is an odd paradox in the anti-baroque attitude of contemporary fashionable liturgists. While, on the one hand, they insist on the necessity of a specific sacred style, on the other they show a determination to eliminate anything that smacks of the spectacular, the marvellous, the miraculous, the ecstatic or the supernatural. But the result of this elimination is precisely to remove the feature that could most sensibly distinguish the sacred from the secular.

I will conclude my plea for baroque elements or parts in the liturgy with just one other observation. A great merit of the Vatican II reforms is that they put the Mass back at the centre of Catholic devotion. But at present the danger has turned rather in the opposite direction: viz. that the liturgy be deprived of anything else that is not the Mass. On the contrary, it seems to me obvious that with the greater prevalence of doubters over unquestioning faithful, the need is greater than ever for paraliturgies. Paraliturgies are structured – like the typically Baroque-age celebrations – with the catechetical element (always present in the liturgy) being given a rather apologetic turn. Moreover, it seems to me equally clear that the celebration of the Mass itself would benefit from the creative reintroduction of some baroque or theatrical elements of the kind that I have indicated.

The title I gave to the organisers of this symposium was formulated before I had decided what to say exactly. At the time I was profoundly shocked by the recent horrific sacrilege against the national heritage at Mnajdra.

I also felt that another sacrilege was being committed through the neglect of our baroque heritage – not playing the music – not performing the drama. Perhaps the worst instances were mutilating the churches, professedly in the interest of current liturgical fashions or fads. In fact, there is undoubtedly a genuine problem here. Can you suitably perform anything but a baroque liturgy in a baroque church? Is any kind of music, let us say, compatible with the setting in St John's Co-Cathedral?

Those were the kind of questions which I had in mind when I spoke of "aspects of liturgy and theatre" – but in actual fact I decided to reduce the topic to one of less troublesome proportions than that of the dramaturgy of a contemporary liturgical performance in a historical baroque church. ■

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