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LITURGY AS CENTRE OF ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS CHRIST

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Introduction

Right from the beginning of this consideration, it is important to state that the Church exists to worship God. This basic fact needs to be asserted clearly and unambiguously again and again, for it is not at all obvious to many of us who think that the Church exists to evangelise the world (the Church is mission) or to serve people's needs (the clergy are thought of as members of the helping professions). The Church, in her grandest view of herself and her most basic view of her purpose, exists to give God what is due, to acknowledge God as God. The one who is the creator and preserver of the whole universe is, as the *Te Deum* sings, "worthy of all worship". The purpose of the Church is to render that worship (cf. 1 Peter 2: 9).

The Church achieves this major purpose through her liturgy, which is celebration by its very nature. Often the experience of liturgy is non-celebratory and non-involving of people and their real lives. If and when this happens, it would not be a failure of the liturgy, but rather a failure in terms of what is done with the liturgy. Liturgy cannot of itself attain its purpose, since it depends on those who carry it out and often people find themselves highly disappointed because the liturgy fails to achieve its purpose. Liturgy has often been misunderstood by those who handle it and that is why today, there are so many aberrations and abuses in the celebration of the liturgy and other sacraments. There are many attitudes that need to be examined and false conceptions that should be clarified in order to arrive at the realization of a liturgy that is celebration - a true liturgy that moves towards an integration of people's lives on the mystery of salvation. We begin by looking at the nature of liturgy.

1. Towards a Definition of Liturgy

Many authors offer divergent definitions of liturgy and there is significant diversity even in Catholic Church documents concerning its function. Vatican II calls the liturgy "culmen et fons" and gives a summary statement thus:

Nevertheless the liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.

This article places the liturgy in a very particular role within all the works of the Church. It is the greatest of the works of the Church and the point towards which all her activities are drawn. It provides the means of fulfillment, since it takes all the other duties beyond their immediate effectiveness and places them within the whole stream of salvation.

Again in this definition, there is a clear recognition of the dual movement of the liturgy. The liturgy aims at the encounter and integration of the lives of the celebrating community and the mystery of salvation - the lives of the community are drawn into the mystery and the mystery flows into all that goes to make the community's life reality. In this interaction, there is a growth in relationship - God and the people and the relationships of the people themselves so that salvation is experienced and worked out within the liturgy as the core activity of the community.

Liturgy is not a substitute for a life involvement, but the point towards which all life in Christ is directed and taken beyond itself into Christ and the realization of his perfect sacrifice at the right hand of the Father. Conceiving liturgy in this way corroborates the idea of Christ's ongoing intercession as expressed in Heb 7: 24-25. The liturgy enables the community to encounter that expression of the High Priest as present within their lives and to be able to be joined in that offering of his sacrifice, by the presentation of their own life sacrifice.

The liturgy is the making present and realization of the whole mystery of salvation precisely because it is integrated into real lives (those of the celebrating community and those for whom the liturgy is celebrated). Is it possible that such a process of making present is executed without this presence being encountered? The very idea of presence demands encounter if it is in any way to be a significant reality. It is here that a real problem lies, since the principle of "ex opere operato" has been extended to guarantee such an encounter. "Ex opere operato" is put forward to safeguard the fact that the liturgy creates the presence of Christ and his salvation, irrespective of the disposition of the celebrant. In this regard Schillebeeckx comments:

*Hence ex opere operato efficacy means that the sacrament, as an act which is done in virtue of character, is objectively and ministerially an act of Christ, an objective celebration in mystery of the historical, redemptive mystery of Christ, in such a way that it brings about the unmerited application of the Redemption, a work of pure mercy, to this person. In this sense ex opere operato is a reference to the universal causality of Christ's mediation, to the pure gratuity of redemption...*⁷

However, this principle says nothing about the recipient or the celebrating community. Such encounter with presence demands the involvement of the person and this is impossible without involvement. Here Schillebeeckx makes the distinction between the "merely valid" and the fruitful sacrament.⁸ The liturgy demands the right disposition in the recipient - a willingness to enter into and live the grace that is opening out by virtue of what is done in that liturgy.

To speak of celebrating the liturgy, therefore, demands the involvement of a believing community ready to move with the encounter experience of Christ as he leads participants to the realization of his work of salvation. This implies that salvation is not magically attained through a process of osmosis by being present at liturgy (spectator mentality), but rather arrived at because the liturgy enables salvation to enter into people's lives and their lives to be lived within the whole work of salvation that belongs to Christ and his Church, guided by the Holy Spirit. As P.J Hartin and his co-editors rightly point out:

There is not the vague idea that such working out of salvation is possible for those who sit back passively and expect it all to happen without their involvement, simply because they fulfilled their liturgical obligation by being 'at the liturgy'.

This situation creates a serious problem in terms of the formation of many people in the Church. The matter needs to be addressed since the person/community need to participate in what is celebrated by making themselves available to encounter the Christ made present and his salvation. If that encounter does not take place because of the non-availability of the person/community to that encounter, then Christ and his salvation are very definitely present, but nothing happens.

The community nature of the liturgy is further demonstrated by Pope Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* when he defines liturgy as:

*The public worship, which our Redeemer as head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship, which the community of the faithful renders to its founder and through him to the heavenly Father. In short, it is the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its head and members.*⁹

This definition profoundly influenced Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC) number 7, which explains the liturgy as "an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ," as the

whole public worship performed by the mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members", and as "an action of Christ the priest and of his Body which is the Church."

Furthermore, SC 7 includes concepts of the presence of Christ in the celebrations of the Mass, the sacraments, the word of God, and the divine office. At Mass, Christ himself "now offers through the hands of the priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross." Quoting a saying from St. Augustine, the constitution affirms that "when a person baptizes, it is really Christ himself who baptizes." He is present in the proclamation of the word and "when the Church prays and sings."

All these affirmations confirm the active role played by Christ in the exercise of his priestly office, which culminated in his death and resurrection and eventual bestowal of the Holy Spirit. This last action of Christ inaugurates the Church as the community of those who by faith share his death and so partake of his life. The Church simply plays a ministerial role in the liturgy. Thus, the Paschal mystery is at the core of the liturgy, whose content is rightly summarized by L. Bouyer:

It is the re-enactment in, by, and for the Church of the act of our Lord which accomplished our salvation; that is, his passion and death, in the fullness of their final effects - the resurrection, and the final consummation of all things.⁶

The new Revised General Instruction on the Roman Missal (henceforth RGIRM) confirms the above assertion that the Paschal Mystery of Christ is at the heart of the Eucharistic Liturgy; a fact that is "in agreement with the whole tradition of the Church." The document affirms that,

The sacrifice of the cross and its sacramental renewal in the Mass, which Christ instituted at the Last Supper and commanded his apostles to do in his memory, are one and the same, differing only in the manner of offering.⁷

For the foregoing reasons, the Church does not come after Christ and replace him on earth; it does not substitute for his personal presence during the time between his ascension and his return on the clouds of heaven at the end of history. Nor is her liturgy mere mental recollection of mighty deeds now long past or expectation of wonders yet to come. The Church is Christ himself who, in the power of the Spirit raising him from the dead and manifesting him as Lord draws his brothers and sisters into the fullness of his ever-actual presence and associates them in his own praise and intercession. In the words of P. Regan,

The liturgical assembly, therefore, is the epiphany of the Victorious Lord, his Parousia in the world. Its prayer is the prayer of Christ himself, which is one with his redemptive work.⁸

Similarly, Hans Urs von Balthasar powerfully writes:

There is one place in God's creation where the world holds uninterrupted intercourse with God: the place where, thanks to the power incessantly poured out from on high, the earth opens itself to heaven, to the heaven which holds itself open to the earth - and this is the eternal Son, given to us by the Father, to lead creation back to the Father, as the bridegroom brings home his bride.⁹

In the liturgy of the Church, therefore, the eternal Son extends his once-for-all death and glorification into the ongoing flow of history sanctifying it and claiming it for himself. He transforms the time and space of the world into the heavenly kingdom and enables the community, which he gathers into it for prayer, to recognize him as Lord and himself as the creation of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

In summary then, the liturgy expresses clearly the nature of the Church. Being an action of Christ and the Church, the liturgy "is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its effectiveness by the same title and to the same degree."¹¹ This manifestation of the Church reaches its highest point in the summit of the liturgy, which is the Eucharist.

2. The Centrality of the Eucharist in the Church

The church exists because of the Eucharist. She exists in order to make an anamnesis, a re-enactment of the paschal Mystery of Christ and this is made manifest in a most excellent way in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, the Eucharist is not only a particular intense expression of the reality of the church's life, but also in a way its "fountain-head".¹² It is by its nature, "an epiphany of the church."¹³ In the words of Vatican II:

at the last supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our saviour instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until He should come again, and so to entrust to His beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of His death and resurrection.¹⁴

It is the mind of the Church that the faithful should participate knowingly, devoutly, and actively in this rite, be instructed by God's word and be refreshed at the table of the Lord's body. Indeed, the Council Fathers feel so strongly about the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Christian community that they state clearly that "no Christian community... can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the most Holy Eucharist."¹⁵

The Eucharist, therefore, feeds and forms the Church. Because of the vital link between the Church and the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord, the mystery of the Church is savoured, proclaimed and lived supremely in the Eucharist.¹⁶ Although, the ecclesial dimension of the Eucharist is realized in every Eucharistic celebration, it becomes more profound on the day when the whole community gathers to commemorate the Lord's resurrection. Thus, *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "Sunday celebration of the Lord's day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life."¹⁷ The Eucharist occupies the same centrality in other sacraments. This pre-eminence is clearly expressed when Vatican II call the Eucharist "the summit and fount-*culmen et fons*"¹⁸ of other sacraments as well as all other celebrations of the Church. The term summit means that the celebration of each of the sacraments reaches its climatic point, its highest point, it's apex in the celebration of the Eucharist. All the other sacraments are Eucharist-oriented. In the same way, the word "fount" refers to the Eucharist as the source, the wellspring of power for substances in the life of grace received. The Eucharist is the sacrament par excellence. It is the centre of the Church's life.¹⁹

3. The Communal Nature of Liturgical Celebration

A principal mark of liturgical celebrations especially that of the Eucharist is its community character. Against this background, the Conciliar Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says:

Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the "sacrament of unity", namely, a holy people united

and organized under their bishop.... whenever... rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private.²⁰

In other words, the liturgy belongs to the whole Body of the church. It is not a sum total of numerous personal prayers but a totality; a well-structured whole made up of action, praying and singing with individuals carrying out their various roles in an ordered manner. No one person may do everything neither may all collectively do everything. The Eucharistic community is made up of differentiated parts. The first major distinction is between the president and congregation.

These two active subjects each execute their own part, or delegate it to someone. The president (bishop or priest) acts as leader of the gathering. He acts in the name of Christ when he speaks the prayers that belong to him by his office. He is also a member of the people of God. He prays in their name and the community makes its own and acknowledges as its own by its "Amen". The president is also the official proclaimer and interpreter of God's word. According to circumstances he can be helped by concelebrants, a deacon, and usually, a reader.

The community, for its part, may act as a body in word and song, response and acclamation. It may also, especially for actions that a crowd finds difficult to perform properly, allow itself to be presented by members of the community that are delegated for these actions. Thus, for the more difficult kinds of singing, which require somewhat lengthy training and practice, the community may be represented by the choir or scholar with its cantor (the Greek word *scholē* means "leisure" and the school in which the leisure is spent). For the procession with the gifts or such services as the bringing of the liturgical vessels, it is represented by the servers; for help in the singing, by a choirmaster or an organist. Even homely services such as cleaning and polishing the church, laying out the hymnals and other aids, bringing those ill of body or mind to the places for worship, taking up the collection, and many other tasks, are in the last analysis liturgical functions, making it possible for a communal celebration to proceed successfully without hitches.

Thus, there is a distribution of liturgical roles. Each person contributes to the celebration what his/her office calls for or his/her abilities allow. Least the various services be left to chance, so that stopgaps become necessary, assignments must be made and practices held, this is a matter best left to a responsible group usually the community's liturgical committee. The above fact, namely, elaboration

preparation for liturgical celebration is attested to by the new RGIRM when it says:

When Christ the Lord was about to celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples and institutes the sacrifice of His Body and Blood, he directed them to prepare a large room, arranged for the supper (Luke 22:12).²¹

An essential component of the liturgy is full participation, which involves the whole human being. We are creatures of the senses; only by means of the sensible can we grasp spiritual realities. There is nothing like a direct conversation between two souls, but only through perceptible words, gestures or communications mediated by the senses. It is characteristic of every sacrament and all liturgical celebrations that to the external there corresponds something internal, to the visible sign the appropriation of God's gifts, which are usually invisible. The human body is expressive: attitude and gesture, word and facial expression, attest what is in the mind and heart. Conversely, expressive bodily actions such as standing and kneeling, sitting and walking, are helpful in intellectual and spiritual movement or meditation.

Finally, and above all, the participation must be marked by piety. The whole realm of external signs and the aim of the conciliar reform and promotion of the liturgy all are geared toward the deepening of faith.²² Indeed, the liturgy depends for its vitality on faith, hope and love. Without these it is dead. We shall now look at concrete ways in which liturgical spirituality is vitiated.

3. Aberrations in Liturgical Celebrations

Today more than ever before the liturgy has been plagued by many aberrations and abuses. Some priests invent their own liturgy, make additions and totally unjustified modifications or omissions, neglecting the laid down liturgical laws.²³ They misinterpret the flexibility of the new legislation and post Conciliar decrees and think that each celebrant can simply exercise his own creativity. But as earlier mentioned, liturgical celebrations are not private functions, they are celebrations of the Church. Therefore, the chief celebrant cannot go on just doing or omitting whatever appeals to his fancy.²⁴ Listen to what the Law says:

The liturgical books approved by the competent authority are to be faithfully observed in the celebration of the sacraments, therefore no one on personal authority may add, remove or change anything in them.²⁵

One of the major aberrations in our liturgical celebrations today is what Eugene Uzukwu calls "the introduction of patterns of cooperative development or

improvement unions into the rite of the 'presentation of gifts' during the Eucharistic celebration."²⁶ The presentation of the gifts or offerings in procession, according to the Roman rite, involves bringing the bread and wine to the altar accompanied by the offertory hymn. Money or gifts for the poor and the Church may also be collected or brought forward during the preparation of the gifts.²⁷ But today, among our people, this has been converted into a procession of song and dance by everybody in the assembly to present his or her gift to the Lord. It has become a fundraising strategy to ensure a self-reliant Church. All our inculturation efforts begin and end in carefully ensuring that offertory songs inspire participation of all. The procession is accompanied by singing, hand clapping, and dancing. The minister often stands before the altar to sprinkle holy water on those presenting their gifts. The dramatic display of this kind of presentation of gifts is on Holy Thursday (Chrism Mass) and Harvest and Bazaar. Bishops and priests who may have reservations about charismatic hymns, hand-clapping, dancing and percussion evocative of jazz encourage or allow the free performance of these in order to generate as much revenue as possible. Such Masses may last four to five hours.

We are all witnesses to the exaggerations and sometimes abuses in this pattern of celebration. One of them is that some worshippers leave the assembly as soon as they make their offering. Some go home, eat and return to the same Eucharistic celebration. Another abuse is the tendency of some priests to rush the Eucharistic liturgy - what is understandable after over two hours of intensive dancing, shouting, auctioneering, breaking (selling of kola nuts) etc. with half of the congregation gone.

This aberration is considered today as the worst of all. The same abuse has given rise to the syndrome of 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, collections in one particular Mass. We suggest that all collections should be taken after the post-communion prayer. Even the Harvest or Catechism should begin at the end of Mass.

Another area of abuse of the sacraments is using them as pastoral strategy. Except for grave reasons, pastors may not deny the faithful the sacraments. This is what canon law says:

The sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed and are not prohibited by law from receiving them.²⁸

The above law is rooted on the earlier canon 213 - dealing on the right of the Christian faithful "to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God, and the sacraments." This right again is based on baptism; it is not a privilege granted by Church authorities but a

Church is fast disappearing due to the excessive copying tendencies shown in the frequent and indiscriminate calling of God's name, beginning prayers in Jesus name instead of ending with through Christ our Lord, reduction of God to an automata and commanding God to do miracles; apparent manipulation of the Holy Spirit: / *command the Holy Ghost fire to do this and do that* with the noise and shouting that go with such invocations.

4. Liturgy and Inculturation

Finally, I wish to discuss briefly the project of Inculturation. While I agree that Inculturation is important, it is wrong for anybody to resort to either on-the-spot mutilation of the liturgical texts or to over-emphasize one aspect of the celebration more than the others. How else can one explain the common phenomenon today whereby liturgical Inculturation takes place only at the offertory? Or the practice of carrying the elevated host through the isles of the Church or at the open air Mass going round as people make ejaculations or sing hymns on seeing the elevated host? The same happens with the elevated chalice. Would that be the significance of the gesture of elevating the host and chalice?

What of the practice by some priests who substitute parts of the liturgy of the Mass with their own words probably to show their aversion for the apparent arid Roman Liturgy? Areas often abused include, "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith", where some priests close their eyes and burst into charismatic incantations instead of intoning the laid down proclamation? Other areas are at the beginning of Mass or during the homily, where some priests spend up to thirty minutes chanting choruses that have nothing to do with the theme of the celebration. At times such choruses have nothing spiritual about them. Church music must be theological, spiritual, liturgical, meaningful and adorative. But today noise characterizes our liturgical celebrations. The slogan today is the more noise you generate, the more successful you are as a minister. Does one conclude by saying that as long as the people like it, it is acceptable and right? Liturgical Inculturation means much more than all these. It is not a free-for-all affair. It requires scientific study, mastery and proper application of theology and allied sciences, liturgical principles and the knowledge of the culture of the people.

In all these, it is the right of the local ordinary to legislate on the liturgy. He is the absolute interpreter of liturgical laws in his diocese. As the new RGRIM puts it: "the diocesan Bishop is the chief steward of the mysteries of God in the particular Church entrusted to his care; he is the moderator, promoter and guardian of its entire liturgical life" (no. 22).

claim rooted in the action of Christ that empowers Christians to seek the services of the sacred pastors.

It is interesting to know that this is the first right mentioned for lay persons and all Christians in *Lumen Gentium* 37 - the source for many of the rights in this regard. Both *De Populo Dei* (c. 24, par 1) and the *Lex Ecclesiae Fundamentalis* considered it a fundamental right (*iure*) for all Christians.

This same right was the only one directly stated for lay persons in the former Code (CIC 682), though put in more general terms. Moreover, access to the sacraments cannot be denied someone in full communion without serious cause and due process of law.²⁹ Even those not in full communion can on occasion seek and receive the sacraments in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Catholics may seek the sacraments wherever they are validly celebrated provided obvious conditions are met.³⁰

Another area that signals danger to the sacraments is the indiscriminate anointing going on, including bathing of "clients" with special water and oil. Remember Christ's answer to Peter at the Last Supper when he insisted that if Christ must wash his feet; then his hands and head as well must be washed. Jesus answered him: "No one who has taken a bath needs washing, he is clean all over" (John 13:9-11). The new rite of the anointing of the sick says:

The sick person is anointed on the forehead and on the hands....in case of necessity; however, it is sufficient that a single anointing be given on the forehead or, because of the particular condition of the sick person, on another suitable part of the body...³¹

Of course, "the oil of the sick is ordinarily blessed by the bishop on Holy Thursday."³² But today many priests anoint with all sorts of oil. Some have their own special oil blessed and sold by them at exorbitant prices. The issue of consultation fee is already causing trouble in some dioceses. These abuses are nothing short of simony, which was part of what caused the protestant revolt of Martin Luther in the 16th Century.

Other abuses in the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments include the careless way with which some priests handle the consecrated hosts. Some leave them in their rooms, cars and tabernacle for months. These are signs that all is not well.

One more area of abuse is the copying tendencies of the Pentecostal form of praying and preaching among both the clergy and the lay faithful. The sole pride of the Church is the liturgy, which the Pentecostals do not have. But this pride of the

Conclusion

As we have seen, the liturgy is the "culmen et fons", the apex and source of the Christian life. The Church aims at celebrating her liturgy in a manner that effects the sanctification, transformation, edification of the members and ultimate glorification of God.¹² Hence the clarion call of the Church for active, conscious and effective participation in liturgical celebrations.¹³ The Church's liturgy must not be encumbered with unnecessary additions which are often distractions and utterly inadmissible. On the contrary, liturgical celebrations are characterized by noble brevity, simplicity, sobriety and practicality.¹⁴

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