

Theological Trends

LITURGICAL THEOLOGY: Who's in Charge?

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CURRENT WRITINGS IN LITURGICAL THEOLOGY tend to focus on a broad range of problems. My suggestion is that, if we take a look at the underlying problem as being the search for the answer to the question 'Who's in charge?', we may see that the liturgy itself supplies us with a helpful answer.¹

The problem

There seems to be something of a crisis of identity in liturgical theology. Generally, the discipline of liturgical theology is seen as an adjunct to either the department of systematic theology or the department of pastoral theology. Liturgical theology is the bridesmaid but never the bride. Liturgical theologians have a difficult time in insisting that theirs is an intellectually demanding and worthy discipline. Part of the reason for this difficulty is that for centuries, the liturgy was seen as an *object* for examination, if not dissection, by the scholastic-trained systematians. In recent times, moves to examine the liturgy out of a hermeneutic of symbolic action have attracted suspicion from traditional systematians and from those institutional churches who rely on them for intellectual argumentation. Along with this, there has for a long time been a schizophrenia in liturgy: in many churches the level of symbolic understanding and the deep commitment to an understanding of liturgy as sacred act which transforms us has gone far beyond the official view, while concurrently there are people in the same pews who still find plenty to worship with a theology which focuses primarily on the sacred objects of the liturgy.

Aidan Kavanagh has neatly identified the problem as the difference between liturgy as *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda*: the first, if we see the liturgy as the central piece of Christian experience of the divine, out of which all theological discourse and discovery must develop (it would be inconceivable in this model for a New Testament scholar not to have a deep liturgical life); and the second, where the liturgy takes its place alongside other aspects of Christian experience and study (and in this model the level of liturgical experience of a New Testament scholar might be irrelevant). It may not be too much of an over-simplification to suggest that the first tends to look at the liturgy as being about *actions* and the second tends to look at the liturgy as being about *objects*.

Who's in charge?

One way to identify the problem is to see how liturgical theologians might currently answer the question 'Who or what is in charge in liturgical theology?' These writers (by no means an exhaustive list) may be summarized as follows: Edward Kilmartin:² The Trinity; Aidan Kavanagh:³ God; David Power:⁴ God as Other; Louis-Marie Chauvet:⁵ God as Other; Kevin Irwin:⁶ The context of the liturgy; Jean Corbon:⁷ The mystical, unending rite; Gordon Lathrop:⁸ The Ordo; Alexander Schmemmann:⁹ The Ordo; David Newman:¹⁰ The Assembly.

One of the basic assumptions in the development of liturgical theology is that the long-standing hermeneutic, based in western philosophy, stands side by side with our understanding of the liturgy. This has had consequences, both good and bad, and most liturgical theologians will nowadays agree that using the old language-systems has left us in a kind of intellectual cul-de-sac. Examples of this problem might be the refusal of many to understand the sacramentality of marriage in terms of its mutuality, but only in terms of indelibility, the prevailing understanding of priesthood in the Roman-Catholic Church as *in persona Christi*, and the hermeneutic that understands sacramental moments as specific words connected with specific species.

The late Jesuit Edward Kilmartin offers a broadly successful attempt to examine the liturgy afresh from the stance of systematic theology. Kilmartin examines the sacraments in detail and applies insights from anthropology. He insists that the liturgy has to be approached from the understanding that the Trinity is 'in charge'. One unfortunate aspect of his writing is that Kilmartin has too great a fondness for *normative law*, but the gain of his trinitarian model is that it reminds us of the inner power at work, in God at one level, and in us at another.

Of the writers mentioned above, only Power and Chauvet really take on the problem of the pervading philosophical hermeneutic. David Power suggests that a way out of the current crisis in the liturgy is to renew and refresh our understanding of the nature of the liturgy as *symbol*. He makes an extensive survey of the ways in which aspects of the liturgy respond to and benefit from this renewed understanding. The crisis as he sees it is probably identifiable with a misapprehension of the true nature of the liturgy, in word and action, as the locus of symbolic language and action. Perhaps his greatest insight is the need to retain a sense of God as *other* and of the *non-identity* of symbolic language, in order to incorporate the freedom of God's gracious act within and beyond the boundaries of our culture-specified understanding:

Liturgy does not deal with what goes on in an individual's fantasy, but with something that the church assembly recognizes as its own, whatever the individual talents that together bring it to being. The church celebrates the presence of its Lord in these symbols, while at the same time recognizing the absence that will endure until the eschaton.¹¹

Power's argument reminds us that two key elements of an enlightened experience of liturgy are the power of *anamnesis*, which brings the past into our present, and *epiclesis*, in which God as wholly other becomes truly immanent. Power seems to be arguing that true growth into God takes us into the 'Abba' experience of Christ, within which we achieve union, both in community and in the glory of the beyond, by sharing in the self-emptying action of Christ. Indeed, acceptance of an authentic understanding of the true power of the liturgy as symbol leads us by necessity beyond ourselves in radical and grace-filled ways. This happens when we accept the radical otherness of God and of the human person beyond us, and open ourselves to the gift of the other. It is only by accepting this non-identity and otherness in the one whom we praise and proclaim in worship, that our worship can lead us into the depth of its symbolic meaning and engagement, for it is only through the language of symbol and metaphor that we can even apply coherent meaning to the term 'God'. This conclusion has important consequences for anyone engaged in the liturgy: it reminds us that *we* are not the central focus of liturgical activity, but that an openness to dialogue with *the other who remains entirely other* is demanded of us. It beckons us towards the realization that the process is bigger than us, that there is a true and inexorable pattern to the liturgy that goes beyond current events and concerns.

Kavanagh concentrates rather more on the consequences of the problem and suggests that a deeper understanding of what happens to us in the liturgy, linked with a definite desire to allow for the radical otherness of God alongside our belief in God's power to act in us, will help us to reshape our liturgical language. Here he is similar to Power, but his arguments seem to reflect a deeper engagement with the liturgy as it is actually experienced.

For Kavanagh, the law of prayer and supplication is the foundation of the law of belief. The two are in dialogue, but the first is prior to the second. The first consists in primary theological speech, the second in secondary theological speech. The developments of scholastic philosophy and the invention of printing switched the elements around and we need to recover the correct dialectic.¹² For Kavanagh, all theologies arise as a consequence of the liturgy: faith is the coming-to-be of prayer and praise in dialogue with human understanding.¹³

Kavanagh agrees with Schmemmann, and with most modern liturgical theologians, that the liturgy 'is not an "authority" or a *locus theologicus*; it is the ontological condition of theology'.¹⁴ He adopts a Rahnerian understanding of creation as God's self-expression in love and employs it along with Augustine's notion of the City to show that we need a deeper appreciation of the experience of the hearing of God's word and the expression of the Word, of the presence of God in the world as sacrament. The obligation of those who feel beckoned to learn and to teach about the liturgy is that they see their mission as dangerous: committed to following the consequences of their study wherever they lead, including possible conflict with both ecclesial and socio-political structures, and aware of the awesome power of God's holiness and

presence with which they ultimately deal. The consequences of our not facing the problem bravely and allowing the act of the unseen God to change us through the liturgy are serious:

We risk becoming so uninteresting in the eyes of ourselves and this world that we come to think of ourselves, and to be regarded by this world, as just one more outfit in the standard repertoire of hardly interesting abnormalities; merely another luncheon club for those with ecclesiastical tastes. None shiver when we enter a room. Indeed, few notice.¹⁵

For Louis-Marie Chauvet the problem lies in the western metaphysical basis of theological language. Because this has been 'in charge' for so long, it is difficult for us to break through and learn to speak in new ways about the liturgy. In an exhaustive and often exhilarating survey, Chauvet discovers that context is text and that language is a dangerous, though necessary, means of communication with one another and with the 'other'. The power of language is such that it can open us to the sacred; this is so important that Chauvet indicates the necessity of poets in every society.¹⁶ In his discussion on the power of the symbol, Chauvet indicates that there is an 'all or nothing' significance in symbolic language and action:

[T]he relation here is global and internal – to such an extent that we recognize in ritual baths, notably those used as part of an initiation ceremony involving a symbolic death and rebirth, the highest manifestation of the 'reality' of water. Water never comes so close to its 'truth' as when it functions as both sepulchre of death and bath of rebirth: the fundamental metaphor of human existence.

Far, then, from being opposed to the 'real,' as the reigning logic of signs would have it, *the symbol touches the most real aspect of ourselves and our world*. It touches us to the quick.¹⁷

For Chauvet, all realistic theological language has to preserve the notion of the *absence* of God to be authentic to Christian experience. For him the answer to the question 'Who's in charge?' would thus be God as Other, allowing for the absence of God, and giving God the freedom to act in us. In addition, Chauvet gives an important explication of symbolic gift-exchange, outside the order of value, in which a gift is given freely but necessitates gift-giving in return. This hints at the true meaning of sacraments for Chauvet, and indicates what he thinks is going on in the liturgy. The primary role of the human person in the economy of sacraments and grace is affirmed, indeed, the living body is for Chauvet the arch-symbol. There are important consequences for the liturgy when we adopt Chauvet's own hermeneutic of openness to the action of God and involvement in the symbolic gift-exchange. The Scriptures, for example, take on a new importance for us: we are called to be *open* to their

power. Chauvet presents a thorough examination of word (Scripture) as sacrament, in which the reading of the word creates new text in the life of the Church. This develops into an affirmation of the Judaeo-Christian notion of memory as lived experience recalled into the present by those who hear the word ('It is from the Omega that we read the Alpha'¹⁸), in which the Passover is the memorial paradigm. Chauvet then goes on to apply his hermeneutic to the doctrines of justification by faith and the true meaning of Christ's sacrifice, as the self-offering of the whole Church as return gift in a gift-exchange to God in response to God's gift to us. As a consequence of this answer to be open to the radical otherness of God and our involvement in the symbolic gift-exchange, Chauvet is instructive in his criticism of liturgical 'terrorists' who impose their agenda on the rite, but upon whom the rite 'takes its revenge', and he urges an adult humility towards the process. Ritual takes place in the realm of the world and of the body, in which the mystery of the creation is seen as a model and as a gift. The rites mediate the sacred to us and from within us, and the world that is spoken is God's memory coming to life again in us; thus in a real sense Christ in the eucharist comes from the assembly.¹⁹

Chauvet presents a critical examination of the problems in traditional sacramental theology as a result of scholasticism, found in more recent times in both Neo-Scholasticism and in Barth. He rejects the traditional Christomonism which has hampered the understanding of the Spirit, and makes an impassioned case for a study of the liturgy which is profoundly trinitarian. With this he seeks to avoid Christo- and Pneumato-monism, tendencies which might be found in the writings of Kevin Irwin and Jean Corbon. Chauvet seeks to stress humanity's significance as both other than God and the place of God's activity; and implies that it is only by our accepting that the God that we seek is the God as Other who acts within us that we can begin to see the liturgy shape us as we partake in it.

Kevin Irwin, in *Context and text*, employs a systematic method to show that in the field of liturgy, *context is text*. While therefore making a claim for *context* as a ruling element in both the way liturgy is done and the way in which theologians study the liturgy, it appears as if he is reluctant to take his conclusions as far as he might; the established norms of the institutional Roman Catholic Church outweigh other principles. Irwin takes his cue from history: we know what happened in the liturgies of the past from the texts that have been left behind. We theorize about what the content of liturgy should be from those available sources. But a major part of the source-store has to be the context in which these texts were used and/or written down, and it is therefore the context of such texts that should be the texts for us today. This approach will allow two things (at least): to develop our theories about liturgy from the viewpoint of what is *essential* to the rite or rites in question, without being hampered simply by having to rely on the *texts*; to adopt a new model of liturgical theology in which *context is text*: every aspect of human inquiry can and should have a bearing on our study of the liturgy.²⁰

Irwin's liturgical theology is profoundly sacramental, in the sense that he is convinced that theology is basically a reflection upon the meaning of what the

Church does in prayer and action. He is prepared to take his view seriously enough to commit himself to a detailed re-examination of as many areas of the Church's life and ministry as seem germane. There are benefits to be gained from looking at the liturgy from the point of view that seeks to question the context of our words and actions – in other words, putting the context in charge – but the overall hermeneutic, that we are striving after 'less and less inadequate formulations in liturgical euchology'²¹ puts the argument in a negative light from the outset, and the occasional references to orthodox euchology and to Corbon's modern mystagogy never really constitute a recovery of the riches of theological experience through the liturgy.

Both Jean Corbon and Alexander Schmemmann approach the problem of the liturgy out of the context of Orthodox Christianity. Interestingly, they seem to have quite different answers to the question 'Who's in charge?' For Corbon the liturgy is the 'river of life',²² the source from which, by which and in which God and the whole world are in communication in love. The liturgy is the supreme end-point, starting-point and mid-point at which sacramental communication takes place in its most complete and fulfilling way. The power of the Spirit is the energy force which drives the whole process, a force whose first presentation occurred at the Transfiguration, and a force which exists today. Corbon derives his liturgical theology primarily from what seems like his own experience, and also from Scripture; he is absolutely sure of his convictions, and rarely seems to consider it necessary to prove anything by logic or reason. This is so because the mystical rite is 'in charge'. Corbon's approach is singularly Eastern, with much emphasis on the image and power of the icon, and of an iconic approach to the sacraments in general; but he shies away from metaphorical or symbolic language. For him, all aspects of the liturgy and prayer are *real, immediate and profoundly graced*. The mystical, unending rite is the locus of worship, and in our liturgies we open ourselves and our world to experience that rite.

For both Alexander Schmemmann and Gordon Lathrop, the *Ordo* is the key element of liturgical experience. This factor gives us a sense both of lived tradition and of our participation in rather than our determination of what takes place in the liturgy. We 'hand over' any desire to make the liturgy solely the *locus* of our agenda and open ourselves up to the possibility of God's grace through frequent and established patterns of prayer.

Lathrop shows how *ordo* in liturgy is neither arbitrary nor random, and this allows him to incorporate the necessity of juxtaposition in liturgy into his argument; the *ordo* is the ground of meaning or basic pattern on which the metaphorical language of liturgy can work for us:

Meaning occurs through structure, by one thing set next to another. The scheduling of the *ordo*, the setting of one liturgical thing next to another in the shape of the liturgy, evokes and replicates the deep structure of biblical language, the use of the old to say the new by means of juxtaposition.²³

Lathrop argues that all symbol sets, language structures, hierarchies, meanings and so on, need to be in some sense *broken*, in order to emphasize our need of God: thanksgiving and lament have to go together; charism needs to be balanced by our continual need of grace; all gifts are given for the sake of the assembly. In all this, the *ordo* is fundamentally in control. However, Lathrop is much more in favour of what he calls the 'paradoxical appositions of liturgy'²⁴ than in unchanging and fixed sets of rituals; the first can communicate a much broader range of meanings than the second. His focus on the activity of the leader who is *for* the assembly and the importance of the idea that in the liturgy we express both the *already* and the *not yet* of God's plan help us to understand the liturgy as both human and divine in a new way.²⁵ In the liturgy our agenda and God's agenda come into dialogue and are reborn. The best attitude in such a dialogue is humility and openness, with a readiness to receive that which God is communicating to us, principally by means of the *ordo* and the word.²⁶

For David Newman the assembly plays a key role in the liturgy. He examines the liturgy as the primary *locus* of theological inquiry, and develops a theology that is well-considered, challenging and ecumenically significant. He draws on insights from language theory to show that the liturgy needs to be seen afresh as a 'sign-act', and that, in the liturgy, the combination of both word and sign-act is fundamental. His knowledge of anthropology enables him to draw conclusions about the importance of the liturgy for the whole world, not just for the gathered community. He sees in a renewed realization of the power of the liturgy the possibility of recapturing the agenda of the search for the transcendent from more worldly methods. He acknowledges the power of the liturgy to turn humanity away from the tendency towards individuality at the expense of community. The turn back to community is beckoned by the realization that we are involved in the liturgy with a God who reveals human weakness on the cross:

As Christians we are called to participate in that worldly vulnerability in a life lived for others. We will find among those who have been made powerless and vulnerable by oppression, accident, and want signs of Christ's broken body in the world, and therefore we will seek *koinonia* with them as a way of being in fellowship with Christ. Indeed the poor of this world may be viewed by Christians as sacraments of Christ's presence.²⁷

Newman's articulation of the 'as though not' aspect of Christian theology enables him to apply the insights of Ricoeur on the significance of symbols in liturgical experience, and to show that, as with Corbon, there is a mystical and earthly unity in the assembly gathered for worship, most especially at eucharist.²⁸ This gathered assembly *is* the presence of the risen Christ here on earth, and the experience of the assembly in worship and praise of God is the experience of the possibility of mystical communion with God in the here and

now. Such a realization has the consequence of empowering that community with the authority of the gospel, and the assembly acts *as if* with the very power of God. He concludes:

The church itself *is* a sacrament to the world in acting out God's love for the world. The action of the Eucharist implies all this. It is a commitment to ethical, social, and political action as well as symbolic action – to a new kind of presence and action of the church in the world, as well as a different kind of worship. No less can be expected of a liturgy that is both praise and empowerment.²⁹

Conclusion

As we reach the end of this consideration of the question 'Who's in charge?' we may see that some essential elements need to be retained in our approach to the liturgy. At all levels there needs to be the element of our making allowance for God to remain radically *other* than us. Otherwise we are in danger of creating God (or the 'higher power') in our own image and likeness. We need to see that our religious language *works* when it engages our imaginations and takes us into the depths of its symbolic meaning, and we need to see that this process can never reach its end-point – it is asymptotic.³⁰ In liturgical language – in the language of speech and gesture – we must always be *on the way*. If we stop for a moment, God will respond to push us on, even by confusing our language.³¹ Our context for this journey is the paschal mystery of Christ, which is for us the fulfilment of the expression of the Trinity. In this mystery God's time and our time become intertwined, and the gift of grace to us is responded to by our living grace-filled lives in the world. The liturgy has real meaning for us when we allow the paschal cycle to embrace us and the whole world.

NOTES

¹ A more extensive version of this article was prepared for a doctoral seminar in liturgical theology at the G.T.U. in Berkeley, California. I am grateful to Prof. John Baldovin SJ for his encouragement and insights.

² Kilmartin, Edward, *Christian liturgy: Vol. 1, Theology* (Kansas City MO: Sheed and Ward, 1988).

³ Kavanagh, Aidan, *On liturgical theology* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

⁴ Power, David, *Unsearchable riches: the symbolic nature of liturgy* (Collegeville MN: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984).

⁵ Chauvet, Louis-Marie, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental re-reading of Christian existence*, trans Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994).

⁶ Irwin, Kevin W., *Context and text: method in liturgical theology* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994).

⁷ Corbon, Jean, *The wellspring of worship*, trans Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁸ Lathrop, Gordon, *Holy things: a liturgical theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁹ Schmemmann, Alexander, *Introduction to liturgical theology*, trans Asheleigh Moorhouse, 3rd edn (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Newman, David, *Worship as praise and empowerment* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988).

¹¹ Power, p 72.

¹² Kavanagh, p 104: 'A Presence which had formerly been experienced by most as a kind of enfolding embrace had now modulated into an abecedarian printout to which only the skill of literacy could give complete access . . . The truth lies now exclusively in the text; no longer on the walls, or in the windows, or in the liturgical activity of those who occupy the churches.' In a footnote Kavanagh summarizes this trend as the move from 'anagogy to exegesis'.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 12: 'For what emerges most directly from an assembly's liturgical act is not a new species of theology among others. It is *theologia* itself. Nor is it inchoate and raw, despite the fact that it is always open to endless further specification and exploitation by human minds.'

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 75, quoting Schmemmann, 'Theology and liturgical tradition' in Massey Shepherd (ed), *Worship in scripture and tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 1963), p 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 172.

¹⁶ Chauvet, p 60: 'Against the invading objectification of things by representation, calculation, and planning, the poet is the one who reminds us of the Openness of being in which we must maintain ourselves; thereby the poet opens us to the Sacred, which is the space of the play of being and of the risk of openness, where the gods may come near us . . . By doing this, the poet reveals the human vocation, continually forgotten: to hold oneself ready, to be constantly 'on watch' in order to reserve a space for the possible arrival of the god, in a gracious attitude of letting be the gratuitousness of being and of letting oneself be spoken by it.'

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 230.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 390: '[T]he Eucharistic presence appears as the *crystallization* of Christ's presence in the *assembly* (ecclesia) gathered in his name and presided over by himself and in the *Scriptures* proclaimed as his living word.'

²⁰ Irwin, pp 54–55: 'First, *context* means the historical evolution of a given liturgical rite in order to determine its origin, component parts, and variations in history both liturgically and theologically. The purpose of this study is to uncover the theological meanings which the rite has traditionally conveyed as well as to distinguish aspects of the rite that are essential from those that are peripheral. Second, *context* means an examination of the present reformed rites to determine whether the contemporary celebration of these rites in specific contexts expresses what is actually envisioned in the published rites . . . the third notion of *context* argued here shifts attention from what is experienced in liturgy to what is often termed the critical function of liturgical theology. Here the contemporary cultural and theological context of liturgical celebration will be noted in order to explore ways of determining the adequacy of the present liturgical rites and of adapting them to a variety of changing ecclesial and cultural settings.'

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 207.

²² Corbon, p 77.

²³ Lathrop, p 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 79.

²⁵ Schmemmann places the liturgy in the context of our world as the 'end time', in which regular patterns of prayer articulate the presence of God's *kairos* with our *chronos*: '[The] rhythm of fast and Eucharist which is perhaps the forgotten and unfulfilled but still obvious and basic principle of the Ordo shows that at the foundation of the Church's liturgical life there is still that same unchanging and inexhaustible life experience of eschatology, the experience of the Church as new life in new time existing within this old world and its time for the express purpose of its salvation and renewal' (Schmemmann, p 216).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 175: 'The liturgy offers us a way through false alternatives in the present. It is neither a retreat into the group and a refusal of social-critical action nor a conversion of the faith into a social program. It is neither 'group-thunk' nor individualism. It is neither pure biblical criticism nor biblical fundamentalism. It does not gather us around a lecture on the critical interpretation of

a biblical book nor into an exercise of communal convictions regarding biblical inerrancy. Rather, the liturgy inserts us into the rich dialectic of the biblical word.'

²⁷ Newman, p 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 115: 'We encounter in worship the extraordinary in the ordinary. A meeting of earth and heaven takes place. In worship we acknowledge a reality that goes far beyond the limited, 'one-dimensional' sphere within which we are normally wont to live our lives.'

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 150.

³⁰ John Honner has shown how Rahner adopts this term from mathematics for theological language in his article 'Unity-in-difference: Karl Rahner and Niels Bohr', *Theological Studies* 46(1985), pp 480-506.

³¹ This point is the implication of Chauvet's outstanding explication of the Tower of Babel: *op. cit.*, pp 521-522.