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Thomas R. Whelan

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

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PART TWO: PASTORAL LITURGY

Attendance at Sunday worship is seen to constitute the core of what being a Catholic christian is all about. Catholics ‘go to Mass’. However, something much more important and central to our faith is at stake. An authentic celebration of liturgy points the assembly to the deeper reality of the cosmic liturgy (the context of our ritual engagement) and to the ‘liturgy after the liturgy’: the worship of the ‘real presence’ of Christ in the poor, in the marginalised, in the hungry ... and in creation. The desire for a liturgy that is more ‘meaningful’ is expressed in the synodal Synthesis document (section x) and this highlights a yearning for full participation and for liturgical celebrations that ‘speak to people’s lives’. Nothing can be more relevant and Gospel-filled than celebrating the Mystery of Christ in a way that is inclusive and that moves the assembly out to the margins.

Much pastoral energy has been given over to forms of online worship since the beginning of the pandemic. Some places used the opportunity to create an awareness of the need to reach out to others. However, this outward movement was not always evident or even alluded to and the aspiration was that, as quickly as possible, people would be able to return to in-person church attendance on Sunday mornings. This has had the unhelpful effect of reinforcing

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a form of idolatry centred on liturgy and church attendance. The article by Denysenko, mentioned in Part One, refers to this:¹

Pastors tend to practice a form of liturgiolatry in the way they explain liturgy to the people. Public messaging that depicts the liturgy as a requirement to be fulfilled at the risk of divine penalty is one symptom of liturgiolatry. [296] ... Has maximal attendance at [liturgy] become the destiny of the Christian journey? If so, then the church has replaced the altar designed to honour God with an altar glorifying the human contribution to liturgy. [297]

It is so easy to *reduce* worship to law and obligation and make it seem as if the purpose of our Christian existence was Sunday attendance at worship.² The relationship between liturgy and Christian living is complex and multifaceted and cannot be explained in a simplistic and fundamentalist account of the liturgy. When this happens it easily becomes an act of idolatry. Moltmann has observed that ‘The reduction of faith to practice has not enriched faith; it has impoverished it. It has let practice itself become a matter of law and compulsion’.³

The purpose of a ritual assembly is to create an environment which would facilitate our transformation and our graced condition in God through our engagement with the word and the sacraments of liberation. Spoken word leads us to the Incarnate Word and is sacramental. In the words of David Power, all sacrament is ‘Event eventing’. We are fed, not as an end in itself, but as a means of being nourished by life in the Trinity which finds expression morning, noon, and night in disciples of Christ and in all of creation. Immersed in word and sacrament, we are made participants in the life of a Triune God as well as in the mission of God (*missio Dei*).⁴ To what end? That we collectively point to the fundamental sacrament of creation wherein praise is offered to

1 Nicholas Denysenko, ‘Liturgical Theology in Crisis – Twenty-First Century Version,’ *Worship* 95 (2021): 292-298 [henceforth, page references will be in the main body of the text in square brackets]. See also his, ‘Finding Divine Beauty in an Age of Liturgical Idolatry,’ *Worship* 96 (2022): 34-54, esp. 47-51.

2 The Irish Episcopal Conference issued a statement after their Spring meeting (published on IEC website, 9 March 2022) that from Easter Sunday 17 April, attendance at Sunday Mass will ‘once again be deemed an essential expression of faith for all in our Church in Ireland’. Those who are unwell ‘will not be under any *obligation* to attend Mass’. [emphasis added]

3 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 8.

4 To understand worship as having an instrumental role in relation to mission (e.g., as a tool of mission) is to misunderstand both ‘worship’ and what is referred to as the *missio Dei*.

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Father, through the Son and in the Spirit and thereby glorify our wonderment at the earth which reflects God's marvels (see Psalm 8, etc.).⁵ This is the same earth which we have succeeded in all but destroying wantonly. To be authentic, this act of glorification must overflow into *service* of God's Reign which prioritises the margins of society. Human reality is the only context in which we can carry out sacramental worship: ritual behaviour helps us interpret our lives as a Gospel people, pointing *beyond* itself to something more important. If our ritual celebration is transformative and graced, there might be some chance that our sacramental engagement in world and creation be transubstantive of society and world.

'PASTORAL LITURGY'

The term 'pastoral liturgy' is used frequently without much consideration given to what it could mean. The significance of the term in various languages changed somewhat from its initial use in the 1920s. German thinking brought a critical approach into play as a necessary dialogic component of the pastoral experience.⁶ In the romance languages, the term generally refers to the *liturgical dimension* of pastoral theology/activity – rather than to the study of liturgy as an object that can be reduced to the 'pastoral/practical'.⁷ This envisages that the actual celebration of liturgy is *shaped* by an understanding of ecclesiology, proclamation, sacramental theology, ritual studies, etc. – all valued as theological explorations of salvation. Here 'liturgy' is seen to be a dimension of pastoral theology. From 1943, with the foundation of the *Centre (National) de Pastorale Liturgique*, the French term referred unapologetically to a discipline which was at once theological, biblical and pastoral. Still existing, and through its scholarly organ, *La Maison-Dieu*, it continues to bring the very best of historical, theological and liturgical scholarship – framed by rigorous academic critical reflection – to bear on the worship needs of Christian people in the early twenty-first century.

For many, liturgy remains the most important expression and means of pastoral ministry in the church. Two Benedictines, seminal figures in the reform movement of the early twentieth century (the Belgian Lambert Beauduin, d. 1960 and the American

5 See Michael Plekon, "The World as Sacrament" in Alexander Schmemmann's *Vision*, *Logos* 50 (2009): 429-439

6 The German term (*Pastoralliturgik*) referred to a theological discipline which explored how liturgy could be best understood as serving the salvific work of Christ in the assembly and in the world. What precisely this might mean was much debated in later years.

7 French, *la pastorale liturgique*; Italian, *la pastorale liturgica*; Spanish, *la pastoral litúrgica*.

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Virgil Michel, d. 1938), were motivated principally by *pastoral* concern and their vision of worship saw a direct link between reform of liturgy *and* social justice. ‘Justice’ was understood to embrace everything that related to the amelioration of the daily lives of ‘ordinary’ people. In fact, justice was initially the dominant driver towards reform.⁸ However, the preoccupation of the liturgy reform movement throughout much of the twentieth century became reduced to the study of text and ceremony – important as these are – but with little emphasis on the pastoral or on the more radical question (posed by Guardini) of the capacity of the contemporary person to even engage in liturgy. Tragically, the underpinning of the vision by justice is all but absent in the Conciliar Liturgy Constitution (the 60th anniversary of which will occur in December 2023).

The Rahnerian insight is important here: the pastoral purpose of *all* theology is to assist the church in its call to become the realisation of the mystical body of Christ. It should be noted that what has occasionally been referred to in Ireland as ‘pastoral liturgy’ has little in common with the continental debates, and less to do with how a similar term – pastoral liturgical studies – is employed in the USA.

AN ‘APPLIED’ DISCIPLINE?

Unfortunately, ‘pastoral liturgy’ is often reduced to ‘applied’ studies – something which involves little more than implementation and execution: the ‘how to’ of liturgy enacted from beginning to end, almost as an exercise in the mechanics of performing that which is found in the rubrical material of the official ritual books. When it is reduced to being a ‘practical’ or ‘applied’ discipline, it generally ends up becoming devoid of solid theology and scholarship. It also has the unintended outcome that participants in programmes leading to academic qualification do not receive sufficiently broad immersion in foundational material to develop for themselves the necessary basic knowledge, competences, and tools with which to develop appropriate critical skills. For some, ‘pastoral’ is taken to refer to a form of ministerial empathy. This reflects a gross misunderstanding of a statement which, in itself, is true: that pastoral liturgy is the practice of liturgy *as it relates to people*. At surface level, the phrase is generally taken to suggest that liturgy is *not* intrinsically bound up with theology. There are several issues at stake here.

8 Beauduin was motivated by his involvement with the Catholic Workers’ Movement; Michel, a social scientist, later saw in liturgy – and its necessary reform – the key to the ‘social regeneration’ of American society.

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- a) The fundamental question for ‘pastoral’ liturgy (no matter how it is understood) is whether the assembly is the starting point for theological reflection (assembly as *subject*) or the end toward which that reflection is directed (assembly as *object*)?
- b) Liturgy is not a spectator activity inviting passive attendance, nor can it be reduced to a study of the action of the priest/presider, cantors/musicians, or other ministers – as important as these are. These people are merely *servants* within the assembly, which is itself the principal actor (in Christ) in the celebration.
- c) Liturgy cannot be reduced to the implementation or execution of the ritual books in the assembly. This reflects an erroneous sense that ‘good liturgy’ requires ceremonial rectitude and fidelity to the detail of the rubrics. Rather, a ‘living’ liturgy is one that invites *interiorisation within the assembly* (Congar) – ‘assembly’ understood as a corporate entity rather than a collection of individuals.
- d) Neither can liturgy become a free-for-all without any awareness of both formative and expressive roles of ritual. When ministers and presiders approach the worship event with informality, the resultant if unintended effect is that of drawing attention to the personalities of those whose task it is to lead the celebration and make of it a performance that includes, at best, ‘audience participation’. Formality does not equate with being cold.
- e) The criterion for evaluating local worship is supplied by the sacramental agenda that underpins the juxtaposition between daily life and the mystery of the liberating death and resurrection (which roots this in reality, in faith, and around the Cross of the Risen Lord). This is also a non-negotiable criterion for good liturgical formation.
- f) We need to move away from an instrumental concept of liturgy, one which sees the worship event as a productive exercise leading to a measurable outcome. Grace cannot be measured. On the contrary, the liturgical event is an incarnational encounter that actualises in our midst (in *this* assembly, *now*) God’s continuing revelation and graced presence. An understanding of the worship event that is subservient and tangential to the Mystery does not help us understand that all worship, an embodiment of salvific presence, unfolds for every assembly in the intersection between the lives, angsts and hopes of those gathered now and God’s saving and transformative outreach in Christ. It happens in the ‘*today-ness*’ of the life of the assembly.
- g) Mystagogy is central to this process. *Explanation* of symbols can unhelpfully take priority over *mystery*. A flat-minded literalism is intrinsically ‘anti-sacramental’ and diminishes the potential for an engagement with the ‘Catholic imagination’.

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What is 'real' to a faith community cannot be accessed through a scientific mode of knowledge.

- h) Society has changed how it perceives 'reality' and has, to a large extent, lost a sense of the religious imagination. Sacramental imagination intuitively sees the workings of God in all things that upbuild, that radiate beauty, that work towards harmony in creation and among people, and that have justice at the heart of its endeavours. It is central to how we perceive things. It is by means of imagination and its related mystagogy we uncover the sphere within which faith is developed and nourished rather than through a catechetical re-visitation of professed belief statements and creed (as important as these are).

PASTORAL LITURGICAL STUDIES: THE CONVERSATION TODAY

Contemporary reflection has developed from elements of the seminal thinking of the British-American scholar Mark Searle, moving the discussion in new directions.⁹ For Searle, 'pastoral liturgical studies' is a rigorous and demanding subdiscipline lodged in an interpretation of how an *assembly* is engaged in liturgy. It has little interest in the rubrical dimension of worship and even less in ceremonial efficiency. He spoke of the need to recognise the limitations of forms of scholarship that prioritise text and a narrow sense of history over a willingness to grapple with new problems, new forms of research, and new ways of understanding. Today, pastoral liturgical studies needs to sharpen its critical approach. Fresh fields of scholarship have opened up in more recent times, not least the development of a social history of worship in which, as Robert Taft would see it, space is given to how ordinary people experienced and thought about the way they worshipped. This remains a greatly unexplored goldmine. Findings must be filtered in the light of how the official texts and expectations considered these popular movements.¹⁰

Such an approach will require that more attention be directed at ritual embodiment and expression, and not just to texts. According

9 See especially his, 'New Tasks, New Methods: The Emergence of Pastoral Liturgical Studies' [*Worship*, 1983], reprinted in, *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, eds., Anne Koester and Barbara Searle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 27-48; and Stephen S. Wilbricht, *Rehearsing God's Just Kingdom: The Eucharistic Vision of Mark Searle* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013). Others who worked along similar lines, without always using this term, include David N. Power, Mary Collins, Angelus Häußling, Bernard Cooke, Gerard Lukken, Andrea Grillo, and Louis-Marie Chauvet.

10 One of the widely recognised weaknesses of the narrative of liturgical history until more recent decades is that it presumes to offer a 'universal' reading based on what is found in the manuscripts that come from the patristic, as well as the major cathedrals and monastic centres throughout medieval Europe. David Power was fond of saying that the most significant historical developments in sacramental theology are to be found, not at the 'centre', but at the periphery.

to Searle, this will permit us to understand pastoral liturgy better as being not just expressive of the faith of the assembly but also *formative* of it.¹¹ A deep sense of the Catholic sacramental imagination informs this, thereby respecting the indispensable presence and role of human imagination. Pastoral liturgical studies can never be reduced to the descriptive but rather privileges ‘tradition’ (understood as a living entity) over both history and a deductive approach by theology. In this context it can be suggested that the primary task of the pastoral liturgist is not so much to be aligned with the official reform programme but to challenge how *local church* embodies the Mystery of Christ in its worship. Its critical task will include a reading of how official reforms are implemented, and if the official rationale presented to support a programme is theologically sustainable.

Liturgical ministry will recognise that the reality of life, faced daily by christian people, requires a fresh language to support engagement with the salvific reality found in Christ.¹² Even the vocabulary and concepts employed need to be re-evaluated with care. This will help shape how a local christian community begins to image the world in which it lives and of which it forms part. As church is, so will liturgy be. The converse is also true. Both need to be credible and reflect the best of humanity. Otherwise the relationship falls. And, as the Synthesis of the synodal process confirms, this church needs to be known for welcoming all, including those who identify as LGBTQI+, those in second relationships, and those whom society deems to be the ‘have-nots’. Only then can we speak of liturgy being leaven that evangelises. Anything else smacks of gimmicky. A cultural and theological evaluation of contemporary society will emerge from and effect the empirical in a way that little else can. The rewards are lasting. There is nothing magical about this process. Contemporary sacramental theology is seeking to move away from a narrow sense of ontology¹³ and to explore the implications of the acceptance of the New Cosmology, of a contemporary phenomenology (important for sacramental theology), and of a reading of cultural and social movements that infuse the very air that we breath in Ireland.¹⁴

11 Movements towards renewal of church have always involved liturgical reform. It is almost an axiom to say that liturgy is at the heart of all forms of church renewal.

12 All forms of liturgical ministry – including proclamation, leading worship – are attempts to embody faith reality. This is an important issue which continues to be discussed by the Council of Liturgy of the Episcopal Conference.

13 One needs to ask if medieval philosophies, at least in terms of the narrow forms inherited, continue to serve adequately. Much sacramental theology today dialogues with contemporary philosophies, as with, for example, David Power, Louis-Marie Chauvet, Andrea Grillo.

14 Over many years, the writings of Professor Michael Conway (Maynooth) in this journal and elsewhere, offer a good entry point for helping us understand the questions which are framing, and in turn being framed by, contemporary culture.

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LITURGICAL FORMATION — AGAIN

The type of liturgical and pastoral formation that is offered must relate to the needs of those engaging with it (respecting appropriate ‘learning outcomes’ for each group). Regarding the ‘content’ of such immersion, it must be accepted that *all* liturgical study (as is also the case with the serious study of scripture, moral and systematic theology) is *pastoral* at its very roots. Questions that shape the programme emerge from a discussion of lived experience in order to return to a pastoral context, now infused with a new sense of how the Mystery of Christ intersects with the lives of baptised today. To offer ‘pastoral’ liturgy (however this is understood) to people without a solid theological foundation in liturgical studies (albeit at a level suitable to the group, whether parish/diocesan workshop or Third Level) is unhelpful and can be even harmful. At best, it is akin to offering answers to questions never posed in the first place. Rather, participants will be enlightened by serious foundational theology of worship and will seek opportunities to identify some of the underlying problems sacramental theology encounters as it negotiates with contemporary society. They will be encouraged to learn to interact with an enfleshment of Christ, discerned through the *living* Body of Christ which in turn filters and is filtered by social and cultural perception. This embodiment deeply values human emotions and feelings. Liturgy, properly celebrated, requires that we engage corporately and corporeally in the name of Christ, and respond in a graced relationship in and through our humanity. Formation will draw people’s attention to this and become an exercise in ritual awareness as well as mystagogical familiarity.

A particular approach will be required for those who are members of diocesan and parish liturgy groups / pastoral councils and people involved in various ministries. This must include parishioners who desire to be immersed in a fuller investigation of what it means to be a believing and active ritual participant in their local assembly’s regular worship. This exercise will embrace the findings of the *entire* Irish Synthesis of the synodal process – and not just section x (‘liturgy’). They will gradually come to a realisation that it is precisely in *their* context (i.e., the local assembly) that the sacramental encounter with the Risen Lord is actualised and will challenge them to place the excluded at the very centre of the community. It is primarily mystagogy, not academics, that will allow people to understand this.

The nature of the liturgical formation given at Third Level colleges is significantly different to what must be offered in parishes and in other pastoral contexts. Here, participants preparing for

academic qualifications, must develop the ability not just to know, but to critically appraise theological approaches to sacramentality and of 'reading' pastoral situations. They will need to be grounded in a solid *liturgical* theological understanding of sacrament, and not just in the biblical foundations or the ritual / theological history of the sacrament (being conscious that every sacramental rite developed differently). A person with a specialised master's qualification should be of sufficiently high standard to be capable of becoming a trainer of trainers at parish and diocesan levels.

Liturgical formation of a high standard must become available so that training can be decentralised and take place at regional and local levels. This means that such a person is at home with the various theological and liturgical discussions and debates that are currently in the ether as well as being familiar with anthropological and ritual studies suitable to their needs. They need to be capable of evaluating these. Appropriate skills will be required to assist others in their pastoral task, as well as having the competency to apply their studies in various concrete situations. There should be no difference in the quality of the 'content' and the level of theological education offered to degree students and what is on offer to those preparing for ordained ministry or in 'clergy-renewal' days. Otherwise, it would smack of clericalism, which is seriously sinful.

Pastoral Liturgical studies is predicated on two principal factors:

- (a) on a sacramental theology that is sourced in the graced and transformed encounter found in Christ, that is, in the rites themselves *as celebrated* ('Liturgical Theology') rather than from a theology that is 'of' liturgy (i.e., at a step removed). The empirical approach is therefore central to formation.
- (b) on academic credibility. Kathleen Hughes, with reference to Jungmann, offered the opinion that,

The Church is filled with pastoral liturgists today who have lost their theological and historical moorings and have become liturgical dilettantes. ... [today, like Jungmann, scholars must ground their] convictions in meticulous research into the ... multiple factors which produced liturgy over the centuries ... [and which examine] equally complex reality of the liturgy as it unfolds in the political and cultural context of today.¹⁵

15 Kathleen Hughes, 'Meticulous Scholarship at the service of a Living Liturgy,' in Joanne M. Pierce, Michael Downey, eds., *Source and Summit. Commemorating Joseph A. Jungmann SJ* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 21-32, at 31.

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And, Yves Congar, writing on liturgy in 1948, said that the last thing we need today ‘is not less intellectual or less scientific, less rigorous or less traditional academic formation. What we need ... are studies that ... respond to the real needs of real persons.’¹⁶

16 Yves Congar “‘Real’ Liturgy, ‘Real’ Preaching’, in *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar*, trans / ed. by Paul Philibert (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1-12, at 12.

Van Gogh. Vincent Van Gogh identified with the ‘man of sorrows’ who shared the lot of the poor, humiliated and broken. He saw his art as showing solidarity with the broken and the outsider. In a letter to his brother Theo he said: “That does not keep me from having a terrible need of – shall I say the word – religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars”. He looked at the poverty, loneliness and rejection suffered by Jesus who gave life to those in sorrow. He saw God in nature. When he painted the ‘Starry Night’ he said: “When all sounds cease, God’s voice is heard under the stars”. He saw the stars and the night sky as expressions of the love of God. He said “the moon is still shining and the sun and the evening star, which is a good thing – and they also speak of the love of God and makes one think of the word, ‘So I am with you always, even to the end of the world’ (Mt 28:20)”. He saw his art as consoling those who had been broken by life. It was a new way of expressing Jesus’s ministry of compassion.

– JOHN O’BRIEN, OFM, *At Eternity’s Gate: Artist of the Infinite*, Amazon, 2020, p72.