

The Heart's Language: Toward a Liturgical Anthropology

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By the early twentieth century, the battle-lines were drawn up between rationalists and romantics, modernists and defenders of the ancien régime. Outside these categories, but at the time (and to some extent even today) insufficiently distinguished from them, the work of *ressourcement* was being carried forward by such figures as Maurice Blondel, Odo Casel, Romano Guardini, Louis Bouyer and Henri de Lubac. These men were trying to escape the nineteenth-century impasse by looking further back than the Baroque, further than the middle ages, back to the undivided church of patristic times. In the writings of the church fathers they believed they had found a way beyond the opposition of subjectivism and objectivism. The mystery of “participation” would provide the key to a genuine renewal, not merely of the letter but of the spirit of the Catholic liturgy.

According to Blondel and de Lubac, a distortion had crept into Catholic sensibility with the Enlightenment. The distortion amounted to a tendency to separate grace from nature.^[1] The rationalist mentality demanded a world in which natural reason could operate without interference from the theologian. Secure in their knowledge that the supernatural realm would always remain superior to the world of nature, leading scholastic theologians had permitted this separation, effectively leaving society and cosmos to the interpretation of the new sciences. The church had lost its grip on the culture, while within the community of believers the supernatural order, deprived of any intrinsic relationship to the natural, could only be imposed as it were by force - hence the tactics used to suppress modernism.

The liturgical movement associated with the Second Vatican Council was closely related to the *ressourcement*. Yet it was influenced also by rationalism on the one hand, and certain aspects of nineteenth-century romanticism on the other. Aidan Nichols described the confluence of these influences as follows:

If the Enlightenment insinuated into the stream of consciousness of practical liturgists such ambiguous notions as didacticism, naturalism, moral community-building, anti-devotionalism, and the desirability of simplification for its own sake, early Romanticism contributed such baleful notions as piety without dogma, reflecting the idea that man is a *Gefühlswesen* (what really matters is how you feel), a subjectivism different in kind from the Enlightenment's and more voracious, for anything and everything could be made to serve the production of the Romantic ego; an approach to symbolism that was aestheticist rather than genuinely ecclesial; and an enthusiasm for cosmic nature (*Naturschwärmerei*) that would see its final delayed offspring in the ‘creation-centered’ spirituality of the 1980s.”^[2]

Active Participation

Aware of the growing gulf between faith and culture, linked to a division within the church between a passive laity and an active clergy, the church sought to “raze the bastions” and reach out to the world in the Second Vatican Council. Building on Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* the Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy summed up many of the insights of the liturgical movement, most especially the fact that in the divine sacrifice of the eucharist “the work of our redemption is accomplished” (no. 2), implying the realism of the mystery of salvation in every Mass.^[3] This included an acknowledgement at the very outset that action should be subordinated to contemplation, the visible to the invisible. However, the Constitution gave particular prominence to the theme of “active participation” (*participatio actuosa*): “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (no. 14). To encourage this participation, the Constitution recommended simplification of the rites (no. 34) on the one hand, and careful attention to the people's responses (acclamations, gestures, and so forth) on the other (no. 30).

The true meaning of the *actio* in which the Council fathers intended the faithful to participate has been explained by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, most recently in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*.^[4] It is essentially an act of prayer. The Council was reacting against the view that prayer was something the

faithful did on their own while the Mass was being celebrated by the priest. Nevertheless, the emphasis that the Council laid on the priest's responsibility to ensure this active participation on the part of the faithful in the liturgy as prayer did in practice give a great deal of weight to outward and vocal activity, which was observable, as distinct from the more important inner act which this activity was supposed to promote.

It seems that those who were charged with the task of carrying out the reform in the name of the Council, far from transcending rationalism and romanticism, managed to perpetuate the worst elements of both. The functionalism and activism of the rationalist tendency was married with a romantic overemphasis on community and feeling. The dualism of nature and grace was attacked, but not at its root. Clericalism was not overcome, but simply adopted another form. Intimations of transcendence – indeed, references to the “soul” – were minimized. Within the churches, walls were whitewashed and relics dumped in the name of what the liturgy Constitution called “noble simplicity” (no. 34). Unlike the much earlier Cistercian rebellion against artistic extravagances at Cluny, this modern campaign for simplicity was not coupled with the asceticism and devotion that might alone have rendered it spiritually “noble”. It fell easy victim to the prevailing culture of comfort and prosperity.^[5]

The Vertical Dimension

The misjudgments to which I am referring, and which have been extensively analysed elsewhere,^[6] were not able to affect the liturgical act itself or its validity, but they were serious enough to be accounted by many a disaster, and to provoke a schism. How did this disaster come about? A great part of the explanation must lie with the cultural moment. All earlier liturgies, Aidon Nichols points out, “formed part of a culture itself ritual in character.”^[7] The prevailing culture that began to emerge after the Second World War, far from being “ritual in character,” was one in which ritual, hierarchy, reverence and custom were regarded with suspicion. Human freedom and creativity depend upon such rules and frameworks, not on liberation from them. Mary Douglas, a leading anthropologist writing at the end of the 1960s, argued that the contempt for ritual forms leads to the privatization of religious experience and thereby to secular humanism. The reformers were blithely unaware of such contemporary reappraisals of liturgy.^[8]

The very act of undertaking a far-reaching reform in these circumstances (however necessary a reform may have been) was bound to encourage an activist mentality that would regard itself as the master of the liturgy. Humble receptivity, so essential in matters of worship, was “put on hold” during the time it would take to make the desired changes. But a virtue once suspended is hard to revive. The reformist attitude showed itself in three particular ways. Firstly, having escaped from the kind of theological rationalism that was associated with the old scholastic manuals, it fell into the trap of historicist rationalism.^[9] Pope Pius XII had warned against “archaeologism” in *Mediator Dei*, but the commissions responsible for implementing *Sacrosanctum Concilium* appear to have chopped and trimmed, manipulated and manhandled the liturgy as though trying to reconstruct a primitive liturgy.^[10]

Secondly, as Casel, Bouyer, Guardini and others had insisted, the liturgical act is not only a prayer (for at least that much had been generally recognized) but also a mystery, in which something is done to us which we cannot fully understand, and which we must consent to and receive. The emphasis had swung towards didacticism, the endless preaching and explaining of the action of the liturgy. Over simplified (and often patronizing) vernacular translations were intended to facilitate this. But in reality a sense of the sacred is essential to the act of worship, and is always inseparable from a sense of transcendence. Worship demands repentance and receptivity. Correctly understood, “active participation” in the liturgy is therefore no merely external activity, but rather an intensely active receptivity: the receiving and giving of the self in prayer.

Thirdly, the reformers' modernistic aversion to any kind of ordered, harmonious space separating sacred and profane was in fact a reaction against the symbolism of space, and ultimately against all symbolism in the true sense. Symbols were to be reduced to the status of visual aids, in the service of a purely didactic rather than a sacramental ideal of liturgy. This was a rejection of sacred cosmology.^[11] With the loss of cosmic symbolism it was as though the vertical dimension of the liturgy had become inaccessible, and everything was concentrated on the horizontal plane, with an emphasis upon the cultivation of warm feelings among the congregation.

A fourth tendency has been mentioned by Cardinal Ratzinger on several occasions, namely the failure to understand the liturgy as a sacrifice - not as a separate sacrifice in addition to that of Calvary, or a “reconstruction” of the Passion, but as the self-same act performed once and for all, making present the sacrifice of the Cross “in an unbloody manner” throughout the church, in diverse times and places. Thus the Mass was reduced to one of its aspects: that of a sacred meal, a celebratory feast.

Liturgical Beauty

The result of all these tendencies was a loss of liturgical beauty. Not that beauty per se is sacred: that would be the error of the aesthete. The deepest sense of beauty is the splendor of God’s glory, perceived by the spiritual senses. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes on this:

God’s glory, the majesty of his splendor, comes with its most precious gifts to us who are to “praise the glory of his grace” (Eph. 1:6). This last summons constitutes the norm and criterion for planning our liturgical services. It would be ridiculous and blasphemous to want to respond to the glory of God’s grace with a counter-glory produced from our own creaturely reserves, in contrast to the heavenly liturgy that is portrayed for us in the Book of Revelation as completely dominated and shaped by God’s glory. Whatever form the response of our liturgy takes, it can only be the expression of the most pure and selfless reception possible of the divine majesty of his grace; although reception, far from signifying something passive, is much rather than most active thing of which a creature is capable. ^[12]

With the loss of the transcendent reference of the liturgy understood as a response to the divine glory, beauty is reduced to a purely subjective quality - a matter of personal taste - which is then easily swept aside in the interests of a more seemingly objective content: the moral lesson to be conveyed by the ritual. Thus, once again, we see the act of worship becoming didactic, moralizing, sentimental.

If the frustration of the reform was due in large measure to errors such as these, it can be understood and counteracted today only by attaining a deeper understanding of the true nature of the Catholic liturgy. The lesson of the liturgical reform is that the liturgy must ultimately be understood not in isolation, not in purely historical terms, not aesthetically, not sociologically, but ontologically, that is to say, in its full metaphysical and meta-anthropological depth.

An Adequate Anthropology of the Liturgy

According to Mary Shivanandan, it was Pope John Paul II who set the church on the road to an adequate anthropology, for example in his famous Wednesday catecheses on the book of Genesis, behind which lay earlier, more philosophical works such as *The Acting Person* and *Love and Responsibility*. ^[13] This anthropology has most often been discussed in connection with the moral theology of the family. I will summarize it briefly, before trying to relate it to the liturgy.

The first point to make is that human will or free choice lies at the centre of the Pope’s conception of man. This freedom, however, is founded on truth. To choose freely is “to make a decision according to the principle of truth.”^[14] Truth is not something imposed arbitrarily from outside by the divine will, as it became for the nominalists of the fourteenth century. It is normative precisely because it is intrinsic to the person, who must learn to choose in accordance with reality in order to achieve self-fulfillment. Thus the order of values or moral norms transcends the separation of subjective and objective which is characteristic of modern philosophy, because these norms are “personalistic”: that is, intrinsic to the person. The Acting Person coins the term “reflexive” to describe our awareness of ourselves as the source of our actions. Reflexive consciousness is the condition of freedom. It is not the cognitive grasping of the self as object by the mediation of an idea, but the lived experience of being an acting person. ^[15]

Secondly, the Pope recognizes that the particular nature of human action is that of an embodied creature rather than a pure spirit. The human person is a unity of soul and body, so that the truth which must be

chosen is one that includes the reality of the body. Here the reflections of the philosopher Wojtyla are deepened by the Pope's meditation on Holy Scripture. The human creature is formed in what he calls "original solitude," a solitude that distinguishes him from all the other animals. This state of isolation is connected with the fact that man is only able to achieve fulfillment "through a sincere gift of himself." The aptitude for self-gift is what makes it impossible for Adam to find a suitable "helper" or companion among the animals. It isolates him, but at the same time it potentially opens him - to the Other, to the Woman, whom he greets with a cry of joy when she is brought to him for the first time. It is also this capacity for community, for *communio*, that constitutes his likeness to the trinitarian God. The self-giving of man, the fact that his heart is made to be given into the keeping of another, is an image of the divine processions: the generation of the Son, and his unity with the Father in the Holy Spirit who is "spirated" by both.

Nuptial Mystery

Thus the Pope recognizes our likeness to the Trinity not merely in the possession of freedom, but in "nuptiality" - in the physical difference of man and woman. The image of God is certainly in the soul, which images God as spirit. But the image of God as Trinity is found first and foremost in the nature of man as "male and female," and precisely in the nuptial relationship described in the second chapter of Genesis. What is characteristic of the relationship of male to female, when compared with all other physical differences that exist between individuals, is that it is a difference that is specifically ordered towards the reproduction of life. Gender complementarity exists for the sake of procreation. Marriage partners are not merely turned towards one another: they are also oriented towards a potential third, towards the child which expresses the unity of both in one flesh. It is therefore an open relationship, not a closed or dualistic one. Angelo Scola describes the structure of this relationship as one of "asymmetrical reciprocity."^[16] Sexual difference is not overcome or cancelled out in the unity of marriage, because each spouse does not simply complete the other: he or she opens up new depths, new possibilities within the other. It is precisely in this respect that marriage mirrors the "dynamism" of the eternal perichoresis.

The anthropology that emerges through the writings of John Paul II is therefore marked by a nuptial and a trinitarian structure. The Pope's "Christian non-dualism" is not a denial of the legitimacy of Christian dualism, but it preserves dualism within a trinitarian dynamic. It is premised on the fact that all merely dualistic relationships are inherently unstable, and thus have a tendency to collapse into some form of monism. The sexual relationship, for example, if it is not open to new life, collapses into a form of narcissism. Connected with this is a strong sense of what is wrong with the act of contraception. To contracept is wrong because by acting against the being of the child who might otherwise come to exist through the act, it turns the relationship back into a dualistic one, no longer "asymmetrical" and no longer open to a mysterious "third person." It is to act (however unknowingly) not just against the potential child but against the presence within the marriage of the Holy Spirit, who is the Giver of Life.

Now we can turn back to the liturgy. What makes the connection is the fact that the mystery of the Mass has the same root as marriage, that nuptial mystery which is written into the essence of human nature. The marriage partners in this case are Christ the bridegroom and his bride the church. The union between them is a covenant in the Holy Spirit. The liturgy enacts the marriage of the Lamb, combining the wedding banquet of the Last Supper with the redemptive act of the Passion.^[17] Furthermore the trinitarian character of the Mass makes it "asymmetrical" in the same way that marriage is asymmetrical (see Eph 5:31-2). The "offspring" of this union are Christian souls, indwelt by the Holy Spirit.^[18]

Acting Persons

Resistance to the Pope's nuptial anthropology is deeply rooted. Rationalism cannot be overcome by mere intensity of sentiment. Romanticism cannot be overcome by more careful planning and calculation. We are caught in the dichotomy characteristic of western thought since Descartes: the radical division between cold objectivity ("clear and distinct ideas") and unintelligent subjectivity. According to Christian "non-dualism," if two realities are to be united without losing their distinctiveness, they must find their unity in a

third. If this is applied not to the relationship between persons, but to the human faculties within the individual, it suggests that reason and intuition, thought and feeling, may find their unity and fulfillment in a third faculty, the “intelligence of the heart” without which soul and body would not cohere to form a single hypostasis (and without which, therefore, the Incarnation itself would be impossible).

In his essay on “Tripartite Anthropology” in the collection *Theology in History*,^[19] Henri de Lubac traces the rise and fall in Christian tradition of the idea that man is composed not simply of body and soul, but of body, soul and spirit (1 Thess 5:23). Of course, in much of the tradition the soul and spirit are treated as one, yet traces of the distinction remain, whether in St Teresa’s reference to the “spirit of the soul” or (arguably) in St Thomas’s intellectus agens. It is certainly present in *The Philokalia*, where the eastern fathers contrast the nous dwelling in the depths of the soul with the dianoia or discursive reason.^[20] Jean Borella also writes of this topic of the “human ternary,” making clear its roots in the Old Testament.^[21] For the philosopher who became John Paul II, the “third” in question seems to be that “reflexive” consciousness by which we experience the drama of human existence as acting persons.

The spirit is the “place” within us where we receive the kiss of life from our Creator (Gen 2:7), and where God makes his throne in the saints. Thus when St Paul appeals to the Romans (12:1-2) to present their bodies as a living sacrifice in “spiritual worship” (*logike latreia*), he immediately continues: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind [nous], that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”^[22] Paul implies that the “logic” of Christian worship — a logic of self-sacrifice that conforms us to the will of God - corresponds to a new intelligence. Discussions of the liturgy in the immediate postconciliar period may not have taken enough account of this fact – with the results we have already noted.

Symbolic Realism

As a natural faculty, even before it is “supernaturalized” by the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit at baptism, the spiritual intellect or apex mentis is the organ of metaphysics. It is recognized in all religious traditions, and the knowledge of universals which it gives (however distorted and confused after the Fall) is part of the common heritage of humanity. This is the faculty which perceives all things as symbolic in their very nature: that is, as expressing the attributes of God. The existence of God can be known from the things that are made; and the “book” of nature can be “read” according to the multiple aspects of the divine Wisdom present throughout creation. Thus Balthasar writes:

The whole world of images that surrounds us is a single field of significations. Every flower we see is an expression, every landscape has its significance, every human or animal face speaks its wordless language. It would be utterly futile to attempt a transposition of this language into concepts. Though we might try to circumscribe, even to describe, the content these things express, we would never succeed in rendering it adequately. This expressive language is addressed primarily, not to conceptual thought, but to the kind of intelligence that perceptively reads the gestalt of things.^[23]

Whatever name we give it (“intellect,” “imagination,” or “heart”), what Balthasar has in mind here is a faculty that transcends yet at the same time unifies feeling and thought, body and soul, sensation and rationality. It is the kind of intelligence that sees the meaning in things, that reads them as symbols - symbols, not of something else, but of themselves as they stand in God. Thus in the spiritual intelligence of man, being is unveiled in its true nature as a gift bearing within it the love of the Giver. Ultimately things – just as truly as persons – can be truly known only through love. In other words, a thing can be known only when it draws us out of ourselves, when we grasp it in its otherness from ourselves, in the meaning which it possesses as beauty, uniting truth and goodness.^[24] This kind of knowledge is justly called *sobria ebrietas* (“drunken” sobriety) because it is ecstatic, rapturous, although at the same time measured, ordered, dignified. It is an encounter with the Other which takes the heart out of itself and places it in another centre, which is ultimately the very centre of being, where all things are received from God.^[25]

All of this is implicit in the liturgy, the school where we learn this drunken sobriety, this intelligence of the heart.^[26] Its ABC is the language of natural symbols, such as water, light, oil and the gestures of the body,

which the liturgy employs to speak of the sacramental mysteries unfolding within it. But symbols are far from being mere “visual aids,” designed by the experts of the church to communicate an idea or moral lesson that might more easily be conveyed in concepts to educated people. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann explains that the symbol is not merely an “illustration” but rather a genuine “manifestation”: The symbol “does not so much ‘resemble’ the reality that it symbolizes as it participates in it, and therefore is capable of communicating it in reality.” Also, according to Schmemmann, “a sacrament is primarily a revelation of the [potential?] sacramentality of creation itself, for the world was created and given to man for conversion of creaturely life into participation in divine life.”^[27]

Overcoming Dualism

In the preceding two sections I have been suggesting that the “watermark” of the Trinity is found throughout all of creation at every level, wherever the identities of two things are preserved (and deepened) by uniting them in a third. Human and divine natures are united in the Person of the Son (Chalcedon). God and humanity are united in the sacrament of the church (Vatican II). Man and woman are united in the “one flesh” of marriage. Reason and feeling are united in the intelligence of the heart.

Contrasted with this is the dualism which can only unite two things by absorbing one of them into the other. Dualism of this type afflicts the relationship of church and world, priest and people, grace and nature, faith and culture, man and woman. It is the root both of clericalism and of secularism. The obvious conclusion from this analysis is that many seemingly unrelated problems in the church have a common cause. The crisis over sexuality, brought into the open by the reaction to *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, stems from the mentality that fails to understand the true nature of the “asymmetric” relationship between man and woman. This is the same mentality that fails to understand the relationship between priest and people in the liturgy. This failure may express itself either in a clerical domination of the laity, or in a reversal of that relationship that eliminates all sense of the transcendent. On the one side, we find a poisonous cocktail of clericalism, aestheticism and misogyny. On the other, we observe “politically correct” liturgies devoted to the themes of justice and peace.

Social charity cannot be reduced to a dualistic relationship without becoming either sentimental or domineering. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the liturgy gradually became separated from any living concern with social justice – or at least, it seems to have become hard to see the connection.^[28] Naturally, Christians were expected to go out from the liturgy and live virtuous lives, and thus have a transformative effect on society, but they did this by crossing from sacred space into secular space, rather than by discovering a deeper relationship between the two. This could be described as a profanization of charity; a secularization of solidarity. The post-conciliar reaction was to emphasize the horizontal dimension of the liturgy (social concern) over the vertical (the act of worship), or even to confuse the two. Whole religious orders went into steep decline as the communitarian aspect of their mission took precedence over the liturgical, the love of neighbor over the love of God. The problem of liberation theology was fundamentally therefore a product not of the 1960s, but of the dualism of an earlier era.

Social Solidarity

Social solidarity is more securely grounded on right worship than on common feelings: The love of neighbor is founded on the love of God. This is in fact one of the clear implications, not only of the Ten Commandments themselves (the first three of which are devoted to the worship of God), but of the new Christian anthropology. The human person is by its very nature “trans-centric,” or other-centered. We love God, and this opens us to the life of the other in our neighbor; we love our neighbor, and this opens us to the love of God. We do not simply go out to do good to another in the world, inspired by our worship of God in the church. Rather, the love of God sends us out to do good, because it reveals who we are and who is our neighbor. We are not (only) imitating the love of God that we see demonstrated in the liturgy, but living the liturgy out in the world.^[29] The liturgy is not (merely) separate in a horizontal sense from what goes on outside, but separate in the sense of being “interior,” or revealing the inner meaning and purpose of

what lies outside. Sacred space, sacred time and sacred art are distinctive, not (just) as belonging to a parallel world, but as defining the centre of this world: the world in which we live and work.

The secure possession of an authentic Christian anthropology thus reveals itself in the close involvement of the church - whether as parish, as diocese, as religious order, as secular institute or as ecclesial movement - in forms of social action to relieve distress and to build a “culture of life.” But it also reveals itself in more subtle ways: in the spirit with which the priest addresses the congregation, and the respect with which he is treated by them.^[30] He must lavish the same quality of attentiveness and devotion on the least of his brethren as he does on his rubrics and vestments on the one hand, and on the parish stalwarts on the other. Simone Weil once said that “prayer is attention,” and we can make her words our own. The living prayer which is kindled in the liturgy - as it were from the Paschal candle at Eastertide - and without which the liturgy becomes an empty shell, involves a quality of loving attention which is directed towards that Other whom God has placed in our path, the Other who is a sign of the uniting Third, the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

My intention in this paper was to steer a course between the clashing rocks of rationalism and romanticism. The modern temptation is to think that the liturgy is something we can analyze “scientifically,” with a view to controlling and perhaps improving it. Alternatively, we may think it nothing more than a collective celebration of togetherness to generate a strong community spirit. Here the rational and romantic approaches bring out the worst in each other. But with the awakening of the heart’s intelligence, both approaches are transformed. The liturgy is understood from within, organically rather than mechanically. It is no longer a machine to be tinkered with, but a garden to be tended. The romantic tendency is also transformed. Feelings are rightly ordered towards the God who is our true centre because he is transcendent, and who is the giver of unity because he is other than ourselves.

Understood in this way the liturgy reveals us to ourselves, because it reveals “the mystery of the Father and his love” (in the famous words of *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). The Father’s love is not a thing, not an object to be known and researched, but an act, a deed, an event, which may be known only through participation. In the Son, in the reception of his gift which is the Holy Spirit and Redemption, we are broken open and poured out for the world, mingling our lives with his in the communion of the church. Such talk makes no sense if the heart is not able to see the whole in the parts, the symbols as sacrament. But if the eye of the heart is opened, the world’s true centre and purpose are unveiled. Our own identity as children of God, our “most high calling,” is brought to light.