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Roman Missal at 50: Liturgical Asceticism

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This is the tenth and final article in this series that aimed to provoke a sort of extended liturgical examination of conscience as we mark the 50th anniversary of the *Roman Missal* renewed under Pope Paul VI, one of the clearest fruits of the Second Vatican Council. My contention throughout has been that the liturgical renewal proposed by the Council has yet to be fully implemented. This is despite the publication of a series of renewed liturgical books that are vastly superior to their Tridentine forerunners in terms of coherent presentations of the *lex credendi* [law of belief] of the Church. The mistake that has been all too often made is that of equating a minimal adoption of the new books with the liturgical renewal itself. I believe that the Church needs at least a century to appropriate the renewal that an Ecumenical Council offers. We are barely at the half-way stage and therefore this examination of conscience should help us to improve our liturgical celebrations.

Having read my earlier articles, readers may rightfully question, what do we need to do? Is it simply a matter of time? Is it enough to give the liturgical renewal more time to develop? No, there is a lot of work that we can do. While the Scholastic axiom holds true that God is not confined to the sacraments and he can work with people in mysterious ways outside of the structure of the Catholic Church, the treasure of the Eucharist is perhaps the most important reality inherited by the Church from Christ. As number 16 of the *GIRM* puts it:

The celebration of Mass ... is the center of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the Father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit. In it, moreover, during the course of the year, the mysteries of

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redemption are recalled so as in some way to be made present. Furthermore, the other sacred actions and all the activities of the Christian life are bound up with it, flow from it, and are ordered to it.

The first point that needs to be underlined is that the importance of the Eucharist requires that we give it our very best. A “good enough” effort is not enough to give to preparation of the Eucharist. It requires the very best that we have: as beautiful a setting for the celebration as we can possibly give it, the most beautiful vessels and vestments, the best prepared liturgy possible (even if it is a pain to have a liturgy committee in a parish), beautiful music and art and well-prepared prophetic homilies. On a very simple level of natural justice, we owe God the very best that we can possibly give him. Visitors to the National Museum in Kildare Street in Dublin can see an example of this in the Ardagh Chalice. The most beautiful part of this eighth century chalice (itself the most beautiful piece of metalwork ever produced on this island) is in the underside of the foot of the chalice. Today a mirror placed beneath the chalice allows visitors to see this highly decorated feature. However, when it was designed it is likely that its creator considered that only God would be able to see this, as it would not be visible during the liturgy. The best is “wasted” on God, like the costly nard with which Mary anointed Jesus’ feet (Jn 12:3).

If we hope to get anything from the liturgy, we must give it our very best. We cannot simply give the liturgy our leftovers. We are not aiming at a minimalistic validity to cover our responsibility (even if we must guarantee the minimum for a valid and licit celebration). We need to constantly ask ourselves how we can celebrate the liturgy in its fulness. This preparation has both external and interior dimensions, with the internal preparation being far more important.

It is interesting to note that at the end of his life, when St. Francis had been relieved from any leadership role in the Franciscan Order, and as the Order was increasing greatly in numbers and strength, what most concerned the saint was the dignity with which the Eucharist was celebrated in the houses of the Order. In his last letter to his brothers late in 1224, which forms a sort of spiritual testament, he did not choose to give an exhortation on charity or poverty, but wrote on the importance of the worthy celebration of the Eucharist:

In the Lord I also beg all my brothers who are priests, or who will be or who wish to be priests of the Most High, that, whenever they wish to celebrate Mass, being pure, they offer

THE FURROW

the true Sacrifice of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ purely. [Let them do this] with reverence [and] with a holy and pure intention, not for any mundane reason or out of fear or out of love of some person, as if they were pleasing people.¹

CONVERSION AND HOLINESS

It should be no surprise that perhaps the harshest criticism that is levelled against the current liturgy is that all too often it is divorced from life. Amending liturgical books is ridiculous if Christians do not amend their lives. The renewed Missal of Vatican II must be accompanied by conversion. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reminds us that “in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.”

Pope Francis has warned that hypocrisy is one of the biggest sins of today’s Christians. This “sin is saying one thing and doing another; it is a double life,” he warned. He continued with this example, “I am very Catholic, I always go to Mass, I belong to this association and another; but my life is not Christian, I do not pay my employees fairly, I take advantage of people, I play dirty in business, I launder money.”² For the liturgy to be fruitfully celebrated it requires personal holiness.

David Fagerberg, Professor of Liturgy in the University of Notre Dame, IN, has proposed the new term “*liturgical asceticism*” to explain what is most needed in today’s liturgical celebrations.³ In order to understand exactly what this liturgical asceticism is meant to achieve, it would be helpful to consider Fagerberg’s basic understanding of what liturgy itself is. He defines it in this way:

Liturgy is the Trinity’s perichoresis kenotically extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification. In other words, the

- 1 *A Letter to the Entire Order* 14 in Francis and Clare, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 56. For more on the background of this letter see Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 119-122.
- 2 Pope Francis, Morning Meditation In The Chapel Of The *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 23 February 2017. Available at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170223_do-not-delay-conversion.html
- 3 Fagerberg’s theological project of “liturgical asceticism” is a development of the work of Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) and Aidan Kavanaugh (1929-2006). He summarizes the project in the prologue to David W. Fagerberg, *Liturgical Mysticism* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), xiii-xxi, n.b. xiv-xv.

Trinity's circulation of love turns itself outward, and in humility the Son and the Spirit work the Father's good pleasure for all creation, which is to invite our ascent to participate in the very life of God; however, this cannot be forced, it must be done with our cooperation.⁴

In order to participate in this liturgy, we need to change or convert, and this conversion is both the gateway to participate in the liturgical action and one of the principal effects of our participation. Fagerberg explains that liturgical asceticism is this nexus of conversion and participation:

Liturgical asceticism capacitates a person for liturgy. The preliminary, negative asceticism is only to clear out the silt, to awaken the sleepwalker, to dust off the coin that bears the king's image, so that the *imago Dei* can again stand aright, and offer the holy oblation in peace. And where is this sacrificial oblation accomplished? In both the sacred and the profane. It happens in the former under sensible signs, and it happens in the latter by *consecratio mundi*. The sacramental liturgy and our personal liturgy are connected as in a seamless garment.⁵

This does not happen all at once, but is the fruit of:

A lifetime of liturgy in all its dimensions – the liturgical year, the liturgy of the hours, the Divine Liturgy, the fasts and the feasts, the sacrament and the sacramental – is required to give a person the calm, steady, ascetical regard for the Godhead. Liturgy is the perichoresis of the Trinity kenotically extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification. By her ascetical formation in the liturgical life, Mrs. Murphy becomes a theologian.⁶

I quoted from the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann in the first of this series.⁷ Perhaps another quote from him would

4 David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington D.C.: C.U.A. Press, 2013), 9.

5 David W. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2016), 2.

6 Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, 113-114. The Mrs. Murphy he refers to is a sort of liturgical everyman that stands for the normal practicing Christian who regularly partakes in the various expressions of the Church's liturgical life and, while having no formal training in academic theology is a better "theologian" than many of the experts who try to instruct her. See Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary 1981* (New York: Pueblo, 1984), 146-147.

7 For an introduction to Schmemmann see my earlier article, "Schmemmann's Challenge for Contemporary Roman Catholicism." *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 73 (2008): 133-147.

THE FURROW

be a good way to conclude. He argues that for liturgy to have any meaning whatsoever it must be fully assimilated by today's Christians:

The early Christians realized that in order to become the temple of the Holy Spirit they must *ascend to heaven* where Christ has ascended. They realized also that this ascension was the very condition of their ministry to the world. For there – in heaven – they were immersed in the new life of the Kingdom; and when, after this 'liturgy of the ascension,' they returned into the world their faces reflected the light, the 'joy and peace' of that Kingdom and they were truly its witnesses. They brought no programs and no theories; but wherever they went, the seeds of the Kingdom sprouted, faith was kindled, life was transfigured, things impossible were made possible. They were witnesses, and when they were asked, 'Whence shines this light, where is the source of this power?' they knew what to answer and where to lead men. In church today, we so often find we meet only the same old world, not Christ and His Kingdom. We do not realize that we never get anywhere because we never leave any place behind us.⁸

8 Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1973), 28.

The Road to Joy. A fourth feature of joy is that it is not just rooted in God but in the ways of God. These are the ways of God we must embrace if Joy is to be ours. For example, joy will be impossible if we act unjustly or ignore truth. Plato (428-347 BC) argued that justice is always happiness (The Republic, 'Book 2', 358a) and St Augustine (354-430) insisted that 'the happy life is joy based on the truth. This is joy grounded in you, O God, who are the truth' (Confessions 10, 22, 33). Likewise, St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) argued that all the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Gospel are ordered to our Joy (Summa Theologiae, q. 99). Here is the invitation to order our lives along the domains of justice, truth, peace and love. It is the way of the Beatitudes where Jesus teaches us how to be blessed. When we are blessed, joy ensues. Feelings come and go but the fruit of a well ordered life is blessedness which leads to lasting joy.

– BILLY SWAN, *Love Has a Source* (Maynooth, St. Paul's Publishing) p.139.