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# The FURROW

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Liturgy, Mission  
and Ministry  
in Ireland  
Today: *Random  
Reflections and  
Thoughts*

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# Liturgy, Mission and Ministry in Ireland Today: *Random Reflections and Thoughts*

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## PART ONE: LITURGICAL FORMATION

There are significant changes taking place in the Catholic Church in Ireland at present, not least are those which touch, either directly or indirectly, into the very heart of what it is to celebrate liturgy. Liturgy is not marginal to who we are or to our Christian self-understanding. This must now be re-evaluated, and thereby supply us with a synodal-type process of hope motivated by pastoral need and not unduly restrained by financial resources.

These ‘random reflections’ are stimulated by a recent publication.<sup>1</sup> In subsequent parts to this article, the concept of ‘pastoral’ liturgy (Part Two), as well as the relationship between worship and ‘mission’ (Part Three), and ministry (Part Four), will be looked at. ‘Pastoral’ liturgy is somewhat maligned as a concept and, one fears, is generally reduced to pastoral ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’. This short-circuits a *creative dialogue* between what liturgy presupposes and the actual human *experience* of worship. ‘Mission’ is an ill-defined word generally used as a handy term that is applied to anything and everything. It can also lead to superficial

1 ‘The Amen Corner’ in the October 2021 issue of *Worship* 95, 292-298 [page reference will be given in the main body of the text in square brackets]. The contributor is Nicholas Denysenko writing on ‘Liturgical Theology in Crisis – Twenty-First Century Version’, to mark the centennial anniversary of the birth of Alexander Schmemmann (d. 1983).

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understanding of the foundational and fundamental mandate from Christ.

### LITURGICAL FORMATION I

Recent events have brought into focus, once again, the celebration of liturgy itself, how we might best approach this in Ireland, and how we might serve the all-important field of liturgical formation.<sup>2</sup> Throughout different parts of the English-speaking world in recent years, courses relating to liturgical theology began to be watered down. Worse, these were often reduced to ceremonial accounts with a description coming from systematics which is detached from the worship experience. In his article, Denysenko refers to an invitation he had recently received to a virtual panel on post-pandemic liturgy – offered by a first-rate Catholic university – featuring a panel consisting of ecclesiologists and sociologists. Not a liturgist in sight.

The author laments the ‘serious decline’ that the ongoing liturgy reform movement is currently experiencing in the USA. It had blossomed after the Council and had deep roots in the earliest decades of the twentieth century. It should be noted that such a decline is not felt to the same extent in countries like France, Germany, Spain, and Italy where liturgy is valued as an academic discipline and given due honour by the episcopal leadership in these countries. The American experience, however, seems to be reflected in Ireland and the UK (in imitation of that of the USA?).

### GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

When the assembly gathers to celebrate liturgy, it does so in a *ritual act* that is *sacramental*: the assembly is placed, in its full humanity, before the living God in such a way that the actuality of salvation offered by God through the Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is laid open before it. It is therefore a ‘primary’ act of the worshipping community – one that imbues, infests, transforms, and enlivens. In the words of Alexander Schmemmann:

- 2 Pope Francis has often spoken about the need for liturgical formation – in continuity with his predecessors – and most recently to the Faculty and students of the Pontifical Institute for Liturgy in Rome (7 May 2022). He spoke about the *study* of the promotion of active participation (‘a fundamental dimension of christian life’); the important *ecclesial* role of liturgy; and an evangelisation that ‘starts with the liturgical life which involves all of the baptised’. He referred to the fact that liturgy is ‘not a question of rites, it is the mystery of Christ’. Addressing the importance of serious study of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, he urged that ‘we must continue this task of forming *the* liturgy in order to be formed by the liturgy’. Pope Francis has since issued an Apostolic Letter, *Desiderio Desideravi* (29 June 2022), on the topic of Liturgical Formation which warrants deep study.

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It is precisely in and through her liturgy – this being [its] specific and unique ‘function’ – that the Church is *informed* of her cosmic and eschatological vocation, *receives* the power to fulfil it and thus truly *becomes* ‘what she is’ – the sacrament, in Christ, of the new creation; the sacrament, in Christ, of the Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

The study of this event (= secondary theology) must engage and dialogue with lived human experience. However, *how* this secondary theology works is important. It must place value on the salvific encounter of Christians before the living God as they enact sacrament. One cannot get to know a piece of music or a theatrical work by first studying the written text or the musical score: encountering this in live performance is essential. Study of the text, but only after the event, can lead to a discovery of fresh horizons and new interpretations. As with literature or music, interpretation of sacramental rites in a specific local church is not a licence for a ‘free for all’ but an invaluable opportunity to allow the salvific mystery of a loving God to invade the life of a particular assembly and its members – and to respond to this creatively.

Liturgical and sacramental theology (a unified discipline) takes as its starting point the actual liturgical celebration and builds on that. It is in the worship-act of the assembly (where ‘sacrament’ happens) that salvation is experienced as an encounter with God. Secondary theology (typically found in lecture halls and in learned books) discusses and talks about this, but *ex professio*, does not experience it. At best, secondary theology points to where God-in-Christ has been and might be encountered (Kavanagh) whereas the primary theological act is constituted *in* the celebrated liturgical event itself. All forms of liturgical formation – in parishes, dioceses, or at more professional levels – need to reflect seriously on the experience of celebrating sacrament, just as the musician needs to examine the detail of the ‘dots’ to gain a deeper sense of the music she is performing – but the magic is in the performance. The importance of this cannot be overemphasised. A classroom-style of systematic theology of sacrament is incomplete and hollow when divorced from the natural environment of ritual action in which the salvific mystery is actualised and celebrated.

3 Alexander Schmemmann, ‘Liturgy and Theology,’ in Thomas Fisch, ed., *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1990) 57 [emphasis in the original]. Similar thinking can be found in the writings of Aidan Kavanagh, Robert Taft, John Baldovin, Kevin Irwin, to mention a few.

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### INHABITING THE MYSTERY

The importance of liturgy as a lived and celebrated reality cannot be overestimated. The gathered worshipping church encounters, *in a living way*, the presence of God in its midst. And this presence is not passive or 'reified', as is often implied in catechetical and homiletic sources. The encounter of worship (shared in assembly and with God in Christ and the Spirit) embodies the life and mission of the church, without, however, ever substituting for or replacing these.

Gathering for liturgy helps us rehearse attitudes and to learn what proper and 'just' Gospel living might be about. In the citation above, Schmemmann states a truth about liturgy being a rehearsal of a whole lifestyle:

- because we are reconciled, we learn how to embrace forgiveness and to reconcile;
- because we are invited to the table to partake in the Banquet of the Lord, we learn to welcome others to our tables and to share with them;
- because we experience welcome and radical inclusion without pre-condition, we in turn learn to welcome the stranger in our midst without question;
- because we seek mercy, we learn not to hold grudges;
- because we look for transformation through sacrament, we learn to see the transformative action of God around us;
- and because we engage in word with the Word, we learn the importance of encounter with others and identifying echoes of Revelation in words exchanged in truth, beauty, and love.

Notice the number of *verbs* here: reconcile, forgive, share, welcome, seek mercy, engage .... They all demand of us commitment. Liturgy is *not* primarily about saying prayers or an intellectual exercise or a disembodied spiritual exercise. Being with God overflows into doing. Contemplative action. One could say that in liturgy, to use an Americanism, we 'do' God. While liturgy contains much catechesis, its task is not primarily to pass on information or to inculcate beliefs or promote church doctrines. Worship is bound up with glorification and praise of God and is thus self-implicating. Unconditionally. We become implicated in a certain narrative, supplied by liturgy, which can only be translated into the act of doing. Anything less than this turns our worship into an act of hypocrisy.

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So, liturgy has less to do with words and an intellectualising of faith or even an engagement in ‘profound thought’: it may do these things, but always as a by-product of the worshipful act. Sacramental encounter must be an exercise of carnality before it is an exercise of the cerebral. And it happens week after week.

This life-rehearsal demands that we evaluate everything from the perspective of the Reign as preached by Jesus, and the inherent vision of justice and inclusion in liturgy. The creation of this vision involves a re-setting of the relationships between God and all of creation (the destruction of which we willingly engineer). Justice is indivisible. Liturgy supplies the weekly and daily attempt to learn that the Cross is central to our discipleship, but that this is the same Cross which embodies hope and promise. We learn to rehearse the Kingdom in the contexts within which we live. In this sense it has little to do with personal emotions and feelings *in and of themselves*, but much to do with the human person standing naked before the Mystery. Emotions and feelings must be valued deeply and brought into conversation with the enfleshed Christ so that all recognise that every aspect of our human person forms part of our response to God, that we intuitively learn to right the wrongs we so willingly, if innocently, visit on others and on this tiny part of the cosmos. However, everything cannot be reduced to the subjective.

### LITURGICAL FORMATION II

It makes sense that a theological introduction to liturgy and the necessary accompanying formation (which is ongoing) must take the empirical as a starting point – the experience of worship in its multiple dimensions in assembly. The emphasis is on the ‘here and now’, the local, where God’s salvific embrace is experienced as grace. This is the approach that framed how the *National Centre for Liturgy (NCL)* intuitively worked. The more academic and theological consideration of the church’s life at worship is vastly important and was supplied in abundance at the NCL. Participants experienced sacrament as a celebrated reality, in the first place – and prayer was a feature at the Centre at the beginning of each day as they assembled to pray Daily Prayer and Eucharist. In this way, they were immersed in the gentle ebb-and-flow of the liturgical year through their own absorption into the prayer of the church, and thus into a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ: as course participants they prayed each day *in Christ*, with the voice of Christ, and *as church*. They got to learn how to live Daily Prayer (Liturgy of the Hours) and came to love it for the exposure it gives to the psalms and to the pattern of praise and intercession that permeate it in and through its capacity to uncover every human emotion and

their potential for transformation in God. This experience of Daily Prayer was the context which created the environment in which systematic reflection on the sacramental life of the church could begin and deepen. Music and song flowed as a living and joyful prayer from worship to classroom and back.

All those lecturing and working in the discipline readily helped shape this experience – not because we were asked to by the leadership in the NCL, but because this is the way in which lecturers intuitively work in liturgical and sacramental formation. When participants saw – and understood – that this was the norm, they felt almost seduced into attuning their ‘faith-sensors’. They became imbued with a method for liturgical formation which framed their ‘learnings’. We hope that this might continue in any new configuration of the NLC.

Much current difficulty around the provision of formation hinges around finance and that enterprise is market-driven, a situation aggravated by the pandemic. This is not unique to Ireland. Third level institutions fuse liturgical and sacramental theology with other offerings, sometimes merging programmes to rationalise resources. Less resources means reduced expenditure. Churches in English-speaking countries in this part of the world have rarely given the priority to the discipline that it requires [see Denysenko, 293ff.]. Liturgy does not form part of the academic agenda in most third-level places, despite the call by the Liturgy Constitution (= SC) 16 that it should ‘rank among the principal courses’. It is no longer deemed to be of importance. The Constitution speaks of an ‘Institute of Pastoral Liturgy’ to guide the Bishops’ Conference in its task of promoting good liturgical practice and to help their Liturgy Commission in the Bishop’s work (SC 44). The early history of the NCL, particularly in Portarlington and Carlow, consciously served this purpose. Sadly only a few dioceses are now prepared to invest resources in various parochial formation programmes at this time, and the results of this are evident in how parishes deal with various issues relating to worship.

Some parameters and caveats regarding formation:

- (1) We have generally approached liturgical formation in parishes as a didactic activity. However, didactic catechesis is deeply unhelpful and ineffectual. Liturgy, well celebrated, is itself formative<sup>4</sup> and offers the basis of a mystagogic catechesis.
- (2) This points to the need to take as a starting point the lived experience of worshippers – as a faith-reality, as an

4 ‘The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well’: Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis* 2007, 64.

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interpretative tool in helping identify requirements, and as a human engagement that is often hampered by a detached ‘performance’ on the part of liturgical ministers.

- (3) The strengths and weaknesses of the human dimension of sacrament supplies a context that is both real and precious. It is in the ‘human’ that the intersection of salvation with lived reality is most evident. The couple who asks the assembly of the church for its prayerful blessing as they publicly and solemnly exchange their marriage consent do so knowing not just the potential vulnerabilities but also the intense joy of a loving relationship. They know of the frailties of being human but trust the strength and accompaniment of the Spirit operating in their relationship and in the assembly, and of their sacramental insertion into the Paschal Mystery. They know these, never as a magic bond or guarantee, but as an inner power that will guide them for as long as they remain open to the Spirit.
- (4) How we negotiate the human experience of sacrament must be part of liturgical catechesis. It is only in the corporeal encounter in our reality with the efficacious workings of Christ in Word and rite (see SC 48) that sacrament can exist. It does not exist in the ritual books or in the theology of a classroom divorced from lived experience but only when the liturgical rubber hits the road of reality.
- (5) A large gulf exists between what is experienced in worship in the context of daily living (the empirical) and what the catechism teaches us (the cerebral). If celebrated properly and fully, then we find that liturgy exposes us to the experience of being church, the experience of reconciliation and God’s mercy, and the experience of wining and dining at the Banquet of the Lord – through the agency of our fundamental human experience.
- (6) We learn more ‘about’ God in Christ than we might in any book by standing naked in God’s presence in assembly as we confess and grapple with the fact that as sinners we are unconditionally loved, however unworthy we might feel of this Love. It is only because we know our proficiency in sin (not least in social and structural sin) that we can learn – through experience and in faith – the gratuity and abundance of grace.
- (7) This moves us to learn how to intercede for those who do not experience human warmth or inclusion. An invitation to the supper of the Lamb means doing more than simply reaching out actively to those who do not get to eat and drink what is required for basic human survival. Authentic sharing in the Eucharist requires of us to ensure that the appropriate human



structures are in place to guarantee an abundance for those most in need. The sustainability of our current dining habits impacts on how we celebrate Eucharist. The authenticity of our acceptance of the invitation to the Banquet is related directly to our capacity to feed the hungry and create the conditions to alleviate hunger in the world. Not to do this is not just sinful: it is blasphemous.

- (8) The most important caveat in the task of formation is to realise that increasingly people find church and its expressions to be irrelevant. Those who seek God often do so in a more fluid fashion by picking what they consider to be helpful and ignoring everything else. Diminishing church attendance should help us reflect on the seriously deficient styles of liturgy we employ.

Liturgical formation has little to do with ceremonial and more to do with a mystagogical immersion into sacrament and the event of liturgy. What we are dealing with here are the beginnings of liturgical spirituality. The easier and lazier option is normally to go through the ceremonial unfolding of worship and ‘explain’ things. More will be gained by an assembly through the acquisition of a *capacity to ‘do ritual’* – something that has little to do with simply ‘doing the ceremony accurately’.

We need to take seriously the nature of all worship: it is, on the *one* hand, deeply immersed in the world around us with the cultural, philosophical, ideological, and political aspirations of our age, while, on the *other*, simultaneously and profoundly involving a penetration of the saving act of Christ in our engagement with this world. Liturgy can never be reduced to a ‘holy’ or a pious activity of believers. We cannot live, act, or behave except as people who are functioning members of society and world. Crucial to how we live as Christians is how we negotiate with the Mystery of God in Christ. Openness to the action of the Spirit guides. Because liturgy actualises this mystery – that is, makes it a reality in the assembly – it becomes the privileged, but not sole, place where negotiation takes place. This creates a faith and a human dialogue between God’s graced and loving outreach to us and ‘our’ worlds of hope and love, suffering, anxieties, joy, and healing. *This* is where ‘salvation’ occurs and is experienced.

Just as there is a faith-formation dimension to the study of theology at every academic level, this same dimension must permeate the work of pastoral liturgical formation.