

PART TWO

CELEBRATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE LITURGY

(Catechism nn. 1066-1212)

Having completed the reflections on the Creed, the Catechism in Part Two (n. 1066-1690) looks at the celebration of the Christian Mystery in the liturgy and the sacraments. This present chapter (Catechism 1066-1209) lays the foundation. We will build on it in later chapters as we reflect on each of the sacraments in turn.

The Letter to the Hebrews (an oration, rather than a letter) speaks of the risen Jesus as ‘a minister (Greek: *leitourgos*) in the sanctuary of heaven’ (Hebrews 8:2), and speaks of his ‘ministry’ (Greek: *leitourgia*, Hebrews 8:6). Literally this denotes a ‘work’ (Greek: *ergon*) of the people (Greek: *laos*). His is a ‘priestly’ ministry: mediating between God and mankind, revealing to us God’s word, God’s will, and, in a special way, God’s redeeming love. The Newer Testament also speaks of Jesus as a ‘prophet’, that is to say, one who speaks God’s word to the people from the sanctuary of his own communion with God; and as a ‘king’, that is to say, one who brings about the reign of God among the people, thus making the world a sacred place, a ‘holy land’, a ‘sanctuary’. All this is central to our understanding of liturgy.

A sacrament, as the word indicates, refers to something that pertains to the ‘sacred’. The Latin ‘*sacramentum*’ translates the Greek ‘*mysterion*’, as when Paul writes about ‘the mystery made known to me by revelation’ (Ephesians 3:3). Sometimes the Greek ‘*mysterion*’ is translated by the Latin ‘*mysterium*’ as when Mark speaks of ‘the mystery of the kingdom of God’ (Mark 4:11). So there is a close relationship between ‘sacrament’ and ‘mystery’. A ‘mystery’ denotes something revealed by God, but able to be perceived only by one who is open to believe (having a faith that loves). The Latin words ‘*sacramentum*’ and ‘*symbolum*’ are often used interchangeably in tradition, so there is also an intimate connection between ‘sacrament’ and ‘symbol’. A ‘symbol’ (from the Greek ‘*symbolon*’, meaning something that is ‘throw together’) denotes something that brings many different aspects together. Since God is ‘the Heart and the Beyond of everything’ (Teilhard), ultimately a symbol is something that reveals the divine. The conclusion is that a sacrament is a liturgical happening in which the divine is revealed, though always in mystery and symbol.

In this sense, for Christians, Jesus is the sacrament, the mystery, the symbol of God. As Jesus said to Philip: ‘to see me is to see the Father’ (John 14:8). Because the Church lives by Jesus’ Spirit, and is therefore the ‘Body’ of the Risen Christ, the Church is the sacrament, the mystery, the symbol of the Risen Christ. The Church is the community of disciples of Jesus, the Way to the Father (John 14:10), and the sacraments, as part of the Church’s liturgy, have a central place in the journey of Jesus’ disciples into the fullness of communion with God. The Catechism (n. 1068) states:

‘It is the Paschal mystery of Christ that the Church proclaims and celebrates in her liturgy, so that the faithful may live from it and bear witness to it in the world.’

The word ‘mystery’ is used here because, as already explained, only one who believes is open to and able to receive what God is revealing. It is not something that can be comprehended by unaided logic. It requires openness to love and a willingness to transcend the self. The Catechism speaks of the ‘Paschal’ mystery, referring to Jesus’ self-giving on the cross and to his being embraced by God in the resurrected life.

The Catechism (n. 1068) goes on to quote from the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 2):

‘It is in the liturgy, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, that the work of our redemption is accomplished, and it is through the liturgy especially that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.’

In the next number (n. 1069) the Catechism quotes from the same document (SC, 7):

‘The liturgy is an exercise of the priestly work of Jesus Christ ... Every liturgical celebration ... is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body, which is the Church.

It is also an exercise of Jesus’ prophetic and kingly work (Catechism n. 1069). We will reflect further on Jesus as priest, prophet and king when dealing with baptism in the following chapter.

The Catechism (n. 1072) continues its introduction to the essential sacramental nature of the Church:

‘The sacred liturgy must be preceded by evangelisation, faith and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the lives of the faithful: new life in the Spirit, involvement in the mission of the Church, and service to her unity.’

To enter into the liturgy, we need the faith that opens us to the mysterious revelation of the transcendent God. Faith is a response to hearing the Good News, and faith, to be real, must show itself in love (Galatians 5:6). As Paul says:

“‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’”. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:13-15).

When we take part in the liturgy, Jesus is in our midst, and we are praying his prayer and enjoying his communion with God:

‘The liturgy is a participation in Christ’s own prayer addressed to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy all Christian prayer finds its source and goal. Through the liturgy our inner self is rooted and grounded in the great love with which the Father loves us in his Beloved Son’ (Catechism n. 1073).

The central place of the liturgy in the life of the community is highlighted by the Catechism (n. 1074):

‘The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed. It is also the font from which all her power flows. It is the privileged place for catechising the People of God. Liturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (‘mystagogy’) by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to what it is that is signified, from the sacraments to the mysteries’ (n. 1075).

Christ present in the Liturgy

It is the Risen Christ who calls us together. It is the Risen Christ who is present at the heart of the assembled community and who is acting through each of the people ministering in their various roles:

‘Christ is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptises it is really Christ himself who baptises. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. He is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised “where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in their midst”’ (Catechism n.1088).

As the community lives through the great events of our salvation throughout the liturgical year, these events are made present to us, for the liturgy is not just something that we are doing. It is something that God, who is not bound by space and time, is doing. We are taken into the ‘now’ of God, in which we are present to all God’s action, especially God’s action in Jesus.

‘The Church re-reads and re-lives the great events of salvation history in the “today” of her liturgy’ (Catechism n. 1095).

In the liturgy Jesus’ self-giving (culminating on Calvary) and God’s taking him into the risen life are re-presented (made present again) for us and for our salvation. In the liturgy we gather as God’s People to open our hearts to welcome the blessings that God is pouring out upon us.

The Catechism focuses on the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy:

‘The liturgical assembly derives its unity from the “communion of the Holy Spirit” who gathers the children of God into the one Body of Christ’ (n.1097).

‘The grace of the Holy Spirit seeks to awaken faith, conversion of heart, and adherence to the Father’s will. These dispositions are the precondition both for the reception of other graces conferred in the celebration itself and the fruits of new life that the celebration is intended to produce afterward’ (n.1098).

‘The Holy Spirit gives a spiritual understanding of the Word of God to those who read or hear it, according to the disposition of their hearts. By means of the words, actions, and symbols that form the structure of the celebration, the Spirit puts the faithful and the ministers into a living relationship with Christ, the Word and Image of the Father, so that they can live out the meaning of what they hear, contemplate and do in the celebration’ (n. 1101).

‘The mission of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy of the Church is to prepare the assembly to encounter Christ; to recall and manifest Christ to the faith of the assembly; to make the saving work of Christ present and active by his transforming power; and to make the gift of communion bear fruit in the Church’ (n. 1112).

An important aspect of the sacraments is the assurance of faith that the grace signified by the sacramental symbols is certainly being offered, and, since God is the one offering, it is offered unconditionally. Of course, though it is certainly and unconditionally offered, it is conditionally received, for its reception is dependent on the faith and dispositions of the person receiving the sacrament.

‘Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. This is because in them Christ himself is acting’ (n. 1127).

The sacraments belong to the Church. Because of the communion of saints (see Chapter 15), we should appreciate that more is happening than what we can discern with our senses. The whole Church is present at the liturgy:

‘The liturgy is offered by the powers of heaven, the whole of creation, the people of the Old and New Covenants: ‘a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages’ (Revelation 7:9) (Catechism n. 1138).

There was a time when it seemed as though the people in the sanctuary, especially the priest, were ‘doing’ the liturgy, while the rest of us were observing. This was never meant to be the case, and, especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has clearly proclaimed that every baptized person is celebrating the liturgy:

‘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, and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people”, have a right and an obligation by reason of their Baptism’ (n. 1141).

‘In the celebration of the sacraments it is the whole assembly that is *leitourgos*, each according to its function, but in the unity of the Spirit who acts in all’ (n. 1144).

While everyone is celebrating the liturgy, some are called to exercise a special role in it. Some ministers are consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the Head. The ordained minister is, as it were, an ‘icon’ of Christ the priest (Catechism n. 1142). Other liturgical ministries include acolytes, servers, readers, commentators, music ministers, special ministers of the Eucharist (Catechism n. 1143).

The ‘harmony of signs (song, music, words and actions) is all the more expressive and fruitful when expressed in the cultural richness of the People of God who celebrate’ (Catechism n. 1158). The Catechism goes on to speak of images (n. 1159-1162), liturgical seasons, including the central place in the liturgy of Sunday as the Day of the Resurrection (n. 1163-1173), the Liturgy of the Hours (n. 1174-1178), and the role of the Church building (n. 1179-1186). ‘The Church is the house of all God’s children, open and welcoming’ (n. 1186).

The Prayer of the Church

A comment on the Prayer of the Church’ (also called the ‘Divine Office’) is perhaps in order here. It is a structured form of prayer, which includes hymns, psalms, Scripture readings and prayers of petition. In promulgating the new form of the Divine Office in 1970, Pope Paul VI wrote:

‘Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of humankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his or her part in this prayer which

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is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the Beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people and making intercession for the necessities common to all humankind. It obtains its unity from the heart of Christ himself. Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice, wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official Prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his voice in us.’

In his commentary on the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, Father Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Liturgical prayer, like every other prayer, is to be vivified by interior prayer. If the external movement that it imposes, the art that it cultivates, the sustained attention that it requires, should hinder or even destroy the contemplation that it is meant to serve, the devotion that it should stimulate, or the interior spirit that it wants to express, it would be mere external worship that God could not accept, according to the words of Scripture: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (Isaiah 29:13, quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:6). The beginner must learn to pray with the Church, to enter into the majestic beauty of her ceremonies, to penetrate their symbolism and delight in her liturgical texts. We must above all seek in liturgical prayer the movements of the soul of Christ in the Church, listening to the movements of his Spirit of Love, and so learn in the school of Jesus Christ our Master his daily intimate and silent prayer’ (I want to see God page 191).

The importance of inculturation

‘The Church is Catholic, capable of integrating into her unity, while purifying, all the authentic riches of cultures’ (Catechism n. 1202).

‘In order that the mystery of Christ be “made known to all the nations ... to bring about the obedience of faith” (Romans 16:26), it must be proclaimed, celebrated and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and brought to their fullness. It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God’s children has access to the Father in the one Spirit’ (n. 1204).

Great care must be taken in speaking of ‘the world’. Sometimes in the New Testament ‘the world’ denotes those who reject grace and refuse God’s offer of healing love. In his Letter, John warns against ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’. Those ‘in the world’ are those who prefer darkness to light. At other times ‘the world’ is the object of God’s unconditional love. If our focus is on sin it should be obvious that ‘the world’ exists both outside and inside the Christian community. If this is overlooked there is a danger (evident from a reading of history) that people will see ‘the world’ and ‘the Church’ as inhabiting different domains. In this false perspective, the sacraments can be thought of as graced divine interventions that happen within the Church, setting it apart from an otherwise graceless world.

Don't we believe, thanks to Jesus, that God wills everyone to be saved? Don't we believe Jesus when he says: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself'? One of the great contributions of the Second Vatican Council was an optimistic view of salvation. A deeper awareness of God's universal and unconditional love has brought us to the realisation that rejection of grace happens only when a person determines to act against his or her conscience. The world is full of good people who are responding to grace, whether they realise it or not, in striving for the truth and in responding to situations in love.

The sacraments are not graced interventions that belong to the Church in an otherwise graceless world. They are special moments that manifest what God is doing in the world. In the sacraments are manifested what is going on at the heart of the human condition. The Christian community is saying an explicit "Yes" to what God is doing throughout the world. The conferring of a sacrament, including as it does the "Yes" of the recipient, brings about a surge of grace, the grace which is already and always working at the heart of creation. As the Second Vatican Council assures us, the Church is a sacrament of salvation (life) for the world. In 'the world' grace is hidden. God is drawing people to his heart, wanting them to know 'the truth' by experiencing consciously the wonder of divine communion. This truth is made manifest in the Church, especially in the sacraments.

In his *Theological Investigations* Volume 14, Karl Rahner, speaking of the welcoming of God's offer of communion, writes:

'This proceeds from the innermost heart and centre of the world and of the human: it takes place not as a special phenomenon, as one particular process apart from the rest of human life. Rather, it is quite simply the ultimate depths and the radical dimension of all that which the spiritual creature experiences, achieves and suffers in all those areas in which human beings achieve their own fullness, and so in their laughter and its tears, in their taking of responsibility, in their loving, living and dying, whenever a person keeps faith with the truth, breaks through his own egoism in his relationships, whenever he hopes against all hope, whenever he smiles and refuses to be disquieted or embittered by the folly of everyday pursuits, whenever he is able to be silent, and whenever within this silence of the heart that evil which a man has engendered against another in his heart does not develop any further into external action, but rather dies within his heart as in a grave – whenever, in a word, life is lived as a human being would seek to live it, in such a way as to overcome his own egoism and the despair of his heart which constantly assails him. There grace has the force of an event, because all this of its very nature loses itself in the silent infinitude of God, is hidden in the absolute unconditionality in the future of the fulness of victory which in turn is God himself'(pages (167-168).

The conferring of a sacrament, including as it does the "Yes" of the recipient, brings about a surge of the grace it signifies, the grace which is always working at the heart of creation. Those who experience the privilege of enjoying the sacraments of the Church's liturgy, should do all in the power to attract others to know how amazing is the love of God and the longing of the heart of Jesus that everyone experience the freedom of living a full human life in conscious communion with God.

