

Worship as Public Theology

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Liturgy—grounded in Jesus, tuned to the public, and forged in mission—is necessarily understood as public theology. To the extent that there is perceivable coherence between what we enact in our worship and how we live the rest of our ecclesial life, so will our worship be a more credible form of public theology—an embodied way the church shapes civil, social, and political life from a theological perspective.

There are many ways that believers commonly think about worship. For example, it is often recognized to be an act of faith, a gathering of the community, a time to be with God, and an opportunity to reflect upon one's life. Theologians also have many sometimes similar and sometimes different ways of thinking about worship. Thus, scholarly tomes have examined worship as a formative event, a celebration of the paschal mystery, and the church's first theology. While instinctively understood by some ordinary believers and related to the thinking of a few celebrated theologians, it is yet uncommon to consider the worship of Roman Catholics or other Christian denominations as an act of "public theology." While an unusual category, I contend that this is a useful, even essential way to think about our worship in this media-drenched age that has witnessed an explosion of digital boundary crossings.

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Considering liturgy as an act of public theology presupposes that many, if not most of those who will interpret the meaning of the worship event, will be from outside the faith community where the worship originates. This means that our bishops, our books, our official documents, and our dogmatically proclaimed teachings will not ordinarily provide the lenses for interpreting what we do in our worship. Rather, our worship is and will be interpreted by those outside the sanctuary—an almost unmappable diversity of religious, cultural, and social groups, of individuals and perspectives that are far beyond our control. In view of this pluriformity of unexpected worship consumers—many of whom are unsympathetic to the liturgical and ecclesial values that we hold dear—this article first outlines ways to understand the term “public theology,” considers some of its historical precedents, reflects on worship as an act of public theology, and suggests some theological foundations for considering worship as an act of public worship. Finally, we offer some criteria to pastoral ministers for discerning the appropriateness and authenticity of worship from a public standpoint.

Public Theology: Origins and Definitions

The term *public theology* is a relatively recent term in the theological discourse of the Christian West. There is no universal agreement on a definition for this term that is often interpreted in vastly different ways. Martin Marty is often cited as originator of the term in 1981. During the 1970s Marty engaged in public exchanges about the nature of “civil religion” in the United States. This dialogue was largely sparked by the work of Robert Bellah, who had presented a lecture in 1966 at a conference on American Religion, later published as the highly influential article “Civil Religion in America.” Bellah argued that alongside the “national faith” of Christianity there existed another “civil religion” in the United States that was distinctive from the churches. Martin Marty, who already in 1974 had spoken of “public theologians” (1974, 155), drew upon the writings of Benjamin Franklin (d. 1790) who in 1749 had anonymously penned a pamphlet that argued for the necessity of “public religion” in education and its usefulness to society. Marty adapted Franklin’s term, suggesting that it was more helpful in the current discussion to speak about public church than civil religion (1981, 16). Marty defined “the public church” as “a family of apostolic churches with Jesus Christ at the center . . . that are especially sensitive to the *res publica*, the public order that surrounds and includes people of faith” (1981, 3). According to Marty, this clearly Christian public church engages in “public theology,” which he defined as an effort “to interpret the life of a people in the light of a transcendent reference” (1981, 16). Marty believed that the people whose lives are being interpreted in this process are not just Christians but the broader public with whom the church is more broadly engaged. Thus, for Marty, the public church is not so much concerned with the

way individuals are saved or reconciled to God, but instead concerned with the contribution such a public church makes to shaping civil, social, and political life from a theological perspective.

While the term is relatively new, the form of theologizing here characterized as “public” is recognizable throughout the history of Christianity. Any Christian public theology must be grounded in Jesus, whose life was that of a public figure and whose death was that of a public criminal. He theologized with the coin of the realm in his hand (Matt 22:19-21), he publicly narrated parables about the nature of God’s reign and its in-breaking in human history (Matt 13:11-17), and he ritualized that parabolic in-breaking with multitudes on both the Jewish (e.g., Mark 6:34-44) and Gentile (e.g., Mark 8:1-10) sides of the Sea of Galilee. After trial before both religious (Matt 26:57) and civil authorities (Matt 27:11), he was eventually executed in the public square we call Golgotha (Matt 27:33-40). From the perspective of Christian theology, Jesus was the aboriginal public theologian.

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Many others in the history of Christian thought could also be rightly considered under the rubric of public theologian. Justin Martyr (d. 165) wrote apologetic works addressed to Roman emperors and the Roman senate for the expressed purpose of demonstrating the respectability of Christianity in the philosophical currency of the day. Ambrose (d. 397) carried on public debates with emperors and other temporal powers about the disposal of church property, the protection of church rights, and the nature of orthodoxy. Less adversarial to his monarch, Alcuin of York (d. 804) was not only the equivalent to Charlemagne’s secretary of education, providing important vision and direction to the burgeoning Carolingian renaissance, but served as a kind of English ambassador in the royal court, exerting enormous influence over matters of both church and state. Thomas à Becket (d. 1170) could be considered a reluctant theologizer in matters of the realm, transformed from Henry II’s (d. 1189) chancellor to the arch-

bishop of Canterbury where he continuously clashed with Henry over the relations between church and state, culminating first in his exile and eventually in his martyrdom. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) undertook a tide-turning public debate when she convinced Pope Gregory XI and his successor Urban IV to restore the papacy to Rome after decades of exile in Avignon marked by war and civil strife. In a similar vein one could consider Thomas More (d. 1535), whose journey from

statesman to martyr not only occurred in the public arena but pivoted on national issues regarding the relationship of church and state. Bartolomé de las Casas (d. 1566) certainly qualified as a public theologian, in his very public, decades-long struggle on both sides of the Atlantic to put an end to the slavery of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Many Christian leaders have spoken out over the centuries for or against trends in the wider society or culture from a Gospel perspective. What is somewhat unusual in our own day, however, is that in places like the United States there are increasingly a number of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations that are promulgating their own public theologies. Whether civil religions, alternate spiritualities, or new age trends—whatever the label, in many public contexts in the United States innumerable entities are communicating powerful and often problematic messages about the nature and goal of religion (e.g., that it is for personal well-being), its appropriate uses (e.g., for political advancement or personal development), and even its very viability (e.g., a disposable commodity easily replaced by something else). Churches and synagogues are thus no longer the only sources of spirituality, religious teaching, or even the promulgation of doctrine in the United States. Consequently, we cannot be content with effective and credible catechesis within our churches. Rather, we need to take responsibility for exploring what synagogues and churches in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, have to contribute to the public debate about what it means to be a U.S. citizen, how to treat those among us who are not citizens, and even how we relate to the other citizens of the world.

Liturgy as Public Theology

It is one thing to suggest that public theology is an important, even necessary contribution of the churches today. It is another to suggest that our worship is credibly and appropriately understood as an act of public theology. In order to justify a consideration of liturgy as an act of public theology, I would suggest that it must meet three criteria: (1) it has to be grounded in the public ministry of Jesus; (2) it must, at its heart, be a public event; and (3) its public enactment is for the sake of the world, not just the church, and thus is fundamentally missiological.

Grounded in Jesus

We have previously recognized the public ministry of Jesus as foundational for any Christian understanding of public theology. In order to consider liturgy as public theology, however, we need to consider his ritualization in the same vein. There are individual pericopes, like Jesus' reading and preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27), which could be understood as acts of public theology. More central, however, is the table fellowship that marked his public life. In that vein, Robert Karris asserts that according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was crucified

because of the way he ate (47). This assertion is sustainable beyond Luke, for throughout the gospels is pervasive evidence that Jesus ate and drank with sinners, a charge publicly leveled against Jesus by his critics (e.g., Mark 2:16; Matt 9:11). While on the surface the religious accusation may have been blasphemy, and the political incrimination sedition, the psychological catalyst for crucifixion seems to have been the public theology that Jesus enacted through table ministry. It was his sustained and open dining with tax collectors and sinners that ultimately drove the authorities to plot his death. Norman Perrin summarizes: “Jesus welcomed these outcasts into table fellowship with himself in the name of the kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews’ ultimate hope, and so both prostituted that hope and shattered the closed ranks of the community against their enemy. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Jewish sensibilities” (103). Given the centrality of the shared table with sinners in his public ministry, it seems at least credible to assert that the prayerful ritualization of Jesus at table can be evoked as a paradigm and foundation for considering our worship as an act of public theology.

Tuned to the Public

To suggest that the liturgy is in its essence a “public act” is to affirm that liturgy is always and essentially an ecclesial event. The public and ecclesial nature of the liturgy is one of the most widely accepted truths about Roman Catholic worship in contemporary magisterial and theological writings. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) offers multiple allusions to and assertions about worship as an ecclesial and public event (e.g., nos. 2, 7, 26, 41, and 42). Few are as powerful as number 7: “In [the liturgy], complete and definitive public worship is performed by the mystical body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members.” The current *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2002) analogously asserts that “the celebration of Mass is a corporate act, an act of the whole assembly gathered for worship. All the particular ministries serve this corporate function” (no. 27).

Forged in Mission

A third criterion for establishing worship as public theology is demonstrating how it today fulfills the basic mission of the church. Mission—as it is broadly construed at the beginning of the third millennium—is not so much a church’s acquisition of new members but rather the way a community of faith brings its gifts to the service and transformation of the world. For Roman Catholics this missionary vision is embedded in Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, whose preface (no. 3) states:

And so the council . . . can find no more eloquent expression of this people’s solidarity, respect and love for the whole human family, of which it forms part, than to enter into dialogue with it about all these various problems, throwing the light of the Gospel on them and supplying humanity with the saving resources which the church has received from its founder under the promptings of the holy

Spirit. It is the human person that is to be saved, human society which must be renewed. . . . This is the reason why this holy synod, in proclaiming humanity's noble destiny and affirming that there exists in it a divine seed, offers the human race the sincere cooperation of the church in fostering a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood to correspond to their destiny. (Flannery, 164–65)

Mission so conceived is the very foundation of the kind of public theology Martin Marty envisioned. More than simply asserting that the church is missionary at its core, we must also assert that the liturgy of the church shares this missiological trajectory. Worship is not the only expression of the church's participation in God's mission to the world but, at least from a Roman Catholic perspective, it is a key mode of the church's missionary activity. If the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy affirms that the liturgy (especially the Eucharist) is the font and summit of the church's life (no. 10), then it follows that the liturgy must be the font and summit of the church's engagement in God's mission.

Liturgy—grounded in Jesus, tuned to the public, and forged in mission—is necessarily understood as public theology. To sharpen the point, consider John Pawlikowski's examination of the symbolic genius of Nazi leadership through the lens of Reinhold Niebuhr's distinctions between the vitalistic and the rational as a way to underscore the importance of symbolic mediation for the good not just of a church but of a republic. As Pawlikowski summarizes, "vitalistic" for Niebuhr covers those areas of human consciousness not controlled by the rational faculty, e.g., feeling, memory, and myth making. While many wanted to locate ethics primarily in people's rational capacity, Niebuhr stressed that effective human ethics required involving the vitalistic energies. Pawlikowski illustrates this point by demonstrating how "the regeneration of the vitalistic side of humanity . . . stood at the heart of the Nazi enterprise." With special references to their "public liturgies," he admits how perceptive Nazi leadership was in recognizing the influence of symbolism in human life. Pawlikowski concludes:

One of the convictions that has continued to deepen with me . . . is that moral sensitivity remains an indispensable prelude to moral reasoning. We ethicists can provide the necessary clarifications of human response mandated by such sensitivity. Such clarifications are absolutely essential if religious experience is not to degenerate into religious fanaticism. But, as an ethicist, I cannot create the sensitivity itself. Mere appeals to reason, authority, and/or natural law will prove ineffective by themselves. Such sensitivity will reemerge only through a new awareness of God's intimate link with humankind, in suffering and joy, through symbolic experience. Nothing short of this will suffice in light of the Holocaust. (Pawlikowski, 169–70)

For Roman Catholics, the liturgy—especially the Eucharist—is this essential and ecclesial experience par excellence.

Methods for Discerning Liturgically Enacted Public Theology

Whether worshipping communities are aware of it or not, they are engaged in a ritual form of public theology whenever they gather for worship. Christian worship is ordinarily a publicized and open event, inviting not only the faithful but visitors and seekers to participate. Some worship is even broadcasted or recorded; some sermons are podcasted or printed; and sometimes various aspects of our worship are even commented upon in the public press. While many faith communities have little self-awareness that their worship is, in fact, public theology, this does not exempt their worship from public scrutiny, though it could mute a community's effectiveness in bringing its values and insights to bear in a sustained dialogue with society. A faith community unaware that its worship is an act of public theology is unaware that it is engaged in such dialogue. Thus it may be uncritical of its own presuppositions or assertions about the surrounding culture or society.

Thus, a first pastoral task is to enable our communities of faith to attend to the kind of theology they are making when they worship. Beyond that, such communities need to be equipped further to understand, develop, and evaluate their worship-as-public-theology. To that end, I would like to propose four considerations that could contribute to a more informed understanding and effective performance of our liturgy as public theology.

The Need for a Community's Conscious Self-Interpretation of Their Own Worship

Worship as a symbolic event is by nature multivalent and ambiguous, meaning many different things to different people. No one can control how worship is interpreted by those who actively participate in the worship. The challenge of liturgical interpretation is multiplied when considering our worship in dialogue with a wider circle where it will be interpreted by those who may not share the beliefs, commitments, or worldview of the worshipping community. While a faith community cannot control how worship is interpreted by others, it can articulate its own understanding of its ritual patterns. Whether this is communicated through a community's mission statement or some other media, it is critical that a community of faith self-interpret the public meaning of their own worship and not cede that responsibility to others.

The Need for Worship to Be Anchored in the Tradition

Within consumer societies like that of the United States, religion and worship are susceptible to being reduced to commodities. Symbols and practices are removed from their original contexts and retrieved within the framework of a fundamentally different logic (Miller, 84). In the process, Vincent Miller argues that

our music, texts, ritual actions, religious art, and sacramental elements can become free-floating cultural objects put to whatever use one wishes, even uses that are wholly unrelated or even contradictory to the meaning a community believes they are suppose to bear. This poses a particular challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, where the worship action of a single community can be interpreted by an outsider as symbolic of the belief and practices of an entire ecclesial body or denomination. While one cannot stop this interpretive process from continuing, a community can position itself to identify more credibly and even refute misinterpretation of its central symbols and key practices by ensuring that these are strongly moored within the tradition one is celebrating. This does not mean that worship cannot be reformed, rejuvenated, or reshaped. It does mean, however, that any changes in central symbols or key practices must be linked to deep-seated beliefs, traditions, and values of a faith community. Such symbols and practices provide some safeguard from being unmoored from the context that provides what Vincent Miller considers the semantic mass necessary for their coherent interpretation.

The Need for Worship to Be Congruent with the Rest of a Community's Public Life

More than simply providing a window into a community's liturgical patterns, worship as an act of public theology speaks volumes about a community's deep-seated convictions and practices. Theologically, many admit that worship is the fount and summit of a community's faith life and thus must have integrity with the relationships, teaching, social action, and Christian living that flow from and lead to public worship. There are other interpreters, often from outside the community, who will ask analogous questions about the coherence and integrity of what we say and enact in our worship with how we speak and act as communities of faith outside of worship. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is often criticized for what appears to some to be an incoherent message about the equality of the baptized by what is perceived by some as the second-class status of women within the Roman Catholic Church. The sexual abuse scandal unveiled at the onset of the twenty-first century by the 2003 Pulitzer prize-winning reporting of the *Boston Globe* often elicited a reaction from the public that the Roman Catholic Church's handling of the situation was dishonest and "two-faced." To the extent that there is perceivable coherence between what we enact in our worship and how we live the rest of our ecclesial life, so to that extent will our worship be a more credible form of public theology.

The Need for Worship to Engage in a Mutually Critical Public Dialogue

A common characteristic of public theology as articulated by Marty and others is that of conversation, exchange, or dialogue. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin provided

an example of such a conversation in his first major address on abortion entitled, "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue" at Fordham University in 1983. Roman Catholics, like many other Christians, also conceive of worship as a dialogue between God and people and between people and each other. Construed as a public dialogue with the world, the liturgical dialogue need be mutual. As Edward Schillebeeckx has argued, the Christian tradition and human experience are both sources of theology, which require a critical correlation and sometimes even a critical confrontation between the two (50). Thus our worship not only provides commentary and offers direction to public life, but in this age of postconciliar dialogue must also be open to enlightenment and even critique from contemporary society.

Fine-tuning Our Transmission

The 1997 movie *Contact* is a science-fiction examination of a first direct contact with life forces from outside our galaxy. An initial stage in that contact is the reception of an audiovisual message sent from outer space. After some confusion, the scientists are finally able to discern the message and it stuns them. The message is a television transmission of Adolph Hitler speaking at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The scientists are distraught by the transmission and wonder aloud whether the transmission reveals the malevolence of the sender. Finally, it dawns on them: they are receiving back exactly what they sent out, i.e., the images and sounds from the first large-scale television transmission in the history of the planet. Unaware of what they had sent, they were unprepared for what they received. Analogously, many faith communities may be unhappy with the "return transmissions" they are receiving about their worship from society, but may be unaware that they are receiving back their own original transmissions. The more such communities are empowered to understand the social and public nature of their worship transmissions, the more it is possible that they will nuance and fine-tune those transmissions so that they encourage dialogue and not simply return static.

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