

# IMAGES AND WORSHIP

By MARK SEARLE

IT IS DIFFICULT to speak of images and worship without conjuring up visions of image-worship, or to speak of liturgy and imagination without appearing to detract from the seriousness of the liturgy. Yet it will be the contention of this article that religion is inescapably the honouring of images and that worship is, above all, an act of the imagination. Conversely, it will be suggested, the problems faced by religion in our culture and by liturgy in our churches spring largely from habits of literalism which have wasted our powers of imagination.

It is not difficult to agree that the liturgy is full of images: verbal images of scripture, prayer and hymnody; musical images; visual images in the form of art, but more importantly in the form of the very presence of the participants, their differences of dress, the roles they enact; there are the ritual images of the postures and gestures we are invited to adopt as the ritual unfolds; there are even smells and tastes that are integral to the rite and tend to linger in the memory. Liturgy is obviously a multi-media event, a cornucopia of imagery poured out upon the gathered congregation. This is not to say that it is always well presented, or that it is always as impressive as it sounds. But it is not the aesthetic dimension of the liturgy that we will focus on here as much as the problem of the function of the image to present something more than itself. An image is a copy, a reproduction, a reflection of some original; it is not itself original. It serves to point beyond itself to that which it serves to present. For this to happen, though, it is not enough that the image be good; it is also necessary that those who come into contact with the image have the imagination necessary to go beyond it or to be put in contact with that which the image presents.

It is clear, at least in retrospect, that the liturgical movement was a movement for the renewal of the christian imagination. It originated in a Church which envisaged sacraments simply as causes of graces administered by the few to the many; in which liturgy was thought of as a set of more or less dispensable ceremonies designed to honour the sacrament and edify the observant; and in which devotion was identified with exercises of individualistic interiority. When Pius X wrote that he wished to restore 'the true christian spirit' whose 'primary and indispensable source' was 'active participation

in the holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church',<sup>1</sup> he was inaugurating (perhaps unwittingly) what would later become known as a 'paradigm shift'.<sup>2</sup> What the liturgical movement worked for was not so much change in the liturgy itself (though pressure for such change built up as the movement progressed), as an alteration in the way people related to the liturgy and, ultimately, in the way they saw themselves as Church. Liturgical renewal was, from the beginning, a function of ecclesial renewal, and ecclesial renewal meant a renewal of the christian imagination. 'Body' was to replace 'institution' as the dominant model or metaphor; 'we' was to replace 'I' in the language of prayer; 'community celebration' was to replace 'private administration', 'participation' was to replace 'attendance' in sacramental rites.

Yet, despite all this, the imagination itself was never made the subject of conscious and critical reflection, and this may be part of the reason why, after all the changes that have occurred, the expected renewal of church life has come to something of a stalemate. The failure to attend to the imagination itself, and not just to the images, is understandable, for the imagination is invisible. The imagination is not what we see or think: it is rather the lens through which we see, the very patterns within which we think. Consequently, it is only in confronting the mixed effects of liturgical reform that we have begun to take seriously the anthropological conditions under which rites and ritual language flourish or decline. It is only recently that we have become aware of what Ray Hart has called 'the sedimented imagination',<sup>3</sup> a condition in which the imagination goes flat, substitutes translation for contemplation, forfeits signification for function:

The crisis of our time, as we are beginning  
 slowly and painfully to perceive  
 is not a crisis of the hands  
 but of the hearts.

The failure is a failure of desire.  
 It is because we the people do not wish —  
 because we the people do not know  
 what kind of a world we should imagine,  
 that this trouble haunts us.

The failure is a failure of the spirit;  
 a failure of the spirit to imagine,  
 a failure of the spirit to imagine and desire.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis of our time, liturgically, is not a crisis brought about by poor texts and shoddy ceremonial. These are mere symptoms. The crisis is a crisis provoked by our not desiring, not even knowing, the kind of activity liturgy is: an activity of the imagination. In Romano Guardini's words:

... those whose task it is to teach and educate will have to ask themselves — and this is all-decisive — whether they themselves desire the liturgical act or, to put it plainly, whether they know of its existence and what exactly it consists of and that it is neither a luxury nor an oddity, but a matter of fundamental importance. Or does it, basically, mean the same to them as to the parish priest of the late nineteenth century who said: 'We must organize the procession better; we must see to it that the praying and the singing are done better'. He did not realize that he should have asked himself quite a different question: how can the act of walking become a religious act, a retinue for the Lord progressing through his land, that an 'epiphany' may take place?<sup>5</sup>

The point of Guardini's warning is that the reform of texts and rubrics, while overdue, is not enough. It is not merely a revision of the images presented in the liturgy — use of the vernacular, congregational participation, simplification of the rites — but a renewal of the christian imagination which we bring to liturgy, that is called for. What is needed is what Lonergan calls 'intellectual conversion . . . the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity and human knowledge'. This myth has to do with what we see and how we see it; 'the myth that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen, and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at'.<sup>6</sup> Such mythical thinking fails to distinguish between the world that meets our senses and the world mediated by meaning: it ignores the sign character of the sensible world and fails to see how 'objective realities' mediate a world of meanings within a cultural community. It forgets the caution of Thomas Aquinas *fides terminatur non ad enunciabile, sed ad rem* — faith moves from the sign to the signified, from what meets the senses to that which transcends immediate knowing. The purpose of revising the signifiers is to call them into question so that they can no longer be taken literally, matter-of-factly, but must yield before the meaning they serve.

*Development of the imagination*

Developmental studies of thinking, morality and faith have had enormous impact in our time and this impact will undoubtedly make its mark in catechesis. Yet to be thoroughly studied is the matter of the imagination's development or successive transformations. Dominic Crossan<sup>7</sup> has sketched an outline of a theory which, while based on clinical studies, remains to be tested. Nevertheless, his sketch is of sufficient interest to make its consideration worthwhile here.

The way Crossan poses the problem of the imagination situates it in terms of metaphorical and literal language. Pre-school children reveal enormous creativity in the invention of metaphor: the pencil is a rocket, the table is a castle. Yet the abundance of metaphor at this stage is characterized by two things which must caution us against idealizing the childish imagination. For one thing, while the production of metaphors is astounding, not all the metaphors are appropriate: successful and unsuccessful identifications are all jumbled up together. For another thing, the metaphorical transaction between contexts, the identification of one thing with another, is so complete that it represents a veritable metamorphosis. The signifier and the signified become one and the same. In short, one is really not dealing with metaphor proper, but with that characteristic of naïve thinking which Levy-Bruhl called *participation mystique*: a collapse of the two levels of sign and signified into one, in which the signifier is simply transformed into the signified. One can hardly avoid the question of the extent to which this happens in the liturgy, particularly with regards to the eucharist as sacrament, the effect of the 'words of consecration', and the role of the priest 'as representing Christ'. Crossan suggests that in this, as in other areas of life, childhood is not so much left behind as incorporated into one's adult life. But do the sacramental system and the authenticity of the liturgy require a regression to naïve, magical thinking? Can they survive growing up?

The second stage in the development of the imagination coincides, Crossan suggests, with the early years of school. Between the ages of seven and eleven, particularly, children show a serious concern for literal meanings. This is altogether to be expected, since they are being taught to order and categorize the universe in reading, writing and arithmetic. But Crossan's point is that we have to be educated to literalism; it does not come naturally. On the contrary, our habitual, unreflected mode of discourse is heavily laden with

allusion and metaphor. It is speaking univocally, precisely, which requires care and effort, not speaking allusively and metaphorically. But a person's education in literal language may well be a necessary stage in the development of a proper understanding of the relationship between the *enuntiabile* and the *res*, between signifier and signified. For it is only by overcoming the naïve and childish tendency towards magical identification, where anything can be anything else, by adopting its antithesis (the literal mood: this is not that), that a more careful and sophisticated use of metaphor becomes possible. The problem, however, is that the literalism to which we have been culturally acclimatized by the educational system has become a prevailing and unexamined habit of mind, even in religious matters. Paradoxically, magical thinking is highly literal and can therefore survive in a literalist culture: the sign is taken for granted as identical with the reality and no further thought need be given to the matter — whether it be consecration, eucharistic presence, or the doctrinal definitions learnt in the catechisms.

Lonergan's intellectual conversion, or something akin to it, would appear to be the only way forward. Enough has already been done by people like Tracy, Crossan and Ricoeur, building on Heidegger, Ramsey, Austin and others, to begin to develop some experiments in 'hermeneutical catechetics', that is, a catechesis geared less towards content than towards the proper development of the religious imagination in older children and adults. It will be more concerned with the *fides qua* (in its socio-cultural context) than simply with the *fides quae creditur* . . . and it will have to be closely related to the practice of liturgical participation. It is the liturgy which, as a complex of ritual acts and symbolic speech, suffers most from the 'myth of objectivity' and from the collapsing of sign and signified. What is required is a new mystagogy of faith aimed at converting the way we see, listen and act liturgically. In this sense, what is required is a conversion of the imagination, a re-awakening of the imagination as a desire for the 'Reality' mediated by the words, signs and gestures of the rite.

#### *Liturgy with imagination*

The call for allowing more room to the imagination in liturgy is one that can be (and has been) misunderstood. My point is not that we need to come up with imaginative alternatives to the rites we have received (in the manner of so-called 'creative liturgies'), but that we need to recognize that the language of the rite is primarily

directed to the imagination, and that we need to let the imagination go to work on the texts and rites we have, to discover anew their twofold level of discourse. Perhaps, by way of example, we might take the most basic sign upon which the rest of the liturgy is predicated: the liturgical assembly. Although theologically the liturgical assembly has been re-vindicated as a primary sacrament of the presence of Christ and as the primary celebrant of the liturgy, it is not at all clear that in catechesis and practice we have been taught what to make of this, or how to make anything of it. For centuries the sign value or sacramental quality of the congregated faithful has simply been ignored, and much contemporary effort at encouraging 'active participation' seems intent on continuing to ignore it. The question is: does 'active participation' merely mean joining in, doing what everyone else is doing? Is loud singing and a boisterous exchange at the kiss of peace really what we are after? On the other hand, many who decry the changes in the liturgy seemed locked into a religious individualism which makes even less of the congregation as sacrament. C. S. Lewis described this temptation well:

One of our great allies at present is the church itself. . . . All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham-gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with a rather oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the Body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew.<sup>8</sup>

The christian imagination must find some way forward between the individualism which prevailed so far as to make the congregation dispensable without noticing any significant difference between 'private masses' and 'public masses', and the new sociability which is more often successful in destroying private prayer than in cultivating public prayer. Both are forms of literalism. The first step must surely be to make the gathered congregation an object of reflective awareness as a visible sign of invisible realities, instead of being just the context within which (or to which) things are done. I shall try to spell this out a little under four headings.

### 1 *Contemplation*

'Our problem', wrote Romano Guardini, 'is to rise above reading and writing and learn really to look with understanding'.<sup>9</sup> He was referring to the liturgy in general, but his remark applies *a fortiori* to the assembly itself and to the act of participating in an action of the community. So what would it mean 'to look with understanding'?

The condition of all valid seeing and hearing, upon every plane of consciousness, lies not in a sharpening of the senses, but in a particular attitude of the whole personality: in a self-forgetting attentiveness, a profound concentration, a self-merging which operates a real communion between the seer and the seen — in a word, in *contemplation*.<sup>10</sup>

Given that the prayer of the liturgy, even if articulated by the priest, nevertheless arises from the community as a whole, it is necessary, if one is to be part of that prayer, that one come to that 'real communion' of which Evelyn Underhill speaks. Often it is assumed that congregational singing will produce such communion and under certain circumstances that may well be true. But it is important that those responsible for liturgical music know the difference between the praying community and the cup-final crowd. In both instances, singing is introduced to forge solidarity, but the kind of togetherness which is appropriate, the kind of consciousness which needs to prevail, is vastly different in each of the two cases. If the liturgy really is the prayer of the Spirit of Christ in his body, the assembly, then the assembly's song needs to be perceived as functioning as a sign or image of that other prayer.

More study needs to be made of the role of music and song in the liturgy, but the point here is that if such music does not foster 'a self-forgetting attentiveness, a profound concentration, a self-merging' into the unity of the one body, then it is mere distraction, whatever its aesthetic qualities. In the meantime, the role of silence should not be overlooked: not the silence of mute withdrawal, but the deep ground of silence in which we find ourselves at one, and in which the Spirit of Christ dwells. Out of that silence, the silence of our common humanity, sinful yet redeemed, where the faithful are not only collected but recollected, the prayer of the Spirit of Christ can rise up before the throne of God, articulated in the words and gestures of the community. As Taizé has shown, music and song can foster such recollection, but it is rare. It requires a

discipline of which most congregations and their leaders are pitifully unaware.

## 2 *Discipline*

Discipline might be defined as the kind of self-control which frees one from distraction and preserves one from dissipation. Ritual behaviour is a prime example of such discipline. By putting us through the same paces over and over again, ritual rehearses us in certain kinds of interaction over and over again, until the ego finally gives up its phrenetic desire to be in charge and lets the Spirit take over. The repetitiousness of the liturgy is something many would like to avoid; but this would be a profound mistake. It is not entertainment, or exposure to new ideas. It is rather a rehearsal of attitudes, a repeated befriending of images and symbols, so that they penetrate more and more deeply into our inner self and make us, or re-make us, in their own image.

Kneeling, for example, is not an expression of our humanity: it is more an invitation to discover what reality looks like when we put ourselves in that position. The texts of scripture and the images of the liturgy are not didactic messages wrapped up in some decorative covering which can be thrown away when the context is extracted. They are images and sets of images to be toyed with, befriended, rubbed over and over again, until, gradually and sporadically, they yield flashes of insight and encounter with the 'Reality' of which they sing. Their purpose is not to give rise to thought (at least, not immediately), but to mediate encounter. As Heidegger said in another context: 'The point is not to listen to a series of propositions, but to follow the movement of showing'.<sup>11</sup>

So there is a discipline of listening, looking and gesturing to be learnt: ways of standing, touching, receiving, holding, embracing, eating and drinking which recognize these activities as *significant* and which enable us to perform them in such a way that we are open to the meaning (the *res*) which they mediate. In terms of the assembly, the primary signifier, there is a way of being together with others in the liturgy — a way of which all these ritual activities are a part — which goes beyond mere juxtaposition of bodies and beyond the pain or pleasure of orchestrated responses, and which leads to the loss of self in favour of profound union with the Body. One acts without acting, speaks without speaking, sings without singing: for it is Christ who prays, blesses, touches and sings in the Body to which my own body is given over.



### 3 *Preaching and catechesis*

From all that has been said it must be obvious that preaching and catechizing are crucially important. Do they foster what Guardini calls 'the liturgical act'? Do they know that there is such a thing? They must both become exercises of the imagination which foster the religious imagination of those to whom they are addressed. The accusation has often been made, and sometimes on good grounds, that the postconciliar liturgy is too didactic, that it has destroyed the mystery by explaining it all away. This is not true of the liturgical reforms themselves which, for the most part, have actually restored the symbolic dimension of the liturgy rather than diminished it. A liturgical reform which has restored communion under both kinds, fostered a diversification of ministries, restored the kiss of peace at the eucharist and the signing of the child by parents and godparents at baptism — not to mention the whole elaborate drama of the Rite of Adult Initiation — can hardly be accused of iconoclasm! But the revised books are not always finding their ideals met in practice, while the freedom allowed to the celebrant, and the encouragement to preach, have often resulted in a barrage of words less chosen and measured than one would have liked.

In one particular way we continue to suffer from the inadequacies of our past, and that is in our preoccupation with teaching people the meaning of things. Thus arguments fly back and forth over whether the mass is a meal or sacrifice. Parents and teachers are often at odds over the meaning of confirmation. Would it be too much to ask that we temporarily lay aside our preconceptions and begin to attend to the language of the liturgy? Just as in our youth we were catechized as to the meaning of the sacraments without reference to the actual celebration of the rites (that, after all, was how theology itself proceeded); so in our own day preachers continue to read preconceived meanings (whether progressive or reactionary, it makes no difference) into the texts of scripture, and catechists take their cue for teaching the sacraments from any place other than the ritual itself. In either instance, we have a survival of the idea that images are merely the wrappings of 'truth' and that they can be dispensed with, explained in other terms, and then reintroduced as illustrations of the teacher's remarks. It is an exact parallel to, and perhaps a symptom of, the understanding of metaphor which regarded it merely as a decorative rhetorical device. But in an age where the indispensability, even the priority, of the image has once again been recovered, can preaching and teaching continue unaffected? The

fourth- and fifth-century Fathers only taught about baptism and eucharist to those who had already been initiated by these sacramental rites. Their preaching was not an explanation of what the rites meant, but a commentary on the experiences of the neophytes. Far from defining the meaning of eucharist and baptism, they multiplied the associations evoked by the ritual and prayer, showing how the image opens on to a larger world of reality than meets our eye or ear. The role of preaching and catechesis today must be the same: practical demonstrations of how, by befriending the image — whether it be word or gesture, or even the congregation itself — and by working with it lovingly, it will yield a glimpse of the world invisible, a snatch of the song of the angels and saints, a momentary awareness of myself and the grocer as one Body, one Spirit in Christ.

#### 4 *Conversion of life*

The importance of this re-awakening of the religious imagination goes beyond having better liturgies to what really matters: better living. 'To the extent that he is altered in the recesses of his imagination, indeed of his being, to that extent he must act differently in daily life'.<sup>12</sup> The imagination is not just some gift possessed by some and not by others; nor is it a particular compartment of the personality, along with intellect and will and so forth. It would seem, rather, to be the very way we grasp our existence in the world, the very form of consciousness itself, and thus the foundation of the activities of intellect and will. To shatter, or even to stretch, the horizons of the imagination is to challenge the intellect and to set new desiderata before the energies of the will. To transform the working of the religious imagination is to enable people to situate themselves differently in the world, to challenge their values, to bring them to question their accepted patterns of behaviour.

From this perspective, it can be envisaged that the liturgy might operate in christian life rather like the parables of Jesus, indeed as enacted parable. By opening oneself to be receptive to the symbols of the liturgy, whether verbal or non-verbal, one risks discovery and encounter in confronting the True and the Holy. One risks growing in wisdom and holiness by developing a contemplative attention to words and actions even outside the liturgy. One risks losing one's comfortable ideas and familiar patterns of prejudice by learning really to listen and to act in the Spirit.

It has often been remarked that the renewed liturgy has not proved as effective as some might have hoped in renewing christian

life in general. If the thesis of this article is correct, then the fault is not so much in the renewed liturgy as in what we have made of it. Were there more widespread awareness of the kind of activity liturgy is, and of the discipline it requires of those who would participate in it, it might yet contribute to a renewal of our self-understanding, or rather of the images we have of our place in the world.

### *Conclusion*

To call for a renewal of the christian imagination in order for the liturgy to be more effective may sound altogether more utopian than the call for the reform of rites and texts sounded at the beginning of this century. If it is thought of in terms of a programme to be imposed upon all the faithful that would certainly be true; but, in fact, it is less of a programme than mere 'hints and guesses'. Unlike the reform of the liturgy, it is something which we can each undertake for ourselves: an exploration of the possibilities of a more contemplative approach to liturgical participation. While it would be fostered by 'good liturgy' it is not dependent upon it (indeed, the criteria by which one judges liturgy good or bad tend to waver somewhat in these circumstances). All that it requires is that one strive to relax and centre oneself before the liturgy begins, and to maintain the attitude of attentive receptivity to everything that happens in the rite as it unfolds. Though it helps to have some theoretical knowledge of language and sign theory, and though it helps even more to have some training in meditative or contemplative prayer, one can train oneself. The only important thing is to trust the liturgy and the presence of the Spirit, allowing them to pray through one. This will affect the way one sings, stands, responds, sits, participates in the sacrament, uses the silence, and so forth.

In fact, it is essential that one practise such recollection oneself before attempting to turn it into a programme for improving parish liturgy. If those responsible for liturgy — the celebrant, the musicians, those responsible for the readings, the selection of songs, the composition of the bidding prayers — themselves come to the liturgy this way, the effect will register itself in the celebration without a word being said. We probably do not need more programmes or more explanations: it may be enough if the images of the liturgy — of which our very presence and participation are constitutive parts — are allowed to speak for themselves.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Tra le sollicitudini*, Motu Proprio on the restoration of church music, 22 November 1903.
- <sup>2</sup> Kuhn, Thomas: *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago, 1970).
- <sup>3</sup> Hart, Ray: *Unfinished man and the imagination* (New York, 1968).
- <sup>4</sup> Macleish, Archibald: *Listen to love*, quoted by Patrick Collins: *More than meets the eye* (New York, 1983), p 11.
- <sup>5</sup> 'A letter from Romano Guardini', in *Herder Correspondence* (August 1964), p 238.
- <sup>6</sup> Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in theology* (New York, 1973), p 238.
- <sup>7</sup> Crossan, John Dominic: 'Stages in imagination', in C. E. Winquist (ed.) *The archeology of the imagination*, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Thematic Studies*, XLVIII/2 (1981), pp 49-62.
- <sup>8</sup> Lewis, C. S.: *The Screwtape letters* (London, 1942), pp 15-16.
- <sup>9</sup> 'A letter from Romano Guardini', *supra*, p 238.
- <sup>10</sup> Underhill, Evelyn: *Mysticism: a study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness* (New York, 1930), p 300.
- <sup>11</sup> Heidegger, Martin: *On time and being* (New York, 1972), p 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Hassan, Ihab: *Paracriticisms* (Chicago, 1975), p 6. Cited by Crossan, *art. cit.*, p 60.