

# NTR

WORD AND WORSHIP

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## **Anger, Liturgy, and the Mind of the Church**

1. Liturgy is at the very center of the redemptive work Christ exercises through the ministry of the Church.
2. A community that does not pray together regularly cannot claim to be Christian.
3. Anyone who does not celebrate and live the liturgy of the Church according to the mind of the Church cannot pretend to be true to the Church, and therefore to the Society [of Jesus] and its ministry.

[Theses for discussion. "Liturgy in the Life and Mission of the Society of Jesus," Robert Taft, S.J., *National Jesuit News* 32:1 (October 2002) 11.]

These three general theses began a list of ten which Robert Taft suggested to the participants in the International Meeting on Jesuit Liturgy held in Rome in June 2002. Those at the meeting were strong personalities, teachers, and other professionals involved in formation of communities for liturgical prayer. None of these raised an objection to Taft's theses. Indeed, there was strong agreement that, both in parishes and in religious communities, the liturgy must be celebrated and lived according to the

mind of the Church. Each person invited to participate would have been competent to articulate what Taft meant by the mind of the Church on the subject of liturgical celebration. Though each would have formulated the instruction in a slightly different way, all would readily have agreed that liturgy celebrates the paschal mystery by which Christians come into communion with the Persons of the Trinity, and that Christian worshipers are sanctified by the faith expressed and developed through conscious and active participation in the ritual. All the participants in this meeting would have agreed that liturgy has a dynamic structure, and that worshipers are transformed by their entry into the interpersonal relationships which constitute liturgical celebration. The mind of the Church has been clearly expressed on this subject; the Church earnestly desires that all worshipers participate in the liturgy exercising the fullness of their roles, singing, listening, responding, keeping a reverent silence, processing, expressing in the unity of their action that unity of offering which is given to the Church by the Holy Spirit. The Church earnestly desires that the liturgy be celebrated in public, in assemblies of

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the faithful which are large enough to include a diversity of ministers. The Church earnestly desires that worshipers receive communion from the altar, not from the tabernacle, and under both species whenever the breadth of legislation allows. The Church expects that presiders will be well-prepared, that there will be compelling preaching and illuminating catechesis. The Church desires that Morning and Evening Prayer, as well as Eucharist, be celebrated in parish churches and in chapels of religious communities and apostolic institutes, and that clergy and laity alike come together to celebrate these Hours. Liturgy celebrated according to the mind of the Church glorifies God by its transformation of those who participate in its celebration. All these points were touched on by Taft's address, and the strong individuals who listened to him agreed that he was expressing the mind of the Church.

This group, however, was made up of a sort of elite, familiar with liturgical history and Church teaching, and attentive to the language of liturgy. Their liturgical celebrations, performed in various languages and styles during the meeting, showed the value of celebration, described in a much-loved document from the recent past:

We are celebrating when we involve ourselves meaningfully in the thoughts, words, songs and gestures of the worshiping community—when everything we do is whole-hearted and authentic for us—and when we mean the words and want to do what is done. . . . Christians' love for Christ and for one another and Christians' faith in Christ and in one another must be expressed in the signs and symbols of celebration or they will die" ["Music in Catholic Worship," (1972) 3, 4].

It has often been remarked that not every Christian worshiper manifests much enthusiasm for celebration; many seem to engage in their own private prayer and reflection rather than letting themselves be fully involved in the actions of the worshiping community. At the same time, many seem not to know the mind of the Church as it has, in the scholars' opinion, been so clearly expressed on the subject of liturgy. Influenced by the polarization in civil and religious society, and concerned for what they consider guideposts of orthodoxy, they may express a dissatisfaction with the words or gestures of those with whom they pray, setting themselves apart as a sort of critical subsection of the worshiping assembly. This sort of separation within the liturgical assembly cannot but be damaging to all concerned. Two small examples may illustrate the point, and lead to some suggestions for continuing catechesis and formation.

On an Advent Sunday, the parish announcements (read by this writer, the presider, while the collection was being taken up) dealt with the changes in the assembly's ritual posture under the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. When the table was prepared, the presider would signal the assembly to rise before the invitation to the prayer over the gifts; that change went smoothly. At Communion, all would be asked to use the simple bow identified by the bishops' conference as the common gesture of reverence before receiving Communion; that change went less smoothly. Some bowed gracefully, others bowed with awkwardness. Some bowed solemnly, some did not bow at all, and some genuflected. Among those who genuflected were some parents who instructed their children to do the same. The unified sign envisioned by the bishops' conference would obviously take some time to emerge from the life of this assembly!

After the liturgy, two of those communicants who had genuflected before receiving the host spoke with the presider about their unhappiness with being asked to replace their customary genuflection with a simple bow. One of these persons offered a somewhat disjointed critique of the parish's implementation of the new GIRM. This person was greatly distressed that not all the prescriptions of the GIRM were being followed, and felt that the parish's celebration had expressed a disobedience to the mind of the Church. During the course of the conversation, it was clear that these persons had no intention of obeying the instruction of the U.S. bishops and bowing their heads, rather than genuflecting, before receiving Communion. One of these persons dismissed the bishops' directive with the observation that the bishops had no right telling anybody what to do until they set their own house in order. The anger and sense of betrayal expressed by these parishioners was painful to hear, as was their judgment of the clergy's and their fellow-parishioners' prideful disobedience and their dismissal of the authority of the bishop. In those few sad moments, it became clear why many priests avoid conversations about liturgy and spend so little time and energy on liturgical catechesis.

The anguish expressed by these parishioners helped this writer understand a bit better some of the difficulties experienced in the seminary, where the daily celebration of liturgy can also be a source of pain and division. With the pressure and tedium of daily life, the liturgy can lose its joy. The gospel canticles of Morning and Evening Prayer can be sung without feeling or conviction, and the psalms read as if they had little connection with the assembly's life. Especially when people get tired and testy, some worshipers may fold their arms and close their mouths rather than sing hymns

whose words or music they do not like. Especially on those days, the students may report that they feel divided into conflicting groups of right and left. Our seminarians and other students of theology, no less than our parishioners, are influenced by the polarizing pressures of contemporary American society!

Faced with the pain and anger of both parishioners and students, what is a teacher of liturgy to do? How can we form our students so they will be able to minister to the parish communities in which they will live and work?

A realistic acceptance of the situation seems to be a proper starting point. The anger, pain, and polarization in Church and society are real. Some persons' feeling of betrayal by Church authorities goes back to the great liturgical changes of the 1960s; others date from more recent hurts. Members of the older generation silently carry the pain of the Depression and World War II; middle-aged parishioners carry the grief of the Cuban revolution, of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence in Latin America, of the long struggle for civil rights and of the Vietnam war. Many of us remember the resignation of Richard Nixon; more remember the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Clergy and laity feel battered and bruised after a year of front-page news about the mishandling of sexual abuse cases, and are by no means ready to trust the bishops' judgment in matters liturgical or in any other area. Many persons, including some seminarians, who have been only recently initiated into the Roman Catholic Church, yearn for a golden time of beauty and truth which might be ushered in by celebrations with more chant, more incense, and more silence. Confronted by celebrations which they find banal and noisy, they express their hurt feelings by a reduced sort of participation. The distrust and disengage-

ment are well-rooted, both in civil society and in the Church.

Having acknowledged, however, that such feelings of betrayal, anger, and pain are indeed real, believers must rededicate themselves to engaging in the Church's common worship of God. Taking seriously the pain that Christians feel, especially the hurts they cause one another, the Church must persist in offering itself in the spirit of the same faith which Jesus Christ, betrayed, abused, and abandoned, expressed in his sacrificial offering on the cross. No local gathering of Christians can wait to worship God until all its members' wounds have been healed; instead, at least partly conscious of each other's burdens, those Christians are called to find God's faithfulness, and their own healing, in the midst of their suffering. Were betrayal to block Christians from participating in ecclesial worship, they would not be celebrating the faith of Christ, which was tested, but not broken, by betrayal. This difficult point should be made in conversation and in preaching.

Teachers of liturgy and those involved in ministerial formation would also do well to call those studying for ministry to go beyond their own feelings and develop the capacity to act professionally as liturgical ministers. As other professionals, whether actors, singers, surgeons, police officers, or chefs, must perform their duties carefully and well, regardless of their personal feelings, so liturgical presiders must throw themselves into the celebration, leaving much of their individual preferences, agenda, and feelings in the sacristy. The ordained minister, indeed, is called upon to sing with joyous conviction even when the music does not speak to his own concerns and interests, to preside energetically even when he feels lacking in energy or affect, and to pray with words of confident faith and joy even when he is struggling with

his own faith. The professional minister is called to be a model of celebrative behavior, engaging in the common work and finding the Lord's transformative presence in the subjection of personal feelings of hurt or anger to the discipline of the liturgical ministry for which he was ordained.

Subjecting self to that discipline, the ordained minister can, by example and by word, invite the other members of the worshiping assembly to find God's sanctifying action in their own intimate collaboration as they offer together the sacrifice of their lives. The presider can notice, and call others to notice, the intimate level at which the texts and actions of the reformed liturgical rites bring the members of the liturgical assembly to share their experience of God. People who scarcely know each other find themselves, in the course of the liturgy, repeating words of intimate relationship with God and with each other. They find themselves cooperating in actions, gestures, and songs, working together in an event which proclaims the faith of Christ and the Church. Though they may not bear each other much affection, and though they may not fully trust that some of their fellow-worshippers live according to the mind of the Church, by praying the official texts and by performing their proper part in the sacramental rites, they accept each other as orthodox and enter together into the communion of the Trinity. This acceptance is expressed, above all, in the prayer-action of the communion procession.

The experience of liturgical cooperation, repeated at least weekly over the course of a lifetime, should transform all those who participate in it. In their celebration they will find that they are indeed united in the deepest experience of salvation, of trust, of confident expectation. As they pray the penitential psalms, hearing each other's voice raised in prayer for conversion, heal-

ing and peace, they will gradually learn not to judge each other harshly. Praying for each other day by day, they will learn to take the other's need for salvation as seriously as their own. As they celebrate consciously, they will find that they are indeed being made into one Body and one Spirit, offering themselves in a single offering, rather than each one praying for his or her own acceptance by the Lord. As one body they will sing, "I love you, Lord, my deliverer!"

The discipline of the liturgy calls for its participants to accept a common sanctification, signified and effected by their cooperation in the common prayer of the Church. This discipline imposes on all the worshipers the asceticism of accepting not only the official texts and gestures of the prayers, but also the words, tunes, harmonization, orchestration and execution of songs chosen by the music ministers for a particular liturgy. Their willing participation in an event planned by other persons, near and far, can express that faith that is a total surrender of self, which holds nothing back, but gracefully accepts the meaning of one's life from God's own hand. The worshipers' engagement in the celebration proclaims their faith that the ultimate designer of the liturgy is the Holy Spirit who uses the particular celebration to bring Christians into communion in Jesus Christ and thus to form them to work for justice and reconciliation.

Since the transformation which God works through the liturgy is seen in the celebration of the rite, it would be perilous for a Christian to refuse to take part in the

assembly's songs, spoken prayers, gestures, and actions. Though none can entirely escape the polarizing influences at work in society and in the Church, worshipers, and especially those who preside, must let feelings of distrust and separation be judged by what the liturgy tells us about our unity and sanctification in the Body of Christ. With the help of professional presiders, skilled at setting aside their own preferences in order to serve the local community's expression of the Church's faith, those who feel wounded or betrayed can find themselves overcoming sin, isolation, and loneliness through generous celebration of the paschal mystery. They can, prompted by the prayers in the Sacramentary, learn to take their experience of corporate worship as a saving event, proof of the salvation given the human race in Christ.

We all need to trust the liturgy to do what it does, to ourselves and to others, by the action of that Holy Spirit who is the architect or designer of the liturgy. Trust in the Lord who works in the liturgy can make it possible for us to give ourselves wholeheartedly to its celebration. Faith, indeed, involves giving ourselves totally to God, holding nothing back, not calculating the cost of discipleship. It is to be lived with a full and free heart, with joy and conviction, without hesitation or turning back. The liturgy which is the celebration of that faith needs to be characterized by the same generous, convinced self-donation of the worshipers as they engage fully, consciously, and actively in the work God gives them to do.