

# LITURGY AND COMMUNICATION

By KEVIN DONOVAN

**B**UT I CAN communicate perfectly well with my intellect'. Spoken by a young german woman, with a touch of defiance in her voice, late one night in the mysterious space of half-lit Coventry Cathedral, dominated by the great tapestry of Christ in majesty. There were over a hundred people from several countries, including the United States, taking part in a 'worship workshop'. We had all been asked to relate to each other using gestures only, without any words. A sort of sensitivity session. She must have found the mirror-movement embarrassing, ridiculous, perhaps even threatening. At any rate, she refused to join in. 'What is the point?' 'It's a form of communication'. 'But I can communicate perfectly well with my intellect'.

It might be more comfortable, less ambiguous, if we could; but the fact of the matter is that we are not angels. Even the most subtle thoughts need to be verbalized if anyone else is to share them. And with the encoding of our message in a new medium, not always verbal, comes the double possibility of understanding or of being misunderstood. This is the law of relationships. For communication is ultimately about relationships. There is no other way of building up relationships save by communication. It may be kept at the trivial level – deliberately so, either from a fear of deeper and more demanding involvement, or simply to keep the channels of communication open in an unpromising situation. 'Good morning, nice day, see you later'. But at its fullest and most human it is self-communication. Not the imparting of information merely, not the commending of attitudes and values, but the opening of oneself fully to another person in reciprocal communication. This is familiar enough ground. What is important to remember is that this applies also to God. God can only communicate to man in human terms, because man can only hear on those terms – the mystics notwithstanding. God uses human intermediaries: the word of God in the words of men. This self-communication of God by God, this divine revelation, is not a question of ideas merely, but of personalities. 'Through divine

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revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate himself and the eternal decisions of his will regarding the salvation of men'.<sup>1</sup> The fulness of revelation had to be God become a human person – Chalcedon notwithstanding. And the Incarnation, like any other communication, aspires to be, has to be, reciprocal. The feed-back, the response to God's revelation and offering of himself, is our personal self-giving. And what else is our liturgy?

Yet if there is a similarity between God's self-communication and that of man, there is also a difference. Already the Old Testament had used the model of human love and marriage to describe God's relations with man; and St Paul repeats this of Christ and his Church. Here, the 'two in one flesh' reaches a new intensity of meaning and of fact. As the early Fathers were so fond of repeating, in receiving Christ eucharistically we are quite literally assimilated to him; we become his body, the Church. The Church continues the self-revelation of Christ who is God incarnate,<sup>2</sup> and the liturgy is the place where God dwells with men. There he continues to speak to them – the men of today; and the purpose of this self-communication is still the same: to impart the divine life to us in him and through his Spirit. Participation at this level (which is the response to the divine communication) becomes religious experience; seeing, as we say, 'with the eyes of faith'; and hearing and maybe tasting and touching as well.

This is the understanding of faith. To the outsider, the liturgy can seem to be no more than an unusual example of a communications system, with its own private code, remarkable only because of the rather sharply differentiated roles for transmitter and receiver. For the christian, the liturgy represents much more than this. It is the clearest instance of God's speaking to men through his Word, of Christ communicating his life to us through the sacraments. Of course, we also believe that God, who has created all men to share in his divine life, somehow communicates that life to those who are outside the visible christian community and its celebration of the liturgy. Nonetheless, they are not unrelated to Christ and to his paschal mystery. 'Since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, passim – esp. chs 7 and 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

The Church, as the council so frequently points out, is the visible sacrament of this divine activity which is present throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> In the Church, and especially in her liturgy, this divine action, while remaining divine, becomes partially visible and open to inspection.

The term communication is thus applied to the liturgy in two different but interconnected senses. God communicates with man, visibly; and man responds, visibly and in a community. This is the first sense. But this visible divine communication (as opposed, say, to the secret dialogue in a person's conscience, where 'he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths'<sup>5</sup>) takes place through human instruments, using human words and human actions. This complex of human words and actions can be subjected to analysis and criticism like any other human communications system. This is the second sense of communication in the liturgy: the communication which is ostensibly an affair between men, but which mediates God's revelation and self-communication. Communication in the second sense is a rich complex of verbal and non-verbal discourse. Because it is so complex, involving so many human variables, with the possibility of so much interference, it can become faulty. This is a risk that God consented to take in becoming man in order to share his divine life with men.

This suggests a question which no-one can answer. How far can God reach us through a communications system like the liturgy when it is, humanly speaking, defective? When, to take the most obvious example, the word of God is so inaudibly proclaimed that no-one can possibly hear it? We may be unable to find the answer. But we are surely bound to ensure, as stewards of the mysteries, that the overt, human communications system, through which God has chosen to speak to us, should be as trouble-free as we can possibly make it. This responsibility flows directly from the human co-operation that God seeks in the divine process of redemption. Already St Paul had pointed out that there could be no explicit faith without a preacher. 'They will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher'.<sup>6</sup> Also Paul had quite decided views on the importance of clear communications, particularly in the liturgy. 'When I am in the presence of the community, I would rather say five words that mean something than ten

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 10, 14.

thousand words in a tongue'.<sup>7</sup> The whole of this chapter is worth pondering. 'There are any number of different languages in the world, and not one of them is meaningless; but if I am ignorant of what the sounds mean, I am a savage to the man who is speaking, and he is a savage to me . . . How will he say Amen to your thanksgiving for he will have no idea what you are saying.'<sup>8</sup> Amazing, that Paul's insistence on the need for intelligible speech in worship should have been neglected for so long. The reason must be that in reading this passage, people thought only of his immediate context, the concern to regulate charismatic utterance in worship. The more general principle was unfortunately overlooked – the need that christian worship has of intelligible language and good communication. Today's scientific study of the communications media has not changed the principle involved. What it has done is to increase enormously our understanding of the factors, besides speaking in tongues, which can impede communication in the liturgy. A final observation on St Paul. At the end of the chapter, he explicitly considers the case of unbelievers attending the christian assembly at Corinth. His hope is that through the experience of hearing what was there, their secret thoughts would be laid bare, and they would come to worship God. This too presupposes intelligible communication. How far do we honour Paul's principle in our broadcast or televised religious services? How far do we really consider the countless half-believers who, for sociological reasons, still attend Sunday Mass? What message do they in fact receive at the back of the church? The human medium we are using may well be distorting the divine message we are trying to communicate. Electric guitars and incense are equally capable of producing an impression of the incongruous which can hamper some people's response to God.

This is where communications experts have a particular contribution to make to the renewal of the liturgy, both in shape and style. Their contribution is primarily at the obvious level of technique: the need the speaker has to be heard, to articulate, to use his microphone competently, to express himself in terms that his audience can grasp, if the divine message of which he is the servant is to reach the hearers and move them to respond to God in the sacramental encounter. To be aware of the particular 'language-game' that is the liturgy. To be audible in the fullest sense, with the right timbre and tone. To remember that liturgical communication is so much more

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 14, 19.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor 14, 10–12.

than a matter of words, that it means relating to people, and creating for them an atmosphere of worship, a rich amalgam of sights, sounds and smells – yet one which is not subtly at variance with the cultural back-ground of his hearers. And not passive hearers or spectators. Communication is two-way. How can God's hearers become active in their worship, embodying their response in a language and ritual that remains credible? The distinction between technique and art becomes blurred. It is not the 'sound-effects man' alone, nor the speech therapist, who is needed here. The poet and the dramatist, musicians, artists, even choreographers, can help the ordained representative of Christ and his Church to ensure that, as far as is humanly possible, God's message of self-communication gets through.

Much has been written recently on this subject on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, for example, there is the recent two-volume survey of pastoral liturgy, edited by Gelineau and published simultaneously in several languages. This work (*Dans vos assemblées*) develops themes originally explored in reviews such as *La Maison Dieu*. In the english-speaking world, journals like *Worship* have regularly carried articles with titles like 'Ritual as Communication'. There is no need to rehearse what has been said elsewhere, and by the very specialists from whom we have to learn. But this is not to say that no problems remain for us to grapple with.

The chief of these is probably still that of translation. It is true that God revealed himself in the human person of Christ, a jew and a man of his own time and culture. If it is also true that the christian liturgy continues to embody God's self-revelation for the men of another time and culture, it cannot on that account cut itself off from its authentic palestinian roots. That culture was agrarian and deeply religious, ours is increasingly industrial and secular. How can you, or better, how, through you, can God continue to communicate with the men of today, using the language and thought patterns of a bygone age. Must we, to worship, become cultural, even social deviants? There is here a formidable problem of translation, one which goes deeper than most words, or the difficulties associated with rendering latin into ICEL or ICET or neo-Cranmer or whatever. It is the deeper problem of finding today's equivalents for the biblical rites and concepts themselves – and of facing the question whether there can be an equivalent. God, after all, chose to reveal himself in *this* particular way; he communicates himself through *these* rites in a guaranteed manner. Does 'The Lord is my

shop-steward', or 'my probation officer', or (as the New Catholic Hymnal, basing itself on a japanese version, has it) 'The Lord is my pacesetter': do these versions adequately represent the shepherd of the original? And if so, will krispies and milk or pizza and beer do instead of bread and wine?

For the main-stream christian, there is something definitive, and not merely exemplary, about the person and work of Christ. What is implicit in other religions, and in the sincere searching of the agnostic, becomes explicit in Christ and in the christian liturgy. Here, the unique event of a transcendent God becoming incarnate out of love for man is somehow prolonged in time through the Church. Christian worship is today's self-communication of God and our human response; both are made in and through Christ. 'In Christ' implies a certain basic given once-for-all set of concepts and rites, even allowing for the modifications and additions which they have certainly received. Hence the question, 'How can we worship God in an out-moded language?' The answer to this question I take to be two-fold. By learning the language, and by doing a spot of comparative philology.

How does one learn a language? By listening to other people as they talk, and by trying to join in, to imitate them. We learn from our parents, our teachers, our school-companions. Our learning may be supplemented by the latest audio-visual aids of a well-equipped language laboratory. But this should not obscure the fact that in learning a language, especially our mother-tongue, we are joining a community. The same is true of the language and community of revelation. The place where people, that is, christians, continue to learn the language of Christ is above all in the place where communication through Christ takes place most explicitly. 'Let us pray to the Father in the words our Saviour gave us'. The liturgy provides us with a gradual education in biblical culture. It is a school of prayer in which we learn by imitating and by doing. It teaches us anew the great themes of christian prayer, with its dominant note of thanksgiving and oblation in Christ. In extreme cases, where a christian community has been denied all other forms of instruction and preaching, the words and actions of the liturgy have been their sole teacher. But teaching, even through the liturgy, is a skill. There are good and bad teachers; and some forms of liturgy may be better adapted than others at providing the progressive initiation of neophytes into their christian heritage. The basic point we must remember is that we learn social skills from the community;

and this is true of worship and of religious language. We learn also from experience. Educationalists as well as communications experts have a contribution to make to our renewed liturgy. As an example of the sort of help they can give, I should like to quote a short passage from a remarkable little book by a dynamic New Zealand priest. Called 'Growing in Community', it is an approach to religious education through the liturgy, based on his experience in a deprived area of London. Although he has young children in mind, it is easy to see that his words have a much wider application.

Our first meeting with Christ is undoubtedly in the community of the family, where our baptism begins to take shape in our lives; but in the parish liturgy, we stand together as the sign and reality of Christ's presence among men. A liturgy that speaks this truth at the level of a child's understanding will be a truly religious experience. A poor experience of the liturgy will never be compensated for by a body of knowledge nor an expertise in answering questions about the faith. What we attempted was to combine the functions of learning and worshipping in an experience relevant to the age-level of the participating children. Religious education we visualized as a growth through and out of the liturgy; for it is in the liturgy that the child will meet Christ as in no other place.<sup>9</sup>

Confronted as we are with the task of learning the language of the liturgy, we simply have to become bilingual, talking the language of secular man (on the assumption that he really exists), but also talking to God and to one another in the words our Saviour taught us. In so doing, we may well find the expertise of others useful in avoiding traumatic clashes between the two types of language.

The Incarnation itself, God's becoming fully human, a man like us in all things but sin, explains what is meant by 'doing a spot of comparative philology'. If 'learning a new language' seems to stress the discontinuity between liturgy and the ordinary human experience which the liturgy illuminates, the 'comparative philology' approach stresses the similarities. It means seeing the affinities that exist between our own particular idiom of divine revelation and other forms of language and ritual, particularly in the religious sphere. The Jewish-Christian idiom is certainly distinctive; but it is not discontinuous, not totally different from the varied forms taken by man's quest for a God who, as we saw, reveals himself, however imperfectly, in the world of conscience and creation. For example,

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<sup>9</sup> Derrick, Ewen: *Growing in Community* (London, 1969), p 22.

those typical instances of encounter with God through Christ which we call sacraments have their human counterpart. Man is a ritual animal. Rituals for celebrating such turning points as birth, maturity, marriage and decline towards the grave, are not the exclusive preserve of religious systems. At critical moments of a man's life he is more open to the action and invitation of God; yet this action is nevertheless obscurely present throughout his life. A sacrament in the full sense, as well as communicating Christ's divine life to the individual, also makes explicit the full value and meaning of all human activity and life. We need to explore, even to rediscover, these points of contact between our sacraments and ordinary human culture if we are not to remain incommunicado as christians.

At the end of our exploration we shall, I think, find that worship is after all possible for a community of faith belonging to the world of the 'seventies'. Our experience of faith and worship will in part be discontinuous. For the sake of mankind, we must never let it become totally discontinuous from the world in which we live – be that a world of aborigines or of pop-culture. We must strive with all our nerve to fit authentic christian worship into the culture which provides the context for the rest of our living and relating. This is happening in the former mission territories; the lesson of the chinese rites has at last been learnt. The wide-spread interest aroused by rock operas like *Jesus Christ Super Star* and *Godspell* may turn out to have equal significance for our liturgy in the West,

It would be cherishing an illusion if one were to end on a note of facile optimism, as though the advent of Gospel Rock had solved all problems. For one thing, many christians will not be helped at all by worship in this idiom. More important, all christians, whatever the idiom in which their worship is clothed, must come to terms with a certain discontinuity. For worship, even when it most illuminates the meaning of mankind, and relates the sacrifice of our everyday activity to the one sacrifice of Christ, is nevertheless not quite the same as ordinary life. We will always experience something of a cultural discontinuity as we enter a church, or begin a mass, even without vestments. We cannot altogether eliminate this, nor should we want to. For provided it is not too great, this 'disparity-in-continuity' between liturgy and life has a message. It serves precisely to put us in the proper dispositions of mind and body, to remind us that we are once more about to enter into explicit communication with God.