



Pastor's Column

Liturgy ~ October 8, 2017

In our Catholic faith, we often speak of or hear about “liturgy.” But what exactly is liturgy and why is it so important?

First of all, the word “liturgy” is derived from a Greek term that, in the ancient Greek culture, referred to any generic public service but later came to mean worship in particular. Liturgy is the form of our Catholic worship. When we speak of “liturgy” today within our Catholic context, we most often speak in reference to the Mass, the Eucharist. But there is a liturgical form for the celebration of each of the seven Sacraments, insofar as there is a prescribed form of worship involved, containing certain words, certain prayers, and certain actions. Funerals, burials, blessings of religious articles, and other non-sacramental celebrations also can take on a very liturgical form and therefore, in certain measure, are expressions of Catholic Christian worship.

The nature of sacred liturgy is to be the time and the place in which the human encounters the divine – when human beings meet God directly. The means by which we enter into this encounter, this relationship, is worship: God speaks to us and we respond; we give thanks to God and God communicates with us. Our encounter with God is most poignantly to be found above all in *praising* God (“I AM who AM”), not merely in reflecting upon the nature and attributes of God (God is merciful, God is just). The liturgy is the platform, the avenue, for this encounter; thus, the liturgy is not something invented by us in order to have some vague religious experience for some certain space of time; rather, the liturgy is singing with the choir of angels and saints, entering (if only imperfectly here on Earth) into the fullness of reality and the cosmos. In this way, then, the liturgy becomes expansive and awesome; it becomes our communion with all of God’s Creation.

Perhaps this makes liturgy sound too much like a mere musical performance. Not so, but rather more like a journey, our pilgrim’s journey of faith here on Earth toward halls of heavenly realms. The liturgy is the journey of the soul to God, and the ultimate aim and end of that journey is, again, that deeply personal encounter with God. Michelangelo’s famous art of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel features the creation of Adam, a very famous scene wherein God fully extends hand and finger toward Adam, and Adam’s finger is almost but not quite touching God’s finger. It is the liturgy that fills that gap between the fingers because it is the liturgy that empowers us to encounter God most fully here in mortal life.

Liturgy, then, is clearly so important and also so sacred: God comes down from Heaven in the liturgy so that we experience Heaven on Earth. Heaven is so much larger, so much greater than we can possibly imagine in this mortal life, as is every mystery of God as we find in Sacred Scripture: in the liturgy is the burning bush that was not consumed, the heavenly Jerusalem come down from Heaven, the Incarnation and the Nativity of Jesus Christ, the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the Crucifixion on Mount Calvary, the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost. In short, liturgy is the ecstasy of “beauty ever ancient, ever new” – Beauty and Goodness and Truth that pour the fire of God into the hearts of humanity. Thus is how, in the liturgy, Heaven and Earth come in contact.

Hopefully, then, we can now understand why our active, joyful, and reverent participation in the liturgy, especially in the liturgy of the Mass, is so absolutely crucial. In the Mass, we are integral parts of this sublime, cosmic display. And right down to the smallest details of what we say and do, how we say it and do it, can have such a profound effect on the liturgy overall and everybody else’s participation in it: what we wear to Mass; whether we sing or not; what our interior attitudes might be (“Sheesh, Mass is so boring!” Or: “Wow, Mass is so amazing!”)

And hopefully, we will strive more and more each day to do our part to enhance the liturgy with what we ourselves, each of us individually, strive to say and do in God’s most holy Name.

~ Fr. Lewis