

LITURGY: ART OR SCIENCE?

By ERNEST SANDS

Two American Jesuits recently visited Britain. They found themselves in the congregation of a Roman Catholic cathedral in the south of England during the celebration of Christmas Midnight Mass. The ceremonies were carried out to the last detail. During the Eucharistic Prayer the presider spoke of 'this holy and living sacrifice'. One Jesuit turned to the other and said, 'It may be holy, but it certainly is not living'. Shortly afterwards they both left.

In a northern diocese a group of clergy were concelebrants at a Youth Mass with a predominantly teenage congregation. The presider, a skilled communicator, adapted each of the elements of the celebration in such a way that the normal structure of Eucharist became difficult to follow. As the concelebrants returned to the sacristy, one of them threw his stole down in frustration and referred to the whole exercise as 'Spot the Mass'.

Discovering the foundations

LITURGY IS IGNEOUS. It is capable of sparking off volcanic fires of passion, resentment and elation. It can anger, frustrate, summon, hint, seduce and inspire. In seeking to discern the presence of God and to respond in praise, petition and thanksgiving, authentic liturgy can leave no one untouched or unconvicted. It speaks of and to the basic yearnings of the human heart, offering the elusive promise that in Christ the good life is possible.

But liturgy is also batholithic. It runs deep and expresses the sublime. The frustration shown by the two American Jesuits and the northern concelebrant is living proof that Christians are rightly protective about those rites which evoke the mysteries of their life of faith. When liturgy falls short of expressing this reality, or does so in a way which appears to distort the reality, then people feel uneasy. Moreover, the solution to this problem is not simple. The

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artist of the teenage celebration failed to carry his concelebrants with him because he overlooked certain laws of security, whereas the protagonists at the cathedral were mindful of liturgical propriety but lacking any aesthetic or creative dimension.

The problem seems insuperable only if we view liturgy as the mere carrying out of ceremony. But to ask whether liturgy is art or science is to go beyond the issues of parameter and freedom, beyond stylistic and creative expression to a deeper set of questions. What is liturgy *for*? What is liturgy an expression of? What are the influences which shape liturgy both in its theoretical presentation and in its practical execution? For liturgy is more than skin deep. It is the heartbeat of the community and as such it touches the nerve centre of the body because it challenges and affirms our presuppositions about the nature of Church and community. Just as a body with cancer can show its disease by the appearance of secondaries, so too liturgical disputes are the secondaries of particular ecclesiologies with which Christians are no longer at ease. An unease in ecclesiology is not a problem but rather a challenge to liturgy, whereas disease, when one ecclesiology has come to dominate above all its theological partners, can create an unbalanced understanding of liturgy and can ultimately strangle its legitimately diverse expression. The reactions provoked by the cathedral Mass and the youth Mass teach us as much about ecclesiology as they do about liturgy.

Such a theological analysis does not stop at ecclesiology. It recognizes that most ecclesiologies are a reflection of christology. If the role of the Church is in some way to proclaim the presence of Christ in every age, then the particular vision of Christ which any christology promotes will accordingly shape its ecclesiological expression. Different visions of Christ will lead to different expressions of the nature and purpose of the Church. This in turn will set the agenda and the limits to what is expected of liturgy.

To do justice to the foundations of liturgy is to develop the interconnection not only between liturgy, ecclesiology and christology, but between christology and the nature of God, revelation and spirituality. Let it suffice here to point out that liturgy is not about bells and smells, and therefore requires more than an actor, a police officer or a scientist. It is about the very self-actuation of the Church, and demands that we be cognizant of the ecclesial context of our worship, and of the face of Christ whose presence is named in its celebration. Pointing to these deeper questions in

the face of capricious attempts to make liturgy 'meaningful', John Gunstone says,

Worship needs more than that. It needs to draw on the rich sources of the Christian faith, the Scriptures and the Church's obedient response to the Word of God enshrined in liturgical traditions, as well as on the human situation in which the worshippers find themselves and their experience of God's grace in their lives.¹

Liturgy is more than meets the eye; it uncovers something of the mystery of the Church.

Law versus creativity

That liturgy is susceptible to law is beyond doubt. This can be shown on a number of levels. In the most remote sense Anton Baumstark formulated certain laws of liturgical evolution in which, among other things, he showed the tendency to move from austerity to richness in Christian ritual.² In the same way Edmund Bishop was able to offer interpretive laws for distinguishing Roman and Gallican patterns of worship.³ More recently Robert Taft has scrutinized eastern and western liturgy for general laws of liturgical development and provided a methodology for evaluating aspects of liturgical change.⁴ In trying to grapple with law, principle and liturgical style, Aidan Kavanagh has provided a highly contentious list of particular 'laws' based upon a series of affirmations he considers axiomatic to liturgy.⁵

On a different level there are particular laws governing the actual celebration of the Church's liturgy. The General Instruction on the Roman Missal and on the Lectionary, as well as the *Praenotanda* to each of the sacraments contain rules and regulations to be applied on the day. The broad issues are corroborated in the Code of Canon Law. In these documents is reflected a four-fold concern which is evangelical, theological, juridical and pastoral. Framed in the spirit of the New Testament they attempt to elaborate the theological foundations for the way in which the Church is sanctified and worships. Whilst proposing definite practical lines of action for liturgy, they are always conscious that any law must reflect the pastoral demands of the worshipping community. This means that invariable application of rubrics may well create validity, but may equally often produce inauthenticity. For liturgy to be authentic it

must be more than valid. This is evidently the mind of the Council Fathers:

Pastors must realize that when the liturgy is celebrated something more is required than the mere observance of laws governing valid and lawful celebration; it is also their duty to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.⁶

More is required than observing the laws of validity. Does this mean then that laws may be broken in a spirit of pastoral creativity? Kevin Seasoltz, who happily wears both a liturgist's and a canonist's yoke, distinguishes between those who respond only to commands and ignore counsel, those who give a strict juridical interpretation where it least belongs, and those whose attempt to counteract legalism results only in a contempt for practical norms.⁷

Creativity for creativity's sake would seem to have no place in sound liturgical practice. Creativity as a response to legitimate pastoral need would appear to be an imperative if we are to move beyond the valid to the authentic, although, as Mary Collins has pointed out, people are loath to endorse creativity in liturgy. She suggests one of the reasons may be

. . . the tendency of those who hold the common tradition in trust to identify its interests with their own, so that what threatens personal or group interests is perceived to threaten the tradition. In this situation, the gift of form and meaning offered by the creative member and welcomed in the community may be significantly modified by the endorser, if it is endorsed at all, to weaken its impact on the public life of the community and so to protect those vested interests.⁸

As long as rubrics are devoid of theological significance, are decontextualized and are seen as regulations for implementing ceremonial, we can hold out no hope for our two Jesuits and our northern concelebrant: the artist will be repressed and the scientist undermined.

In this context it is worth drawing attention to two old Latin sayings. The first is: *De minimis non curat praetor* ('The leader does not look after the smallest details'). No liturgist would ever want to see a code of regulations which prescribed universally for every conceivable eventuality. Cultural differences, individual needs and

the legitimate claims of creativity would thereby be abused. No genuine pastor would ever wish to be circumscribed by dictates on the positioning of a 'second collection' or the frequency of the Blessing of Engaged Couples during Sunday parish Eucharist. There are some things which do not merit legislation. The second saying is: *Sacramenta propter homines* ('Sacraments exist for people'). It is only common sense that sacraments exist for people and not the other way round. No one would deny communion to a bride and groom on their wedding day if by chance they had eaten within the previous hour. Common sense tells us that the Eucharistic fast is to prepare us for communion, not to prevent us from it.

Conscious of this creative tension between liturgical law and pastoral need, the *Praenotanda* of the Roman rites presume a degree of sensitivity in interpreting the rubrical statements. Not all laws are intended to have the same weight. Some are intended as preceptive, and only in the most extreme of human situations would they be alterable. The use of bread and wine at Eucharist and water for Baptism are usually given as examples of this kind. Other laws are directive; they are offered as the most suitable way of proceeding. If I give you traffic directions, I guarantee you will arrive at your destination, but you may prefer to travel there by a more scenic route. An example of such a directive rubric would be the one which says that presbyteral ordinations should take place on Sundays. A facultative rubric allows for an option to be taken up if suitable. At the blessing of the font during the Easter Vigil an antiphon may be sung. Equally, it may not be.

The artist will tend to juggle with the creative possibilities of the three levels of liturgical law, whereas the scientist will prefer to operate from within the safety of the book. The scientist knows that good laws are not arbitrary and so tends to accept them. The artist, whilst accepting the validity of the law, is also aware that there are other factors such as the congregational size, the time available, the mood, personality, culture etc., which contribute to the liturgical moment. These demand creativity but also sensitivity to the substantial unity of the Roman rite. Dennis C. Smolarski makes the point more elegantly:

We can break a law and at the same time be on very good grounds theologically, psychologically, symbolically, historically and culturally. But, in my experience, that occurs rarely. More often, when rubrics are violated, other aspects of the liturgical experience are damaged as well . . .⁹

Perhaps one way out of the dilemma is to posit a distinction between rubric and nigric. The rubric (the red writing) is the rule or regulation which requests us to perform liturgy in a particular way. The nigric (the black writing) would be a neologism for the spirit of the Church's liturgy at a given moment within the celebration. It is what, in ideal circumstances, we are trying to achieve by keeping the rubrics. Consequently, it may be said that rubrics exist to protect nigrics. They are there to ensure that the nigric comes to birth and is accessible to the assembly. Under ordinary circumstances the rubric will produce the nigric, but sometimes due to the specific circumstances of a given situation, the rubric may well frustrate the nigric. At this point the liturgical scientist is forced to re-evaluate his laws, and the liturgical artist's skills of adaptation and creativity are tested. Kevin Seasoltz wrestles with this tension between fidelity to law and fidelity to pastoral needs, and says of liturgical ministers,

... they must go beyond the norms, in the sense that they must bring the liturgy to life for people. Consequently, they must develop a sensitive ministerial style that enables them to be aware of the pastoral needs of the people and to structure and execute celebrations in such a way that they truly respond to people's needs. This presupposes an understanding both of the theological and aesthetic dimensions of the liturgy. Without undermining liturgical discipline, ministers may and should explore opportunities for creativity within the liturgy.¹⁰

By using the nigric, the artist practises science.

Rite and celebration

Because of the close connection between a heavy reliance on the force of law and a tendency to adopt an ecclesiology which looks primarily to Church as Institution, the scientist tends to favour a vision of liturgy which can be characterized as 'rite'. This is not to say that rite is absent from other views of worship, but simply to say that the main thrust of the scientist's approach is to aim for the correct, valid and licit performance of the liturgical rites. Sometimes this manifests itself in the assertion that there is somehow a perfect way of celebrating the mysteries which, if the Church would only commit it to print, could then be learnt and applied to all occasions. Words such as 'proper', 'correct', 'invariable' are used to describe this approach, and often it is accompanied by the

reasonable request for 'reverence', although usually of a pietistic nature.

When this finds practical expression in liturgy, it stems from viewing the Church's mission as teaching, governing and sanctifying humanity. This, however, is part of a vision that sees these functions as done by the leaders of the Church for its 'subjects'. So the Church, and therefore its liturgy, becomes identified with the leaders and what they do in governing and presiding. When liturgy is viewed as 'rite', it tends to be something done for the people by the ministers, a situation which not only emphasizes the clergy-laity distinction, but also encourages a passivity on the part of the congregation. In extreme cases it leads to practising a liturgy in which the clergy are viewed as a source of grace through the performance of certain ritual actions, to the feeling that there is an inherent sacrality to whatever a validly ordained minister does in the name of the Church, and a belief that the test of authentic liturgy is what can be juridically verified. In all of this, the chief beneficiaries are the members of the Church. Mission, evangelization, social justice, ecumenism etc., are not deemed essential to the nature of worship. It is inward-looking, but it provides a strong sense of identity.

It is rare to meet anyone who embodies all of these characteristics, but it is quite common to come across individuals who espouse one or more of them as a result of viewing Church solely from the position of its institutional nature. To be trapped entirely within 'Institution' is virtually to ensure a vision and spirituality of liturgy as 'rite'. James Empereur elucidates:

This view of the liturgy presupposes an ecclesiology which sees the Church primarily in terms of its visible structures, its officers and its required procedures. Such a view is more than the affirmation that for the Church to accomplish its task for building up the kingdom of God, it is necessary to have some kind of visibility, some leaders and some accepted methods of conducting its business. Rather it is the institutional aspect of the Church which is regarded as primary. It is the model for understanding the Church.¹¹

Something of the bridge between viewing liturgy as science or as art is shown in Aidan Kavanagh's insistence on the use of human structures, and yet their innate vulnerability. He considers liturgy to be essentially antistructural.

Since liturgy is a complex mode of divine and human communication, and must therefore draw upon human structures for all its elements of expression, it is easy to overlook or forget the fact that liturgy, like ritual in general, exists to undercut and overthrow the very structures it uses. This is so not because the Gospel is similarly antistructural, which it is, but because historic human wisdom has detected that human structures ossify and become oppressive or disintegrate when left to themselves.¹²

It is, of course, true that the scientist's approach to liturgy is not to be found only in the model of liturgy as 'rite'. Liturgy viewed under the theological models of 'mystery', 'communio', 'creative advance', 'symbol' or even 'liberation' can give shelter to the scientist. But it is much more likely that here we will find the artist at work. The artist's canvas is the complexity of the relations which exist in the individual psyche, in general commerce between members of society, and the presence or seeming absence of God in our midst. The broad brush of the artist takes in that we exist uniquely as human beings, that we reach our potential only in interaction with each other, and that the Christ event is God's 'word' which makes sense of our lived experiences. That the Word took flesh means that in the person of Jesus we have God's way to be human, we have the first-born of all creation, the only one ever to try to be human and succeed.

Liturgy for the artist is the celebration of the significance of that breakthrough. Not celebration in the popular sense of dancing a jig, but the naming of the presence of God in the complexity of our daily lives and in the network of social relations, and the broadcasting or proclaiming of the goodness of such a God. Whichever model the artist uses, there is always a sense of trying to see the point and value of our lived experience as touched by God. There is worship, the affirmation of worth to our human existence as redeemed in Christ, and the affirmation of value (in praise, thanksgiving etc.) to God who continues to be present and active in our world. And yet this worship is not merely mimetic of personal progress or human achievement, but is a fanfare of how much more the reign of God still promises us. Whether the artist chooses to incarnate this in a liberationist model, a therapeutic model, or any other model of liturgy is ultimately irrelevant. It is the starting point which is crucial: the proclaiming of the wonders of God as experienced by the Church incarnated in this particular

assembly. Such an 'artistic' understanding of liturgy is one which finds echoes in Tad Guzie's working definition of a sacrament:

A sacrament is a festive action in which Christians assemble to celebrate their lived experience and to call to heart their common story. The action is a symbol of God's care for us in Christ. Enacting the symbol brings us closer to one another in the Church and to the Lord who is there for us.¹³

Throughout this article it may be maintained that the distinction being drawn between artist and scientist is false. To a degree, of course, it is. But there are enough differences in approach to liturgy to enable us to posit that as a general rule people's position regarding the nature and practice of liturgy can justifiably be included under one or other heading. At the end of the day the scientist takes a deductive road, and the artist an inductive route. To enquire into each of them is not for the purpose of endorsing one and rejecting the other, but so that by appreciating the values which are uppermost in each, one can understand the legitimate hopes and spiritual aspirations which they both seek to pursue.

NOTES

¹ Cf the chapter by John Gunstone in Stevenson, K. (ed): *Liturgy reshaped* (SPCK, London, 1982), p 4.

² Baumstark, Anton: *Vom geschichtlichen Werden der Liturgie* (Herder, Freiburg, 1923).

³ Cf Bishop, Edmund: 'The genius of the Roman rite', in *Liturgica historica* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1918), pp 1-19.

⁴ Taft, Robert: *Beyond east and west: problems in liturgical understanding* (The Pastoral Press, Washington DC, 1984).

⁵ Kavanagh, Aidan: *Elements of rite* (Pueblo, New York, 1982).

⁶ Cf *Sacrosanctum concilium* No 11.

⁷ Seasoltz, Kevin: *New liturgy, new laws* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1980).

⁸ Cf Collins, Mary: *Worship: renewal to practice* (The Pastoral Press, Washington, 1987), p 242.

⁹ Cf Smolarski, Dennis C.: *How not to say Mass* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1986), p 10.

¹⁰ Seasoltz, Kevin: *op. cit.*, p 207.

¹¹ Cf Empereur, James: *Worship: exploring the sacred* (The Pastoral Press, Washington DC, 1987), p 68.

¹² Kavanagh, Aidan: *op. cit.*, p 40.

¹³ Cf Guzie, Tad: *The book of sacramental basics* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1981).