

## THE PLACE OF THE LITURGY IN THE PLAN OF SUPERNATURAL ADOPTION\*

F. A. MCGOWAN

**T**HE Liturgy is a great subject, sometimes an inflammatory one, known to generate devotion, enthusiasm, even heat. But there is a possibility of avoiding the controversial, making the study exploratory, seeking out the facts and their relations which help us to live better the life of union with God. So, for security reasons, it is well to begin by putting liturgy in its place by defining terms.

Liturgy is the Church's official dispensation of the Mysteries of Christ. It is the 'whole body of the official prayers and sacramental actions whereby the communication of men with God is carried on in the Church'; 'the life-dispensing, life-preserving, and life-restoring activity of *Ecclesia*, the Mystical Christ'. In less technical words: *Liturgy is the official communication of divine life by Christ through the Church*. The liturgy consists of four inter-related parts: the sacraments, the sacramentals, Divine Office and ritual prayers, and the Liturgical Year—all centred in and drawing their source from the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which, as the re-enactment of Calvary, is the core of the liturgy.

Let us analyse the definition: the official communication of divine life by Christ through the Church. That definition is more than logical; it is dynamic because it deals with life, divine life. Logically, the definition distinguishes liturgy, marks it off as part of a whole. The operative word is 'communication'. Liturgy is not an end in itself; it is a *function* with divine union as purpose. Moreover, it is a doubly restricted function. The first limitation is that of *agent* because liturgy is confined to the communication of grace *through the Church*. Though the *normal* and full means of our participation in divine nature is through the organized Visible Body of Christ, it is not the only means. To say so would be to fall into the Boston heresy which forgets that God is free to use any channels he chooses for communicating divine life to souls.

The second limitation of liturgy is that of *mode*. Liturgy is the

\* First of a series on the Liturgy given to lay Adult Education groups.

*official* means, the corporate, the organized, the formal means of dispensing the Christ-life. But it is not the only way by which the sanctifying work of the Church is extended to regions and spheres of influence. It is the *official* mode of communication by which the Church fulfils her *office* of transfusing the members of the Mystical Body. We can pause a moment on the word 'office', *officium* in Latin, which is often translated 'duty', as in the Mass of the Sacred Heart, 'duty of reparation'. But *officium* connotes a scale of responses, of obligations based on one's position in relation to another person or to an institution, say, the state. It ranges from burdens accepted under duress to self-imposed sacrifices freely undertaken by eagerness of love. And a word on officers or officials—they suppose rank and file. We must not allow our imaginations to limit the Church to the clergy and members of religious orders. Every baptized person shares in the priesthood of Christ though there are recognized degrees.

We said that the liturgy is the *formal* mode of communicating life. Any formulated process is expressed externally through ceremonial and ritual. Unfortunately, the externals of liturgical worship, the rubrics, are too frequently rated as the liturgy itself. Many of us were amused in Bruce Marshall's *All Glorious Within* by the Scottish lady convert who carried a missal the size of an encyclopaedia and by the expert whom the author inaccurately labelled

... a liturgical scholar who knew exactly how a Benedictine abbot should sing a Pontifical High Mass on a double of the second class in the presence of a Cardinal Archbishop of the Ambrosian rite (p. 83).

It is to be hoped that there will be no disappointment if this article does not give household hints for arranging candles, trimming surplices, training altar boys, or even cultivating a taste for Gregorian Chant. These externals are good and necessary. God is interested in these *as details*. Pope Pius XII reminds us in the encyclical *Mediator Dei: On the Sacred Liturgy*, referring to *Leviticus* (which gives embroidery directions):

Thus we observe that when God institutes the Old Law, he makes provision besides for sacred rites, and determines in exact detail the rules to be observed by his people in rendering him the worship he ordains. To this end he established various kinds of sacrifice and designated the ceremonies with which

they were to be offered to him. His enactments on all matters related to the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple and the holy days are minute and clear. He established a sacerdotal tribe (of Levi) with its high priest, selected and described the vestments with which the sacred ministers were to be clothed, and every function in any way pertaining to divine worship. (English edition, *The Catholic Mind*, June 1948, Section 16.)

Externals of liturgy should be treated as externals. The dialogue Mass and the use of the vernacular or local language have their reference because they implement *corporate*, co-operative worship; the liturgy is *the* corporate, co-operative worship of the entire Mystical Body, Head *and members*, dispensing the Mysteries of Christ.

Mysteries of Christ—we come to the *matter* of the liturgy. The term must be explained because in the definitions given above it has been equated with divine life, that which makes liturgy a dynamic function, the word 'life' has an abstract tinge, suggests other abstractions—force, energy, or vitality, a derivative from 'life'. The diction of the Early Church, preserved in the liturgy, uses a concrete term which not only means Christ-life but indicated his historical years on earth when he 'shaped divinity to human form'. This term is the Mysteries of Christ, or more frequently and more simply, the Mysteries.

In doctrine class we learned that a mystery in the *intellectual* order is a divinely revealed fact that we cannot fully *understand*. Though we habitually use the term 'mystery' in the operational order<sup>1</sup> we rarely stop to consider the distinction. A mystery in the operational, activity order, is a divine fact or action whose meaning *and power* can never be exhausted.

Mysteries in religion, unlike those of escape fiction, are never completely solved but they are alike in this: the more absorbed we are in them, the clearer, the more satisfying, and the more thrilling they become. The clue to the Mysteries of Christ is his divine personality. That raises the fundamental question: Can the life of Christ be limited to the time between the Annunciation and the Ascension? The answer is negative; that would be only his historical life on earth. From all eternity, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he lives the Trinitarian life. He became man at the time of the Annunciation and we call the time between the Annunciation and the Ascension his historical life, always

1 Cf. Humbert Clérissac, O.P., *The Mystery of the Church*. New York, 1937, p. 7.

remembering that from the moment of the Incarnation, his sacred humanity has been united to his divinity and will be so throughout eternity. Since his ascension into heaven when he 'set at the right of thy glory the substance of our frail human nature which he has taken to himself' (Ascension Mass, *Communicantes*), he lives the glorified life and he is Head of the Mystical Body. It is the same *person* who lives in these different modes and also sacramentally in the Holy Eucharist.

Yet many a so-called 'Life of Christ' goes no further than offering our Lord as a 'model of perfection'. They forget that There can therefore be no contemplation of God that is not also a concrete supervital union. . . . God cannot be the passive object of any creature's knowledge or will (E. I. Watkin, *A Philosophy of Form*, London, 1935, p. 369-388).

The study of the historical life of Christ is infinitely different from that of the greatest hero or saint. The most that a great hero could do for his followers would be to inspire them with enthusiasm to use the powers they already possess to copy him in his best actions. Our Lord not only shows us *how* to act but he gives his own power with which to act and to become the unique person which he intends each of us to be. When our Lord performed the acts of his historical life, he had each of us in mind and we now draw graces from those acts. Since we can never exhaust the meaning and the power of his acts, we call them 'mysteries'. We apply the term *Mysteries of Christ* to the events of Christ's life, or to the Mass where they were re-presented, when we wish to emphasize the fact that the words and acts of a Divine Person cannot be limited by time or space but continue to be actualized in the Church, especially through the celebration of the Mass.<sup>2</sup>

For example: on a certain day, in a certain town, our Lord cured a particular man of leprosy. The essence of that divine-human act continues when he acts in the Church through the sacrament of Penance forgiving sins, or when he offers us actual grace with which to correct our damaged nature.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. C. D'Arcy, S.J., *The Life of the Church*, New York, 1933, p. 19. 'The heart of the Christian mystery is this, that the Christ who was both God and man, has determined to extend His life from the terrain of Galilee and Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, and His span of days from thirty odd years to the end of time; and He is to bear the same relation, as far as that is possible, to human individuals which His divine nature bore to His own soul and body. There is one fundamental difference, of course: His own soul and body had no human personality, whereas we, no matter how close we live in the divine life, remain persons, able to say: "No longer I live but Thou."'

These Mysteries of Christ are ours because Christ lived them to redeem us; he lived them to communicate his divine nature to us; he associated us with him in his Mysteries as he lived them; he has made them accessible to us through the liturgy, especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

With this analysis of the liturgy—its divine matter, its communication function, its purpose of divine union—we can now place it in the Divine Plan of Redemption.

#### THE PLAN OF SUPERNATURAL ADOPTION

God is. 'I am Who am.' That fact is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega of all things. That relationship to the creator gives a dignity to the creature which we sometimes fail to attribute to ourselves. We come from the Trinity; we live by the Trinity, we go to the Trinity.

*Trinitarian Life:* From all eternity there is one God in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, knowing and loving each other.

*Creation:* To show forth his goodness and to share his happiness, God made out of nothing other beings, each a unique reflection of himself.

This should be a stimulus to each one. He reflects God as no one else does. God is so great that all the trillions of creatures can never represent all his aspects. In heaven we shall see them in the Beatific Vision as vistas of God's glory.<sup>3</sup> While here on earth we are not certain what we are supposed to be and we want to be like someone else. Instead of a depression diet of wormwood because I am not so beautiful as a movie star, not so popular as a crooner, not so *evidently* holy as the parish saint, I can console myself with the fact that God sees himself in me in a way that he does not see himself in anyone else. As was said earlier, in each event of his historical life, our Lord was thinking how each of us would use its essence, as it comes through the liturgy, to become this unique reflection he has planned each of us to be.

*Elevation of chief creatures:* To further share his happiness,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *L'éternelle vie*, Paris, 1949, p. 312f; and D-M Nothomb, 'Afin d'embrasser l'univers', *La Vie Spirituelle*, May 1955, p. 454: 'Tous sont des idées de Dieu réalisées, des actes d'amour de Dieu, puis des objets de son amour. Dieu notre Père est comme un miroir où nous retrouvons le visage de chaque homme; non seulement son visage, mais son âme, mais ce qui fait le plus intime secret de lui-même, là où seul Dieu pénètre. . . . [The 'new name' which perfectly describes each one's relation to God.]

God raised angels and man above their natures to a created participation in the divine nature, that is, to the state of grace. Grace is defined by Saint Peter (II: 1, 4) as a created participation in the divine nature. Nature is defined as essence in act. God cannot share his essence with us. No matter how closely we become united to him, we shall never lose our identity. But he does give us created participation in his nature, he does give us the capacity to *act* with his power, he does dwell in us and act *through us*. This bestowal of his nature raises angels and men to the state of adopted children of God. Normally, men receive this gift through the liturgy.

*Defection of Creatures:* Some of the angels and Adam, the head of the human race, refused this supernatural gift of God.

They wished to have it by right of their own nature. The bad angels made their choice with full knowledge of the consequences and they have never gone back on their decision. Adam and Eve repented. It required the God-man to restore grace.

*Restoration of Divine Life to Man*

In order to repair to his Father for the offense against Divine Love, and to restore Divine Life to mankind, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, became man, born of the Virgin Mary, and by his life—especially his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension—redeemed the human race.

Note that the citations of the Mysteries in the Canon of the Mass do not end with our Lord's Death but continue, mentioning the Resurrection and Ascension. Some liturgies even include the Sending of the Paraclete. Our Lord did not come to earth just to die for us but to restore life to us. Paradoxically the Easter Sequence sings:

Death and Life strove in extraordinary duel—

The Prince of Life dead, now lives and reigns.

That restoration was for the whole race, every member of it, yet no member may be saved against his will or without his personal effort. Therefore, our Lord must devise a way for applying Calvary to each of us personally. He instituted the Church, a new mode of life, in which individuals in every place, until the end of time, can contact Calvary. The Church was born when the Sacred Heart was pierced. As Pope Pius XII so concisely and beautifully words it,

Lifted up between heaven and earth, he offers the saving sacrifice of his life, and pours forth, as it were, from his pierced Heart the sacraments destined to impart the treasures of redemption to the souls of men (*op. cit.*, Section 17).

*The Life of Christ Prolonged in Time and Space:* The God-man, now in heaven, is the Head of the Mystical Body, the Church, through which he continues until the end of time his life of teaching, directing, and sanctifying individual persons.

*Communication of Christ's Life to Individuals:* The official distribution of Christ's life is the liturgy by which Christ through the Church communicates to individuals by four inter-related parts—the sacraments, the sacramentals, the Divine Office, and the Liturgical Year—the grace of Calvary because the centre and source of the liturgy is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

It is the Mysteries of Christ that the liturgy communicates, his Trinitarian life, his historical life between the Annunciation and the Ascension, his glorified life at the right hand of the Father, as the Head of the Mystical Body which is the prolongation of his historical life in time and space. The sacraments are the continuation of his God-giving actions—bestowing, restoring, increasing sanctifying grace. The sacramentals are the continuation of those actions by which he transformed material objects from possibilities of harm into means of grace. We recall that God gave Adam charge of the material world. When Adam submitted to Satan, he surrendered this sovereignty but, since the Incarnation, the objects that we use in our work-a-day life can be changed from the state of harmful or of merely neutral to that of implements for the Christ-life. The Divine Office and Ritual Prayers are the continuation of Christ's words of formal prayer. The Liturgical Cycle—spiral not just repetitious—is our gradual growth in Christ through participation in the recurrent actualization of his mysteries.

The centre and core of the liturgy is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the source of divine life, where the *reality* of all the mysteries of Christ is made present whenever it is celebrated. All four parts of the liturgy are related because they draw from the same source for the divine life they communicate, from the Mass.

There are also related in the process of dispensing Christ's life. Sacramentals are blessed by ritual prayers and are used in the

administration of all the sacraments, in the recitation of Divine Office, and in carrying out the Liturgical Year. Some sacramentals are practically incorporated into the Proper of the Mass—the candles at Candlemas, the ashes on Ash Wednesday, palms on Palm Sunday, the Paschal candle at Eastertide; others are outside the Mass but associated with it, as the blessing of throats with special Saint Blaise candle, the Christmas crib, and the like. The Divine Office, an extension of the Proper of the Mass, is the prayer-setting for the Holy Sacrifice and changes seasonally through the Liturgical Year.

*Co-operative Development of Christ's Life:* It is not sufficient to passively receive Christ's Life through the liturgy; we must deliberately and continuously co-operate with actual graces, exercising and developing the supernatural virtues and gifts of the Holy Ghost received at Baptism.

We must use the divine power received through the liturgy to keep the Commandments, to practise the temporal and spiritual works of mercy, to observe the duties of our state of life, and then to develop a sensitive ear to the suggestions which our position, our *officium* as adopted children of God, indicates for the eagerness of love.

Now co-operation with grace has the effect of increasing one's capacity for grace. Suppose that the reward for winning a race were not the gold medal, purse, and, or renown, but an increase in speed. Every response to grace not only makes one more God-like but gives a greater capacity for divine life. And God will always supply.

*Beatified Share in the Trinitarian Life:* According to the capacity for God which each one has acquired by the moment of death, each will enjoy forever the life of the Blessed Trinity in the Beatific Vision.