

L I T U R G Y a n d S P I R I T U A L I T Y

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I cannot begin to address myself to this subject without recalling that it was the theme of the Societas Liturgica Conference at Vienna in 1983, though the submissions were thought justly to be stronger on Liturgy than on Spirituality. This may have been because, as Dom Aidan Kavanagh said, in the most stimulating and provocative of the papers, "My suspicion is ... that 'Spirituality' is another of those convenient and relatively recent abstractions invited by secondary theologians as a general category into which diverse phenomena can be fitted and referred to under a single heading". He also stated emphatically that "the liturgy is not prayer. It is rite, a ritual act which embraces more than prayer (things such as credal assertions, proclamations, acclamations, gestures, sights, non-verbal sounds, and smells) and is not reducible to any one of these forms of communication alone". But in the end, Kavanagh performed better than he promised in the recognition of both subjects and I shall refer to him again later in less dismissive mood.

Let me offer my own definitions:

Liturgy is a prescribed and ordered act of corporate worship which may be public, though it will proclaim the inmost truths of faith by which the community which devised it lives.

There is something arcane about liturgy; its most profound and converting communications may be subliminal, which is why revision is a more difficult and dangerous operation than educationalists and some liturgists think. It bears the faith of generations past as well as of the present and evokes complex memories of the elemental whether of folk or faith.

Spirituality is not solely Christian, nor solely good. Hitler and Stalin were spiritual beings. The late VA Demant pointed out years ago that the self-centred and grasping life is a spiritual activity.

"Spiritual is not synonymous with Christian and the training of the soul in Christian faith requires as much weaning and purging from 'spiritual' movements

in general as from vital urges and entanglements with things.¹

There is something to be said for the preference of Alexander Schmemmann for the substitution in Christianity, to which I must confine myself, of "the Christian life" for spirituality.² This is, of course, the life in which the Spirit of God, the Divine activity released by the Passion and Glorification of Christ, takes possession of our own spirits, inspires them and assists them, silently, anonymously, yet always with power. It is not therefore a bad definition, if rough and colloquial, to say that

Spirituality is what makes us tick

as Christians - those beliefs, commitments, actions and - dare I say it ? - techniques by which our Christian life is sustained and expressed. There is obviously something subliminal here too - what most influences my intentionally Christian life may not be what I think it is. My practice may be Catholic, or my creed liberal, but I may be controlled by a submerged evangelical. I may feed my soul on all the best books, classical and contemporary, but all the time my spirituality may be what my mother taught me long ago. The earliest unconscious influences are what I cannot escape (which is one reason why infant baptism should not cavalierly be dismissed as a scandalous underselling of the gospel and why the liturgical ethos of infancy and childhood is all-important and why educationalists must not seek to capture liturgy for their own theories).

Here is an immediate link between liturgy and spirituality. Liturgy helps to shape spirituality. Everything is derived from the consensus fidelium. For the Christian, there is no such thing as prayer outside the Church.

Of course, it is a matter of which came first, the chicken or the egg ? Liturgy is the expression of spirituality, which in one sense is primary. Worship springs from encounter with the living God - Moses at the Burning Bush, Abraham on Mount Moriah, the Christian at Calvary. You can no more contrive a liturgy to set the bush on fire than you can describe the Crucifixion as a Liturgy, which is almost³ blasphemous. Yet Liturgy is the only way of coming to terms with either. "When they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives" - to Gethsemane, the Judgement Hill and the Cross - the warrant for Cranmer's placing the Gloria in Excelsis at the end of his Communion Service and of the earliest Baptist Collections of Hymns for the Lord's Supper of Benjamin Keach and Joseph Stennett. The Passion of Jesus has been found "matter of eternal praise" (Charles Wesley).

The sinner's refuge here below

The angels' theme in heaven above (Thomas Kelly)

In the death trains rumbling to Auschwitz the Jews sang of the heavenly banquet when they would feed upon Leviathan.

There is an inter-connection between spirituality and liturgy. This may be expressed in very practical ways. Our private devotion should be related to what goes on in Church, to the whole worship of the people of God; our prayer at home the extension of the Eucharist to our seven weekly attempts at living.⁴ I have often advised my fellow Methodists to make a note of the hymns and readings in their Sunday worship and to remember what they can of prayers and sermon and make these the basis of their daily devotions, as well as to anticipate the following Sunday by using its texts in advance. This presupposes that there is a proper liturgical order and comprehensiveness in the worship even though it be without book and that it is not simply a political manifesto nor concerned solely with this world, nor a series of testimonies. The heavenly dimension must not be lost, nor the objective, the given.

The traditional Catholic way of linking liturgy and spirituality has been through the office. And it is significant that the two most eloquent commendations of the office in my time have been by Free Churchmen - Nathaniel Micklem "Prayers and Praises" (1941 and subsequent editions) and Stephen Winward in his fine introductory essay⁵ to the first edition of the Joint Liturgical Group's "The Daily Office". The value of the office is that it is there as duty in our dry seasons "*when*" as Micklem says "*no words come to our lips and upon the surface of our hearts are numb*", while the bare frame of it may be filled out when the Spirit descends and we may on occasions rise by these set forms into the heavenly places; though "*it may, perhaps, be an even better thing - and certainly not less spontaneous - that we praise (God) out of the depths and in defiance of our moods and feelings*".

I agree with Aidan Kavanaugh that Liturgy takes precedence over spirituality. Liturgy is the objective 'given' of the Church whereas spirituality, however much derived from the holy tradition and shaped by our inheritance conscious or unconscious, must be intensely personal.

(a) Private prayer may sometimes do more harm than good. It may not deliver us from the evil in our hearts, or lift us out of our depressions, but sink us in the sea of our troubles and the world's.⁶

To enter into the liturgy in which everything is laid before Christ's cross and our own lives are transcended in the contemplation of his redeeming sacrifice may help us to lose ourselves in him and find that even suffering shines in the divine splendour of his victory. Whether the liturgy is traditional or modern revised may not matter. Each type may achieve this

in different ways. WH Vanstone has said in a profound and reconciling essay that modern liturgies give 'place'; ancient liturgies 'space'. We may find healing and forgiveness by discovering 'the beyond in our midst' as we look into our neighbour's eyes, exchange the peace and partake of communion with each other and the Lord. Recognition by God and our fellows is often the way to salvation, as the doctrine of justification by faith declares. But the contemplative way also leads us to the God in whom alone we can love our neighbour, and there are many who may be saved from their sins and from themselves by being lost in God.

(b) Liturgy corrects and restrains spirituality which may be self-indulgence and wild excess. St Paul introduced the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist because of the Corinthians' charismatic enthusiasm in danger of blasphemy and their turning of the Christian table fellowship into an orgy which *inter alia* divided rich from poor. 'Let everything be done decently and in order.' Methodism in the Caribbean 'contained' a revivalism which might have degenerated into hysteria by offering the Wesley hymns and The Book of Common Prayer. I have more sympathy than a Methodist ought with Newman's sermon on 'Religious Worship the Remedy for Excitements' and with Keble's inclinations towards a quietness and discipline which might lead to dullness. Not that the liturgy should ever be dull, proclaiming as it does the stupendous good news of our salvation. Its wonder is so great in itself that it ought not to need accompaniments or appurtenances to give it interest or entertainment value.

And yet one of our problems in these days is that people are not finding in liturgy the proper expression of their spirituality. One of the great demands in our world is for freedom, not the freedom of the capitalist which throws people to the forces of the market by which only the fittest to survive, survive; and prosper while others are destroyed; but freedom from the tyranny of unjust rule - slavery and exploitation - and from inhibitions which imprison them within their own personalities or make their social relationships torture. They want to dance - in the spirit if not in the body - not forever to be circumscribed by conventional codes of behaviour or 'manners', by fear of physical contact with their fellows or of expressing themselves in the exuberance of the sheer joy of living which so often co-exists with poverty and pain.

Spontaneity then is back. The Free Churches have won the victory after all. In Nigeria in August 1986 I worshipped in a Leper Settlement where the crippled, deformed and defaced came to bring their money dancing a conga; and might indeed, though on that occasion it did not happen,

have gone on to a worship which seemed unable to stop in its ever louder and more noisy praise. Did not their formless forms give them a liberty with one another before God which life had denied them ? And was not there also an 'abandon' - like the sense of this French word - which was a eucharistic sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving ? Such worship, whatever its dangers (and at times it made me long for an English Cathedral), revealed a freedom of the Spirit which transcended the sad circumstances of their lives. They also made a celebration of death, for after a long funeral service I attended with its interment (somewhat bungled) the drums began to beat in excited rhythm and the young women went back to their homes dancing.

And yet behind the enthusiasm and the play there is seriousness. And sometimes the vigour, the physical movement and the noise may be vestiges of the attempt to banish demons and to submerge sorrows in an exuberance which reality belies. Anthropologists have acknowledged the element of play in primitive worship, but there is a fundamental seriousness. Suzanne K Langer wrote years ago in a work of seminal philosophy *"The driving force in human minds is fear which begets an imperious demand for security in the world's confusion"*.⁸

"Smile, Jesus loves you" is not always an antidote to despair or adequate either to the tragedy of life or our sense of sin. Liturgy must provide for the melancholy of a Dr Johnson who seems to have gone to Church rarely but nearly always at Passiontide:

"On the 9th of April, being Good Friday, I breakfasted with him on tea and cross-buns...He carried me with him to the church of St Clement Danes, where he had his seat; and his behaviour was, as I had imagined to myself, solemnly devout. I shall never forget the tremendous earnestness with which he pronounced the awful petition in the Litany: "In the hour of death,⁹ and in the day of judgement, good Lord deliver us."

There is dispute as to the proper place of penitence in liturgy. Should it not be extralitururgical as in the Orthodox and Catholic tradition? Is there not something pathological about Cranmer's liturgies for ever punctuated by penitence ? Wolfhart Pannenberg in "Christian Spirituality and Sacramental Community" has felt that there is a particular psychological criticism to be made of his own Protestant tradition. "Why is the penitential piety of Protestant pietism so vulnerable to the criticisms of Nietzsche and Freud?" He says this is because "Pietism, especially in its late revivalist forms, made meditation on guilt and sinfulness a basic and permanent communion with God".¹⁰

That is a criticism to be heeded, though I do not think that the history of

spirituality shows that the Catholic has always been less sin laden than the Protestant. While a Christian theologian is saying this, the psychiatrists' and psychoanalysts' consulting rooms are full of people who desire to be freed of guilt, which is a phenomenon of life, not something invented by a certain type of Christianity, and it is the very presupposition of the Gospel that Christ receives sinners and that, in Wesley's words "the vilest offender may turn and find grace".

Nor is guilt simply pathological. Someone said to TS Eliot that he was seeking comfort in Christianity. He replied that it had in fact "forced him to face the full dangers of the human predicament, not just in this life but for eternity; and it had burdened his soul with a terrible and hitherto unrealised weight of human responsibility".

What we sometimes forget is that penitence is not only the result of our grubbing about in the sinks and sewers of our own sins, but the result of adoration, of the glimpse of God and of heaven which made Gerontius, borne by his angel with alleluias, cry "Take me away". This is the profound psychology of Cranmer's notorious 'mutilation of the Canon' in 1552. He follows Isaiah, of course, whom the sight of the Seraphim and the Song of the Sanctus moved not to gratification or to praise but to the acknowledgement of his own impurity - "Woe is me for I am undone".

And we have to grapple with the mystery of the Felix Culpa. There is a very powerful passage in Louis Bouyer's The Paschal Mystery:

Seemingly there is in divine love, in the love that is God, something that sin alone has permitted us to understand. The paradox is bold, but the Church has made it her own in the words she will sing on Holy Saturday: "O happy Fault !" Sin kindles divine wrath, but against this glowing background, divine love is unveiled in an entirely new light. And God suddenly opens a broad vista above His eternal secrets. It is the inscrutable mystery of the kenosis, of the God who makes Himself poor to enrich us, who renders Himself sensible to our blows in order to pardon us for them. On the cross, divinity seems to obliterate itself. The God-Judge makes a screen for His own anger. Rather, the Almighty delivers Himself to sinners and they do to Him whatever they choose. But without the sight of this suffering God (Deus patiens), would the creature ever have understood the boundless generosity

*that constitutes the depth of the divine Being ? It was necessary, it seems that this flaming torrent should rush across the world so that in its sound we might perceive some distant echo of eternal fountains.*¹²

It may be that all this points to a spirituality of the other Gospel sacrament, Baptism. This is not a sacrament of the individual's conversion and faith but of our incorporation into Christ. This does not ipso facto free us from sin or from guilt and penitence. We never dare treat sin lightly, nor cease to remember the oldest of all prayers "God be merciful to me a sinner", though "Lord have mercy" in the Orthodox liturgy is not obsequious grovelling but rather a confirmation of God's mercy over all his works - "O Lord let thy mercy lighten upon us". It is, as Cabasilas has said, the prayer for the kingdom.¹³

But the fact that we have been baptised should give us confidence in that our salvation does not depend on us but on the finished work of Christ, and that we are throughout our lives sustained by our enrolment in God's covenant people.

I conclude with the final words of a report on Christian Initiation presented to the Methodist Conference of 1985:

Baptism commits the Christian to a discipline of prayer, of fidelity to the other means of grace, especially worship in the congregation, and association with God's people for mutual support and growth in understanding, and for corporate action in the world to relieve distress and to offer Christ in manifold ways. To regard all this as the extension of baptism roots all our Christian lives in the finished work of Christ. It reminds us that we are no longer our own, but, as the Heidelberg Catechism has it, 'with body and soul both in life and in death' belong to our 'faithful Saviour Jesus Christ', and even as in the Holy Eucharist we are brought to a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, so in the end we shall be led to its consummation in eternal joy. But at the moment of baptism, whenever we receive it, we are all infants in Christ, and the baptismal life means growth until we come personally and in the fellowship of believers to the measure of the stature of his fullness. Nor should the other drastic image of the New Testament be forgotten that we are baptised into Christ's death; through that alone does our new birth come. And our baptism, which does not celebrate our human life

but our regeneration, is into the whole Christ, incarnate, ministering, crucified, risen, ascended and to come. Into what then are we initiated in baptism? Into Christ and the new life which he came to bring, which is expressed by membership of the Church which is his Body, sometimes in homely inconspicuous ways of caring and of friendship, 'nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love', often, by work for a better social order and a refusal to acquiesce in any compromise with evil or admission that it will prevail. The baptised carry on Christ's victory, witness in life and death to the triumph of his Cross, know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, and work and pray for the acknowledgement of his rule in all the earth. But the baptismal life extends beyond time and this world altogether. It makes us 'very members incorporate in the mystical body' of God's son and gives us part in 'the hidden yet real life of....the day without evening of the Kingdom'. (Alexander Schmemmann, Of Water and the Spirit [SPCK 1974] p154).¹⁴

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NOTES

- 1 VA Demant, A Two-Way Religion (Mowbrays 1957) p14
- 2 A Schmemmann, Of Water and the Spirit (SPCK 1976) p107
- 3 Cf UE Simon A Theology of Auschwitz (Gollancz 1967) p47
- 4 Cf J Neville Ward The Use of Praying (Epworth Press 1967)p17
- 5 Cf GK Chesterton's story "The Hammer of God"
- 6 WH Vanstone, "Parish, Church and Prayer Book" in David Martin and Peter Mullen, No Alternative: The Prayer Book Controversy (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981) pp143ff
- 7 Suzanne K Langer Philosophy in a New Key (Harvard, 3rd ed 1969)p158
- 8 James Boswell Life of Johnson ii p214
- 9 Wolfhart Panneberg Christian Spirituality and Sacramental Community (DLT 1983) p20
- 10 Peter Ackroyd TS Eliot (Abacus 1985) p208
- 11 Louis Bouyer The Paschal Mystery (George Allen and Unwin 1951) p233
- 12 JM Hussey and PA McNally ed Nicholas Cabasilas A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy (SPCK 3rd imp 1977)p47
- 13 Agenda, Methodist Conference 1985, p626

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