

REFRACTED LIGHT: THE PROBLEM OF THE VISUAL IN LITURGY

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SAN FRANCISCO IS A CITY of many surprises; even so, it still comes as a shock to find a perfect reproduction of a medieval Russian cathedral stuck in the middle of twentieth-century apartment blocks, its golden cupolas shimmering in the hot sun. I went there once, to attend the Great Vigil for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, partly to hear the wonderful choir, but also out of a liturgist's curiosity to experience something new! Internally, the cathedral matches its outside appearance, with walls covered by frescoes of the angels, prophets, saints and martyrs; and the Iconostasis spreading across the body of the church, hung with gold-leafed icons and shimmering with glittering lamps. There is no fixed setting, as is normal in Orthodox churches, and the worshippers congregated in the central space, many moving from icon to icon in prayer. Except for the contemporary clothing of the people, it was a scene straight out of old Russia. Although I did not understand the language and found it difficult to follow the structure of the service, the Slavonic chant, the rich vestments, the candles, lights, profusion of incense and continual movement created a sense of celebration, mystery and awe. I began to participate through the medium of the visual, in gesture, sound and sight. The impact of these things draws one into the realm of imagination, where one is operating on the level of sign and symbol. The symbols at work in the Orthodox liturgy opened up another horizon beyond the immediate into what the eastern mystics call the 'refracted' light of the divine presence.

Without digging deep into the hermeneutic of sign and symbol, it is important to remember the distinction between them. Sign and symbol are often confused; with the sign there is an unequivocal message, the communication intends to produce a specific meaning and nothing else. For example, a road sign signifies what it stands for; stop!, slow!, one way!, and so on. With the symbol one is led

to all kinds of other realities, often themselves symbolic: for instance the water we use at baptism is not only a symbol of new life, but also of death to sin. In human life water is seen as essential for survival and growth, but it is also dangerous and chaotic, bringing death in floods and ocean storms. A symbol is open-ended, because it has an unpredictability and a richness which comes from the inexhaustible possibilities of new meanings; Joseph Gelineau makes this point:

In the first place, it is false to say that people today are out of touch with the world of symbols because their mind only functions on the cognitive level of technical language and utilitarian or moral behaviour.

It is often true that their conscious speech only uses this behaviour. But a more careful observation of their behaviour shows that symbols are still important in their lives although they may often be unconscious. No one falls in love without symbolising the object of his love. He calls her all sorts of names . . . which create a certain relationship. And no one invents or creates without symbolically projecting what he seeks. Only if we come to the liturgy without hopes or fears, without longings or hunger will the rites symbolise nothing and remain indifferent or curious 'objects'. Moreover, people who are not accustomed to poetic, artistic or musical language or symbolic acts among their means of expression, find the liturgy like a foreign country whose customs and language are strange to them.¹

The problem we seem to be facing with our liturgy today is connected not so much with a loss of symbol, but with the relationship of our visual symbols to the culture, tradition and spiritual life of our particular group or society. The visual elements of our worship need to be grounded in our history and traditions, but also to be capable of renewal and adaptation so that another generation may find the door to an unknown world opening for them. If, as Gelineau suggests, we just want a liturgy composed of words, gesture and visual art forms that are understood because their meaning is obvious or explicit, then ritual and symbolism become defunct because we are operating solely in the rational world of the sign. Any attempt to impose upon the liturgy a literalism with fixed and restrictive interpretation (of our symbols) at once removes the nuances, imaginative suggestions and ambivalence which a true symbol possesses. Not only that, once a society

changes its imagery (as, for example an industrial nation emerging out of an agricultural community), old symbols become distorted because they no longer represent important things relevant to the people. We have to rediscover in our visual arts what can be kept from the old and what can emerge from the new.

Figures and symbols are still there to give meaning to the constant newness of what life produces for our faith. They are always the necessity to seek, the risk to run, the promise to keep, the covenant to renew. Our explanatory and moralising liturgy needs figures whose very mystery is our hope, metaphor that surprises us and leads us on (where?), poetry which 'means nothing' but which moves us (how?), and the gesture which commits us (to what and to whom?). Thus and only thus can we go to meet Him-who-comes as the utterly new, Him who would never have restricted us within an ideology or possessed us by a moral code.²

Why is it then that the visual and artistic forms of the Byzantine liturgy, based upon ceremonial taken from the court of Constantinople and belonging to a culture which is alien to a modern European, African or American setting, have the power to draw these people into its celebration and expose them to the experience of the beauty and mystery of God? It cannot simply be dismissed as novelty or superstition. I think the answer lies in a connection between the form in which the symbol is seen or heard in the liturgy and the 'confidence' (to use Gelineau's word) that we must have in the power of our visual symbols.

For pious Orthodox Christians, liturgy is bound up with life. Through it their spirituality comes alive and is nourished, for this is where (especially for the Russian Orthodox) the action and visual forms of worship combine to give a glimpse of the unity between heaven and earth. It is an auditory and a visual experience which educates the community gathered in faith, through the theology contained in its music, lessons, homilies and art. More than perhaps anything else, it is through the icon that this expression reaches one of its deepest levels: it is seen as the vision of a transfigured world, what humankind will become after the resurrection. The representational forms of the icon are understood as having a teaching authority linked to the spiritual life of the believer; as a recent Russian artist wrote,

A Christian must love his neighbour, for the eternal dignity of his nature recreated and deified by Christ. In this is the meaning of

the new, the eternally new, commandment: love one another. The faces, eyes, gestures and form of the icons transmit Love to the viewer (to the measure of his preparedness)—that spiritual state of the depicted which, using Hesychastic term, we call 'Paradise of the heart'. The spatial structure of the icon is intended to include the viewer in the icon's space, in that harmonious world in which life is so permeated with the radiance of the life-giving light and all-encompassing love.³

Because iconography is linked to the life of the Orthodox believer through this liturgical and spiritual dimension, it has retained its power as a living symbol. The icon does not attempt to portray realism, but through almost abstract forms and defined colour schemes draws the beholder into a symbolic world where the presence of the living God and the saints, angels and the faithful departed is glimpsed through the image in church and home.

There is a growing interest in the icon amongst many Roman Catholics, not simply as an art form but as a means of entering into a particular type of spirituality associated with the mystical tradition of the Eastern Church. In some ways this is a response to a problem that has become acute within Catholic worship at the present time. Many people complain that there has been a 'demystification' of worship, that the 'sacred' has disappeared under a mound of relevant services sometimes glibly dismissed under the title 'pop' or 'folk' liturgy. These are extreme comments, but do touch a raw nerve; since the second Vatican Council our liturgy has undergone immense change; for the main part the results have been advantageous and vastly outweigh any so-called 'loss of mystery'. The change from Latin to the vernacular opened up the treasury of scripture to everybody, many of whom, as one priest pointed out, 'heard the scriptures for the first time'. This has helped to develop a particular spiritual tradition which is centred on the monastic idea of *lectio divina*. Within the liturgy there has been new depth of understanding and participation, and a greater awareness of the importance of communal prayer. But at the same time there has been much over-verbalization in our celebrations; inadequate theological and liturgical preparation has also meant that there was much haphazard and arbitrary renewal by clergy and people. Zeal for 'relevance' saw the removal of many externals (statuary, furnishings, vesture, incense etc.) without any real consideration of their position in the visual dimension of

worship. It has taken twenty five years even to begin understanding the principles behind the conciliar document on the liturgy!

Basically we have two main types of spirituality present in worship. The first is 'word'-centred, where people are asked to listen to the word, to hear it expounded, meditate on it and react to it in faith. This is a tradition found in the synagogue and dominant in Protestant worship, but kept alive in 'Catholic' tradition through the monastic *lectio divina* and the celebration of the divine office. The second strand is the emphasis on 'sacrament', which stresses the mystery through the visible form of the cult in altar, priest, sacrifice and so on. A word-centred spirituality stresses God as distant, invisible, transcendent but heard: contact is through the word, where God is revealed, named and covenanted with the people. In the 'sacrament' type of spirituality, God is mediated through the eye, present by being represented through our participation in act, gesture, music and light. These two spiritualities are two poles found within our liturgical celebrations, especially in the Eucharist. Both have different aims, but both are needed. This reintegration is the task of the liturgists, pastors, musicians, architects, theologians and artists in the coming years. The impact of the icon and an appreciation of the visual as seen, for example in the Eastern liturgy, has opened a door that should enable us to re-evaluate the position of the visual in the spiritual life of a people formed through worship.

A cautionary note must be sounded about over-romanticization of the Orthodox. It has to be remembered that the Byzantine liturgy is very static, and that their spirituality is not only tied up with a very definite theological tradition, but is also part of a cultural milieu. Roman Catholicism has not experienced the same static effect, our visual arts have evolved. It is true that for many nostalgic people, Christianity is identified with the Gothic or Baroque style, but this is a minor aberration; our liturgical tradition is rooted in the past, but not wedded to any particular century. The pull of the Byzantine liturgy is usually a contrast to the vagaries of the Latin liturgy, which at one point became a clerical preserve, performed in front of the faithful. To offset this, the use of the visual arts was developed, in order to capture the imagination and souls of the faithful. The church building itself, originally termed the 'house of the assembly' (*domus ecclesiae*) became God's house (*domus Dei*), a place where light, colour, smell and sound proclaimed the mysterious rites performed within it. At its most

decadent this became pure theatre. All through history reformers have inveighed against the tendency to overplay this aspect of our worship. Present reforms have now to redress the balance. The problem is that we have divorced culture and taste from visual art in church. There is a mediocrity about the things we use, a desire to identify objects as somehow 'churchy', as though a particular style of art, architecture or music had some overriding claim as a medium for the 'spiritual'. But you cannot separate liturgy from life; the over-verbalization complained of in our contemporary worship has a reactionary style about it. There is a need to put away a visual symbolism that has become obsolete, because it no longer speaks, and far from bringing us into contact with the transcendent leaves us with a void of indifference. Heije Faber, in his book on contemporary spirituality, *Above the treeline*, quotes from Emmy van Overeem, who puts our present problem into a wider context. She saw that our symbols are about life and death today, about building community and sharing with others now, not something translated from the distant past.

Since the World War and since Auschwitz people wanted unveiled and direct communication with the numinous. If you have lived in a concentration camp and been stripped of all your dignity, and good manners have gone by the board, if you have lost everything that you possessed as a respected citizen, then you can no longer find God in a liturgical language which is too artificial, and in a meal which no longer looks like a meal, the celebration of God's presence in worship then becomes obscure. In the concentration camps people were completely thrown back on the heart of things. They were utterly dehumanized. That was primitive, but also completely authentic.⁴

This radical stripping is, of course, part of our Christian tradition; sometimes we need the props removed so that we can recover the heart of our worship and rediscover in both old and new forms the experience of God's presence. Just as the early Church saw their buildings as *domus ecclesiae*, so must our contemporary spirituality of liturgy reinstate the value of visual arts as linked to the life and experience of a particular people, so that it becomes authentic. The 'house of the assembly' is also the 'house of God', simply because the sacred is that which is caught up and transformed by the Spirit of Christ in the life of the people of God. What we have done in recent liturgical reform is to prune the

inessential, without revitalizing the essential. The connection has not quite been made between life and liturgy. Why is it for instance, that we still retain formal dress for formal meals and functions, light candles at parties, burn incense and joss sticks to create an atmosphere of festivity at a social gathering, and yet remove these same visual images from our worship? Is it perhaps because of the legacy we retain from the past? In the Middle Ages the visual played a great rôle in the life of the Christian community. Within the liturgy itself events or 'mysteries' were performed to encourage devotion and to teach the faith. There was great potential in the stained glass of the windows, the frescoes on the church walls, the carvings on portals and porches, which acted as a 'bible of the poor' for those who could not read or understand Church language. But there was a worm in the apple. This over-emphasis on the visual produced a tendency to reduce the ambiguity and openendedness of a symbol to the flat definition of sign; everything had to be explained, contained, defined. This ensured that the celebration of the liturgy became more divorced from daily life and experience.

The clerics seem to have been unable to change liturgy itself in ways that integrated forms appropriate to the culture and popular piety, so that it was often made accessible to people only through vulgarizations connected with the 'real presence', with relics, and with processions.⁵

This vulgarization of our visual symbol is why there has been such an iconoclastic reaction. Many Catholics can remember images that should have awoken in us an experience of 'the other' simply as incredible signs, often explained in terms of 'miraculous' happenings, blood dripping from hosts to prove it was the body of Christ, liquefaction of a true martyr's blood, statues that cried, and so forth. When we asked for the bread of mystery and experience we were given instead the cold stone of proof! The return to a balanced understanding of word and sacrament as the two complementary poles of our worship has helped to open new doors to the visual arts within liturgy, but our struggle to find new ways and means of expressing symbols encounters the problem of being too didactic. The Sunday Eucharist is for many Catholics the only time they encounter the Church, and so the tendency to elucidate and teach everything so that people may understand,

results in over-verbalization. But the word goes with the sacrament. What we hear we see and glimpse. Bread and wine, symbols of human work are taken, blessed, broken and shared, so that through hearing and seeing we who are many become one in communion with the Lord. We lift our hands and hearts in gestures of prayer and give thanks through our words and actions and our art. It is imperative that our visual symbols be revitalized and therefore the forms they take must be carefully examined:

There are no objects which are themselves symbolic. They can only be made so, either in a situation where they acquire a special meaning for me, or in a particular culture where they have this for the group . . . True symbols cannot be manufactured, they are produced by a culture.⁶

This is the heart of our problem, one which is continually emerging in non-European cultures, as for example in Africa when the liturgy is often the cause of some confusion as a warning about intellectual verbalization makes clear.

The African communities, which are oral in style, very often feel near to the Gospels which were given in an oral culture. And so they are led off course when attempts are made to govern them with a bookish liturgy, as though the religion of the bible implied a religion of the book and a liturgy of the book! But no—the bible is the Word of God handed down in writing, we are a religion of the Word, and not of the book, so why impose on ourselves a liturgy of the book?⁷

That applies to our written culture, too. The liturgy is both auricular and ocular, one sees and one hears, it is word and gesture, movement and repose. What is important is that we distinguish the amount of verbal and visual needed to nourish us. A particular group of Christians, well known to each other, can dispense with many external symbols and rely on the basic forms, but a larger gathering, like the normal Sunday Eucharist, has a variety of individuals who need a different emphasis, perhaps more on colour, smell, sound. Certain festivals like Easter and Christmas call for different styles of celebration with their own traditional and cultural visual aids. If we think back to the ritual actions that followed the tragedy at Hillsborough football stadium, the Liverpool song, the goal posts filled with flowers and scarves, we see a society

still in touch with the visual used as a means of communicating deep emotions and feelings. The wreaths hanging on the railings near the Clapham Junction railway accident, the flowers strewn in the Thames after the *Marchioness* disaster speak to the heart and soul of love, grief and hope which are inadequately expressed in words alone. Those who appreciate the icon do so because it speaks to them, but we cannot take on board every icon, some are too remote from our experience; that is why we need images rooted in our own lives.

In our environmentally conscious world we must find authentic symbols that will speak to us again of the 'holy'. It is a delicate task, as the Dean of Salisbury recently wrote:

If we lose awareness of our own history we lose our spiritual roots, but if we become obsessed with the past and with 'heritage' we lose all hope for human creativity in the present and the divine potential of the future.⁸

There are ways! In our Church the living tradition of monasticism gives one an insight into how it may be achieved. The common life of the monastery blends together liturgical prayer, *lectio divina*, manual and intellectual work and play into a spirituality of wholeness, 'prayer in life'. In the Rule of St Benedict the person in charge of the monastery belongings is reminded that all goods and chattels are to be treated as vessels of the altar: in other words a recognition that anything may become a visual image of holiness. In a more negative statement the Rule reminds the artists and craftsmen of the power that lies in their art, for the visual has the capacity to open up or to close down spiritual values; pride and greed can encourage spiritual death. This is the implicit recognition that there is no boundary wall between sacred and secular: for Benedict 'God may be glorified in all things'.⁹ Lady Julian caught a glimpse in her hazel nut, William Blake in a grain of sand, Saint Benedict in a speck of light—all visual images.

I have purposely left out particular issues concerning visual images in liturgy in an attempt to examine the touchstone where spirituality and the visual arts interact. It is in the realm of symbol, but those which have the capacity to live. If in our churches our vestments are simply the excesses of ecclesiastical fashion, and not a vesture redolent of a symbolic value; and if the bread for our Eucharist requires a major act of faith to see it as a piece of bread;

and if the burning light of a candle, consumed and yet undimmed, becomes the practical illumination of an electric bulb; and if the cross of salvation is multiplied on covers and doors and books and windows; then we shall find that our liturgies will stagnate and slowly empty, for there will be no life left in them, we shall have explained all our visual symbols away.

NOTES

¹ Gelineau, J.: *The liturgy today and tomorrow* (DLT, London, 1978), p 98.

² *Ibid.*, p 100.

³ Vladimorova, E.: 'In the northern retreat', in *The journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* Vol 5, (1989), p 17.

⁴ Faber, Heije: *Above the tree line: towards a contemporary spirituality* (SCM Press, London, 1988), p 35.

⁵ Power, David: *Unsearchable riches, the symbolic nature of liturgy* (Pueblo, New York, 1984), p 53.

⁶ Gelineau, J.: *op. cit.*, p 51.

⁷ Sanon, Anselme: 'Cultural rooting of the liturgy in Africa since Vatican II', in *Concilium* 162 (Clarke/Seaburg, 1983), p 62.

⁸ Dickinson, Hugh: 'A worrying tension between art and human need', in *The Church Times*, 15 September 1989.

⁹ *The rule of Saint Benedict* ch 31.10, 'The monastery cellarer': 'All the utensils and goods of the monastery he must regard as vessels of the altar' (*Omnia vasa monasterii cunctamque substantiam ac si altaris vasa conspiciat*); ch 57.5, 6 'The artisans': 'Let them always remember Ananias and Sapphira, who incurred bodily death, lest they and all who perpetrate fraud in monastery affairs suffer spiritual death.' 'So that in all things God may be glorified.' (*Memorentur semper Ananiae et Saphirae, ne forte mortem quem illi in corpore pertulerunt, hanc isti vel omnes qui aliquem fraudem de rebus monasterii fecerint in anima patiantur. . . . ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus.*)