DIVINE WORSHIP AND HUMAN HEALING

Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death

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Divine Worship and Human Healing

Liturical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death

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Chapter 1

Divine Worship: A Theology of the Liturgy

LITURGY AND HEALING?

At the outset of this project, a few years ago, when describing to various folks its basic scope, namely, a theological book on worship (or liturgy) and healing, I repeatedly found that the very eliding of the two terms would strike fellow believers as intriguing, if not provoc- tive. People seemed ready to sense something promising, perhaps life- giving, in the association of Christian liturgical worship with healing, even as many were likewise quick to say that they had never thought of putting the two concepts together. One friend, a seminarian in his early thirties, pondering the working title of my book, was able to articulate why he found the combination of liturgy and healing baffling. Everything about his formation as a Catholic, he explained, seemed to convey that liturgical worship is a matter of celebration, not of healing. His statement strikes me as carrying two significantly telling implications: first, that the church’s worship is a unidirectional action, something an assembly of believers does for or offers to God; and, second, that the positive nature of such celebration, as an expression of praise and thanksgiving, runs counter to the negative or distressful nature of a situation in which healing is needed. Pressing his reflections even a bit further, I found that the words “worship” and “liturgy” bear for him the narrow connotation of Eucharist or the Mass.¹

The rites proposed here for theological inquiry—the Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum, and the Order of Christian Funerals—often do not come to fellow Catholics’ minds in reference to the notion of liturgy. They tend, rather, to connote the ministration

¹ While my hope is that this book might be of service to Christians of all churches and communions, I write from my particular context of Roman Catholicism. I do this not for exclusivist, let alone triumphalistic, reasons; rather, the theory and practice of my theology, while ecumenically informed and committed, is situated in the Roman tradition.
of a certain sacrament by a priest for the benefit of an individual (and perhaps, in the case of the Order of Christian Funerals, not only for the deceased but also the loved ones). Would many Catholics think of “going to confession” as an act of worshiping God? Likewise, would they consider the “last rites” a celebration of liturgy? On the other hand, what does it mean for the church to say that healing occurs in anointing the sick or administering Viaticum to the dying? An elderly priest and veteran of decades of service in parishes, when occasionally inquiring about the progress of my project, has used these occasions to ascertain, “You are, of course, talking about inner healing, right?” This question-cum-statement points to what would generally be called the spiritual dimension of human existence. But it can also imply a problematic view of salvation (from the perspective of Christian anthropology), one in which the sacred element of human being is immaterial and set apart from the bodily. God is concerned about saving the soul. This tendency toward a rigid bifurcation of the “inner” and “outer” aspects of reality has riddled theological reflection on sacramental liturgy from early centuries onward. If the physical sign of a sacrament only functions to make believers think of a more real spiritual dimension, then why bother doing the sign at all, why not just talk about what is spiritually real? Such theory has also supported symbolically minimalist, clerically instrumentalist, and narrowly juridical practices of the sacraments—approaches to the rites that are utterly antithetical to their fundamentally liturgical (and thus, pastoral) nature.

My wager is that putting these two terms, “liturgy” and “healing,” together affords an opportunity to pose good questions and arrive at theological and pastoral insights into Christian worship as an ecclesial activity both human and divine. A sense of wholeness is intrinsic to both divine worship and human healing, as will hopefully become clear in this first part of the book. An authentic and fruitful celebration of Christian liturgy (no matter which sacramental rite) is an encounter with the divine origin and final end of all creation, a real and nourishing foretaste of the fullness of life in the divine presence. An adequate grasp of what human healing entails is likewise holistic, a matter of arriving at a much-desired comprehensive sense of meaning that transforms a disorienting, alienating, and often life-threatening situation. This is one of the reasons the notion of healing is so attractive in our contemporary social (including religious) context. It bears relief and deliverance, the promise that pain, fragmentation, and indeed,
judgment have passed. One of the primary Christian metaphors for what God has done for humanity in the person and mission of Jesus of Nazareth is salvation, a medicinal concept sharing the same Latin root, salus (health), with salve, a healing ointment. This points to the profound conjunction of divine worship with human healing in the content and practice of Christian faith.

These introductory remarks invite several questions about the nature of Christian liturgy, rite, and celebration, about the role of word and sacrament, about liturgy's symbolic and official dimensions in the context of the entire life of the church and its members. I will address such questions at different points, and in some cases repeatedly, over the course of the following chapters. Again, my hope is that attention to one thematic dimension of Christian faith and human experience, namely, healing, will prove an opportune angle for shedding light on the wider theology of the church's liturgy. Toward that end, an exposition of what is meant by Christian worship is necessary at the outset, one constructed already with a view toward the notion of healing (chapter 1). This will usher in a subsequent investigation into the connotations of healing in contemporary Catholic discourse (chapter 2).

**THE NECESSITY OF LITURGY FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH**

An adequate understanding of Christian liturgy, as part of the broader activity of divine worship, fundamentally depends on recognizing what God it entails. The content, shape, and scope of Christian worship is a function of the God who is both its subject and object, namely, the God of biblical revelation, the God of Jesus, the triune God revealed through his life, death, and resurrection. This apparently innocent, if not seemingly tautological, statement is a stick of theological

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dynamite that, when ignited by the gift of faith in the Gospel, explodes conventional notions of divine worship, breaking down the barriers narrowly confining it to cultic activity, that is, to religious ritual. Put simply, worship of God is the entire Christian life, and thus the entire mission of the church in the world. Liturgy is the symbolic, ritual activity of the assembled church. It gives believers an explicit sense, a tangible presence, of the God hidden in their daily lives, as well as something of the specific content, through proclaiming and responding to Sacred Scripture, of what this ongoing human encounter with the divine is like. In the church’s liturgy believers glorify God by participating more deeply in God’s vision for the world and their place in it through word and sacrament.

Thus Christians have an irreducible need for the liturgy, the ritual worship they celebrate, even as those sacramental rites do not in themselves comprise the total practice of the faith, the single locus for knowing the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ. The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy articulates this dynamic of Christian ecclesial life by stating: “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.” To speak in terms of source and summit indicates that liturgy is not the sole work of the church and its members but, rather, what guides and nourishes all the activity of their lives, creating the possibility of encountering God therein. Christian faith is a praxis in the world. Guided by the ever-beckoning summit revealed in the church’s sacramental worship, believers traverse a terrain experienced as the creation in which God delights in granting them active roles and, moreover, gives them the living water (John 4:14), the bread of life (John 6:35), to sustain them in this co-creative, salvific process. To join in Holy Wisdom’s ongoing work in the history of suffering and the promise of ultimate triumph for all Her creatures is to worship God.6


Over the past century and a half, theological scholarship and official church leadership have adopted the term “liturgy,” based on the ancient Greek concept leitourgia, meaning “work of the people,” to recover the proper, fundamental sense of worship found in Scripture and most ancient tradition. In contrast to such terminology as going to (or hearing) Mass or assisting at Divine Offices or receiving a sacrament, the rhetoric of liturgy revitalizes a sense of the church’s sacramental rites as the symbolic and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, very real participation of all the faithful in the divine-human mystery of creation and redemption.

THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: 
GOD’S GLORY IN HUMANITY’S SALVATION

At the origins of Christianity, mystery was not about esoteric cults or secret rituals but rather the revelation that in the person and mission of the Jewish eschatological prophet Jesus of Nazareth, crucified by sin but raised to life by the Spirit, God’s purpose for creation has been fulfilled. In Jesus, whom faith acclaims the Christ, God’s boundless and merciful love for the suffering and the guilty in the very context of human lives in history has been definitively manifested. The mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection reveals that his words and actions, his total person and personal history, gave glory to God by saving and sanctifying people. In the Gospel of Luke, heavenly messengers proclaim at its outset the meaning of the entire life of Jesus that will follow:

“Glory to God in the highest, 
and on earth peace to those on 
whom his favor rests.” (2:14, NAB)8

As the Christian tradition developed over the next few centuries, this inseparable relationship of divine glorification and human salvation would pervade the sermons, catechetical instructions, and letters of the fathers of the church. By the close of the twentieth century, the


8 See Paul S. Minear, To Heal and To Reveal (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 50.
theologically and pastorally revitalizing potential of this recovery of ancient tradition became evident in the widespread quoting and paraphrasing of the words of St. Ireneaus, a second-century bishop of Lyons: "'For the glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God,' in the Spirit and through the Son, who is 'the visible of the Father.'"9

It is in this broader soteriological perspective that the meaning and purpose of Christian worship resides. The significance of the church's liturgical form of worship does not lie in its cultic personages, objects, actions, and locations in themselves but rather in their symbolic function in relation to the biblical narratives that have revealed the entire cosmos and human history as the arena of God's creative and redemptive activity. What Christian liturgy is about is entirely a function of the specific God it worships—not the distant, mechanistic God of modern deism, nor the idealistic Transcendent in our personal experiences and feelings, nor the divine One "up there" who only appears in certain sacred places "down here"—but the God who covenants, that is, the God who has committed himself in love to the deliverance of humanity in history. This covenantal origin and basis of biblical faith is the reason worship is not a unidirectional ritual action done by believers for God but rather a full-life response to the gracious love (hesed) and trustworthy faithfulness (emet) God has shown the people,10 compelling them to behave in kind:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut 6:4-5; cf. Matt 22:37)

This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22:38-39; cf. Lev 19:18)

The Christian Church reads the Jewish biblical texts, the First (or Old) Testament, as a covenant history, focused on the climactic events of the Exodus and Mount Sinai but founded in the promises to Abraham

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and the patriarchs and revitalized in the symbolic words and deeds of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. God chose Israel to be the recipients of this covenantal heritage, receiving through it the mission to be light to the nations ( Isa 42:6; 49:3, 6). The content of the covenant and the character of the God it reveals comprise the reason that sacred feasts and sacrifices are only pleasing if offered by a people actively striving for justice, mercy, and peace (Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). The need for such justice and peace, nonetheless, points to their absence and thus to the evil and suffering with which human history is riddled in the presence of the all-powerful and all-loving, but thereby totally Other, God.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY PERSONIFIED: COVENANTAL LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS

The testament of the first believers in Jesus as the Christ is that God’s covenantal promise of deliverance to Israel was taken up and transformed in the person, mission, and message of Jesus, with his death and resurrection constituting the climactic moment of covenant history. The gospels present Jesus as an eschatological prophet who claimed that Israel’s longed-for, final deliverance from exile, the reign of God, was coming about through his words and actions. The entire New Testament witnesses to the unexpected shape that God’s faithfulness to Jesus took, raising him bodily from death into a new form of life, revealing his singular divine origin and end as the firstborn of a new creation that will one day be realized for all. This is the mystery revealed at the heart of Christian faith, the revelation that the strength of death is past and that the promised covenant of love written on human hearts is underway. Jesus enacted this greatest of his parabolic actions at the most important point in the Jewish cycle of sacrificial worship, the Passover, the memorial of deliverance from slavery and oppression that bore the promise that God would yet redeem his people definitively. In his mission and death Jesus took on both the


12 My thought here has been greatly shaped by N. T. Wright’s series, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vols. 2 and 3; Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), and The Resurrection of the Son of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), respectively.

13 See Minear, To Heal and To Reveal, 24.
nation’s plight and the form their obedience to the covenant needed to take. In raising Jesus to life after he lay dead, God revealed a new, unexpected outcome for his Passover, the first installment of the resurrection for all humanity.

The mystery of Christian faith, then, is paschal (that is, pertaining to Passover and more specifically to Jesus himself as the definitive sacrifice\textsuperscript{14}). The specific content of this paschal mystery needs to be repeatedly expounded through word and sacrament lest we lose sight of what God we are worshiping: the God who is for humanity, for the happiness and peace of all people; the God who is known in those who join in that activity; the God whose images are not sought in static objects but in actions. Liturgical theology, then, seeks to comprehend the vision and practice of Christian faith not in religious terms of sacred versus profane but rather of mystery disclosed in history: “In doing [the liturgy], the Church pursues its most essential purpose, which is to ensure the active presence of divine realities under the conditions of our present life—and that is what ‘mystery’ means.”\textsuperscript{15} The paschal mystery likewise bears the pain of that which it does not disclose, the inexplicable wisdom in God’s still waiting to deliver all the suffering into “a new heavens and a new earth” (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1).\textsuperscript{16}

In Jesus the categories of sacred and profane break down. Christian liturgy is not a matter of taking believers out of the world for a moment but rather of immersing them more deeply in the mystery of God’s paradoxical purpose for it over time.\textsuperscript{17} Sin is not what happens in the profane world, while perfection can be found in some sacred, separate precinct. Rather than the religious division of sacred and profane, the categories shaping Christianity are past, present,


\textsuperscript{15} Dalmais, *Principles of the Liturgy*, 266.

\textsuperscript{16} In contrast to what he describes as Christian theology’s long trivialization of suffering as an eschatological question, along with its pursuit of “too many clever answers to such questions as Who is God? And Where is God?” Johann Baptist Metz argues compellingly for a turn “to the primordial biblical question, What is God waiting for?” *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, ed. and trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 58; see also 84.