

RELEVANT LITURGY

By AIDAN KAVANAGH

RELEVANT LITURGY IS a good thing. Like all good things, however, it eludes definition while springing out at one in all its tangible reality from what are often the most unexpected quarters. In such instances, one is caught by surprise and seized with chagrin: attempts to recapture the flash of splendour by doing the exact same act of liturgy over again rarely succeed. What worked once may be found not to work again, and one occasion's relevance becomes, imperceptibly, another occasion's *ennui*.

The foregoing is simply my way of sketching from my own experience something of the *non sequitur* embedded deep within the title of this article, a phrase lifted from parlance current among those concerned with liturgical reform and renewal. My purpose here is not to suggest recipes for a relevant liturgy: I have none. My purpose is to bring the phrase itself under scrutiny and to suggest perhaps that its use is less a preface to some startling disclosure than a verbal symptom of the malaise continually hamstringing liturgical renewal in our day. The malaise is our constant assumption that liturgical problems are at base patient of solution on solely liturgical grounds¹ – or, to put it in terms *à propos* here, that there is, waiting to be discovered, some perfect liturgical form not unlike a platonic 'idea', some particular ceremonial structure we have not yet stumbled onto through experimentation, some formula awaiting the advent of a liturgical Einstein, something extant somewhere seeking birth in the present that is a 'relevant liturgy'. My thesis is that there is not, and that to go on assuming that there is, is to hunt the hobbit. Hobbit hunts are fairly harmless affairs, but their result is to distract from the work at hand. Were we to address ourselves to the latter, it might become more obvious to us than it is that we ourselves are the root of irrelevance, and that our liturgical gatherings disclose this, but do not originate it.

This is so because the genus of ritual activity – of which liturgy is

¹ Cf my attempt to diagnose the dimensions of this compound assumption in 'Liturgical needs for today and tomorrow', in *Worship* 43 (1969), pp 488–495.

one, and only one, specific part – is not a thing unto itself: it is the act of people. We ritualize, for good and ill, what we are. Nor is this activity exclusively a human one. As T. T. Paterson has pointed out:

Rituals are formalized behaviour patterns, methods of communication, verbal and non-verbal, necessary for the establishment of relations among members of a group or between groups; for the relations among organisms of any kind are governed to a large extent by the forms of communication, both expected and required.²

The question of relevant or irrelevant human ritual is, as I understand it, not primarily about ritual. It is, rather, about the response or non-response given by people to formalized behaviour patterns, methods of communication, that have to do with group relationships. This realization shifts the core of the question away from ritual forms and their content to the state of group relationships for which ritual modes of communication are sought. Putting this in theological language, one might say that our current liturgical problems are at base not liturgical: they are cosmological and ecclesiological simultaneously.

By cosmology one means the complex of views and assumptions a human group has of the space-time and experience universe in which the groups finds itself. This complex of views and assumptions is the basic context within which ritual first arises, and to which it basically responds. The cosmology of the group is the primal factor, therefore, which determines both the form and content of the group's ritual patterns. The form of such patterns tends to be what Fortes and Evans-Pritchard call *mystical*, due to the ultimate and axiomatic character of the body of socio-behavioural norms (moral and legal) that could not be kept in being merely by secular sanctions. The content of ritual patterns tends to be *symbolic*, since they reflect the basic needs of human existence – with all their tentativeness and ambiguity – upon which social relationships are based. The ritual patterns do not discourse rationally upon these needs in the same way philosophy or a classroom lecturer does. Ritual patterns discriminate these needs less than they secure a social equilibrium and a cosmic perspective within which these needs may be met in a sustained fashion. Thus, they make discursive analysis possible, but they rarely if ever engage in it themselves. As Paterson observes:

² 'Emotive rituals in industrial organisms', in *The Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London*, Series B, no. 772, Vol. 251 (1966), p 437.

The basic need is biological survival of the social organism, which requires basic social relations dependent on the adaptive, decision-making process. The rituals are axiomatic and ultimate; they are mystical because the decision process of a social organism proceeds at the subconscious level.³

They lessen the danger of divisive conflict inherent in the social decision-making process,⁴ contributing a sense of awareness, integration and participation at the deepest psychic levels of the process.⁵ Rituals function at a level on which man does not seek 'truth' but, according to Lévi-Strauss, 'coherence' – a vision of the concrete world that satisfies and makes it possible to bear up under existential stress. The value of rituals, he observes, is '... to preserve... methods of observation and reflection which were (and no doubt still are) precisely adapted to discoveries of a certain type: those which nature authorized from the starting point of a speculative organization of the sensible world in sensible terms'.⁶

It is worth noting that this same, perhaps primitive, approach to reality is by no means concerned with the fabulous. It gave rise to world-changing intellectual achievements such as the invention of pottery, domestication of animals, agriculture, the wheel, writing – achievements that make 'civilization' possible. It also constitutes the only context or orientations capable of supporting a sacramental religion. 'Devotion to the sacraments', Mary Douglas points out, 'depends on a frame of mind which values external forms and is ready to credit them with special efficacy'.⁷ Ecologists are now suggesting that this same approach to reality may be the central factor needing social restoration before environmental destruction can be reversed. A society that views its own relationship to the concrete sensible universe as exploitative must necessarily accept the irrelevancy of its bonding patterns and its religious rituals. To suggest that such a society is in deep trouble is to stress the obvious; but it may be rather less obvious that to reform its religious rituals,

³ *Ibid.*, p 442.

⁴ Cf Schils, E. 'Ritual and crisis', in *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, Series B, no. 772, Vol. 251 (1966), pp 447–50.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1965), and *The Mechanical Bride* (Boston, 1967), provides a repertoire of examples from the ritual patterns used by media and drawn from the folklore of industrial man.

⁶ *The Savage Mind* [1962] (Chicago, 1966), pp 16ff. This whole chapter, entitled 'The Science of the Concrete', pp 1–33, is well worth the reading by those interested in liturgical worship.

⁷ *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York, 1970), pp 8–9.

apart from reforming its relationship to the sensible universe, would be like applying sunburn lotion as a cure for cancer.

By ecclesiology one means the complex of views and assumptions which a group of christians has of the gospel of Jesus Christ, *as group*. To the extent that this complex of views and assumptions is in conformity with the gospel, and to the extent that the gospel becomes the criterion of group existence, one may call the group a community of faith – the people of God. Ecclesiology in this sense is not merely one of several dogmatic tracts but the state of articulated awareness which a faith community, the people of God, has of being in communion with God and itself, through Jesus and in the Spirit. Where such communion is not in evidence, ecclesiology in the lived sense cannot occur. Dogmatic tracts may, however, and juridico-political and ethno-cultural surrogates of lived ecclesiology usually do, take its place. The immediate effects, from the ritual point of view, are to transmute liturgy into dogmatics, canon law, or folk-ways – none of which require a gospel-orientated faith structure to survive. More specifically, the sacramental life breaks down into tenuously related areas that are increasingly discriminated by philosophical, dogmatic and canonical methodology and driven even farther apart – until it becomes no longer really possible to refer to that life as an *economy*. Sacraments become discrete, disconnected ‘things’ to be ‘received’ as products issuing from the quasi-mechanical process described as liturgical.

One could dwell on the details of this phenomenon at length. But the point to be emphasized here is that the break-down proceeds from and reinforces views of the Church that are at best ambiguously orthodox and at worst a species of apostasy from the gospel of Jesus Christ. When this occurs, ritual worship in groups calling themselves christian is cut loose from the one criterion that saves human ritual from degenerating into compulsive formalism, cynical fatalism, or magic. That criterion is the gospel liturgically actualized on a regular basis in baptism and the eucharist, the two premier New Testament sacraments that are the strictly correlative and inseparable foci of christian existence. The eucharist makes no sense apart from baptism, nor baptism apart from the eucharist – any more than Jesus’ death makes sense apart from his resurrection, or his resurrection apart from his death. It is thus true to say that there are but two liturgical sacraments, baptism and eucharist; that they manifest the unique singularity of his passage from death to a stunningly new sort of life; and that all other liturgical under-

takings by those who are dead and risen through him are modulations and explicitations of the two major sacraments. It is one only state of existence that we enjoy in Jesus-become-a-people, the Church. It is communion with God among men. This is the goal of baptismal conversion, ascetical discipline, and is the sole motive for eucharistic celebration.

Thus it is of the highest importance for understanding and celebrating the christian liturgy that one realizes that no specific sacramental undertaking can be relevant at its core unless it is done within the dialectical tension obtaining between the two hinges upon which the entire sacramental economy – a ministry of reconciliation – swings,⁸ baptism and eucharist. The radical criterion of the cross stands at the centre of the gospel, qualifying death and life by each other, insisting that celebration without toil is either infantilism or propaganda; and that toil has its consummation in joy, recalling christians to the passion of Jesus as the necessary precedent for their giving thanks to God for his goodness to the world. Only a mature person who can work and is prepared to die can afford the leisure of the feast.⁹

The aphorism holds good on both cosmological and ecclesiological levels. To ignore its validity is to forego the possibility of a relevant liturgy, and no number of ceremonial gimmicks will retrieve the loss. Liturgical ceremonies do not strike one as irrelevant nearly so much as contemporary society does. It would be difficult to find a matter of such perennial relevance to men as human survival; yet the mind reels to learn that the United States government intends to spend in this fiscal year ten times more money on development of a commercial supersonic transport plane than it will spend on air pollution research. The contrast raises questions of how cosmological values are 'seen' by those in public service: what paradigm of the commonweal motivates such value-allocations, and what will their actualization do in terms of the quality of human life? The questions have only to be asked a few times before one suspects that their very presence constitutes a symptom of political irrelevance and social dissolution already in progress.

Something not unlike this example is, I think, in motion so far as liturgical reform in the body social of the Church is concerned. Specific programmes are provided where in fact fundamental values

⁸ Cf 2 Cor 5, 18–20.

⁹ Cf Pieper, J.: *In Tune with the World: A Theory of festivity*, translated R. and C. Winston (New York, 1965).

are what is really at issue. Thus the new canons are presented by ecclesiastical officials with such maximal assurances about their salutary effects that one forgets to inquire whether most congregations have sufficient motive to celebrate the eucharist in the first place. It is astonishing how rare such inquiries are in the Church. We regularly assume that large numbers of people who have never passed, in conversion, through the prism of Jesus' passion, whose faith is of the most extrinsic conventional sort, and whose lives are much more influenced by values that arise apart from and in opposition to those of the gospel, can in truth be said to have that degree of communion with God among men through Jesus in the Spirit which is the sole motive for eucharistic action. It is even more astonishing that when such action is found to be less than of the highest calibre, the inadequacy is assigned to the ceremonial. We then resort to gimmicks, with good intentions all round; and after these pale we find ourselves once again faced with a faith-*ennui* that is often deeper than before.

This is a sure recipe for the destruction of rite in the Church. The lessons of Paterson, Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, and others mentioned above should alert us to the fact that the demise of rituals in a group is the beginning of social dissolution – because the rituals are wholly necessary for sustaining relations among members of a group and between groups on the deepest levels of value-coherence. Rituals are both signs and causes of such relations, but they are not substitutes for them. A deeply held, if usually unarticulated, assumption among roman catholics of both conservative and liberal-radical persuasions is that the mass alone somehow consummates and exhausts all there is to the Church and the gospel. This is the price we are now forced to pay for *ex opere operato* – drilled into all, at the expense of all else, in the heat of polemic. One finds both conservative and radical liturgical groups doing and talking only about the mass: the one in terms of latin, chant, polyphony and altars against the wall; the other in terms of vernacular, guitars, balloons, and tables anywhere but in a church. Neither has much to say about baptism, the word of God, faith, asceticism, conversion or prayer. This, I take it, is symptomatic of much more than liturgical misunderstanding. It is evidence of schism and apostasy having already begun to set in – not just from the institutional Church, as it is called, but from the gospel itself.

The truth is that we are not facing up to the premier irrelevancy of the 'faith' we have created for ourselves by the way in which we

pick and choose what we ourselves prefer to believe. In this sense we proclaim not the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world, but values this world has sucked dry and discarded before we came upon them. Finding them safely moribund, we adopt them and convince ourselves that we are being creatively relevant in doing so. I find this consistently the case with underground liturgies on which I am asked to give an opinion. My negative reaction is often dismissed as conservative, but in fact it is provoked most often by there being in them almost nothing really *avant-garde*, little truly creative or new, and much that is bankrupt sacramental theology clumsily updated from the seventeenth century into modern jargon of the most dated kind. One asks what there is here that can serve as the spring-board for a sound new grasp on communion that will see the people of God even into the next generation. One seeks some perennial value recreated in new ways, ways in which the half-converted and the unconverted may discover their own vices and virtues stunningly disclosed for what they are. Man does not live by group therapy, Bach or balloons alone.

Social and religious patterns may indeed be changing, but there is no reason why we must stand by helplessly while changes sweep over us, destroying our communion in Christ and the world in which we live. Instead, we can look steadily at the changes, criticizing them most effectively by discerning their form and substance against the criteria of the world and Church we know God to have authored. To do so is to be relevant where relevance matters, at the heart of things. If we are relevant here, all matters of liturgical relevance will take care of themselves. No one who regards the world for what it is, as laid bare in the passage of Jesus from death to life – a passage that has been engaged in as well by the observer – can fail in relevance as he celebrates the world so qualified in the liturgy of the Church.

When an act of liturgy is relevant, it is an act of good liturgy: when it is good liturgy, it is done with faith in the cosmic largesse of Jesus passing into communion with his Father and sharing it with men. Such a liturgy is *not* desiccated rubricism, perfunctory gestures, endless mouthing of words, and evaporated signs (such as drops of stale water, smears of rancid grease for chrism, plastic bread, and canned musak). Such a liturgy is pastorally responsible, grand in gesture, splendid in verbal discretion, and robust in its signs. As Mary Douglas puts it: 'So economical and highly articulated is this system of signs that it is enough to strike one chord to recognize

that the orchestration is on a cosmic scale'.¹⁰ All this is ritually symptomatic of relevance before the fact, and to this extent it becomes causal of relevance after it.

A verbal example of liturgical irrelevance in highly specious modern jargon must conclude these remarks. It is an anonymous prayer for relevance that was submitted, one hopes in jest, to the liturgical commission of a major church in the United States last year.

O God our ultimate concern, who is more likely down than out, and who reveals the void of his being more clearly in our questions than in our answers: Teach us to communicate relevantly with each other across the sacred-secular dichotomy of our existential predicament. Establish authentic I-Thou relationships in the ambiguous context of our pluralistic society. Sensitize us to the hidden agenda of our peer groups in terms of meaningful ego-satisfactions. And help us to confront all disturbed and disadvantaged persons with underlying concern for the paradoxical reality of their interpersonal dynamics. In the name of our mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ. Amen.

Meaning: Fill us with love, compassion, and mercy; through Jesus Christ, in the unity of the holy Spirit in the holy Church. Amen.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p 11.