A Sacramental Church in a Post-Modern World

by Kevin W. Irwin

Three issues are on my mind as I reflect on the relationship of climate change to the Catholic doctrine of creation and, more specifically, to the relationship of the celebration of liturgy and sacraments to ecology. In essence I want to raise some principles of Catholic belief and practice as they come to bear on the crucial issues of climate change and the state of the world’s resources.

At times I wonder whether, either by default or by intention, we separate the sacred—liturgy and sacraments—from the secular. In point of fact, we worship God through the use of the things of this earth and the results of human manufacturing. In that sense, at least, we live in one graced world.

I stand among many others (including Bryan Hehir and Mark Searle) who have raised the (very serious) question of whether, in the post-Vatican II reform of the liturgy, we have witnessed a separation between those involved in liturgical ministries and those engaged in social justice ministries.

What Is Catholic about the New Evangelization?

As the Catholic Church places great emphasis on “the New Evangelization” (even as it is variously described), I am concerned that what is proper to the Catholic theological and liturgical tradition be central to these efforts. Put differently, I want to be sure that the kind of evangelization that is envisioned comes from the depth of a two thousand year old theological tradition and that what was described at Vatican II as the “summit and source” of the Christian life—the liturgy and more specifically the Eucharist—is central in what we engage in program, process, and celebration.

The premise of this article is that the celebration of the liturgy is integral to and integrative of the Christian life. To understand liturgy at its deepest level is to understand the way an appreciation for creation and human work are integral and integrative of its celebration. We worship God through prayers and rites and a good understanding of them (as the Liturgy Constitution states, n. 48) is nothing less than requisite for a proper appreciation and celebration of the liturgy.

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The pastoral lens I want to bring to these issues is that the social doctrine of the church, including its teachings on environment and the world’s resources, are presumed in the celebration of the liturgy expressed in the sacramental principle and in the way we understand the lex orandi, lex credenda of the liturgy.

The principle and premise of sacramentality is the foundation for the celebration of all liturgy and sacraments. It is often said, especially today when we look for chief characteristics of Catholicism, that we belong to a “sacramental church.” This is quite correct. But some commentaries on this phrase misfire when they turn immediately to the celebration of the liturgy and the seven sacraments as external expressions of Catholicism’s uniqueness. Rather, I want to argue that it is the principle of sacramentality in general that undergirds Catholicism’s uniqueness and the celebration of the liturgy. Sacramentality is a principle that is based on the goodness of creation, the value of human labor and productivity, and the engagement of humans in the act of worship. Sacramentality is a world view and a way of looking at life; it is a way of thinking and acting in the world. It invites us to be immersed more and more fully in the here and now on this good earth and not to shun the things of this earth and on this good earth. It asks us not to avoid the challenges that such earthiness will require of us. We do need to recover the paradigm of sacramentality, not only for the sake of liturgy and sacrament but also for the sake of sustaining one of Catholicism’s chief tenets and ways of looking at and living in the world.

Sacramentality deals with and reveres the things of this earth—earth, air, fire, water—natural symbols that are reflective and revelatory of God. They are constantly used in worship as a means of experiencing God, naming God, and worshiping God. But they are used in worship in relation to words and texts, lest their use be perceived to be pantheism of any sort. The God of creation, the covenant, revelation, and redemption is the very same God we worship through the liturgy. One needs all of these dimensions of sacramentality to try to be grasped by God and to attempt to grasp God. Liturgical prayers and texts that accompany the use of the things of this world in worship help to keep that focus before us. But so do things of this world, things made by human hands, and the use of our bodies in worship—gestures, processions, seeing, listening, responding, and (yes) singing.

Sacramentality reflects Catholic liturgical practice that has always been connected to and rooted in the earth. There is a primalness to Catholic worship that stands alongside our use of prayers that contain concepts, images, and metaphors about God and our very human condition. But to lose or even eclipse the primalness of liturgy is to cut ourselves loose from what is a characteristic mooring for the way we have always worshipped God—through things from this earth, which was termed “good” in the book of Genesis.

For example, in baptism we use creation’s gift of water. Why? It is certainly for cleansing and washing. But I would argue it is also because water is the only element without which we cannot live. Why all the (appropriate) attention given to water and hydration? (As a runner and gym type this has immediate implications. And for the dying, why else are we involved in issues about nutrition and hydration?) Part and parcel of the church’s lex orandi of baptism is water. The value of its use is obviously maximized when we immerse for baptism. But immersion is rich in symbolic and theological content—it is a multivalent act. Baptism is about entrance to eternal life through the elements that sustains us in human life and much more besides.

At the same time, if we extend lex orandi and lex credendi to include and involve lex vivendi (or some would use the phrase lex agendi), then I think we need to look at human actions that pollute water and political machinations that limit access to water. (I often wonder to what extent the issues in the ever volatile Middle East are about water rights and access to water.) And for any of us who have ever travelled to the Holy Land, how much more poignant is praying the Psalms about “a dry weary land without water” and “hungering and thirsting for the living God?” The theology of baptism is as much about water as it is about the words we use to describe what water is and does
in the sacrament. (Hence the value of the blessing prayers we have used in the reformed liturgy over baptismal fonts and over water itself.)

Sacramentality also respects human ingenuity in the way human beings work to manufacture some of the symbols used in worship. The process of making such symbols reflects and respects humanity’s ingenuity and ability to work. Humanity’s work is offered back to God in worship. The reminder that all that we do and are comes from God insures that what we do in worship is not perceived to be Pelagian in any way. Human work is initiated by God and sustained by him. And humans respond by producing what is needed to return thanks back to God. For example, the manufacture of bread and wine are paschal processes of dying and rising in order to provide the material elements for the sacrament of the paschal mystery. The work of our redemption is enacted through the work of human hands.

In this regard I find myself asking the question: Are our post-Vatican II liturgies too wordy? Have we lost this primalness, this earthiness, this symbolic substratum?

**Practical Applications**

1. When presiding and participating, allow the liturgy itself to speak on many levels (especially with gestural speech and symbolic actions) and many dimensions. When celebrating the liturgy, show reverence and respect for the things we use to worship God. Allow gestures to speak poignantly as they accompany words. The use of water, bread, and wine speak volumes about a Catholic theology of creation and human work.

2. When composing petitions for the universal prayer, try to include the justice initiatives of the parish and the ways in which what is collected at the liturgy (treasure in its many forms) are distributed to the poor and needy. Integration: liturgy and justice.

3. When doing any catechesis about liturgy and sacraments, always begin with a theology of creation, as revealed in the use of the things of this earth to worship God. For baptism, it is the multivalence and power of water. For the Eucharist, it is the making of bread and wine and the act of dining together (perhaps a lost art in American society today). Integration: life outside and inside of the liturgy.