

To Come to the Liturgy

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1. Brother Dominic had the bizarre idea of asking an old French nun to take part in your colloquium. Certainly, monastic life is a life in liturgy! But the more that we live in liturgy, the more a deep silence makes its home in us, beyond our personal tastes and choices. So what Brother Dominic is asking of me is quite difficult. What's more, we are divided by language.
2. But before I lived in this monastery in the Auvergne, which was also the home of Blessed Agnes of Langeac (1602-1634), I was a philosopher, and when Christ came and turned my life upside down, I reflected a lot on the experience of liturgy, because it was the liturgy which had brought me to him. So I'm going to return here to some experiences which were key and foundational for me. I will analyse what these experiences taught me about the essence of the liturgy, and perhaps this will cast some indirect light on the questions which are so hotly debated in this time in the context of the recent *motu proprio*.
3. There were three key or foundational moments:
 - An experience of sound: listening to the Gospel being chanted in Latin;
 - A visual experience: discovering the architectural symbolism of the Romanesque church of Sénanque;
 - The experience of an actual liturgy: the Service of Light (*lucernaire*) at the beginning of Vespers at the Dominican church in Toulouse.
4. Quite deliberately I do not refer to the heart of the Eucharistic prayer. I hold firmly to the ancient *disciplina arcana* as regards the Eucharist: the Eucharist is the "source and summit of the life of the Church" (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10, 14), and to talk and argue about it risks rendering it flat and banal, even profaning it.

I. Memorial

1. My first debt is to the traditional liturgy in its Extraordinary form. It was there that, for the first time, I heard the Gospel of the Mass being sung, or more precisely chanted - in Latin, of course. And so it was that the time of Jesus, that *in illo tempore* ("in that time") of the beginning of the text, opened before me. The Gospel was no longer an old text, with the priest informing us of its content. Rather, through the *singing*, the word of Jesus was addressed to me in the present. That "present" wasn't my poor present, scattered and short-lived, but the present of the Lord, the eternal present of the Man-God into which I was invited and gathered.

2. Obviously it's the double distancing, the double "estrangement", of the Latin language on the one hand and the singing on the other, which had enabled this grace. In codifying gestures, tone and melody, the rite had bestowed on the word a wholly other status. But don't let's confuse this! This distancing was fruitful not because it went looking in the lost past of a dead language and a tune long abandoned (as many people think). The division came from having been obedient to the forms of our tradition which had been received and handed down. And I can't emphasise enough how this ancient liturgy taught us to enter into the sacred realities with *gravitas* (seriousness), *tarditas* (not rushing), *pietas* (devotion) and *suavitas* (sweetness).
3. This chant was like a very simple gesture of the voice: on the inhalation (*inspiration*) of the breath, itself symbolising the Spirit of God, and like the flight of a bird, it was carried from far to near, from the eternity of the heart of God to the ears of our hearts. So now it was a word addressed to us and not just a simple piece of information. In one single movement, the reader and listeners had themselves been transported through the whole of time, from the Alpha to the Omega: we were listening to the Eternal Word of the Living God.
4. This is where I was given the final essence of the liturgy, which is to be a "memorial". I'd like to point out that this awareness came to me not at the moment of the Consecration, no doubt because this, the heart of the Mass, had already been invested with a great deal of faith and piety. So I didn't expect to be bowled over by the singing of the Gospel... But "memorial" does not serve to represent the past or to signify it; rather it consists in making us really "contemporaries", according to Kierkegaard's concept. The liturgy does this on the bodily level, by bodily gestures, here the singing voice: it moves not the intellect but, first of all, our senses, then our affects and the depths of our heart, at the same time as leaving the intelligence its proper place and the will all its freedom.
5. I insist that this experience of "time recovered", as Proust writes, is not of an archaeological nature: it's not the past as such which returns, but rather that *in* the past as in the present which escapes from every effort of remembering and grasping of whatever kind, and which is the eternal and divine part [of the past and present], its immemorial part. So here I call "the immemorial of time" that which is neither past, present nor future, but is purely *there*, and as such is eternal. Humankind has no hold on it: but rather, as with life, it is the pure gift of God.
6. So the liturgy takes place like the memorial of the immemorial, i.e. the memorial of the gift of a God who comes, always "now" and active (*actuel et agissant*). And that also turns us away both from an attachment to past forms for their own sake, and from an attempt to adapt them to the present according to what is ephemeral, short-lived in it. On the contrary, in the space of ritual, it's a matter of the priority (*antécédence*), both in terms of principles and origins, of the foundational events of our faith. Through the happening (*incidence*) here and now of the gestures and words of the rite, these foundational events of our faith encompass our present in such a way as to go before that present, by opening us on to the *eschaton* (end, Last Day) of time, a bit as John the Baptist spoke of Jesus: "He Who comes after me ranks ahead of me because He was before me" (John 1:15).

II. Mystery

1. My second foundational experience took place early in the morning in the Romanesque abbey of Sénanque in Provence. Although a more visual experience, it

was first and foremost a bodily experience, as I discovered the wonderful hidden (*secretes*) harmonies between my own body, the body of the stones making up the church, and the great cosmic body [macrocosm]. This quasi-Pythagorean experience of volumes and proportions generated a sense of unity and harmony. And so it was, from within this purified Romanesque architecture, that I saw the truth in these words of Henri de Lubac:

The Fathers transposed the ancient doctrine that saw the universe at once as a temple and as a body and each temple as being at once the human body and the universe. By virtue of this transposition, the cosmic and liturgical mirrors, while corresponding with each other, also correspond the mirrors of history and the Bible. The material Church is an image of the perfect Man, being as it is "the geometric projection of the Son of Man on the cross."¹

And by induction, this aesthetic experience made me glimpse [the truth that] the opposition between sacred and profane is perhaps false, because, according to Louis Bouyer's wonderful formula, what we consider profane "is only every the sacred profane."

2. But then another experience superimposed itself on the first one, intensifying and magnifying it. I discovered that this great vessel of stone was in fact only an instrument for the coming and playing of the light, to move there as in a dance. To appear, shine, radiate, cross, caress or underline – then to be extinguished or disappear like so many gestures of a choreography of illumination. And I knew that this choreography would be repeated each day, always the same, but always new, because of the subtle variations of time and of the seasons.
3. But you'll be asking me, what does this have to do with the Church's liturgy? Apart from the fact that light traditionally – and *par excellence* – symbolises *He Who comes* in the liturgy, He who makes Himself manifest in the liturgy, He Whose coming our prayer prepares the way but would never be able to *produce* – what became clear to me was the deep sense of the expression "the mysteries" or "the holy mysteries": the Eucharist and the other sacraments. I understood that in fact what the holy mysteries were about was not a secret teaching or hidden reality, as it was with the Greeks of Late Antiquity. The play of the light on the stones was a translation into the senses of what St. Paul understood by *mysterion*: the divine action in which God accomplishes His eternal plan of salvation, the entire economy of salvation from the first day of the world to the summit of the Cross, coming to completion in the Heavenly Jerusalem... Indeed the Christian symbolism (*symbolique*) of the temple and of the entire liturgy is in fact like a box in which is actualised, according to Dom [Odo] Casel, writing at the beginning of the Liturgical Movement, "a deed of God's, the execution of an everlasting plan of his through an at which proceeds from his eternity realized in time and the world, and returning once more to him its goal in eternity."²
4. This is why dance has a rightful place in the liturgy, not as a sacred ballet of the celebrants or participants, but rather the dance of God Himself: as Zephaniah

¹ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MN : William B. Eerdmans / Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998 [1959], p. 103 ; citing Edgar de Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale* (Bruges : De Temple, 1946), vol. 2, pp. 343-344 ; vol. 1, 259.

² Odo Casel, ed. Burkhard Neunheuser, trans.? *The Mystery of Christian Worship, and Other Writings*, (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press / London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962 [1932]), p. 9.

prophesied, “He will dance for you” (Zep. 3:17). He comes to us like light in His grace, he inverts the fallen world’s energies of death and life, raising us to new life by His sacrifice on Golgotha, then sweeping us along like a rushing torrent in the life of the Spirit. This the liturgy repeats day after day, just like the sun which rises each morning, without this reiteration in any way losing energy nor tiring us, for the One Who comes is always new...new as life, as new as infinite love...

5. So you see that this understanding of the *Exitus-Reditus* (coming out and returning) action of the God who comes started to distance me from the outlook of many Traditionalists. Effectively, in order to honour the first and foremost sacrificial dimension of the Mass, they sometimes get stuck in the sole mystery of the Saviour’s Passion and Cross, leaving aside His priesthood of glory and the great life-giving movement (*élan*) of the Spirit which carries along the Church and the cosmos towards the Father until [the Lord’s] Return. So how, on the contrary, can one not recognise the treasure contained in the texts of the Ordinary form of the liturgy – less moralising, of a piety less strictly individual than those of the Extraordinary form, precisely because they encompass more explicitly the totality of the mystery of salvation? I think of the prayers drawn from very ancient sacramentaries, the new prefaces for the Proper of Time [Advent, Lent, Feasts of the Lord, etc.], the beautiful Solemn Blessings for the end of the Eucharist, and even the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, not to mention the Word of God which is now read through in its full extent. (In saying this, I am only subscribing to the thought of Benedict XVI, who draws up the same balance sheet.)
6. Another remark: this cycle of light which made the nave of Sénanque glow, even to its darkest corners, warned me of the dangers of a liturgical clericalism: I mean that inference (*derive*) which consists of concentrating all the liturgical action on the celebrant – his gestures, vestments (*ornements*), etc: whereas the liturgy should be, as Vatican II emphasised, “the action of the whole Church” (whatever, though, the manner of understanding the *participatio actuosa* of the People of God).

III. Ecclesia (Church)

1. I come to my third foundational experience. This time we are in a very ugly concrete church, at the Dominican priory in Toulouse. The bell rings and the friars begin Lenten vespers with the ancient hymn *Phos hilaron* (“Hail, gladsome light”), sung in harmony in a very plaintive minor mode, while one brother comes out to light the candles, first those on the altar, then before the icon of Christ, which is suddenly resplendent. Then he offers incense in front of the altar before returning to his place among his brethren. At the end of this very simple ritual I was no longer the same, because the symphony of gestures, singing, light and above all the witness of a community’s presence, all dressed in white, had succeeded in breaking through the wall of emotions in me, cracking the carapace which separates the heart from the intellect (*esprit*), and in opening a space within me of which I had been until then unaware, a space of infinite communion.
2. Forgive me: I’m going to make a play on words in French, but maybe also this will work in English. What strikes me here is that in *playing* with synaesthesia, that is, in its simultaneous appeal to all the senses, exterior and interior, the liturgical art had given freedom (literally, “given play”) to the habitual use of the faculties, and thereby succeeded in making a place for a different kind of knowing (*une connaissance autre*). I say “different” because it is neither purely of the senses, nor purely intellectual, but experiential; and I call it knowing (*connaissance*) or wisdom because I found myself taken, body and soul, simultaneously to the threshold of the ineffable mystery of God,

to the heart of the Church and to the deepest place in myself – all of this by means of a symphony of sense impressions which conveyed very powerful antinomies (sadness and joy; illumination of the icon of Christ and withdrawal of the transcendence before which we bow; the celebrant's gesture, then his self-effacement in the silence of the choirstalls).

3. With regard to God, it was of the order of negative theology,³ but actually it revealed a God who comes near while remaining ungraspable: the Transcendent, "the far-near", as the beguine Margaret Porete brilliantly called Him. However, these antinomies or paradoxes, because they were held together by the unity of the rite, expressed a negative theology not by default but, on the contrary, by infinite superabundance, allowing the excess of the divine Real to be felt in an "unobvious obviousness" (*evidence inévidente*).
4. Indeed, because God Himself comes to act by His grace in our prayer and our liturgical gestures, the thought and certainty which arise from them are completely different from our thought previously, our thought which knew nothing of liturgical life. A new "obviousness" is given to us which no degree of speculation would ever attain. It is indeed "obviousness" by virtue of its certainty, by virtue of that Presence graciously given, and at the same time it's an "unobvious" obviousness in that it never imposes itself, even on the believer, but only invites him or her to give a response – and first and foremost the response of praise and of Eucharist (thanksgiving). But this response in turn is not anodyne or inoffensive, because it can turn one's life upside down and change it from top to bottom. The liturgy has a power to awaken one to another dimension of life, life in God, and in that respect the liturgy is a path of initiation offered to all.
5. In this experience of the rebirth of our knowing (*connaissance*), we should add that liturgical wisdom will act as a "*co-naître*" (as Paul Claudel would say), that is, as a "being born *with*": I will experience that I am born in God and that He is born in me. "*You made us for Yourself, Lord, and our hearts are not at rest until they rest in You.*"⁴
6. Let us go further: this *birth* is not limited to myself and my God in an individual piety: I experience it *among* others and *with* them – those who are there near me, celebrating with me. This is why the space of communion and knowing which has thus opened itself within us will radically redefine our deep identity by *displacing* and *dislodging* us from the site of our ego, in order to *re-place* us with authority and sweetness in the Body of Christ, to *make a place for us* in His Church which the assembled community symbolises. So tell me: how can the person who has thus found him- or herself by finding him- or herself in the heart of the Church refuse to obey what the Church asks, and especially in the matter of liturgy?
7. And there is the great secret of liturgy: it's not we who make the liturgy by celebrating it, but the liturgy which makes us. It makes us sons and daughters of the Church, strengthening and nourishing our lives as children of God. This is true principally of the Eucharist, but also of the most humble gesture of liturgical prayer: was Pascal not convinced that just accepting to make a genuflection could convert someone? And the simple Sign of the Cross which is our everyday song: does it not consecrate our days,

³ Negative theology = speaking about God in terms of what He is *not*.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions* I.1.

uniting us instantly to the Son of God and the Trinity, to offer us as a spiritual sacrifice to God?

Conclusion

It's time to conclude. I will do this by means of some scenes from the Gospel which seem to me to trace a path of holiness thanks to the liturgy.

1. Many make the *anointing of Christ at Bethany* a symbol of the liturgy owing to the gratuitousness, beauty and generosity of Mary Magdalene's gesture (Jn 12:1-8).⁵ Such too are our great and ancient liturgical traditions, Roman as well as Eastern.
2. For my part, I love to think about the liturgy through the lens of the *scene of the Visitation* (Lk 1:39-45). I love it that this is how the Lord comes, hidden in His Mother's womb. For Mary is the incomparable figure of the Church. And in the liturgy this is also how it is first of all: the Lord comes to us to make us joyful, carried by the Church. The scene is so simple, a family scene. And Mary sings a new song, drawing the new from the old...
3. Another place in the Gospel which speaks to me of liturgy is Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene on the morning of Easter: "*Noli me tangere, don't hold me back!*" (Jn 20:17). Here I read a real warning against the temptation to get our hands on the liturgy on the pretext either of observing them scrupulously or, on the contrary, to adapt them. The place of the liturgy is the place of a threshold, an edge: the encounter always remains hidden (*furtive*). All aesthetic or pastoral over-investment destroys the grace of the encounter. So what is needed is distance, reserve, modesty. Emotion, even the upheaval of the liturgy "is born from the necessarily tremulous distance between the immobility of sacred signs of the Covenant and their being brought about in the fragility of the instant."⁶ The *ars celebrandi* turns on this criterion of modesty, of chastity.
4. My last image will perhaps surprise you. Its aim is to recall the fact that the Lord Jesus, although a faithful observer of Jewish tradition, only ever gave consideration to one sole liturgical gesture performed in the Temple enclosure: the widow putting two small coins [in the Temple treasury] (Mk 12:41-44; Lk 21:1-4). Jesus gives us this example because "she gave everything she had to live on" (Mk 12:44, Lk 21:4). This is Jesus, in looking at her, seeing Himself in advance, offering His body for us and pouring out his blood for the many.

So I conclude: a liturgy which does not bring its participants themselves to enter into the giving of their lives is not yet really a Christian liturgy.

⁵ Cf also Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Lk 7:36-50.

⁶ Jean-Yves Hameline, "A la recherche d'une économie posturale" ["Seeking an economy of the posture"], *La Maison Dieu*, n° 247, 2006/3, p. 57 (DW's translation).