

LITURGY AND PLURIFORMITY

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THE QUESTION before us is simply posed though not so simply analysed. It deals with multiple forms of liturgical worship, which we are taught to see as the norm rather than the exception for christian prayer.¹ It deals with various authoritative statements within the Church which appear in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of Vatican II, the *General Instruction* of the Roman Sacramentary, and elsewhere: statements about organic growth, and the development of liturgical forms appropriate to the local church as opposed to forms universally imposed. Often, however, these authoritative voices, both Roman and episcopal, seem, in many documents since Vatican II, to be urging precautionary and restrictive counter-moves. How then are we to understand and obey responsibly the mandate of Vatican II, evolutionary in its nature (as indeed are the instructions accompanying the new liturgical texts) in an ecclesiastical context where liturgical growth appears controlled and even restrained by the official Church?

The question is a complex one. Since the reforms of Trent, words such as 'adaptation' and 'liturgical evolution' have been absent from our liturgical vocabulary, whilst the movement which these terms connote have been almost unthinkable in the Church at large. We are only just emerging from 'the age of rubricism', in which liturgical norms, clearly set down, permitted neither option nor opinion. The only interpretative lens through which liturgical questions could be viewed belonged to authority-from-above, according to the maxim, *Roma locuta est, causa finita est* (Rome has spoken; and that's the end of the matter).

People brought up in this atmosphere of liturgical absolutism will be inclined to read the current liturgical scene through the

¹ The conciliar mandate for liturgical reform rejected the idea of a uniform liturgy for all. Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 37 and 38. All citations of official liturgical documents are from the Flannery edition, *Vatican II: the Conciliar and post-conciliar Documents* (New York/Dublin, 1975).

same lenses. They will grant that official authority now allows options; but only those options clearly specified can be permitted. The assumption here is that though the dictates of official authority may have changed, it still retains the controlling voice in matters liturgical. Not only is this assumption inaccurate, as I hope will be shown in the pages that follow, but it also misinterprets the contemporary liturgical task, which is to implement the directives of Vatican II in a positive and dynamic fashion.

The question grows in complexity as we analyse the nature of the Council's mandate, one unique in the history of liturgical reform. Fr John Gallen has distinguished two stages in the conciliar directives: the restoration of liturgical texts, and the translation of these texts into living worship for the Church.² The first is the fruit of liturgical research, which involves a twofold task rightly controlled by authority-from-above: to eliminate any distortion which may have 'crept in' with the passage of time, and to restore lost richness.³ The second stage is subject to a different dynamic, and thus demands that we look at authority from a different perspective. The restoration of these liturgical riches decreed by the Council concerns the life of faith. Its purpose is to build up that faith — lived, as it must be, in a variety of different cultures throughout the world, and on various levels within any and every local church. The purpose of authentic liturgical authority, whoever claims it, is to ensure that these riches enter into this life of faith. It must endeavour to serve that faith, as it seeks new ritual forms in order to express and to nurture it more adequately.⁴ The carrying out of this purpose will result neither in a 'new liturgy', nor even a variety of new liturgies, but a pluriform liturgy which is always in process of being reformed: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*.

We will not phrase our question properly, if we reason in terms of either/or: that is, either to follow blindly the dictates of official commissions, or to move forward in disregard of them. Authority-from-above has, by its own highest mandate, shown itself to be relative and not absolute. In fact, it has restored the proper tension

² 'American Liturgy: a Theological Locus', in *Theological Studies*, 35, 2 (June 1974), p 303; Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York/Pueblo, 1978), p 164; and *Inter Oecumenici; Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no 5 (Flannery, p 46).

³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 21 (Flannery, p 9); see also *Missale Romanum*, the Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Missal (Flannery, p 138).

⁴ E.g., *Ecclesiae Semper*, the Decree on Concelebration and Both Species (Flannery, p 57); and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59 (Flannery, p 20).

between the *above* and the *below* which alone can serve liturgical evolution. Our task is to understand this tension, in such a way that our criteria of interpretation will enable us to determine aright the dictates of true liturgical authority in any given instance. As a modest step in this direction, I suggest that we examine the two apparently contradictory tendencies, the one *progressive*, the other *precautionary*, seeing them in relationship and relative to each other. This mutual complementarity will give shape to the criteria we are looking for; it will give the proper respect both to the 'evolutionary' mandate of Vatican II, and also to the ecclesiastical reality within which this evolution must occur, with the respect owing to truth and responsibility.

The progressive call to liturgical evolution

Vatican II was not called to protect the Church of the past, but to enable her to move forward in the twentieth century. This is the gist of the first paragraph of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: the reason for and the guiding principle behind its mandated liturgical reforms.⁵ Thus, from the outset, the underlying motif of the post-Tridentine reforms, designed to protect both dogma and praxis in the face of the Protestant Reformation, was set aside in favour of one which would focus on the purpose of the liturgy and its rôle in Christian life. Where once the Holy See saw its rôle as ensuring orthodox and uniform liturgical praxis, the Council set out a new assignment: ' . . . that the Christian people may more certainly derive an abundance of graces from the sacred liturgy. . . .'⁶

Sacrosanctum Concilium issued principles for liturgical reform, and introduced a series of priorities concerning the alteration and execution of liturgical worship. These are clearly visible in the new liturgical texts and are incorporated in the *General Instruction* of the Sacramentary and ancillary documents. They are the norms and the spirit which are to guide liturgical worship in the post-conciliar Church. Unlike the Roman Missal of Pius V, where rubrics and canon law held strict control over the way in which the Church's rituals were to be enacted, the new texts give pride of place to liturgical values. Such values need to be pondered before any proper liturgical form can be determined.

The three values most strongly urged in the reformed liturgy are: the intrinsic purpose of the rite, clear and faithful signification, and

⁵ Flannery, p. 1.

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 21 (Flannery, p. 9).

full and active participation of the entire praying assembly. Each of these enjoys the status of the official ecclesiastical mandate, and none can be set aside lightly. Each of them involves, at least implicitly, the call to pluriformity in liturgical worship, and serves to counter any attempt to impose uniformity. Indeed, they lay the principal onus of responsibility upon the local assembly as a whole, and not upon roman or episcopal commissions.

The intrinsic purpose of the rite

The second chapter of the *General Instruction* gives a detailed account of the structure and component parts of the Mass.⁷ It reminds us that some parts of the ritual, such as the readings and the eucharistic prayer, form the heart of the service; while other parts have less import, and therefore serve a more ancillary rôle. This, of course, would be a blinding glimpse of the obvious, were it not for the fact that the Roman Missal of St Pius V shows no consciousness of this distinction. There, the ritual is taken to be all of a piece: a sequence of parts equally protected by law, and of equal importance in the unfolding of the ritual. In contrast, the *General Instruction* details the various component parts in turn and illustrates their variety: dialogue, instruction, proclamation, public and private prayer and so on, explaining the purpose of each, both in itself and in relation to the whole.

Whether one looks to the ritual as a whole or to its individual parts, this consciousness of purpose adds a new factor to the fitting accomplishment of liturgical worship. The ecclesial maxim 'to do what the Church intends', is transposed into a new and more intelligible key, in which the dominant notes are taken, not from dogma or canon law, but from the inner dynamic of the ritual itself. It is no accident, for example, that the *General Instruction* lays down that the bread used for the Eucharist 'must really look like food'.⁸ The deepest purpose of Eucharist is comprehended in what the Eucharist is: a meal shared in faith among sisters and brothers in the Lord. Nor is it by accident that the use of words such as 'reconciliation' and 'initiation' have re-assumed their true value in the reformed sacramental ritual. These terms, too, capture the purpose revealed by the rituals themselves.

One cannot responsibly celebrate the liturgy without taking serious note of what the Church in its ritual wishes to accomplish,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-57 (Flannery, pp 163-79).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 283 (Flannery, p 194).

and taking care to fulfil this purpose with all possible diligence. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in addressing pastors, says that 'when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration'.⁹ Clearly, the intrinsic purpose of the rite is included in this 'something more'. As Richstatter has recently stated: 'The minister is responsible for celebrating the rite in such a way that its purpose can be fulfilled'.¹⁰ Presumably, the minister has the necessary freedom within text and rubric to allow this inner purpose to be expressed. Presumably, too, the literal enactment of ritual according to the given text may not always achieve that purpose.

Whether or not this purpose is achieved in a ritual or any part of it can be determined only at the local level, on the evidence of actual experience. Since cultures vary, as do assemblies within a given culture, it is also clear that the responsible pursuit of this purpose will inevitably lead to a variety of forms of ritual expression. Moreover, since the form is relative to purpose, the guardians of form, according to the directives of the conciliar and post-conciliar texts, must give this relationship clear priority.

Clear and faithful signification

The Council Fathers urged that 'both texts and rites should be drawn up so as to express more clearly the holy things they signify',¹¹ adding that 'because they (the sacraments) are signs, they also instruct'.¹² Undoubtedly, the emphasis on signification, and the reasons for it, go far beyond the merely instructive, and not only because the latin word *instructio* is far more pregnant than the english 'instruction'. Sacraments are given to the Church for human sanctification,¹³ and the Constitution gives fresh emphasis to the scholastic teaching concerning the *ex opere operato* effect of the sacraments by pointing up the intrinsic relationship between sanctification and signification.

The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible to the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs.¹⁴

⁹ 11 (Flannery, p 7).

¹⁰ Thomas Richstatter, *Liturgical Law: New Style, New Spirit* (Chicago, 1977), p 164.

¹¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 21 (Flannery, p 9). ¹² *Ibid.*, 59 (Flannery, p 20).

¹³ The original latin is far stronger and richer here than the english. Cf *ed. cit.*, 52, p 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 (Flannery, p 5).

If, as the tradition has it, the liturgy effects what it signifies *significando* (that is, in ways appropriate to the signs) and since man's 'sanctification . . . is effected in a way that is appropriate to each of these signs', then wherever the sign(s) are blurred or inappropriate, the intended sanctification will be severely hindered.

This unprecedented stress on the appropriate nature of 'each of the signs' of necessity involves a pluriformity in liturgy; since there are so many cases in which the appropriate signs can only be discovered and shaped at the local level. Ritual is a form of language, and is therefore intelligible only if it succeeds in communicating what it intends to say. To put it another way, signification is communication; and hence we must expect the formation of local 'dialects' and accents as ritual becomes once more a living language. What signifies successfully in one place, or to one assembly, can hardly be expected to do so in all places or to all assemblies. For example, concelebration does not always and everywhere signify the unity of the priesthood. To some, it seems a sign of the over-clericalization of worship, which robs the laity of their proper rôle and function. To speak more generally, does the enactment of a given ritual fully signify, in all of its parts, all that the Church claims for it, or is some of that richness obscured, in particular instances and assemblies, by a blind adherence to a general ritual form?

These are questions which celebrants and assistants must answer in terms of their own liturgical assembly with its particular circumstances and local situation. It is not enough merely to observe law and rubric. Rather the first question is whether meticulous observance of law and rubric helps or hinders the more important task of clear signification. The 'substantial unity' called for by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has to be sought in the concrete, as the whole paragraph indicates.¹⁵ What is at stake here is both true Church order and the effectiveness of the liturgy itself. True Church order urges effective liturgy; it in no way attempts to thwart it.

Full and active participation

This third priority reverses a movement which developed throughout the middle ages and gradually gathered up the entire liturgy into the ministry of the celebrating priest. One need only recall such pre-conciliar practices as the recitation by the celebrant of the gradual and the gospel, even when choir and deacon were on hand

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38 (Flannery, p 14).

to fulfil these functions. Vatican II, at once rejecting and reversing this clerical monopoly, reaffirmed the liturgy as the action of the gathered assembly, and indeed of the whole Church.¹⁶ Liturgical action is not constituted simply by the proper performance of a man validly ordained, but by the assembly of the faithful hierarchically gathered, and by a variety of ministries and ministers. The relevant documents emphasize this repeatedly:

In the community which assembles to celebrate Mass, everyone has the right and duty to take an active part, though the ways in which individuals do so will differ according to the status and function of each. Each one, whether cleric or layman, should do all of, but only, those parts pertaining to his office, so that from the very way in which the celebration is organized, the Church may be seen to consist of different orders and ministers.¹⁷

The documents speak of *right* and *duty*; the liturgy is no longer the preserve of the priest alone. Its very nature and the baptism of the faithful demand that liturgical action be the communal act of the gathered Church.

There is an obvious aspect of this third priority which can be mandated from above. In fact, in many local assemblies, the liturgy would be greatly enhanced if both the letter and the spirit of this priority were enforced. A single, poorly-trained lay-person who conducts most of the Liturgy of the Word violates it no less than a celebrant who takes all these functions upon himself.

Yet there is a more subtle level to this priority which links it to the other two. Not only is it violated by a celebrant usurping all the ministries and robbing the people of their proper functions, but also by a ritual form that is alien, abstract, and divorced from the language and symbolism that would involve the assembly. This mandate can never be completely effected by action from above. Here again it depends on the creative experience of the local assembly to discern among various liturgical forms those which are most effective for full, active and conscious participation.¹⁸

It cannot be stressed enough that these priorities are *official norms* for liturgical adaptation and evolution, by means of which authority-from-above has called for responsible creativity from below. Otherwise to insist upon them is likely to be judged as contradicting the

¹⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26 (Flannery, p 10).

¹⁷ General Instruction, 58 (Flannery, pp 179-80); *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 28 (Flannery, p 11). ¹⁸ General Instruction, 3 (Flannery, p 162).

mandates of the official Church. Adaptations beyond 'what is allowed' are taken to be the creations of individual or collective fancy; so that it is never possible to analyse and judge the precautionary voice which rejects any such adaptations. On the contrary, these three priorities for effective and responsible liturgy transcend alike both whim and fancy and conservative restraint. In the interest of promoting genuine liturgical evolution and growth, the official Church has taken up the rôle of servant, and has pledged itself to respond to balanced judgment concerning these principles and priorities established in the Council.

The precautionary voice of official restraint

It follows then, that the voice of official restraint must be heard against the background of the above priorities, and not vice-versa. Otherwise, the emphasis given to these principles in the documents would be not merely otiose, but even a cruel deception. This is not to say that the voice of caution no longer needs to be listened to, understood, and discerned, if a proper creative balance is to be achieved in the process of liturgical evolution. It is an important protective voice, one that cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. As in all other ecclesiastical matters, this voice may sometimes speak out of turn, and on these occasions we must have the courage to ask the right questions. For the most part, however, if it is listened to as a function of true liturgical growth, it can protect the worshipping Church from bizarre distortions, even as the principles emphasized above are equally a protection against a stifling authoritarianism.

The restraining voice most often heard in the liturgical documents speaks as follows:

1. Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See, and, as laws may determine, on the bishop.
2. In virtue of the power conceded by law, the regulation of the liturgy within certain defined limits belongs also to various kinds of bishops' conferences, legitimately established, with competence in given territories.
3. Therefore, no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 22 (Flannery, pp 9-10); *Sacram Liturgiam*, 'Motu Proprio' on the Sacred Liturgy, 11 (Flannery, pp 43-44); *Tres Abhinc Annos*, second instruction on implementation (Flannery, p 99); and *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, Instruction on worship of the Eucharistic Mystery (Flannery, p 127).

Such restraint can be deceptive because of its clarity. A cursory reading of the above statements might leave us with the impression that they are nothing more than a reinforcement of the long-familiar rigid, hierarchical chain of rubrical command. If this were so, then the downward move from above would simply retain its absolute control over liturgical growth. Now, however, the voice of authority speaks of a wide choice of texts, and a flexibility of the rubrics which leaves room for the adaptation of the celebration to the circumstances, mentality and preparation of the assembly, and it might be assumed that the 'authorized' variations will in every case suffice.²⁰ The 'precautionary voice' will admit that the local assembly does have the freedom, and indeed the duty, to choose from the rites and ceremonies proposed by the Church;²¹ but it will insist that it is limited to these forms alone. Hence, according to this view, creativity and innovation on the part of the local church would seem to be eliminated. Such is the concern of literal implementation, not of true adaptation or evolution.

The voice of restraint is, however, far from flat or monotone, as the concluding words ' . . . on his own authority', indicates. This qualifying phrase²² is intelligible and indeed crucial when taken in the triple context of intrinsic purpose, clear signification, and full participation. No one, not even a priest, may change things *on his own authority*. However, changes which are introduced in virtue of anyone of the three guiding principles, discussed at such length above, emanate from the authority of the Holy See and ecclesiastical law. They derive their legitimacy not from any personal arrogation of authority. They are rooted in the nature of the liturgy itself and spelled out in the post-conciliar mandate for vital christian worship.

It remains true, then, that 'there is no need to resort to arbitrary adaptations, which would only weaken the impact of the liturgy'.²³ Any arbitrary adaptation, whatever its nature, is by definition contrary to the mandate for responsible liturgical evolution. However, to maintain that 'every change is arbitrary and therefore rejected',²⁴ is to remove restraint from its proper liturgical context.

²⁰ See *Liturgiae Instauraciones*, third instruction on implementation (Flannery, p 210).

²¹ *General Instruction*, 5 (Flannery, pp 162-63).

²² See *Sacram Liturgiam* 11 (Flannery, p 44). This text, however, cites *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, where the phrase is included. ²³ *Liturgiae Instauraciones* (Flannery, p 210).

²⁴ *Actio Pastoralis Ecclesiae*, Instruction for Masses with special groups, 11 (a) (Flannery, p 146).

It is a return to the assumption that authority-from-above need operate in no other context but its own, thus contravening emphatically both the spirit and the letter of the main conciliar and post-conciliar liturgical documents.

It is necessary to look beyond such deceptively clear restrictions, in order to uncover the real concerns which beset official authority in matters liturgical. On the negative side, the *Third Instruction on the Correct Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* refers to the disastrous results when individuals, acting on private initiative, make changes in liturgical form which are hasty, unwise, and against the basic principles of the liturgy.²⁵ Such changes, the instruction maintains, are not only confusing but are merely pseudo-liturgical individual inventions. On the positive side, the voice of restraint is concerned that changes grow organically out of solid tradition,²⁶ and serve the goals of true liturgical reform.²⁷ In other words, official intervention is negative only in the face of innovations that impede, or are judged to impede, the progress of genuine renewal.²⁸

At the same time, not all 'unauthorized' changes are of the kind justly condemned in *Liturgiae Instauraciones* (nor does one have to be particularly conservative to argue against irresponsible tampering with the Church's prayer). Innovations which serve the goals of Vatican II are to be commended rather than condemned; like the positive concerns of this Instruction, they illustrate that the precautionary voice of restraint is complementary to the progressive call to liturgical evolution. The two voices serve to challenge and criticize each other as together they move God's people towards a truly ecclesial and vital worship. As with seemingly irresponsible innovations, so with negative precautionary restraints. Wherever these thwart true organic growth from solid tradition, they must be challenged.

Conclusion

A proper hermeneutic for liturgical evolution involves a respectful dialogue between the progressive and the precautionary. Decisions affecting liturgical form belong both to the local church and to the universal Church, each bound by the conciliar mandate for fruitful

²⁵ *Liturgiae Instauraciones* (Flannery, p 210).

²⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 23 (Flannery, p 10).

²⁷ *General Instruction*, 5 (Flannery, pp 162-63).

²⁸ *Liturgiae Instauraciones* (Flannery, p 210).

and effective worship. It must be said that each is capable of frustrating that goal, either by arbitrary change, or by undue restriction. Neither of itself can be allowed a free hand. Authority-from-above must join with authority-from-below for healthy evolution. The key to this hermeneutic is mutual challenge and criticism. How it plays itself out in each local instance involves far more variables than can be discussed here.

One thing is certain: responsible liturgical evolution demands informed people who understand the spirit of the conciliar reform, who know the tradition, the structure, and the purpose of the liturgical rites, and who know well the culture, the language, and the *mores* of the local church. The principle *ad experimentum* has become a much more serious project since the promulgation of the new liturgical texts. Responsible evolution also demands informed bishops.²⁹ Ignorance of the liturgy and of the full liturgical task is as reprehensible for a bishop, who must oversee the Church's legislation, as it is for those whose ministry it is to put into practice the worship of the Church.

One other thing is certain: the principles which guided the reformation of the liturgical texts are not suspended now that these texts have been promulgated. They remain to guide their use, and they stand as the instruments of further development. This must needs continue to unfold, because the genius of the different languages and cultures has only begun to shape authentic liturgical forms. In an earlier age of liturgical growth, the language and culture of the time brought forth what we now take for granted to be the major rites of the Church. They retain a substantial unity of faith and substance, even as they show forth that faith in a variety of symbolic forms. It is not beyond the realm of the possible that, as the nations of Asia, Africa, the two Americas and Europe continue to shape new ways of authentic worship, the patterns of the early Church will repeat themselves. In light of that possibility, damage from the occasional irresponsible innovator is far less significant than the unhappy fact that so many local churches have not even begun to use the new texts with the variety and the purpose which these proclaim.

²⁹ *Ibid.* (Flannery, p 211).