

# THE BASES FOR A THEOLOGY OF THE LITURGY

by Rev J.D.Crichton *Ampleforth Review* 2 (1980) 62

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When, in answer to a question from Dame Felicitas of Stanbrook Abbey about my contribution to *The Study of Liturgy*, I replied that I had attempted to write 'A Theology of the Liturgy' (at the request of the editors, I may add) she said 'That is a tall order', or words to that effect. It was and is. And now the Editor of the *Ampleforth Review* has asked me to set out the 'heart-theses' of my writings. That too is a tough and awkward assignment. Tough, because it means summarising my books — which is boring; awkward, because the exercise is likely to seem egotistical. For not only shall I have to re-think what I have written, but I shall have to say something about how I came to write on the liturgy at all. This latter it is that requires a little autobiography which shall be as short as possible.

At school (Cotton) the liturgy was celebrated with great care and exactitude. It was something of an ordeal to serve the daily community Mass said by the headmaster, Thomas Williams, who later became Archbishop of Birmingham, and who incidentally made some contribution to the infant liturgical movement in England. By 1923 the whole school was singing the Ordinary of the Mass, in plainsong, alternating with the choir. Vespers on the greater feasts and Compline as well as other services were sung on Sunday evenings. The Holy Week liturgy, combined with a retreat, was very impressive. But when one went home for the holidays parish worship seemed all wrong. There was the silent congregation at the Low Masses, the sometimes cacophonous singing of the so-called High Mass, and at evening services feeble singing of a very small repertoire of Victorian hymns. The contrast was glaring — and uncomfortable.

Oscott, to which I then went, had a good liturgical tradition, though it was not at its best when I got there in 1925. It improved gradually, and the night office at Christmas, Matins, Mass and Lauds was a memorable experience for all that, by the end of it all, one was half-refrigerated. In the course of all this one learnt a certain amount about plainsong, though I never became really proficient. On ordination I was appointed to St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham, where the Sunday liturgy was done in full; apart from numerous low Masses there was the High Mass at 11.00 am, Vespers in the evening and, of course, rows of baptisms in the afternoon. The choir was under the direction of Henry Washington, later of the London Oratory, and at its best was good, though not even he could do anything about the heavy-footed singing of the plainsong. Some of the men had been in the choir for forty years. The next two parishes found me in charge of choirs! But it was not until about 1936 at Acocks Green, Birmingham, that I began to try to get some 'active participation' from the people. When the church was completed in 1940 I asked the parish priest, Canon John Gibbons, a brother of Dom Bernard Gibbons, to invite Dom Bernard McElligott to come down and give what came to be called a 'liturgical mission'. As well as talks on the Mass this involved teaching the people some of the simpler plainsong and getting them to sing the responses. When, then, the inauguration of the completed church occurred there was full participation from a very large congregation.

The purpose of this brief excursus into the past is to show that I had been doing the liturgy before theorising about it and it was not, I think, until late in the 1930s that I read Pius X's germinal statement, backed up by Pius XI in 1928, that active participation in the celebration of the liturgy is the indispensable source of the Christian spirit. My theological sources had been a little different, principally St Thomas Aquinas, whose treatise on the incarnation, combined with that on the redemption, seemed to provide some basis for a theology that fitted the liturgy. At least he did not dismiss the Ascension in a scholion or treat the Resurrection as the occasion for apologetics. The beginnings of what later came to be called the Paschal Mystery were becoming apparent. Combined with this was his teaching on the priesthood of Christ, and the people's share in it through the 'character' of

baptism and confirmation. St Thomas was the only theologian I came across at the time who had anything positive to say about this mysterious character or 'seal' which all the rest seemed to think was 'defined' by saying it was indelible! This, then, became the basis of my view of active participation, and it was not for many years that I discovered that Dom Lambert Beauduin had made the same pilgrimage. (See *La Piete de l'Eglise*, 1914.)

There were two other factors that made for an understanding of the liturgy. I had begun reading the Sermons of St Leo the Great when a student, and practically the first book I bought after ordination (from Blackwell's, Oxford, for the absurd price of 10s 6d — a large folio volume, the edition of the Jansenist, Pierre Quesnel, and on the Index into the bargain!) was his *Opera Omnia*. As I gradually absorbed him I came to think, as I still do, that he is one of the best commentators on the liturgical year. He leads one to see that the feasts and seasons of the year are not mere commemorations but celebrations making present the great mystery of Christ. This teaching has been incorporated into the Constitution on the Liturgy (no 102). Leo is still my theological basis for treatment of the liturgical year.

The second factor was that I had to study the texts of the Divine Office. The Society of the Magnificat, whose members undertook to say one hour of the office each day, asked for papers on the different feasts and seasons. There was no literature at the time (and not much now) known to me on the texts of the Divine Office, how they came to be there, when they were included and indeed, often, on what they meant. Perforce then I had to study the texts and, as Dom Bernard Botte, both in writing and to his students, has insisted, this is where study of the liturgy must begin. This in turn forced me into a study of the Vulgate and an increasing concern for holy scripture. You could not understand the Roman liturgy without a considerable knowledge of the Vulgate, and that still remains largely true even if the texts have been translated into English. Nor, on the other hand, could one neglect modern exegesis which at its best throws light on the ancient use of the Bible and deepens rather than weakens the insights of the Fathers and the anonymous 'composers' of the early medieval liturgy.[1]

[1] See, for example, Michael Cleary, 'The Feast of the Lord's Baptism' in *Ampleforth Journal* 83:3 (1978)

Historical study of the liturgy had to go along with all this and Edmund Bishop, Louis Duchesne, Pierre Batiffol, Herbert Thurston and Adrian Fortescue were the authors I read, and I also made certain sondages in the *Dictionnaire d'Archeologie Chretienne et de Liturgie* and in the *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* which had much useful material on liturgy. But I used history to acquire an understanding of the meaning of the liturgy and ultimately of its implied theology. It was necessary to attempt to date texts and to observe the differing theological emphases they expressed in different ages. The sort of work I was trying to do in a fumbling and amateurish way was later done magisterially for the Mass by Jungmann in his *Missarum Sollemnia*.

This was the situation for me during the War, though at this time I began to concentrate on the study of the Bible. I was led to this partly by my continuing study of the liturgy, and partly by my continued reading of St Thomas. His *De Vita Christi* in Pars III of the *Summa* seemed to me to have been much neglected, and it was fascinating to see how he summarised so much of the patristic tradition on the life of Christ. His Baptism and Transfiguration were not mere historical events. As Leo had said, they were not only *exempla* but *auxilia*. They were 'mysteries' pregnant with reality which was still available to Christians of successive generations.

The ground was thus prepared for renewed contact with France which I was able to visit in 1946 (a year of great austerity — there was no coffee!). There I learnt that there had been a veritable explosion in scripture, in patristics, in liturgy and, to a lesser extent, in theology. There was the experiment of the worker-priests, there was the proliferating action of the J.O.C. in its many branches and there was the renewal of pastoral life. The new writing which one felt an obligation to absorb was at first overwhelming, and the new insights into pastoral action with their techniques were equally difficult to grasp. But out of it all eventually emerged two conclusions. From all this abounding writing and activity it became possible to identify the centre and the circumference. The centre was the mystery

of Christ, and the circumference was the people to whom it must be made available.

The renewed study of scripture and the Fathers and further attention to the 'mystery-presence' theology of the liturgy of Dom Odo Casel of Marialaach made possible a formulation of the mystery of Christ that avoided some of the less acceptable aspects of Casel's view. I had made contact with it largely through Dom Theodore Wesseling of Farnborough whose little book *Life and Liturgy* appeared just before the war. By correspondence, discussion and the reading of certain articles of his I was able to learn about Dom Casel's theory. It was not, and still is not, easy to summarise and it cannot be done here. But an illustration will help. Theology and devotion had concentrated on the real presence of Christ in the eucharist but he was regarded as primarily the object of worship in the Mass. His presence was so to say passive: he was there to be adored. Dom Casel had wanted to move away from the static presence and to show that Christ's presence is an active presence. In a word, Christ is mediator, present in all his redeeming activity which includes passion, death, resurrection and ascension. It is with this Christ that the worshipper has to make contact, into him that he must be absorbed (Casel liked to speak of being 'plunged' into the mystery of Christ), so that he may live with Christ through his redeeming activity. Casel made much of Romans 6, and perhaps his favourite prayer of the missal was that said over the offerings on the ninth Sunday after Pentecost (now Maundy Thursday): 'as often as we celebrate the memorial of this sacrifice the work of our redemption is accomplished' (or 'put into action'). This ancient prayer which, with some verbal differences, is in the Gelasian Sacramentary [2], could be said to sum up a good deal of Casel's teaching.

[2] 'Quoties huius hostiae commemoratio celebratur, opus nostrae redemptionis exercetur.' *Sacramentary*, ed LC Mohlberg, no. 11. It is found too in the Verona (Leonine) Sacramentary in a version nearer the Missale Romonum (Mohlberg, no 93)

However, it gave rise to a lengthy and, at times, quite vehement controversy and it is still the object of contention. How, theologians asked, could redeeming actions of Christ be present in the eucharist? They were over and done with. Casel protested that he had no thought to say that the historical events were repeated. This was a notion abhorrent to him, but perhaps he never came to a clear formulation of what he did mean. Perhaps it could be said that, what he wanted to preserve and see present in the eucharist, as in other liturgical celebrations, was the dynamism of the saving acts of Christ. If this interpretation is correct, then the eucharist can be seen as the central, reconciling and unifying action of the Church. The saying 'the eucharist makes the Church' was not yet in currency but the truth of it was already apparent. For Casel saw the Church as *ecclesia*, the assembly, and he regularly used the Greek word instead of the German, Kirche. All the members of the body (*soma*) were and must be involved in the liturgical action. But this body was also the Bride of Christ and in the last analysis could only receive from Christ even if that reception had to be active. In the liturgy all the Church could do and had to do was 'to set the rite in motion'. This would engage the action of Christ who would make the dynamic power of his saving acts available to the worshipper. Basing himself on Ephesians 5 and the antiphon to the Benedictus at Lauds (which mercifully is still in the Divine office), he thought of the relationship of the Church to Christ as a *hieros-gamos*, a sacred marriage, and this too gave offence because such a view seemed to be uncomfortably close to the mystery religions and because his understanding of the man-woman relationship in marriage made the wife a simply passive agent.

Whatever is to be said about certain aspects of Casel's teaching, he restored to the Mass and the liturgy as a whole a dynamic quality that in the minds of men had long been lacking, and he prepared the way for the restoration of the paschal mystery, the centre of the liturgy and indeed of the Christian life. But as a result of further scriptural investigations it became clear that the Christian mystery could be expressed in terms that did not involve the mystery-religion overtones of Casel and that it was in fact profoundly biblical.

This understanding came, I think, from the new prominence given to the history of salvation which came to be seen not simply as a sacred record of facts that took place long ago and of no relevance to the Christian of the twentieth century, but as the record of God's initiative, the approach of God to man with his saving, steadfast love (hesed

w'emeth). This approach demands a response from man, a response first of faith and then of love. This is the basis of the 'encounter theology' of which E. Schillebeeckx's *Le Christ, Sacrement de la Rencontre de Dieu* (Trans. as *Christ the Sacrament*) is an example. We meet God in word and sacrament, but through Christ who makes himself present in both (cf. CL no 7). Seen thus the history of salvation, which continues in the Church, is dynamic and admirably fits the dynamic notion of the liturgy.

Of the approach of God to man Christ in his redeeming activity is the centre. He is the mystery (Colossians 1.27) reaching back to the past and summing it up (CL no 5), making present in the here and now its saving power, and reaching on to the future when, according to God's will, all will be summed up in his Son. Furthermore, Christ is the revelation of the Father and his saving love (Colossians 1.25-28, Ephesians 1.9-10) so that, in a term that is now more familiar to the West, he is the sacrament of God, first, partly revealing him, though the ultimate mystery of God remains; and, secondly, making present the redeeming love of God now. This too he does in a 'mysterious' manner for, if the incarnational-sacramental liturgy is an 'epiphany' (a favourite word with Casel) of the divine action, its effects are hidden from us.

This is the perspective in which it was possible to write about the mystery that the liturgy exists to communicate, and this teaching can be seen as underlying the theology of the Constitution on the Liturgy. If I was able to write my first book, *The Church's Worship* (1964), in something from eight to ten weeks it was because I recognised in it teaching with which I had long been familiar. Perhaps I read into the text more than was there, and certainly the Church had no intention of committing itself to any particular view of the mystery-presence.[4]

[4] There could be said to be at least three: Casel's, Sohngen's and Schillebeeckx's. The last, aware of the difficulties of Casel's view, turned it upside down. Instead of saying that the liturgy makes Christ present to us as it were in a downward movement, he held that we are raised up to him 'who is ever living to make intercession for us'. For the acts of Christ inhering in the divine person of Christ do not pass away with the temporal order but are eternal and eternally operative. See *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold (SPCK 1978), pp.5—29. [There is no note 3]

Nonetheless there in the second paragraph of the Constitution was the statement that the liturgy 'through which the work of our redemption is accomplished', especially the eucharist, is the principal means by which the faithful express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ (no 2); and in a further statement Christ is said to achieve the task of his redemption chiefly by the paschal mystery of his passion, death and resurrection (no 5). It all fitted together and in *The Church's Worship* (1964), in *Christian Celebration: The Mass* (1971) and finally in *A Theology of the Liturgy* [5] I felt able to formulate what I believed the Christian Mystery to be. First, one had to insist that it is not simply doctrine (as e.g. the mysteries of faith) but event. Then it could be seen to exist on three levels:

1: There is the mystery of God dwelling in light inaccessible (1 Tim 6.16) but ever supremely active, giving and communicating himself.

2: There is the mystery in the historical order, Christ and his saving work, so much of which is summed up in the hymn of 1 Tim 3.16.

3: There is the mystery, the same, as it exists in the liturgy which is concerned with past events but not simply as past events: 'It seeks to bring about an encounter between the worshippers and the saving mystery'. If an event is to be experienced, it has to be experienced as present. As Dom Odo Casel liked to say (and apparently Kierkegaard before him), 'Christ has to become our contemporary'. As St Leo put the matter: 'Quod... redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transivit' (*de Ascens.*, PL 54, 398). 'What our Redeemer did visibly has passed over into the sacraments'. [6]

[5] Text missing

[6] Text missing

On these terms the liturgy must be seen as mystery: it is the sign or pregnant symbol manifesting God's saving action in Christ, and yet it cannot fully express either the God who is 'revealed' or the depth and intimacy of his action. To attempt to put the matter in a

nutshell: in the liturgy and through Christ we make an encounter with the hidden God who communicates his saving love to all who are open to his action. Approach and response remain the same throughout and that is why liturgy can be described, if not defined, in those terms (*The Study of Liturgy*, pp. 7-11.).

It is for this reason too that it has to be said that the liturgy exists in 'the world of symbols' and this is not readily accepted by modern people. They often equate 'symbol' with 'empty symbol', or they think it is no more than pious mystification. But a symbol, if it is a symbol at all (and not something that has to be 'explained'), is full of significance and in the liturgy communicates what it signifies. But the reason that it is apt for expressing, as far as it is possible, the mystery the liturgy contains is that it is at once opaque, suggesting rather than informing, and revelatory in that it points beyond itself to its content. Thus when the candidate is plunged into the waters of baptism and is taken out again a vivid symbol of the Pauline teaching of Romans 6 is constructed. You do not have to reason about it or justify it though, alas, in these days when symbol is not understood, you have to write about it! The liturgy, seen as a dynamic thing, is totally symbolic but in the Christian liturgy it is efficaciously symbolic

See *The Mass*, chapter 2 and *The Sacraments*, chapter 2. Also *The Prayer of the Church*

One further element remained to be integrated into a theology of the liturgy and this was the crucial one of the place, role and meaning of the word of God. With an atrophied lectionary and sermons that were often not about the texts of the Mass at all, the old rite obscured the importance of the ministry of the word. But increasingly after the War and in the years up to the Council it was realised that the proclamation of God's word in the liturgy was essential to it. Slowly there began to emerge a theology of proclamation of which an instance was a powerful article by Charles Davis in the *Clergy Review* (later reprinted in his *The Study of Theology*) followed (at his request) by another on 'Liturgical Preaching' by the present writer. In Davis's article, and in the vast bibliography that was appended to the *Clergy Review* article, it was clear that a theology of the presence of Christ in the proclamation of his word had now become accepted. This teaching, as everyone knows now, was taken over into the Constitution on the Liturgy (nos 7, 33). Pastorally speaking it was of immense importance and it was at this point that it became very clear that we could no longer go on with a liturgy in a language that was not that of the people. [7]

[7] Text missing

The proclamation of the word shares in the nature of mystery (it is not a mere reading) first because it is the word of him who is the Word and secondly because in it God is still calling his people who can respond to him in faith and love. We are saved by faith and the sacraments of faith; and faith, as St Paul said, comes from hearing. It is for this reason that over the whole range of the new liturgy the word must be proclaimed. The principle adopted by the Church is, No celebration without proclamation. It is, in fact, one of the most important principles of liturgical reform to which too little attention is given.

From the centre we move to the circumference, that is the people though the metaphor is no longer wholly applicable. For the people are not mere recipients, they are celebrants of the liturgy and, with the clergy, constitute the mystery of the Church. The liturgy is the most conspicuous manifestation of the Church (CL, no 2) and this is effected when the people gather round their bishop and become 'the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church' (CL, no 41). It is then that 'the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church' is shown forth (CL, no 2). In its measure this is true of smaller groupings in parishes for instance, and accordingly says the Constitution (no 41), a sense of community must be fostered.

For further treatment of the importance of the word in the liturgy see my article 'A Theology of the Liturgy', pp.9, 10.

Although this constitution was written and promulgated before the Constitution on the Church, it opened up the whole question of the nature of the Church which the Council expounded over many pages. It also opens up the whole question of the worshipping community<sup>8</sup> about which so much has been written in the years since the War. The consequence that 'liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church' is not only written into the Constitution but is made the chief principle of reform

(cf nos 26-31, 48, etc; and cf *The Church's Worship*, 63-72, 100ff). At the same time and in various documents it subsumed and deepened the understanding of the place and role of the laity in the Church. This is the basis of what the French called pastoral liturgy, a term they invented in the dark days of the War when they founded the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique (after the Council, Centre Nationale de Pastorale Liturgique). The liturgy is for the people; it must be available or accessible to the people so that through the celebration of the liturgy, in which they have various ministries, they may be sanctified and lifted up to God in praise and ultimate union. This is, in fact, the answer to those who would say that the new liturgy is too man-centred. It engages the worshipful activity of man only so that he may give glory to God. 'Gloria Dei, vivens homo', said Irenaeus: it is redeemed living and active mankind that gives glory to God.

Much of this teaching is summed up in *Christian Celebration: The Mass* (pp. 33-34): 'The Christian people are a community and Christ's salvation is mediated through it, though each has to appropriate that salvation to himself. But, as the New Testament makes clear, it is a community that is constantly in the making. As it was called, convoked, by God in the beginning, so it has to be called again and again in the present. Every time the Christian community gathers for worship, it is called by God — that is the purpose of the entrance rite and the word that accompanies it. It is at this point that it begins to be the sign of Christ and of the Church (ecclesia) scattered throughout the world. By the proclamation of the word (and the reception of the word in faith), and by the celebration of the eucharist, which according to Saint Augustine (*de Civitate Dei*, X,20) is 'the sacrament of the sacrifice' of Christ, the community becomes existentially the body of Christ offering itself to God. Indeed, we can say that in celebration the Church becomes the Christian community or, better, communion (koinonia): 'the Church (ecclesia) makes the eucharist and the eucharist makes the Church'.

The liturgy, then, is essentially concerned with people, and those whose task it is to promote an understanding and right practice of the liturgy must be concerned with people. The liturgy is meant to affect communities and their life, and since the Council it has had some success, if not sufficient, in doing so. But once you are involved with people you inevitably become concerned about their life, their way of living, the way they have to live for the most part. But this concern is not primarily a moralistic matter. It is too easy to tell other people to do what you do not have to do yourself. One thing that has to be shown is that, between liturgical worship and life, there is no unbridgeable gap. 'Sacraments are not isolated ecclesiastical rites but events in the flowing life of the Church and in the life of man'; 'they correspond to human situations' (CC: *The Sacraments*, pp. 5 & 7). And so we come to the rites of passage, birth, marriage, illness and death. The sacraments meet these situations but 'they also reach down to the deepest level of human life, not merely... to acquire the right kind of material signs (water, bread, wine, etc) but to transform it: Christ takes over these human situations and makes them specifically Christian, grace-full situations, directing them and us to God' (Op cit pp 5, 7, 9, 10). This is one way of showing that no gap exists and, in three books (two above referred to and *Ministry of Reconciliation*), I have tried to show that this is so.

See CC: *The Mass*, chapter 3.

But we live in difficult times and, in *The Once and the Future Liturgy*, I have had something to say about them. My outlook has been described as melancholic and even apocalyptic. At the time of writing (January, 1978) apocalyptic warnings seemed to be understated. But my concern was to consider how the liturgy can be lived in the circumstances of life as we experience it now, and as it might well be in a not too distant future. My contention is that at all costs the word of God must be preached and the sacraments celebrated because it is by them that the Church exists (i.e. is in the order of existence) and lives. My vision is that of house-churches of which the head will celebrate the eucharist, baptise and confirm, minister to the sick and the dying and bury the dead. A Church of this sort will be a stripped Church, possessing nothing but a house and the means necessary to celebrate the liturgy. It will have nothing to be taken away from it. It will be a Church consisting of a number of small communities held together by a common faith and the love they have for one another and their neighbours. To those neighbours the community will be the visible sign of God's love, and in it the gospel will be made known to

those willing to come and listen to it. It will be obscure, yet making present the saving word and work of God in the midst of life. It will be linked to the great Church by the bishop who, as in apostolic times, will be mobile, moving from one 'Church' to another.

If it be said that such a vision is idealistic, Utopian, perhaps absurd, the answer is that it already exists — in Russia. If it be said that it would overturn the institution, it has to be said in reply that the institution was made for man, not man for the institution. If it be said that it will involve all sorts of difficulties, like the ordination of married men, it can only be said that every venture is fraught with difficulties and the institution as it is is not free from them. Can it be said to be penetrating every level of life with the gospel message and the saving grace of Christ? Does it not seem almost infinitely remote from the life of millions of people who, in the intention of God, are to be saved? In short, it is not so much a matter of the Church of the future but of the Church that we need at present. The Church is essentially missionary, said Vatican II, and in so doing it was merely repeating the gospel, and it has a mission to the men and women of this time in whatever circumstances they have to live. But at the heart of mission is the liturgy. People are converted, come to faith, that they may worship, and they worship that they may be united through Christ and in the Holy Spirit with God the Father. They are destined, called, to be sharers in the diving nature, that is to live in the abundant, flowing life of the Holy Trinity. All this that they too in their turn may make Christ and his saving word present to others. When the Mass ends, mission begins.

Liturgy, then, I see as concerned with the roots of human living and in a sense emerging from it. It is the expression of the ineradicable need of mankind to reach out to the Other whom we call God. In the Christian scheme of things it is the grace-endowed response through Jesus Christ, the embodiment of the Father's saving love, to the divine initiative. It issues into communion, *koinonia*, union with God and union with fellow creatures, and it is destined to be expressed in life, in the life of those who celebrate the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. To repeat, 'The liturgy is the principal means by which the people may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church' (CL, no 2).

See *The Once and the Future Liturgy*, chapter 7.

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