For those who have not experienced it for themselves, it must be difficult to imagine just how much liturgical praxis has changed in less than half a century. The evolution that has taken place in the last 30 years is barely perceptible nowadays, since the new liturgical model is considered evident practically everywhere. Such a situation is certainly gratifying, but does it mean that the profound intentions of the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” have thereby been realized? Perhaps now is the appropriate moment for an evaluation.

Active Participation

From its very beginnings, the aim of the liturgical movement, which originated in Belgium in 1909, was to close the gap between the official liturgy of the priest and that of the people. “Active participation” was first promoted through the circulation of what were called people’s missals, which contained the Sunday liturgy. Before long, however, a desire emerged for more than just following along in the book. The Second Vatican Council satisfied this desire by introducing the use of the vernacular, by simplifying liturgical symbolism to make it more transparent, by returning to the praxis of the early church and dropping elements that had later come to overshadow the essentials and by a correct distribution of roles in the service of the liturgy. The result was a far greater involvement of the people, even to the very heart of the liturgy.

The active involvement of the people in the liturgy is, of course, an unparalleled gift from the council to the people of God. As with every worthy reform, however, there is a shadow side. Active participation in the liturgy can lead imperceptibly to a sort of taking possession of the liturgy. The liturgy is not only set free of its untouchable quality—in itself not a bad thing; it also becomes in a sense the property of those who celebrate, a terrain given over to their “creativity.” Those who serve the liturgy—both priests and laity—become its “owners.” In some cases this can even lead to a sort of liturgical “coup,” by which the sacred is eliminated, the language trivialized and the cult turned into a social event. The real subject of the liturgy is no longer the Christ, who through the Spirit worships the Father and sanctifies the people in a symbolic act, but the human person or the celebrating community.

The liturgy is God’s work on us before it is our work on God. The celebrating community enters into it as into a pre-established, divine and spiritual architecture. To a certain degree this is determined by the historical location of Christ and his sacred mysteries: the Eucharist involves the making present of a particular meal, that of Christ with his disciples on the night before he suffered. This does not mean that we must exclude any kind of flexibility in our liturgical style; far from being ruled out, creativity is actually called for. But one cannot simply transform and re-arrange the whole thing. We are not creators of the liturgy; we are...
servants and guardians of its mysteries. We do not own them, nor did we author them. Both individually and collectively our fundamental orientation should be toward God, an attitude of grateful reception, wonder, adoration and praise—in short, an attitude of prayer, of handing ourselves over to God and letting his will be done in us.

‘Understanding’ the Liturgy

One of the primary concerns of Vatican II and of the church has been and remains that the liturgy be understood by the celebrating community. “Understand what you do” is a basic demand of everything that we do.

Certain realities pose obstacles to understanding. The liturgy is almost entirely structured on the Bible, and the Bible uses language and images from a bygone era. The nonbiblical texts in the liturgy are also strange: the Latin collects with their succinct and metrical structure are untranslatable, not so much because the words cannot be transposed into a modern language but because the mentality and culture from which they stem have disappeared. A great many other texts, when detached from their musical setting, end up seeming extremely archaic; imagine, for example, the Salve Regina, the Dies Irae or even the ordinary sung Gregorian introits and Communion antiphons, leaving aside the images of God that such texts maintain (e.g., the God who sleeps, the God of wrath). Certain secondary symbols also no longer seem to function: the drop of water in the chalice, the lavabo, mixing a particle of the host with the wine, the washing of the feet. One frequently hears reproaches such as “old-fashioned,” “passé,” “medieval” and “monastic.”

The remedy employed in most cases is limited to: What can we drop? How can we abbreviate? What would function better to express what is going on in our lives as individuals and as a community? Certain terms are replaced with other, more understandable terms. What do we do, however, with words like “resurrection,” “Easter,” “Eucharist,” “metanoia” and “sin”? They are part of a biblical and liturgical mother tongue that simply cannot be replaced. It has to be learned.

Likewise, does the fact that we no longer see shepherds and flocks every day mean that such images are no longer comprehensible? Is it because no one has ever met a seraph that the metaphorical power of this angelic messenger no longer speaks to us? Half of the poetry ever written makes use of images and terms that are not part of the daily life and environment of the reader.

If the liturgy is not simply a structuring of common human religiosity, but rather the epiphany of God in human history (from Abraham to Christ), then we cannot avoid the need for catechesis and initiation. Because it is both proclamation and the celebration of mysteries that have occurred in the history of Judaism and Christianity, liturgy demands schooling.

Understanding ‘Understanding’

Modern definitions also challenge us. Our contemporaries often conceive of “understanding” as the ability to grasp at first hearing. Something is understandable if we can grasp it immediately. Such an approach is valid for the ordinary objects of our knowledge, which can only be grasped at a purely cognitive level. But where the depths of human and divine reality are concerned, this approach does not work. Love, death, joy, solidarity, knowledge of God can never be grasped at once or on first inspection. Profound realities only gradually yield their full significance. In these cases, understanding is a lengthy and progressive process of becoming familiar with a particular reality.

Analysis, then, is out of place in liturgy; only a prolonged listening and familiarization is appropriate. Our approach must be dialogical: allowing the liturgy time to say what it has to say; listening attentively to its overtones and allowing its deeper meaning to unfold; not looking for an alternative but letting the liturgy speak for itself and expose its own virtualities.

Though this might sound strange to many, our liturgical celebrations are for the most part too short. They do not provide enough time or space to enter into the event. It is not enough that people have heard the liturgy or that it has been spoken. Has it been
proclaimed to them? Have they been given the opportunity to integrate it? The liturgy needs
time to deliver its riches.

A Tyranny of Words

A major factor in all of this is silence. The liturgy of Vatican II provides for periods of
silence, but in practice silence is not given much of a chance. The liturgy is turned into an
unstoppable succession of words that leave no time for interiorization.

Without introducing rhetorical gesticulations and building in theatricality, one can still argue
that the tongue and the ear are frequently the only human organs in use during the liturgy.
How many celebrants consider the homily to be the climax of the liturgy and the barometer
of the celebration? How many have the feeling that the celebration is more or less over after
the Liturgy of the Word?

Too much attention is also given to the intellectual approach to the liturgy. Imagination,
affect, emotion and, properly understood, aesthetics are not given enough room, and the
liturgy thereby fails to reach many of those who participate in it because they are either
non-intellectual types or because they do not consider such things to be nourishing for their
lives.

Liturgy is neither the time nor the place for catechesis. Of course, it has excellent
catechetical value, but it is not there to replace the various catechetical moments in the life
of the Christian. Such moments require their own time. Liturgy belongs to the order of the
“playful.” The uniqueness of “play” is that one plays for the sake of playing. Liturgy’s end is
in itself.

Nor should liturgy be used as a means for disseminating information, no matter how
essential that information might be. It should not be forced to serve as an easy way to
notify the participants about this, that and the other thing. One does not attend the liturgy
on Mission Sunday in order to learn something about this or that mission territory. One
comes to the liturgy to reflect on and integrate one’s mission from Christ to “go out to all
nations.” Liturgy ought not to serve as a warm-up for another activity, even a church
activity. While it can indeed happen that one departs from the liturgy with a greater sense
of engagement, with faith and love that inform and inspire one’s actions, liturgy is not a
meeting but a celebration.

The church fathers, too, adhered to the principle that mystagogical catechesis (in which the
deepest core of the sacred mysteries was laid bare) should come only after the sacraments
of initiation. Their pedagogical approach was “sensorial”: participate first and experience
things at an existential level in the heart of the community, and only then explain. Prior to
baptism they limited themselves to moral instruction and teaching on the Christian “way of
life.” Immediately after baptism—during Easter week—they spoke about the deep meaning
of baptism, chrism and Eucharist. Their entire method of instruction was structured around
a framework of questions and answers such as: “Did you notice that...?” “Well, what this
means is....” Celebrate first, then understand.

Perhaps we do not have to adhere to the letter of such a pedagogical approach, but it
certainly provides a hint in the right direction. No catechetical method will succeed if it is
unable to depend on good, community celebrations of the liturgy. And those who desire to
work with the liturgy and vary its themes will first have to listen attentively to those themes
and participate in the celebration of the liturgy as it is. If they do not, then their entire
liturgical endeavor will turn out to be nothing more than self-expression. What would we
think of a composer who refused to listen to his predecessors or a painter who refused to
visit a museum? The worthy liturgist listens first, meditates, prays and interiorizes. Only
then can he or she “modulate.”

Engaging the Other Senses

The eye is the most active of the senses. In the liturgy nowadays, however, it tends to be
somewhat undervalued. There is a lot to hear but little to see. At one time the situation was
reversed; the verbal dimension was not understood, the visual dimension was pushed to the
fore. Certain secondary liturgical gestures, such as the elevation of the bread and wine at
the consecration, are a consequence of this fact. Even eucharistic worship outside of Mass has its roots here.

It is always best to let the great symbols function. How can baptism be understood as a water bath, if it turns out to be little more than a sprinkling with water? How can we speak of “hearing the message,” if everyone is sitting with their heads bent reading the texts in their missalettes at the moment when they should be listening? Even the place from which the Scriptures are read has some significance. It is better not to read from the middle of the community because the word comes to us from elsewhere. It is proclaimed; it does not simply arise out of the community. It is also best to read from a Book of the Gospels and from an ambo surrounded by symbols suggestive of respect (light, incense, altar servers).

It is of great importance that different text genres should be respected: a reading is not a prayer, a hymn is not a psalm, a song is not an admonition, nor is a homily a set of announcements. Each of these genres requires its own oral treatment. Furthermore, it is clear that neither rhetoric nor theatricality nor pathos has a part in the liturgy. Reading is not acting; it is allowing oneself to be the humble instrument of a word that comes from beyond. The exaggerated impact of the personal individuality of the man or woman who reads can kill the liturgy and eliminate its harmonics.

The sense of touch finds its most profound expression in the laying on of hands and in anointing. These are among the most physical gestures of the liturgy, and they can have an enormous impact on the human person. The significance of praying in the presence of a sick person takes on quite a different character if one places one’s hands on or anoints the person.

Last, the sense of smell is almost completely unused in the liturgy. It is not to our advantage that the use of incense has been pushed aside into the domain of superfluity and hindrance.

**Liturgy and Life**

If, as Pope St. Leo the Great said, the Christian mysteries have crossed over into the liturgy, then it is equally true that liturgy must cross over into the moral and spiritual life of Christians. “Do in practice what you do in the liturgy” (“Imitamini quod tractatis…” ) admonishes the ancient text from the liturgy of ordination.

Some have endeavored to draw the conclusion from this axiom that the liturgy is not important when compared with our day-to-day lives or that it is a sort of preparation or warm-up for life itself, an option for those who need it but redundant for those who do not. Others have suggested that liturgy and life coincide and that true service to God takes place outside the church in one’s daily life.

The life of the Christian is built on *cultus* and *caritas*. Liturgy does not coincide with life; rather, it has a dialectical relationship with life. Sunday is not Monday, nor vice versa. What we do throughout the week in a varied and diluted way we also do in the liturgy but in a more concentrated and purified fashion: we live for God and for others.

Liturgy, however, is not only a representation of human life. Liturgy symbolizes and makes present, first, the mysteries of salvation, the words and deeds of Christ, and also our deeds insofar as they are reflected, purified and redeemed in Christ. His mysteries—made present to us in the liturgy—are our archetypes. This Christological determination of our lives in the liturgy is of the essence.

The liturgy is not a feast we have laid out for ourselves, according to our own personal preferences. It is God’s feast. We attend at God’s invitation.

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