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Liturgy in the Parish

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Evaluating Liturgy in the Parish

Thomas O'Loughlin

The liturgy is, as is widely recognised, the great school of discipleship: there the kerygma is not only heard but embraced in celebration, our identity with the Christ is affirmed, and our hope is given expression so that we sustain our sisters and brothers in faith and, in turn, each of us can be supported by them. Within this theological scenario, liturgy is located at the heart of mission, and is 'the school of discipleship' – a fact that was often pointed out by the theologians who pioneered the reform of Catholic worship. However, liturgy is not an abstract essence but an artefact of many people with differing backgrounds, appreciations of what they are doing, and, indeed, widely varying levels of ritual skill. Liturgy can range from a mere token affair imagined as acting out pre-scripted texts to occasions that can be events of human poetry and moments of the Spirit's enlightening presence. This link between mission and the perceptible quality of celebrations was famously expressed in a 1972 document from the Catholic bishops in the USA:

> Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations weaken and destroy faith. To celebrate the liturgy means to do the action or perform the sign in such a way that the full meaning and impact shine forth in clear and compelling fashion.[1]

The first of these statements from the American bishops has, over the past forty years, become a maxim, while its general truth is known to all engaged in mission who have probed into the factors that have led some to embrace Christianity and other to abandon it. Liturgy matters! This need for theologians to engage with liturgy and so, since liturgy is an art and a practice, with the practicalities of liturgy was well expressed by Hans Küng:

> The liturgy is and remains the centre of the life of the church. If this can be successfully renewed, won't that also have effects on all the areas of church activity?[2]

1 *Music in Catholic Worship* (Washington, DC, 1972), nn. 6-7.

2 *My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 285.

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But such statements, made within the framework of a theological assessment, raise a crucial question: how should we assess a 'good liturgy' and what are the characteristics of 'poor celebrations'?

BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS

The very notion of 'good' liturgy is itself new in Catholic theology. Prior to Vatican II, the notion that there was a 'good' liturgy – logically implying that there were degrees of effectiveness in liturgy such that one was 'better' than another and so possibly more effective in its purpose than another – was itself a rejected notion. Ceremonies were either 'valid' – an *opus operatum* performed (i.e. it 'ticked the boxes' and the job to be done was done) or it was 'invalid' (despite appearances, nothing had happened) and the notion of degrees of quality was considered to smack of a dangerous subjectivism. The seven 'sacraments' were matters that took place '*ex opere operat*o' ['out of the work of the work done'] and did not depend for the reality or finality before God upon any aspect of human will, be that the sanctity of the minister or the recipients, their ritual behaviour, or, indeed, their level of engagement above a minimal threshold of doing 'what the church intends' was considered suspiciously like an appeal to '*ex opere operantis*' ['out of what the doer had done'] which made the effectiveness depend on the minister (sacraments were always 'the work' of individual human agents rather that belonging to the community of faith). It was acknowledged that some actions (e.g. a good homily) might lead to greater piety than another and consequently be beneficial to individual faith, but this only related to accidental aspects of worship or to minor rituals. The core liturgy, in the sense of the church's official worship, was immune to the vagaries of human temperament and performance. So Mass was Mass and it did not matter if it was well done by a man of great pastoral sense or as quickly as was legally allowed as a private affair: the minimal performance of the ritual by a validly ordained priest was what counted.

Equally, in the days of the liturgy in Latin there was a virtually complete disconnect between the liturgy and those *attending* the liturgy.[3] The liturgy only directly affected the clergy taking part, in effect the 'celebrant' (only he celebrated, the rest merely assisted him to celebrate or attended his action), and, indirectly, those serving who performed actions and repeated words from memory in a language they did not understand or understood minimally. The laity had to attend the liturgy *sub poena*, but gestures in responses to bells apart, and occasionally 'receiving communion,' they were supposed to be engaged in their own pious activities (e.g. reciting

3 See T. O'Loughlin, 'Eucharistic Celebrations: the Chasm between Idea and Reality,' *New Blackfriars* 91(2010)423-38.

the Rosary in silence or doing the Stations of the Cross) while the official liturgy progressed behind a railings and a veil of Latinity and silence.

Half a century on, much of the legacy of this period is still with us: clergy are often uncomfortable with the notion of a good or bad liturgy, while for many Catholics the notion of 'getting the sacraments' is often more pressing than whether or not it is a 'good' liturgy and few, when asked, could outline what they would consider the criteria for such a good liturgy. While clergy, quite naturally, jib at the notion that their performance might be assessed and found wanting, most lay Catholics reply by saying they do not like 'boring sermons' [an old anti-clerical trope], rituals that are 'too long' or which affect some pet concern such as 'too much singing'!

However, the steady fall in attendance at liturgy or any sense that it is a worthwhile use of time suggests that *part of the problem* lies in people judging liturgy as failing, albeit inchoately and without any formal reflection on why they perceive it as failing. So, if liturgy is important, it is as important to give thought to what might constitute a good liturgy and to how to distinguish good and poor celebrations.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

If there has been hesitancy over the notion of liturgy having any intrinsic quality, there has been no shortage of attempts to assess the qualities of liturgy as a performance. These can be grouped under three headings, but are so limited in their scope as to be virtually useless in relation to contemporary questions of liturgy and mission.

1. *Liturgy as legal performance*. Most works on liturgy since the middle ages,[4] and especially since the Council of Trent, have assessed liturgy in relation to whether or not it adequately obeyed the requirements of ritual law: 'the rubrics.' If a liturgical performance followed the rules, it was good; and all effort in matters liturgical was concentrated in making the performance ever more perfect in its obedience to those rules. It was unconcerned with liturgy as a communal affair and with its larger purpose in the life of discipleship or of the church. It is often asserted that this 'age of rubricians' came to an end within the Catholic Church with the arrival of the reformed liturgy of Vatican II. However, it has re-emerged in recent years with Roman documents such as *Liturgiam authenticam* and the 2011

4 See T.M. Thibodeau ed., *William Durand, Rationale IV: On the Mass and Each Action Pertaining to it* (Turnhout 2013).

English version of the Missal.[5] As a strategy it is very much alive among many younger Catholic clergy who fail to notice that as a criterion for the effectiveness of the church's mission it is inadequate if not counter-productive in its concentration on specific actions rather than on relationship of liturgy to the lives of the People of God.

2. *Liturgy as being faithful to the past or a normative past*. It is a feature of all human ritual that it is conservative of its own traditions and indeed seeks to locate its traditions not only in the original moments of the tradition but in a mythical originating time such as that characterised by Mircea Eliade (using a stock phrase from the Latin liturgy] as '*in illo tempore*.'[6] This means that there is a continuing tension between the need to rejoice now in our situation, and to retain tangible links with the original times – a tension that has animated most missiological discussions of 'translation,' 'inculturation' and 'local theology' since the 1960s.[7] In terms of liturgy that takes the particular form of assessing this or that liturgical element in terms of when it can be found in the past. This takes the form of asking if the element is in continuity with the past (perceived mythically as virtually unchanging) by Catholics, in which case the element is 'ok', or with some perfect original moment (again a mythic atemporal point long ago) in either 'the bible' or 'the New Testament churches' by Protestants, and again, if such a warrant can be found for the practice, it can be deemed 'ok.' However, in all such seemingly 'historical criteria' there is the limitation that since cultures are distinct and the incarnation is itself historically specific – Jesus was an individual with a history – its value in actual human situations (as opposed to academic enquiry using an atemporal model of theology) is severely limited. While it may be a fact that a practice is well attested in the past, one cannot infer that because it is still repeated, that it is *ipso facto* productive of a good liturgical experience today. Some elements from the past (perhaps long forgotten) may be usefully revived; others (perhaps pertinaciously retained) may need to be passed over as no longer attuned to the deeper needs of Christian worship.[8]

5 See P. Jeffrey, *Translating Tradition: A Chant Historian Reads Liturgiam Authenticam* (Collegeville, MN 2005); and T. O'Loughlin ed., *Liturgical Language and Translation: The Issues Arising from the Revised English Translation of the Roman Missal* (Norwich 2014).

6 See his *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando, FA 1959), 68-113.

7 Cf. R.J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY 1985), 1-21.

8 See T. O'Loughlin, 'Liturgical Evolution and the Fallacy of the Continuing Consequence,' *Worship* 83(2009)312-23.

3. *Liturgy assessed in terms of content or aesthetics*. A fact of ritual is that it is perceived in terms of our personal aesthetics – something that can be seen already in the voluble enthusiasm of Egeria's description of the Jerusalem liturgy in the fourth century. However, the personal likes and dislikes of those for whom ritual is 'their thing' is notoriously weak as a criterion for assessing liturgy in terms of the wider community. That which appeals to an individual or a special group – be that a monastic community or the choir in a local church – may not appeal to a wider spectrum or contribute to a liturgy that promotes faith. Similarly, appeal to specific liturgical elements – for example Gregorian Chant or a 'plentiful' use of the Scriptures may come with sound theological or historical backing, but may not generate an act of worship which, despite its credentials, helps a community to have an experience of faith. Indeed, there is much anecdotal evidence that such sure 'recipes for success' only serve to make the liturgy remote from the general course of Christians and promoting them on the essential hypothesis that 'good liturgy *must* contain' these elements can result in ever more effort for less result. Liturgy that is effective in helping the growth of faith is a matter belonging to the contingent universe of history: what worked there and then may be very different from what works here and now. All who lead liturgy[9] would do well to remember that there is much more to the lives of most Christians than liturgy!

So is there no way of assessing a 'good liturgy' that is both pastorally sensitive to particularity while at the same time allowing for some objective criteria? One possible route it to note the method used in assessing successful designs where a set of abstract principles can be discerned and then used as 'rules of thumb' in the production of other designs, incorporating the insights of others' success. Perhaps evolving such a set of principles would be a service that theologians could offer to the wider body of the church. What follows is an attempt to do this.

As with other sets of guiding principles, these are overlapping and inter-locking; they do not form a hierarchy of principles but rather should be approached as discernible qualities. Similarly, they should be seen as an open rather than a closed set. While they are framed positively ('good liturgy is …') their greatest value may lie in their obverse: i.e. if that quality is lacking, then there are consequences for our view of Christian mission.

9 See, for example, the 'ten principles of good design' that were proposed in the 1970 by Dieter Rams (www.vitsoe.com/gb/about/good-design) or any of applications of these such as, for example, the widely used 'cartographic design principles' (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/resources/carto-design/carto-designprinciples/html).

GOOD LITURGY IS HONEST

Because we imagine our liturgy taking place in the court of heaven (Heb 9:24) we should seek the greatest authenticity in what we do in a world of signs so that, at the very least, it is self-consistent and strives to be consistent with all that we preach. So, minimally, we should seek to remove dissonance between what we say and what we do. But the liturgy is frequently dissonant because it has layers of accretions which, unchecked, divert our sounds, actions, and theology: the result is a situation whereby it appears to be words – but words that mean little and can be seen as simply a clerical rigmarole devoid of genuine communication. There are so many examples of such dissonance in the contemporary Roman liturgy that I suspect it is one of the great, deep-level, reforms that we have barely yet addressed. Consider the example of having a set of prayer texts (i.e. written texts) which proclaim that the purpose of the Eucharist is thanksgiving to the Father in, through and with the Christ – hence their designation: 'eucharistic prayers'; concomitantly we have a set of ritual texts (i.e. what is perceived by anyone present) which are focused on 'transubstantiating' material elements so as to confect the presence of Christ. What we hear depends on what we are hearing with our ears or perceiving with our senses – and the problem gets greater when we seek to explain some of the texts to ourselves or to others (as in ecumenical discussions) which, eventually end in all-round frustration. Consider the small details: we say 'drink this' but then do not drink; we say 'he broke it' but use unbroken individual wavers … … … what we say and what we do in ritual are not in alignment. Yet without this simple level of coherence, a coherence in the visible objects of our liturgy, we are called upon to assume that there is a coherence between the liturgy as such, our kerygma, and our own endeavours as disciples.

When the directness between our ritual words and actions breaks down – as it is both prone to and as has happened during centuries of unreformed repetition – we end up with an infinite regress of signs: signs to signs to signs … . This – as in all logically infinite series – is saying potentially everything and nothing. At best, we can hope to end up with ambiguities, and, at worst, non-sense. A pursuit of honesty between the varieties of our signs must be a primary quality of liturgy.[10] We might recall that it is precisely a dissonance between symbols and intentions that the gospel narrator expects will cause shock in his audience at the event of the arrest of Jesus when a kiss is used by the traitor as his identifying sign (Mk 14:44). In a word: good liturgy should do what it says and say what it does.

10 T. O'Loughlin, 'The liturgical vessels of the Latin eucharistic liturgy: a case of an embedded theology,' *Worship* 82(2008)482-504.

GOOD LITURGY IS JOYFUL

Even in the depths of our sadness – at a funeral, or of our recollection – when recalling Jesus' passion, we are a people of hope: the day of recalling the passion and death of Jesus is *Good* Friday. Our belief is in salvation, redemption, and the victory of love and life over death and dissolution. Any liturgy that does not manifest this is unworthy of being a product of our coming together in the presence of God. This means that our liturgies must reflect a tension inherent in Christian discipleship: we take all suffering most seriously, and we acknowledge openly loss and sadness – we die rather than 'pass away' – but 'our hope is rich in immortality.' So even on the grimmest of occasions, we must remind ourselves of our joy. But, more commonly, in our day-to-day liturgy there needs to be the lightness and joyfulness of those whose religion is not that of a future of 'the great crunch' but of the eschatological banquet.

There is a suspicion of joyful liturgy in many in the mainstream churches as if that is the characteristic of the worship of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches; and, in contrast, more serious churches do things in a serious, heavy, and dull way. Solemnity often takes the form of heavy structure, ponderous ceremonial, and elaborate grandeur. But while this may reflect a human sense of the important as the BIG and the *bold*, it may not be true to the smallness and intimacy of the incarnation. All liturgy must somehow image the fact that Jesus was seen as announcing a joyful festival (Lk 4:17) and his disciples imagined not only their liturgy but their Way in terms of a feast.[11]

GOOD LITURGY CELEBRATES COMMUNITY

There is a widespread tradition in theology of seeing the liturgy as action served / administered by a minority of ritual specialists to a generality of people or which is carried out by those specialists on their behalf. This model was inescapable for Catholics prior to Vatican II: the priest said Mass 'for them' (*pro populo*), the sacraments were 'administered' to them, and they had 'to attend' Mass on the days appointed. It was the active work of one (or a few) men, and the majority of the Church had the distinct task: attending and receiving. For many this is still the key to their ritual thinking; and an outsider – an anthropologist – could easily take that as the dominant factor in many places still. But good liturgy must involve all the people in single activity, and be the 'active participation' that was envisaged at Vatican II.[12]

11 M. Wolter, 'Primitive Christianity as a Feast' in C. Tuckett ed., *Feasts and Festivals* (Leuven 2009), 171-82

12 *Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 14.

All who are there must have a sense that they – as the People of God – are doing something to celebrate their faith in Jesus and, with him, that they are offering thanks and petition to the Father. If the liturgy is seen in terms of the work of just a few, or as a matter of individual sanctity, then it has become a commodity. While from the perspective of the ordained the notion of 'my Mass' may be receding, the corresponding lay view that 'I am going to Mass as part of my private devotion' is not only alive, but all too often tunes in with consumerist individualism: just as I consume my music, my reading, my entertainment, so I can consume my spiritual needs. A quality of good liturgy is that it challenges these individualisms – *both* that inherited from the pre-Vatican II liturgy *and* that which comes from the increasing atomisation of society into customers – and projects a different view of human action and society. Again, we need but think of Paul's comments on the selfishness of the Corinthian gatherings: we are there to share with one another in Christ.[13]

GOOD LITURGY FACILITATES ENGAGEMENT

If liturgy is the public work, the *leitourgia*, of the baptised and all are called to active participation, then one of the qualities of good liturgy is that it facilitates people taking part in the activity, seeks ways to involve as many as possible, and seeks out ways that particular skills and viewpoints can find expression. This is something that is grasped intuitively by many who have had to build a team, and it has been grasped in liturgies with particular groups (e.g. children), but this should be a conscious element in all liturgy planning.

Since at least the time of the Council of Trent a primary skill imparted in clerical training was that of implementing the rubrics; in our culture, a primary skill for anyone presiding at liturgy is facilitating and encouraging the active participation of each person present at an act of worship. It is a skill whose importance was implicitly recognised in Vatican II,[14] but is not yet embedded in the self-perception of most of the ordained.

GOOD LITURGY IS INCLUSIVE

One of the basic 'moves' of ritual is that of dividing: the clean from the unclean, the sacred from the profane, the holy from the unholy, 'them' from 'us.'[15] These notions have all too often been imported, both consciously (imagining the liturgy in terms of the Temple in Jerusalem as exemplified in the language Christians

13 See H.W. Hollander, 'The Idea of Fellowship in 1 Corinthians 10.14-22,' *New Testament Studies* 55(2009)456-70.

14 *Sacrosanctum concilium*, nn. 15-18.

15 M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, NY 1970).

have used[16]) and unconsciously (as in notions of impurity and purification[17]), into Christian worship. But here lies one of the great discontinuities between the kerygma and human religious consciousness: the Christ has overcome the divisions (Gal 3:28), the curtain of the temple has been torn asunder (Mk 15:38), and all the baptised form a priestly people (1 Pet 2:9). Our liturgy, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, proclaims that we are one in Christ (1 Cor 10). So if divisiveness is part of our liturgical assemblies, we may be responding to our unconscious, but not to the gospel.

No one from among the baptised should go away from a liturgy feeling that she/he was excluded, 'cut off' or estranged: when that happens the fundamental dynamic of the liturgy as a celebration of reconciliation has been fatally compromised. Yet all too often the most felt perception of individuals at a liturgy is that of exclusion: exclusion due to theological background, sexual orientation, marital status, or a sense that a liturgy is the property of a particular group.[18] If that is the perception then the liturgy has failed for that individual, and if that perception has a basis in the behaviour of the larger group then their liturgy has become a counter-sign to the gospel of love. While many might assert that their communities are welcoming and, indeed reconciling, it should not be forgotten how easily attitudes of 'them' / 'us,' to those who are 'active participants' v. those who merely 'attend' can appear within our worship. Liturgy must be consciously non-divisive and consciously promote a sense of oneness in Christ. So what signal does the spatial location of clergy / ministers in relation to laity / 'ministered to' send to both groups? In monastic churches is there a choir of monastics and then visitors located elsewhere? This may correspond to the reality that for the monastics, this is home, while everyone else is a 'visitor' to the monastery; but in the liturgical space all are equally sisters and brothers in the family of baptism – and so should, in the context of liturgy, not be segregated. We are claiming, theologically, a new set of relationships in liturgy; the least we can do is to express it in the seating plan![19]

16 Most Catholics still refer to the area surrounding the eucharistic table – imagined as 'the altar' – as the 'sanctuary'; most older buildings still have division markers separating the area of the *sacerdotium* from that of the *laos* (as if these are really distinct); and in Irish a church building is often a *teampeall* (from *templum*).

17 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London 1979); it was exemplified prior to 1971 in 'the churching of women' after childbirth.

18 T. O'Loughlin, 'Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries: reading of Acts 10-11:18 as a key to Luke's ecumenical agenda in Acts,' *Transformation* 32(2015)27-37 (*free online*).

19 On the potential of space / place to be theologically expressive, see R. Giles, *Times and Seasons: Creating Transformative Worship Throughout The Year* (Norwich 2008).

One expression of this quality of liturgy is that the community should manifest itself as welcoming and open. Just as the good news embraces all humanity, so the communities responding to the gospel must convey a sense of welcome to all, but especially to the marginalised. Sectarian behaviour, such as 'we are who we are,' can all too easily become a binding element in a community; but it is its opposite that should be the marker of a healthy liturgy.

GOOD LITURGY IS BASED IN THE CREATION

It might seem a tautology for a monotheist to make this point: where else could liturgy be based except in the creation because it is the form of the creature's attention to the creator. However, in our rituals we are wont to imagine that we wholly leave the creation in liturgy and enter a celestial realm with but tenuous links to the world of our humanity or the material creation. We claim to be taking part in a banquet, but the merest modicum of a foodstuff is sufficient to be a spiritual vehicle; we claim to reside in the world made through the Logos but use a language that shuns the earthy and familiar as somehow unworthy of the sacred.[20] By contrast, if all aspects of our humanity have been redeemed, then our human situation – such as the human desire to share meals[21] – should form the basis of our formal liturgy.

Likewise, our liturgy must not only be in continuity with our nature within the creation but it should reflect a Christian attitude of responsibility towards the creation. Good liturgy should be ecologically sensitive, respect human justice, and exhibit people who can think beyond the immediate. How this 'plays out in practice' is something that can only be known in a particular situation. There are many examples of this, but two will suffice. Jean Vanier in L'Arche has rediscovered the significance of mutual footwashing as a celebration of service,[22] and has used it as a metaphor of mutual healing for the World Council of Churches.[23] Tissa Balasuriya rediscovered the significance of the loaf - as distinct from 'bread'[24] – as an expression of a community's union in Christ and in opposition to oppressive absentee landlords.[25]

20 Recently, Cardinal George Pell characterised the 1973 translation's language as that belonging to 'a barbecue'; but failed to realise that that should be a commendation of its tone, in view of the incarnation, as one of genuine sincerity before God; cf. O'Loughlin, *Liturgical Language*, 31-8.

21 See M. Jones, *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* (Oxford 2007).

22 J. Vanier, *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet* (Toronto 1996).

23 C. Anderson and S. Carroll. 'The Foot-Washing in John 13:1-20 in the context of *L'Arche*,' *Australian Journal of Theology* 20(2013)185-96.

24 T. O'Loughlin, 'Translating *Panis* in a Eucharistic Context: A Problem of Language and Theology,' *Worship* 78(2004)226-35.

25 T. Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (London 1979).

The best way to observe this quality's importance is by its absence: if a liturgy is not rooted in who we are as human beings, and part of our humanity today is the ecological crisis, then its status as *our* worship is open to question.

GOOD LITURGY HIGHLIGHTS THE MARGINALISED

It is easy for ritual to divorce itself from the lived reality of our own messy lives and suffering humanity. When this happens it is no longer the public work of those who are committed to conveying liberation and redemption but has become the refuge from reality that was rightly condemned by Marx:

> The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of Antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the Middle Ages and equally know, when necessary, how to defend the oppression of the proletariat, although they make pitiful face over it.[26]

That 'pitiful face' takes, very often, the form of words used in liturgy without any further engagement. Liturgy must touch on the marginalised in a practical way within its own praxis. The paradigm example of this is the fact that at the early eucharistic banquets there was a collection among the gathering for the poor who were not there.[27] While the collection as a practice has remained, its focus has been subverted from care of the needy to support of the clergy and the administration: but a genuine expression of care for the poor should be part of every celebration. In so far as all Christian liturgy needs to proclaim the absolute generosity of God, this must take material expression in human generosity. Moreover, that generosity cannot be limited to providing resources for the poor – thought that should be a minimal and constant requirement – but must show the community actively relating to all who find themselves marginalised on the basis of race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, disability, civic status or whatever. Just as embracing all such marginalised people must be part of discipleship (Mt 25:31-40), so it must be a felt part of liturgy that claims to celebrate discipleship and proclaim the redemption.

When a liturgy fails to highlight the marginalised it runs the danger of failing to recognise that social change is at the heart of Christianity in that it is a religion of salvation and that Jesus' message is one that sets existing social relationships on their head: he is among us as one who serves, so too we are among humanity proclaiming a new vision of service. Indeed, there is a strong case

26 'The Communism of the Paper *Rheinischer Beobachter*' [1847] in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow 1957), 74.

27 Justin, *Apologia prima* 67,6-7.

to be made that this is one of aspects of discipleship to which Jesus gave ritual shape in footwashing – and it is worth noting how this has been an aspect of Christian ritual, albeit a peripheral one.[28]

GOOD LITURGY AVOIDS CLUTTER

By its nature, ritual is open to endless interpretations: liturgy is akin to poetry rather than prose. But that does not mean that we should not make a conscious effort to avoid conveying incorrect messages or so overloading our ritual communication that it ends up as 'everything is the same as everything else.' An essential part of ritual is communication[29] and it should be capable of saying something about the Christian vision to every participant. But consider a liturgy at Christmas time when directly in front of the eucharistic table is located the crib scene, near it is still to be found the Paschal Candle, and near it is a small baptismal font, and the whole building is arranged in the oblong shape of an old-fashioned theatre rather than for a community celebration around the table of the Lord.

The overload of messages means that only by a conscious action of critical reflection can one focus on the activity and the time without a mass of peripheral concerns. One is there to celebrate a particular aspect of the Christian mystery, but this is effectively buried within a band of noise. At the very least, there needs to be a consciousness that 'clutter is our default setting' and so rather than promoting the gospel it may be propagating many false visions more accurately described as theurgy or magic.

Each liturgy should have its own clear focus, avoiding extraneous matter that fosters confusion, and speak in as simple and direct a manner as possible. We are there in response to a revelatory insight, not engaged in a crossword puzzle. In seeking to be true to its purpose it helps to generate a sense of integrity and honesty.

One particular aspect of the avoidance of clutter is that we see clear communication as part of a good liturgy. A liturgy that is full of distractions, un-necessary complications, or anachronistic curiosities diverts our focus from the divine mystery and our pilgrim path into curiosities. The archaic language of the most recent translation is a case in point: language in ritual is a sign and its task is to point beyond itself to a mystery beyond words and understanding; when that language becomes itself mysterious to listeners it diverts attention from the Mystery to itself. This is clutter!

28 S.M. Schneiders, 'The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43(1981)76-92.

29 E.W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (Thousand Oaks, CA 1998).

GOOD LITURGY IS EXPRESSIVE OF OUR SPECIFIC IDENTITIES

One of the great claims of the pre-conciliar liturgy was that it was *semper et ubique eadem*; from Canton to Connemara it was just the same down to the last comma! The obverse was that it was as much out of touch with Connemara as it was with Canton – and indeed with what most Christians were doing for the past millennium. But we all have a sense of our individual and group identities; and these are not 'givens' fixed in some cultural DNA but are complex and evolving. With all the baptised we may share the identity of 'Christian' but with those taking part with me in a particular liturgy I may share several other identities. This implies that the liturgy should be specific and local as much as it is ecumenical and universal.

This is a notion – often linked with the term 'inculturation' – that has entered the Catholic mainstream with Vatican II and it is one that is fiercely contested in many of the liturgical 'culture wars' that are raging in various parts of the Church. However, if liturgy is to be *our* worship, really located in and coming from us as a community, then specific identity is not some fringe concern but at the heart of what we are doing. It must come from us as a community of faith who are seeking out the way of faith in the particular situation within the created order where we find ourselves. Just as the notion of incarnation generates the awareness that we are the presence of the Christ in the particular, of time and situation, so our worship needs to reflect that particularity, its joys and fears, its needs and its challenges. Liturgy is invariably a 'barometer' of our discipleship. A good liturgy should reflect all that is best in a culture. Equally, it should challenge anything in a culture that is oppressive.

This becomes clearer if we reverse the situation and imagine that the ideal liturgy is untouched by our specific moment and identity: the older ideal of a ritual that avoided local 'colour' (at least in theory) as destructive of Catholic unity. That liturgy had to exist in a parallel universe to the actual rites and rituals – what was often dismissed as 'popular religion' – and so one had two liturgies: the sanctioned 'official' liturgy which was often ignored as necessary but of little actual worth, and local cults which attracted emotional adherence and deep-seated devotion, but which often 'ran to seed' both ritually and ideologically. 'Called or uncalled' specific identity 'will be present' in our rituals; and it is part of the challenge of the integrity of our expressions of what we proclaim that it be given an explicit and appropriate place in our celebrations.

AND (PERHAPS) FINALLY, GOOD LITURGY IS 'OPEN'

The heart of the message of Christianity, as of Judaism and Islam, is the infinity of that which we call 'God.' We express this in

any number of theological shorthands: God is 'one'; creation is *ex nihilo*; only God is absolutely generous; or by asserting that absolute non-mutuality between creator and creation. A god who is an object in the universe is not the God of Abraham, Jesus, or Mohammed.

In contrast with this fundamental affirmation of faith is the fact – which seems to be borne out empirically by anthropologists of religions – that most religious rituals relate to the divine as one more, albeit supreme, force in the universe. Religions generally tends be a matter of *do ut des*: a petitioning for audience, a placating as either a down-payment or a reparation, or an attempt to manipulate the divine. The analysis of this proclivity in Wisdom 15 is accurate as a description of human religiosity: we tend to engage (which of us is immune?) with the divine as another force within a system of forces. And so all Christian liturgy walks a tightrope between asserting its faith in divine interest and care, and a ritual that communicates the manipulation of the divine. This is the topic that hardly ever made it into liturgical discussions, but was reserved for the section on 'the virtue of religion' in moral theology, where it was conveniently solved by seeing the official liturgy as immune, while popular religion (i.e. that which was outside ecclesiastical control) was prone to superstition. The answer was simple: make everything controlled and all would be well! Alas, it was not, nor is it, that simple.

Fear is a part of human life: fear of loss, fear for loved ones, fear of failure and illness, fear of matters that threaten us, and fear – as an existential reality; and, in all of us, fear and faith interact, and so it is naïve to imagine that any human ritual will not have an element of barter, even if we intellectually reject the very notion: a pure 'gift love' – to use the language of C.S. Lewis[30] – may be canonically mandated at times, but is inconsistent with our finitude (as we see in the traditional characterisation of divine power as mercy towards our infirmities: Wis 15:1).

The challenge of liturgy is to give expression to fear and need while not making claims that faith and prayer result in divine favour. While such notions can be dismissed as 'folk superstition' (e.g. chain prayers), 'popular religiosity' (e.g. water from a shrine such as Lourdes as a remedy for a sore throat), or belonging to the wilder extremes of American-based evangelism (e.g. 'the gospel of blessings'), we may find it in a wide range of customs based on what a German theologian has called a 'a payable works piety' (*zahlbare Werkfrömmigkeit*): where accumulation of 'having Masses said,' prayers, visits, donations, or whatever is imagined

30 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London 1960), 7-14.

as a way of attracting divine attention or favour.[31] The opposite to this insidious assumption I call the quality of an 'open liturgy' and just as the tendency towards counting, gathering and imagining that 'we have God' is ever present, so must be our sensitivity that God is always greater and that the liturgy never has 'a control' on the divine: 'The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but know not whence it comes or goes; so it is with everyone born of the Spirit' (Jn 3:8).

ASSESSING LITURGY AND 'TICKING BOXES'

A good liturgy cannot be measured in a finite way. So assessing a liturgy is not a matter of 'ticking boxes' or grading performance. Conversely, a poor liturgy is easier to assess: one sees people departing with messages encoded within the ritual which are often diametrically opposed to the gospel or after having an experience whose is anything but the liberating lightness of encountering love. These principles are intended as both a practical guide – a good liturgy should manifest some or all of them – and also as a stimulant to further reflection on how the liturgy can tell our story to ourselves, help us to affirm our vision of life and of the world, and to model our perception of the boundaries of the Kingdom.

31 O. Nussbaum, *Kloster, Priestermönch und Privatmesse: Ihr Verhältnis im Westen von den Anfängen bis zum hohen Mittelalter* (Bonn 1961.

No conflict. Have women profited from abortion legality? Someone has profited, but not the woman who undergoes an abortion … Do women want abortion? Not like she wants a Porsche or an ice cream cone. Like an animal caught in a trap, trying to gnaw off its own leg, a woman who seeks an abortion is trying to escape a desperate situation by an act of violence and self-loss. Abortion is not a sign that women are free, but a sign that they are desperate … Women's rights are not in conflict with their own children's rights; the appearance of such a conflict is a sign that something is wrong in society.

– Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Remnant*, 20 January, 1992