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Liturgy and Pop Culture— Critique and Contribution

The thesis of this article is that the contemporary reform of the liturgy can and should make a significant contribution to contemporary spirituality and theology. The particular focus of this article concerns two elements of popular culture that at present receive a great deal of attention and about which the liturgy has a great deal to say—spirituality and ecology. Most regrettably, however, for a variety of reasons, the reformed liturgy has not been mined fully or adequately for what it can and should say about both these two topics. In my estimation spirituality and ecology reflect “pop culture” in that they both can be appreciated as truly *popular*, that is they reflect what is *current* in today’s culture and affect *people* in today’s culture. (These meanings are offered at the outset lest “pop culture” be [mis]understood to refer to what is less than serious, profound or deep.) The article is divided into three parts dealing with (1) liturgy, (2) spirituality, and (3) ecology. In the first part I will argue the role which liturgy should have in delineating what comprises spirituality and theology, especially given their respective histories and the status of contemporary debates about method for the study of both theology and spirituality. In the second and third parts I will argue how what the liturgy says and does can contribute to a more profound understanding of both spirituality and ecology.

LITURGY

Just prior and subsequent to the Second Vatican Council the reformed liturgy was both “hot copy” and an exciting academic and pastoral field to enter. As the Public Television Series on Vatican II revealed again and again through interviews with American Catholics, it was the reform of the sacred liturgy after Vatican II that put a face on the reform council for the Catholic world. The term “liturgy” itself, once the science of abiding by rubrics, became commonplace to signify the public prayer of the Church engaged in by the whole Church, not just the ordained.

Liturgical changes imaged the winds of change at work in Catholicism. Praying the liturgy in the vernacular made it accessible to the whole Church. Liturgy was restored as a primary source for the Catholic imagination and the Catholic mind. On a more reflective level it also

ushered in new possibilities for the craft of theology (especially sacramental theology) precisely because of the traditional axiom *lex orandi lex credendi*. If not always stated outright, liturgy was perceived to be a central means to do what the stated aim of the council was:

to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call humankind into the Church's fold. Accordingly it sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 1).

Liturgy then went through the “liturgist/terrorist” phase with both good-hearted and mean-spirited jokes and finger pointing abounding. Today, most regrettably, I judge that we are in the midst of numerous “in house” (perhaps “hothouse”?) liturgy wars over the techniques of liturgical structures, i.e., precision in rubrics, increasingly legalistic interpretations of who can minister in what ways liturgically, adequacy of vernacular translations and *a priori* determinations of the locations of what I regard as the most neutral of the liturgical architecture debates today—tabernacles, kneelers, statues and stations. Let me be clear. For me each of these issues has merit. Especially if one argues, as I do here, that what we say and do liturgically affects theology and spirituality, then the more adequate our liturgical texts and rites can be the better—for the sake of the act of liturgy itself and the implications which liturgy should have on church life. Certainly at this juncture thirty years after the implementation of the conciliar call for a liturgical reform, a reform to that point unknown in the history of our tradition, who would not expect some “mid-course corrections” and energy put into deepening what the liturgical reform was all about? This means corrections in vernacular texts, composition of more adequate music for liturgy, more aesthetically pleasing buildings for worship, etc. However, for me the skirmishes and fights in the current liturgy were but a deeper set of issues.

LITURGY AND REAL RENEWAL

Liturgical *reform* was and is meant to serve liturgical and church *renewal*. It is easier and much less challenging to debate the externals of the revised liturgy than to mine what the reformed liturgy was meant to unleash—a deep and profound conversion to Christ and a spirituality the scope of which goes far beyond self-help books, recipes of chicken soup for all kinds of souls and the good feelings many Americans expect on Sunday nights when they tune into and want themselves to be *Touched By An Angel*. All too commonly today liturgy's storehouse as

a measure of our theology—*lex orandi, lex credendi*—is kept locked with a “do not disturb” sign. When the attention is placed only on liturgy’s externals more often than not attention gets focused on the ministers, both clergy and nonordained, in which case the very thing that the present reform of the liturgy tried to reestablish, namely the enactment of the liturgy by, with and for the assembly, cedes to a Tridentine framing of the issue where assemblies were passive while the clergy conducted services before them.

Similarly to appreciate liturgy as a foundation of true Christian spirituality—that is, the way we look at life and live the Christian life in our world in this day and age—what I term *lex vivendi*—is forsaken by some virulent critics of the contemporary liturgical reform who want to “reform the reform” by which they mean to turn altars around, put Latin back so we do not know what the *orandi* is saying and reconfigure cushions for kneelers attached to increasingly comfortable pews. The proclamation of the two-edged sword of the living Word of God is forsaken in favor of homilies about liturgical etiquette instead of the Incarnate Word of God being reincarnated through the Word at worship. All too often I fear, the two-edged sword of the proclaimed scriptures has been forsaken in favor of a butter knife to spread your soul-soothing balm of choice (to make one feel good) rather than a knife that makes an incision to dig out the cancer of selfishness and “me-ism” of the nineties. Frequently today’s liturgy wars are about the liturgy as an *end* in itself and not a privileged *means* to discover God both in the act of liturgy and in all of life, more often than not in largely unexpected ways. I am deeply concerned to recover liturgy within its mainline theological roots—*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*—so that what we celebrate and how we celebrate has its requisite impact on the way we “do” life. We need to recall that “doing liturgy” is not just about ritual behaviors—it is really all about “doing life” from the perspective of Christ’s dying and rising.

But in fact that may be the problem, or at least one of the present problems. That is, liturgy’s real meaning may well be too much to take. Dying and rising and all of that, through, with and in Christ. Is it any wonder that we collectively seem to prefer the trees for the forest, to debate each other about jot and tittle of rubrical details and in the process make liturgy seem to be a meeting of the disincarnated and those fleeing into the cult of liturgy in order to distance themselves from human life? This is at least paradoxical since one of liturgy’s main purposes is to immerse us as fully as possible in human life, lived from the perspective of Christ’s paschal victory. In some attempts to make the liturgy comprehensible and available to people, there have been times then we have all too often flattened its imagery, “explained” (away?) its intrinsic multivalent nature, and gotten caught up in seeking comfort

from it when the good news to be preached and lived is more often than not about discomfort first, deepening conversion then tranquility in God. Or as the old poster used to say, “the truth will set you free; but first it will make you miserable.”

GETTING A PROPER FOCUS

My intention in this article is not to make us miserable! But my first concern is that we focus as keenly as we can on ways in which the present reformed liturgy can and should achieve two of its classical purposes—that is to contribute to both the Church’s theology and its spirituality. To do this we will need to view the liturgy principally through the lens of *what* it reveals, proclaims and discloses, and not only *how* the Church’s common prayer is conducted. This means that we are to appreciate what the liturgy celebrates through biblical proclamation, euchological (prayer) texts, symbolic engagement and ritual behaviors in the context of a praying Church that seeks to become the ever less imperfect pilgrim Church on earth.

Such an approach shifts our attention from external enactment to attention on what it is we say and do when we celebrate the liturgy. It respects that the liturgy is always the enactment of the Church’s prayer (sometimes referred to as the *actio* of the Church) but it also emphasizes that the Scriptures, prayers, symbols and gestures (among other things) have meanings that transcend the ritual act itself and that these all have theological meanings and spiritual ramifications. That we still need to be reminded of this some thirty years after the postconciliar reform of the liturgy is its own indictment that perhaps all too often we have not allowed the liturgy to challenge conventional ways of thinking, acting and being.

Some would argue that this is the fault of fussy liturgists whose interpretations of the reforms have been too concerned with ritual details or things. (The “liturgist” as “terrorist” phase.) This is likely very true—at least in some places and as far as it goes. However, what may also be true is that the challenge of the reformed liturgy was so deep and far reaching that people decided (at least subconsciously and perhaps only by default) that it was indeed preferable to stay on the level of liturgy’s external, ritual side. But the truth is that by its nature liturgy challenges and disturbs, and when it comforts it does so from the paradoxical perspective that suffering can lead to glory, that humiliation before others may in fact mean exaltation before God, that true Christian witness may well mean challenging assumptions of contemporary culture and society from the perspective of a gospel whose good news centers on the death of the God man Jesus whose truth, and only whose truth, can claim to set us free.

Among other things the liturgy can and should challenge some of the assumptions on which the contemporary fascination about spirituality is based (part two) and can help shape an appropriate Christian response to today's ecological crisis (part three). Unless the contemporary liturgy, in its theological and spiritual meaning and depth, helps us frame debates about such things as spirituality and shape responses to contemporary crises like the environment, then it can be perceived to have imitated the extrinsicism of the Tridentine reform, which extrinsicism it was supposed to overturn in order that active participation in the reformed liturgy could lead to personal and communal Christian renewal.

SPIRITUALITY

There can be no doubt that *spirituality* is "hot copy" in America today. We are inundated with images and likenesses of angels on everything from picture books, to cocktail napkins to beach towels. A glance at *The New York Times* "Best Sellers" lists in recent years reveals that Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* continued to maintain its place among paperbacks (for over 650 weeks in all!) and his subsequent books *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, *Meditations from the Road*, and *The Different Drum* were also best sellers. For over two years James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* about principles for achieving a fulfilling life, sustained best seller status (under fiction, please note) as did his other books (for shorter periods) *A Pocket Guide to the Insights*, *The Tenth Insight* and *The Celestine Vision*. Clearly more substantial than the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* "series" or Redfield are the writings of Thomas Moore, *Care of Soul* and *Soul Mates*.

Despite this proliferation of literature and angelic bric-a-brac, should not one pause to take stock about what is passing as "spirituality" and ask whether it is not really "spirituality lite?" This is not to caricature or to dismiss outright these evidences of a burgeoning interest in the transcendent. (Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels* from the late 1960s has been heard and is now broadcast abroad in the land!). But it is to ask whether and how foundational aspects of the Catholic life and the Catholic spiritual and theological tradition are making their legitimate contribution to this popularity. Specifically the question is whether what passes as "spiritual" today is sufficiently God-centered, revelation-based and concerned for the common good—both of the Church and of the world? As those who preceded us in fostering the reform of the liturgy in this century in America reminded us again and again, the *liturgy* is the matrix for experiencing God in the here and now both in cult and culture, in rite and in life. Catholic liturgy and Catholic spiritual traditions have a great deal to offer here (Pecklers, 1998).

LITURGY VS. SPIRITUAL INDIVIDUALISM

Among others, one of the defining characteristics of (especially Catholic) liturgy which can contribute to Americans' hunger for spirituality and the transcendent in today's pop culture and which is, by intention, aimed at weaknesses in some common assumptions about spirituality is its intrinsic communal nature. In my estimation there is something of a "disconnect" between many examples of concern for one's own personal spirituality in pop culture today and the fact that what the liturgy enacts are rites for the assembly and for the whole Church. This is to say that by its nature the Christian liturgy is for the whole Church whereas all too many examples of concern for contemporary spirituality concern the *self*. (I sometimes wonder whether there is something to the popularity of *People* magazine in the seventies, of *Us* magazine in the eighties and *Self* magazine in the nineties.) Such a preoccupation flies in the face of the essential characteristic of all liturgy—that it draws us out of ourselves and reiterates again and again that "we" come to pray for and with the whole Church, exemplified in the local assembly at liturgy and as each assembly is related to the Church throughout the world. Notice the pronouns which the liturgy uses to refer to ourselves—almost always they are plural: "we," "our" and "us." Almost always when individuals pray they do so for and with the wider Church. What this grammatical evidence reflects is the ecclesiology of every act of liturgy. Hence if we take the liturgy seriously as a primary locus of spirituality, then by its nature the liturgy offers a serious (and much needed critique) to spiritualities that concern the "self" only.

Recall here the assertion of the Liturgy Constitution that liturgical services "are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating" (n. 27), the recent assertions of Pope John Paul II about the relationship of the liturgical assembly to the theology of Sunday in chapter 3 of *Dies Domini* and the way this theme undergirds much of the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on liturgy and sacraments. Here the traditional maxim that "the liturgy makes the Church—the Church makes the liturgy" should be recalled. In a very real sense to say the word "liturgy" implies other people in community and the common good. Unfortunately today to say "spirituality" all too often implies concern for me and myself alone. Hence our need to allow the liturgy itself to challenge self-absorption and aspects of the search for spirituality that concern "me" only.

Classical evidences of this relationship concern appreciating how baptism and confirmation celebrated in common (especially at Easter) lead us to the Eucharist, that these sacraments taken together comprise what we now properly term the "sacraments of initiation" and that

each of them are liturgical experiences to build up the body of Christ, the Church. Another example is the act of collecting gifts for the poor at the Eucharist so that the gifts we have been given are shared, not hoarded. The traditional role of the deacon at the Eucharist exemplified this as he who helped in the collection of such gifts was the one charged with delivering them. It is not a coincidence that it was also the deacon who announced the intentions of the prayer of the faithful at liturgy and named those who were sick and in need. That liturgy is intended to be intrinsically connected with life and that our spiritual lives are to be expressed in the liturgy and that both relate us directly and fully with others are all premises of church life that can critique some contemporary “self help” programs that pass for spirituality. For the Christian there is no true spirituality or honest search for God that does not also imply concern for the other and the search for the common good. It seems to me that where the delicate balance in the American ethos between individual freedoms and the common good tips in favor of the individual, it is the very act of liturgy that should cause a reintegration of the common good as intrinsic to the equation of what comprises an adequate search for God. In Christianity it always includes the search for God in service of the other.

At the same time there is something of a “connect” between the phenomenon of the “self-help group” in America today and what the liturgy enacts, that is support for all, especially when some of us are weak and in need. The proliferation of support group meetings—for example for those in grief, with terminal illnesses, alcohol and drug dependency, etc.—illustrate that the preoccupation with the *self* is paradoxically balanced in pop culture by concern for others who suffer. No one would ever wish to criticize such initiatives or groups. In fact in its own way the liturgy itself is supportive for the weak in faith (all of us?). It is especially when we feel ourselves weakest in faith or virtue that celebrating liturgy with others can give us a better perspective on what it means to admit our unbelief and to hear the consoling words of the third eucharistic prayer when we pray “strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth.” If we were not pilgrims journeying to the kingdom and if we were not all weak in faith to some degree we would not need the medicines (as the medievals put it) of the sacraments to heal us and strengthen what is weak and found wanting.

But again, one aspect of liturgical ecclesiology that can challenge the contemporary self-help group model of support is that the liturgy (and the Church itself) is always the gathering of a wider group than we would normally regard as those who share our circle of intimacy. Liturgy is not for the like-minded or only those of similar political persuasions, or geographical locations, or economic status or particular needs. The liturgical assembly is always of the wider Church—both

sexes and all colors, ages and incomes—since together in our differences we form the mosaic and tapestry that is the body of Christ on earth. We share a common belief in God through Christ in the Spirit in the communion of the Church, but we do this with all the diversity that humanity itself betrays. Hence to “belong” and be a part of the body of Christ also means to be stretched to accept and love others even when we do not see eye to eye on those conventionally celebrated controversial issues: politics or even all aspects of religion. What matters is that we have our eyes fixed on God and through the liturgy have our vision expanded to include all others who pursue the same God. That we go to God together is what matters and at times that fact is its own consolation. In effect, the bedrock of a liturgical spirituality is ecclesiology—that we are part of each other as we search for God in the here and now.

ECOLOGY

Given the fact that whole sections of bookstores concern ecology and “environmental studies” (with the former term in my estimation conveying more adequately that this world is our home and not just nature outside of us) and “earth day” has occurred for over a quarter century in the spring it should be no surprise that I should raise ecology as an aspect of “pop culture.” These facts reflect that there is really no need here to recycle statistics about predictions for increased global warming, the destruction of rain forests, water pollution, the crisis in water rights for all people or that Americans who make up 5 percent of the world’s population consume close to 30 percent of the world’s oil supply and that we produce 290 million tons of toxic waste yearly. What might well raise eyebrows is that I regard the liturgy as having something to offer to this contemporary concern. In line with the argument of this article, I regard liturgy as a theological reality and source which has ramifications for all of life—the environment included. The intention here is to engage theology with contemporary issues the way Catholic theologians have classically done.

This is not meant to politicize theology. It is rather to insist that theology face into and deal with contemporary issues in the light of our biblical, liturgical and theological tradition. This would prevent theology from becoming to “otherworldly.” It would also rescue liturgy and sacraments from becoming solely anthropomorphic at best or boringly irrelevant at worst. My own suspicion is that contemporary theology’s “turn to the subject” has not always been that beneficial for reflecting on humanity’s place in the world, on the world as God’s gift to all humans on it, now and in the years to come. A certain presumptiveness in repeating theology’s formulae from a former age—a theological fundamentalism—needs to be critiqued by a theology that builds bridges from our tradition to the present. This is what I regard as a Catholic

theological strong suit—adaptability in light of contemporary needs and concerns. One such need is clearly the environment.

Contemporary liturgical and sacramental theologians stand in solidarity with the best of their forebears when they raise new questions for Catholic theology in light of new cultural and ecclesial circumstances. This has occurred in significant ways in sacramental theology before Vatican II beginning with pioneering works by several continental theologians. These include, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx in *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* and Karl Rahner in *The Church and Sacraments*. But without wishing to denigrate their ground breaking and truly revolutionary works, it may at least be observed that nowhere in these two books do you find any sense of the devastation in their part of the world as a result of the Second World War. One can only wonder what would have resulted if in fact their emphasis on the objectivity of sacramental engagement and the way sacraments “work” were placed alongside some treatment of the ability of sacraments to offer hope in the midst of hopelessness or reconciliation in the midst of hostilities resulting from a world war. Or that their sacramental theologies might have included some attention to the Holocaust and mass murders. Or perhaps their theologies of grace graciously given might be placed alongside the notion that “cheap grace” dispensed from quasi automatic sacraments may well have dulled Christian consciences and sensibilities.

Today the environmental challenge reflected in much pop culture offers a challenge and stimulus for growth in theology. A truly Catholic contribution can come from what we do, say and use at the liturgy. Therefore for me to use Schillebeeckx’s work requires that I reflect on his categories for the way sacraments work in light of ecology and liturgy. His sound argument is deductive, from God through Christ, in the Church by the use of creation. But perhaps another, more adequate way might be to suggest that we use things from creation in sacraments because creation was given to us by God, that was good, that its resources were meant to be shared and that stewardship of sacred mysteries necessarily implies good stewardship of the world’s goods and resources.

What I should like to propose is an appreciation of liturgy and a concomitant sacramental theology that discusses sacramentality and the theology of creation at the outset and as a framework continually referred to for the study of liturgy and sacraments. In effect this would take Schillebeeckx’s helpful paradigm from God to Christ to Church to sacraments, to human life and (finally) creation and reverse it. This would make creation the ground of theology, both natural and revealed, and would order a study of sacraments as based on how the God of creation and redemption is incarnated in the world and therefore discovered in the world and in all of human life. This would restore the integral

vision of Catholicism in supporting the value of life in the world, not out of the world, and the credibility of our sacramental structure so that what is celebrated in liturgy is based on how we always experience God—in nature, creation and human life and love. The contribution of the celebration of the liturgy as constitutive of the Christian life would be the way it reveals and discloses how God is discoverable and discovered in human life.

In such a paradigm shift the liturgy would be taken very seriously as a reflection of the theological principle of sacramentality which asserts that all reality

is potentially or in fact the bearer of God's presence and the instrument of God's saving activity. This principle is rooted in the nature of a sacrament as such, i.e. a visible sign of the invisible presence and activity of God. Together with the principles of mediation (God works through secondary agents to achieve divine ends) and communion (the end of all of God's activity is the union of humanity), the principle of sacramentality constitutes one of the central theological characteristics of Catholicism (Unsigned, 1148).

This is to suggest that our focus should not only be on what the liturgy *accomplishes* but it should also be on what the liturgy *reveals* about our world and all that dwells in it. One major contribution that the act of liturgy itself makes is that its very enactment continually evidences the Catholic theological principle that all creation is good and that all creation's resources are for the common good. The very fact that we use the primal elements—earth, air, fire and water—in the liturgy reveals that God is disclosed through material means. It should also therefore have its requisite consequence in reminding us that what we have is really "ours" only to use and that the strong suit in a Catholic world view is that we are to be stewards, not masters of what we have. Recent American episcopal leadership on this issue in "Renewing the Earth" in 1991 reflects the clarion call from Pope John Paul II on the environment in his World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1990, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation."

Here the intrinsic relationship between liturgy and social justice receives a wide angle lens. This is to say that when we pray to the God of creation and redemption (as we do in prayers for blessing water at baptism, or the eucharistic prayers at the Eucharist) that we also view all parts of creation as gifts of God for us all. Such an integral and integrating vision derived from the liturgy can go a long way toward deepening our society's ecological consciousness from any unfortunate separation between persons and things toward an integral vision of persons and things as creations of God and as beings to be appropriately revered and cherished. Even more fundamentally such an ap-

proach can foster a sense of ecological concern that makes theology and a God-consciousness prime elements in any kind of response to today's environmental crisis.

Once the Catholic strong suits of liturgy and sacramentality are brought to bear on the ecological concerns of the day, then ecology itself becomes not the concern of a small interest group; rather it becomes an obvious concern of the Church and the wider world. Just as the burgeoning social justice consciousness about persons reflected in papal teaching in this century helped to redirect attention toward liturgy as related to and not separated from life, so today the justice dimensions of liturgy can be seen to refer intrinsically to all of creation.

CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, it may well be that once concerns about spirituality and ecology are enlarged and enlivened by attention to the liturgy as a primary theological source, then the liturgy can be restored to the Church to its rightful place for what it discloses about life and for what it challenges us to do about true Christian living. In fact these two aspects of pop culture may be making the liturgy return to what it is always meant to be—participating in the life of God through Christ in the Spirit in a privileged but provisional way that is derived from and sends us back to life shaped by what we have celebrated. Such challenges can only help serve to make liturgy less self-serving but rather the service of God before the whole world.

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