

Chapter 15

Liturgy and Sacraments: Driving Revitalization by Positioning Worshippers in Vital Communion with the Triune God

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Introduction

A new Spirit hovers over the Christian Church. This Spirit, ever ancient and ever new, inspires an enthusiasm to respond in new and life-giving ways to Christ in this twenty-first century. It is an experience of revitalization. There are many ways to explore this reality and several have been pursued in the consultations that have already taken place, one at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky and the second in Edinburgh, Scotland. This essay hopes to build on that work and offer additional points for reflection and/or conversation from the disciplines of liturgical and sacramental theology. The traditional practice of liturgy and the sacraments is part of the Church's heritage and can potentially provide rich resources for promoting revitalization.

During the Edinburgh consultation in May 2010, this definition of revitalization surfaced in table conversation:

Revitalization originates from and is rooted in the Triune God; it takes place where people in specific (historical, cultural, social and spiritual) contexts experience God's enlivening and reawakening Spirit leading to a fresh encounter with the living Christ.... It often takes place amidst dissatisfaction with the *status quo*, vulnerability, suffering and pain, deep yearning, radical discipleship including persistent prayer, scripture study, worship and an unquenchable

anticipation of God's renewing presence."... It is the prophetic impulse for social and spiritual transformation in every generation.

A key element in this definition is the clear recognition that, like all movements of the Spirit, revitalization is initiated by God, not by human beings. This movement of the Spirit, because it is communicated to human beings, necessarily is expressed and experienced in a particular historical, cultural, and social milieu. Nevertheless, the initiative is always God's, not ours. In other words, any dissatisfaction, yearning, or desire for God's presence comes from God, not us. This acknowledgement of the action of God in our lives has always been understood as inviting—indeed demanding—a response. Spiritual writers have often described the Christian journey toward communion with God as an ongoing response to the promptings of God's Spirit in the everydayness of our lives. This response is often ritualized in liturgical rites.

Certainly this journey toward communion with the Triune God is, in fact, the goal of all human life. It is the straining forward and yearning for the final fulfillment of all things in Christ already won for us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is the eschatological dimension of the Christian life. We have committed ourselves to this journey and to this ongoing response to the Spirit since the moment we were plunged into the waters of baptism. As a result, our Christian life is a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ (that is, his life, death, and resurrection) that will finally culminate in communion with the Triune God.

In addition to the question of "where" we are headed (vital communion with the Triune God) is the question of "how" to get there. Briefly considering some aspects of mystery of the Incarnation can provide a starting point for answering the "how" question. As the Prologue to the Gospel according to John so eloquently expresses it: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn. 1:14). And a few verses later, "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him" (Jn. 1:18).¹ God took on human flesh in order to communicate God's love and will for us. In other words, God revealed God self to us through the human bodiliness of Jesus Christ. God continues to speak to us through our own human bodiliness. We learn to know our Creator and respond to God's invitation as embodied persons. Thus it is by means of our own seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling that other human beings and all of creation communicate the beauty, love, and truth that is God.

Human Beings and Ritual

Anthropologists have long been interested in the study of ritual as a feature of human behavior. To study liturgy as ritual, whether in its historical or contemporary manifestations is to study liturgy in its empirical reality as a species of significant human behavior.² It is by means of ritual behaviors that we forge our identity both as individuals and as members of communities. The term ritual, however, can be applied to a wide range of activity, including those that are not strictly religious in nature. Margaret Kelleher defines ritual as "a social

symbolic process which has the potential for communicating, creating, criticizing, and even transforming meaning.³ We observe rituals in times of joy and sadness, victory and defeat, life and death. There are civil rituals, family rituals, ethnic and sport rituals. Oftentimes these are particularly observed—sometimes unselfconsciously—at holidays and rites of passage.

As Christians, both individually and communally, we engage in ritual behaviors as a means of weaving and reweaving our relationship with the Triune God. This is the case when we gather for worship. However, the term "worship" can be more broadly applied not only to formal services or rites of a particular religion, but also to the way one lives one's life. When the term applies to formal services, Christian worship provides the framework for entering into dialogue with the Triune God. In this case, worship can both express and mediate the divine-human relationship.⁴ This occurs because worship involves both human beings who desire to have a relationship with God and a God who fulfills that desire.⁵

Since worship often includes a broader usage than formal religious rites, this essay will use the term "liturgy." The term more specifically includes the element of ritual activity as part of its function. "Liturgy" may be defined as the formal public worship of Christian assemblies. It is a type of ritual action whereby Christians gather to remember, express, and renew their identity and their relationship with the Triune God. Finally, liturgy described as ritual action highlights the fact that we are engaged in a symbolic process since all ritual is comprised of the interplay of a wide constellation of symbols.⁶

Liturgy as Symbolizing Activity

As with all rituals, the building blocks of liturgy are symbols. These include not only objects, but also movements and postures, light and darkness, color and form, texture and space. Language can be symbolic, as well as such non-verbal expressions as music and art. The philosopher and semiotician, Michael Polanyi, offers several insights about symbol that apply to our consideration of liturgy. The first is that there is an important distinction between signs and symbols. Signs function on the level of cognition, providing us with information. Symbols, on the other hand, function on the level of recognition, providing not information, but integration. This integration functions both within the individual or a group of individuals. Understanding symbols as mediation of recognition rather than information explains how symbols can mediate meaning within particular cultural and social milieu in which the symbolizing activity occurs.⁷ The crucial element is that symbols, and therefore liturgy, are not intended as sources of information. Rather, participation in the liturgy offers an opportunity to recognize and integrate one's place within the experience of Christian faith.

The work of French theologian, Louis-Marie Chauvet, corroborates Polanyi's insights about symbol and applies them to his sacramental theology. He locates his theology of symbol at the heart of mediation, by language, by culture and desire. Indeed, for Chauvet, all reality is mediated through the

symbolic network of the culture that fashions us.⁸ Chauvet points out that the word “symbol” derives from the Greek word “symballein” which means “to throw together.” “Symbolon” involved the ancient practice of cutting an object in two. Partners in some agreement or contract would each retain one part of the symbolon. Separately, the half possessed no value. However, when joined with the other half, the symbolon confirmed the agreement between the two partners. Notice that it was the agreement between the two partners that established the significance of the symbol. It was only because of that agreement that the symbol served as expression of a social pact based on mutual recognition in the rejoining of the two halves. This is what enables a symbol to serve as mediator of identity.⁹ Chauvet’s point in recalling this ancient practice is to highlight the fact that symbols mediate reality by negotiating connections. These connections allow human persons both as individuals and as members of a social group to make sense of their world and to find their identity by discovering and negotiating relationships.¹⁰

What slowly emerges is the way in which liturgy (and in particular the celebration of the sacraments) possesses the potential to negotiate identity and relationships because it is symbolizing activity. When we gather for liturgy, we engage in ritual behavior that involves the interplay of symbols. Those symbols are rooted in creation and speak to a “human be-ing-ness” that is bodily. Comparing this interplay of symbols may perhaps be more easily understood by comparing it with a fundamental principle of quantum physics:

Quantum physics describes the universe as a place where everything is intereoneeted or interrelated. Connections are realized by energy concentrated in bundles called “quanta” that flow throughout all of reality. Indeed, this energy is the primary essence of reality. It is an astounding and fresh way to look at the cosmos! The notion that all of reality is interdependent and that its relatedness is accomplished by means of the flow of energy provides an apt metaphor for understanding the symbolic activity that occurs in the liturgy. Like the bundles of energy described in quantum theory, liturgical symbols interact with each other, transferring and increasing energy, shedding light, and unfolding meaning.¹¹

Liturgical symbols include such elements of creation as water, fire, bread, wine, and oil. They also include architecture, texture, color, sound, silence, music, the scent of incense, sacred vessels, the crucifix, altar, books, vestments, the presider, and the assembly. Postures and gestures such as processing, standing, and bowing are also liturgical symbols. These symbols enable us to both express and shape our Christian faith and position us in vital communion with the Triune God. This is possible because symbols enable both dialogue and transformation.

The Dialogical and Transformative Nature of the Liturgy

Edward Kilmartin has traced the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the primacy of the divine action in the writings of Odo Casel. This early twentieth century Benedictine made it clear that the liturgy is the action of Christ not the

Church. The Church cooperates with the action of Christ, entering into his redeeming work and responding to God’s initiative.¹² Thus the liturgy structures its participants in a relation of dialogue with God. The writings of the Second Vatican Council affirm this dialogical understanding of the liturgy. This does not simply mean that the structure of the liturgy is set up dialogically, although it certainly is (at least in Roman Catholic practice). Rather, it means that on a much more profound level, our impulse to gather for worship is itself a response to God’s invitation.¹³ Within the rites themselves, Christian first listen to God’s Word before making a response. This response can take the form of sung prayer, proclamation of the Creed, or participation in the Eucharistic Prayer and Communion. This dialogic structure is meant to promote our ongoing relationship with God both within and outside the liturgy as we move toward the eschatological goal of full communion with the Triune God.

Because it is symbolic and repetitive, liturgy also has the potential to be transformative. If we apply Chauvet’s theory of symbol, we can see how the dynamic of transformation might be in process in an ongoing way. Engaging in the symbolizing activity of liturgy, human persons open themselves to new opportunities to make sense of their world and to find their identity within it. Symbols can change our point of view and our values by shifting our center of awareness. In their innermost nature symbols, especially aesthetic or art symbols, reveal both who we are and the various possible and actual appearances of the world within the Christian faith context. This experience, furthermore, opens us to the possibility of intentional self-transcendence: we can become different persons, we can grow and change, if we allow ourselves to be carried away by new faith meanings and orient ourselves in new ways to our place within our faith world.¹⁴ Symbolic activity makes this possible.

Chauvet explains that by engaging with symbols and dwelling in the symbolic order, subjects build themselves by building their world. This “building” suggests the process of change that is inherent in the process of transformation. Within the liturgical setting, Christians weave or reweave alliances with God and each other in such a way that they can recognize themselves as members of the social group,¹⁵ that is the Church, and find their identity as Christians.¹⁶

Because liturgical symbols mediate relationships, engaging in the liturgy can direct our responses, not only within the ritual action, but also to our daily living. As the Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles explains, the symbols of the liturgy have the power to stir the imagination, release hidden energies in the soul, give strength and stability to the personality and arouse the will to consistent and committed action.¹⁷ All of this can potentially promote the transformation of both individuals and communities as they live and ritualize the Christian journey.

In speaking specifically of the role of ritual music in Christian liturgy, Don E. Saliers asserts its power to transform those who participate by forming, over time, the imagination and affectivity of the congregation.¹⁸ In making this assertion, Saliers is building on the work of Susanne Langer who describes ritual as the articulation of feeling, not in the logical but in the physiological sense. In

other words, one of ritual's characteristics is the *articulation* of feelings. Its purpose is not simple emotion, but a complex permanent *attitude*.¹⁹ Attitude is the point here since it is in the attitudes of the mind and heart that a Christian experiences transformation. Langer continues:

This attitude, which is the worshipers' response to the insight given by the sacred symbols, is an emotional pattern, which governs all individual lives. It cannot be recognized through any clearer medium than that of formalized gesture; yet in this cryptic form it is recognized, and yields a strong sense of tribal or congregational unity, of rightness and security. A rite regularly performed is the constant reiteration of sentiments toward "first and last things"; it is not a free expression of emotions, but a disciplines rehearsal of "right attitudes."²⁰

This description of ritual or liturgy as the rehearsal of right attitudes captures the idea of both transformation and repetition. It is by repeatedly articulating these right attitudes that authentic transformation can occur.

Indeed, this is the focus of the sacraments of the Church, celebrated in renewed ways in the midst of the worshipping community since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Whether we speak of the primary sacraments of Initiation celebrated by most if not all the churches, or the additional sacraments of healing, ministry, and Christian marriage celebrated by some, each of these sacramental signs celebrates God's action in Christian life. That action is formalized in rituals wherein the interplay of symbols serves to negotiate Christian identity and Christian community.

Conclusions

The Triune God continues to invite humankind into a deeper and deeper relationship, one that will be consummated at the end of time when we are taken up in the *perichoresis*, the dance of the Three Persons of the Trinity. In the meantime, the created world and our human bodiliness are the place where that relationship is worked out. One way this is formalized is through ritual activity we call liturgy. It is a primary means for engaging in dialogue with the God who pursues us first. Chauvet's assertion that all reality is mediated through the symbolic network of the culture that shapes us highlights the significance of symbolic activity. The symbols of the liturgy—when celebrated with integrity, authenticity, and munificence—can position worshippers in such a way that their Christian identity as Church as well as individuals is enlivened with meaning and with hope. This enlivening, which is the fruit of the work of the Spirit, will spill over into a life of mission that can witness to the faith in new and vital ways. It will nurture the revitalization of our churches, positioning us in vital Communion with the Triune God. The structure of ritual behavior includes its celebrating symbols to express and shape identity and relationships. These elements, as well as their faithful repetition over time, provide the possibility that we will grow into communities that are moving toward a more and more intimate relationship with God. This is the life of grace. The liturgical celebration of the sacraments is one of its integral paths.

Notes

1. *New American Bible*, revised edition, 2011.
2. "Mark Scarle: Ritual" in *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*, eds. Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Co., 2007), 9.
3. Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Ritual," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 906.
4. Judith M. Kubicki, *Liturgical Music as Ritual Symbol: A Case Study of Jacques Berthier's Taizé Music*, Liturgia condenda 9, (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1999), 3.
5. Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Worship," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 1105.
6. Kelleher, "Worship," 1106 and Kubicki, 4.
7. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosech, *Meaning* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1975), 73.
8. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 41, 84-85.
9. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 112.
10. Kubicki, *Liturgical Music*, 101.
11. Judith M. Kubicki, *The Presence of Christ in the Gathered Assembly* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 125. My applying the insights of quantum physics to theology is derived from Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, revised (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 29-30.
12. Jerome M. Hall, *We Have the Mind of Christ: The Holy Spirit and Liturgical Memory in the Thought of Edward J. Kilmartin* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 11.
13. Kubicki, *The Presence of Christ*, 36.
14. See Kubicki, *Liturgical Music*, 122-123 and Robert E. Innis, "Art, Symbol, and Consciousness: A Polanyi Gloss on Susan Langer and Nelson Goodman," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (December, 1977): 475-476.
15. The term "social group" here is used in its more technical, sociological sense. It is not meant to suggest the belonging to a church is simply an experiencing of social networking in some superficial sense.
16. Chauvet, 86, 106-107.
17. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1983), 58.
18. Don E. Saliers, "The Integrity of Sung Prayer," *Worship* 55 (July 1981): 293.
19. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 153.
20. *Ibid.*