

LITURGY AND SOCIAL ACTION

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AS THE CHURCH SEES ITSELF more in the service of the reign of God, announced as a reign of justice and peace, it is being challenged to adjust its liturgical expression to include the prayer/actions of those involved in social action. Many Christians involved in issues of justice and peace create liturgical expressions of their commitment which are closely linked to actions for peace or justice. These prayer/actions admit great diversity: a prayer vigil at an embassy, prayer services at military bases, actions of civil disobedience, fasts, marches, pilgrimages. All somehow incorporate prayer with action and employ Christian meaning and symbols.

I would like to reflect on these experiences of prayer/action, or social action liturgies, from the point of view of the Christian peace activist. It is important to see that these liturgies express the faith-commitment of Christians, and therefore are liturgical. They are the work of the people of faith (Gk *leitōs*—public + *ergon*—work). I hope to relate these liturgies to the sacramental-centred liturgies that make up the common experience of liturgy for those in the Catholic tradition.

Liturgy: experience, meaning and symbol

The reason social action liturgies are so important is because symbols are important to social action. One cannot socially express deeply held values without symbols. And when symbols are used, they draw upon the deepest sources of value operating in the person or group. For Christian activists these values are the ones flowing from discipleship to Jesus.

Liturgy connects symbols, meaning and experience. It is the integration of the three that makes liturgy vital. The assertion that liturgy is life is an affirmation of this connection. Likewise, to say that liturgy is the celebration of Christian life is to connect Christian experience, meaning and symbol. Symbols expressing and enacting commonly held meanings of the experience of faith are liturgy.

When the three components become disconnected, then liturgy becomes lifeless. Or conversely, life is not liturgized or celebrated, i.e. the meaning given to experience is not expressed in effective symbols.

I would like to name two kinds of liturgical process. The one creates symbols that express the meaning of an experience: experience → meaning → symbols. Experiences (of faith) give rise to meaning that is expressed in liturgical symbols. This I would call an inductive liturgy. The second reverses the order by utilizing symbols of an experience whose meaning is explained. The order: symbol → meaning → experience. Liturgical symbols are used whose meaning is explained and related to the experience that gave rise to them. This second process I would designate as a deductive liturgy. Each liturgical process has a certain validity and purpose. The inductive process lends itself to an innovative, creative, diverse expression. The deductive process leads to stability, continuity, uniformity and the expression of traditional values. Liturgical tension in the Church seems to arise from the existence of both liturgical processes. The latter deductive mode predominates in the traditional sacramental liturgies which are experienced by the average church-going believer. The former inductive mode is found more frequently in the social action liturgies. Both would seem to serve a distinct purpose in an ongoing dialectic. Each mode carries certain limits or dangers.

As an example of the deductive mode I would include most celebrations of the sacraments. The starting point for these liturgies are rituals and symbols that have been handed down to us over the centuries. The rites and symbols may have been revised officially in the Church, but the celebration of the sacraments begins with the symbols as given through the rituals. The ritual/symbols are explained to those participating and attending, e.g. the water, the candle, the anointing of Baptism and Confirmation and the actions involved; the bread and wine of the Eucharist and its distribution. The person attending experiences directly symbols-explained rather than having their own direct experience expressed in symbols. The symbols are effective to the extent that the experience of those participating can relate to the meaning of the symbols. When the symbols are sufficiently universal in meaning they easily relate to the experience of the participants and the sacrament is meaningful. The washing and water of Baptism relate naturally to the meaning of cleansing and newness of life intended

by the sacrament. But when the experience of the sacrament is an experience only of the explanation of a symbol that does not relate to personal experience, the effectiveness of the sacrament is diminished. Given a scenario of symbols only accessible to personal experience through explanation, it is not difficult to imagine why people often experience the sacramental liturgies of the Church as less than life-giving.

The sacramental liturgies are composed of symbols well-worn by time. Symbols worn by time can continue to hand on cherished values that remain ever ancient, ever new. Time-worn symbols serve to link the community and its contemporary experience with that of the past. They are an antidote to excessive novelty and bear cherished and long-standing values through the vagaries of the ever-new. They help prevent triviality and superficiality, and they abide beyond the ephemeral and transitory. Particularly in stressful situations they bear up the faith that often has little else to cling to. The role of traditional liturgies in politically repressed countries seems evidence of this. The very traditional religious symbols carry both the values of the faith and the enduring cultural expression in which it is lived.

But they can also become gradually detached from the experience that gave rise to them and become irrelevant and unintelligible, certainly unmoving. An IHS appearing on the back of a chasuble is meaningless to all but a few. The fish, and its Greek anagram IXΘΥΣ (ichthus) is likewise lost to contemporary experience, however meaningful it was to early Christians.

Somewhere between the time-worn but cherished symbols, e.g. the crucifix, the breaking of bread, and those whose meaning has faded, are those whose meaning is accessible only through explanation or sympathetic effort. The gospel parables and images are often of this nature. Bread and its multiplication and sharing are understandable, but hosts as distributed in Holy Communion may be so individualized and spiritualized that the idea of sharing bread is lost. The image of the Good Shepherd is understandable but has lost its affective strength for those unacquainted with sheep. Traditions of piety like the Sacred Heart or devotion to saints and various apparitions of Mary are similarly alienating for many Catholics.

Liturgies of social action

The fate of liturgical symbols in general is sharper for those involved in social justice and peace activities. Because symbols are

so powerful in their ability to make tangible and effective the meaning of experience, they are extremely important for those who want to communicate their cries for justice or their desires for disarmament and peace.

Activists seek symbols that link the meaning of their actions to something visible, audible, tangible and kinetic: banners, slogans, songs, objects, actions. It can be said that symbols are more real than facts, because facts do not communicate their own meaning and value. Daniel Berrigan repeats the phrase: 'Truth is not exhausted by the facts'. Facts do not explain themselves, nor communicate intent, purpose, meaning and value. Symbols do. When Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle says 'Trident is the Auschwitz of Puget Sound', he is using a symbol that goes beyond the bare facts of Trident and the statistics of its destructive capacity, however horrendous these statistics are. The symbol evokes all the associations with extermination camps, linking this reality to the possible impending reality made capable by Trident. When activists dig a hole on the ground of the Ministry of Defence and try to bury there an image of Trident, they are saying in symbol that Trident should be buried. The fact of doing the digging on the MoD lawn makes the symbol more dramatic by being arrestable.

The activities themselves often embody the symbols as in the previous example. The term ploughshares action is given to activities, largely symbolic and inevitably illegal, where instruments of nuclear war are physically dismantled or destroyed. Using the image of Isaiah (2,4), 'They shall turn their swords into ploughshares', ploughshares activists translate these words in some literal sense (and therefore symbolically, since Isaiah is using a symbolic image) to dramatize the truth about disarmament. They enact a value with a dramatic symbol in the hope that it might become effective in a real way. The symbolic act anticipates reality in hope by enacting it symbolically. The actual disarmament hoped for will take place through political negotiations. Ploughshares activists are not so naive as to believe that their action in its literal effectiveness will dismantle the nuclear arsenal. The liturgical symbol points to a reality that will come about through other means.

Jim and Shelley Douglass have lived for several years in Bangor, Washington, on the railroad tracks to the Trident submarine base. They have been involved in actions of sitting on the tracks physically to stop the train. The action is symbolic, though stopping the train is real. It enacts their commitment and the call to others of

conscience to bring a stop to the construction and deployment of Trident submarines. Their physical action to stop the train is a symbolic enactment of a hope to divert the impending threat of nuclear annihilation posed by the existence of Trident submarines. It is analogous to the early Christian community's hope to avert the destruction of Jerusalem by adopting the nonviolent message of Jesus.

The symbols and actions used by activists of social justice and peace often draw heavily on traditional religious practice. The masses of people praying the rosary, even kneeling before tanks, or carrying statues of the Blessed Virgin during the political removal of Marcos in the Philippines is a dramatic example of the effectiveness of very traditional religious symbols.

Processions quite easily become marches and carry a message of justice or peace. The commitment to nonviolence comes from the Christian confidence in the power of love over force. On Ash Wednesday, 1989, in London, various Christian peace organizations collaborated in a liturgical action that began with a service on church premises and ended on the grounds of the Ministry of Defence. A similar liturgical action had been done for the past three years. Using the traditional symbols of charcoal and ashes, those gathered for the event marked their foreheads with ashes as traditionally done on Ash Wednesday and listened to the traditional reading from Joel (2, 12-18) on repentance. The ashes carried the additional meaning of the potential destruction that could result from a nuclear explosion. Then, carrying the ashes and charcoal, they went to the Ministry of Defence to scatter the ashes on the ground and to write a call to repentance on the walls of the MoD building. This marking of the walls was arrestable. The meaning of the liturgy was further carried into the courts by appealing to the significance of writing on the wall, and referring to the writing on the wall in Daniel 5, asking the state to take notice more of what was being written on the wall instead of attending exclusively to the fact that the walls were written on. Again, the truth is not exhausted by the facts. The symbol of writing on the wall is intended to point to the meaning; the fact of writing on the wall of the MoD stresses the importance of the message.

For one group participating in this event, the meaning of the ashes was enhanced further by a group liturgy to prepare for the event. In this liturgy the ashes used were created from things burnt that had special meaning for the persons involved. Individuals were

asked to burn something symbolic of what might be lost through a nuclear explosion in order to create the ashes to be spread on the lawn of the Ministry of Defence.

It is by connecting experience, meaning and symbol that activists of justice and peace reclaim old symbols and create new ones. The same gestures of procession as used in a Corpus Christi liturgy or a patron feast are now a symbolic cry for justice or a plea for disarmament. Vigiling before the Blessed Sacrament is a bodily prayer that is transferred to a missile base or an embassy or a factory for nuclear weapons.

Both the time and the place associated with traditional liturgies are used or transformed. The meaning of Ash Wednesday as the beginning of Lent was integral to the call to repentance at the Ministry of Defence. The action coincides with the beginning of the season of repentance. The geographical or physical place of liturgy is important. For the last several years, a group of Christians organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, including many Catholics, celebrate the Good Friday remembrance at an Air Force base, outside the fence. They hang a crucifix on the fence and have a liturgical service celebrating the meaning of Jesus's death with the barbed wire fence of a nuclear base in the background.

In 1989 a group of the Fellowship of Reconciliation fasted from solid food during Holy Week, each day vigiling and leafleting at a location suggesting violence. They were one day at a fast food restaurant, another day at the Stock Exchange. They went to the American Embassy with a statement about its involvement in Central America and to British Aerospace because of its production of military weapons and the export of these weapons to Third World countries. The Friday liturgy, being Good Friday, was at an Air Force base where Cruise missiles are located. On Saturday they fasted before a hospital that is being closed down, suggesting the violence done to health when public funds are withdrawn or diverted into military production. They broke the fast by breaking bread on Holy Saturday at a resource centre for AIDS. The week's fast during the liturgical calendar's Holy Week was accompanied by regular moments of prayer together and a call to almsgiving.

Another Catholic peace group, Catholic Peace Action, uses the traditional Christian symbol of breaking bread at the end of their fast before the Ministry of Defence during Low Week. The group regularly leaflets at the MoD and has periodical acts of civil disobedience there. Their Low Week fast is accompanied by a vigil

at both the MoD and Westminster Cathedral where the Bishops' Conference is meeting at that time.

Integration of two liturgical forms

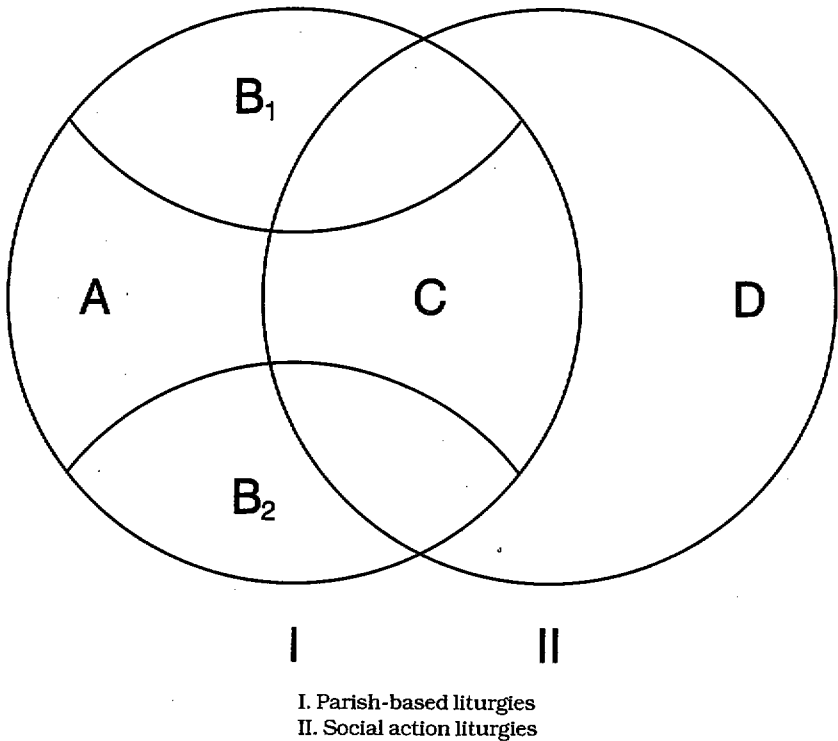
One can well ask how the liturgies arising from 'inside' the Church and those arising 'from the streets' fit together. Since both are an expression of the faith-commitment of believers, are they meant to converge? Do they overlap? A little, much, or not at all? Do they run on parallel or divergent tracks? Are they separate and distinct? Is one 'real' liturgy and another something less than that? If one takes a rather narrow view of liturgy, confining it to the celebration of the rituals of the Church, these liturgies 'of the streets' hardly fit in at all, unless they happen to coincide with or include one of the rituals, such as the Mass. Most, however, are non-eucharistic and non-sacramental, and are composed of ceremonies or services created specifically for the occasion. Regarded, however, as a communal expression of the life of faith for a significant group of Christians, the prayer/actions are definitely 'liturgical'.

How do we relate the diverse liturgical experiences with each other? There seems to be a range of liturgical experiences that vary from those rather strictly associated with the sacramental life of the Church, usually occurring within the context of a parish, or parish-based, to those prayer/actions occurring outside the context of a parish and arising within the action related to a justice or peace issue. In between lie various intermediate possibilities.

The liturgies of those active in social justice or peace and claiming Christian (or Catholic) roots are closely linked with the activities themselves. As such they are often located outside the church buildings, but rather close to the scene of action, e.g. at a military base, at the Ministry of Defence, at an embassy. They may consist in prayer together, perhaps in a church, that flows into the actions that follow, or the prayer/action/symbol may all be a single event. Actions may arise from a local parish to which the activists belong as members and from which they experience support. But more often than not they arise from participation in an organization or affinity group not related to a parish. In some parishes there are justice groups and peace groups that enjoy a certain level of support in their local parish. They may engage in activities and prepare prayer services or awareness events within the parish. But they can also experience a certain alienation in their own parish,

especially if the actions/services take on a controversial character or have a clear political implication, e.g. civil disobedience.

In an attempt to organize these different kinds of prayer/actions or liturgies, the following diagram may be helpful:



The two large circles of the diagram represent parish-based liturgies (I) and social action liturgies (II) respectively. The overlapping areas represent liturgies that are in some way connected both to social action and parish-based liturgies. The divergent parts of the circles that do not overlap represent largely sacramental-oriented parish liturgies (in Circle I) and non-parish social action liturgies (in Circle II).

Looking at a continuum of liturgies, one could move from parish-based liturgies in which little or no social justice content is expressed

to liturgies of social action with no sacramental or parish-based content.

A: Sacramental liturgies with no particular social justice or peace content.

B: Liturgies, sacramental or non-sacramental, that sometimes do and sometimes do not contain themes of social justice or peace. The Eucharistic liturgy (B₁), for example, for Peace Sunday could well combine the Eucharist with a clear expression of justice and peace. Non-eucharistic (B₂) bible services or special prayer services could well include themes of justice and peace during Lent or One World Week.

C: Special liturgies, prayer services or events could be focused on specific peace and justice issues, e.g. Northern Ireland, Central America Week, South Africa.

D: Liturgies that arise from social justice movements or events that have no sacramental or parish connection.

The purpose of this diagram is not so much to separate out or distinguish the different kinds of liturgies as to see how they fit together. The accent is on making links with the experience of liturgy in the parish and the liturgical experiences of social action. Unless this link is made there is a danger of seeing these social action liturgies as outside the scope of our liturgical life and therefore extra, extraneous, unimportant. When that happens, the liturgies that celebrate the sacraments and take place 'on location' in the parish are easily regarded as the 'real' life of the Church, and the prayer/actions or liturgies taking place elsewhere are seen as peripheral, unimportant or unnecessary. The same perception is then applied to the importance of justice and peace for the life of the Church in general. The life of the 'Church' (= parish) is identified with the liturgies of celebration (often of personal life events like baptism, marriage, first communion and confirmation) while the mission of the Church to announce God's reign of justice and peace is relegated to the fringe. To perceive the Church as a peace-building community of disciples seeking the justice of God's reign becomes alien to the liturgical experience of the average Catholic. At the same time, the person deeply committed to work actively for justice and peace feels alienated from the parish life and its liturgies.

The forms of liturgies emerging from peace and justice actions diverge from sacramental-oriented liturgies for reasons other than

location as well. Since they occur frequently in supra- or extra-parish contexts they are often ecumenical or inter-faith events. The challenges of peace and justice address all people of good will, and so people of different denominations and faiths are present. Some groups or events may be specifically Catholic (e.g. Catholic Peace Action or Pax Christi), others ecumenical (Fellowship of Reconciliation or Christian CND), and others inter-faith. The liturgies that result from this collaboration express the common roots of faith of those participating. As such, they lose the particular identity as 'Catholic' or 'Anglican' that is associated with the sacramental parish-based liturgies.

Also, because the liturgies of social action are frequently non-sacramental, they do not depend on a clerical structure and can be more inclusive, freer of sexist or clerical predominance. Because the sacraments depend for their ordinary celebration on the presence of a priest, they bear the burden of being sexist and clerical. For those aware and sensitive to the clerical and sexist predominance in parish-based and sacramental liturgies of the Catholic Church, the social action liturgies are experienced as a kind of space of liberation in this regard. The concern about separatist and autonomous liturgy is of course present, but perhaps we should attend first to the need for these opportunities of expression of inclusive liturgies.

Conclusion

The emergence of social action liturgies alongside the traditional sacramental and parish-based liturgies creates a kind of liturgical diversity and tension that seeks integration within the Christian community. As awareness of the justice and peace dimensions of the Church's mission grows at various levels, including the local parish, the need to integrate this awareness liturgically also increases. At present, two forms of liturgical expression occur alongside each other. One is a deductive liturgy based on the sacraments that is centred in the parish; the second is an inductive liturgy based on prayer/actions of Christians committed to actions for justice and peace which extends beyond parish boundaries. It is hoped that by welcoming the diverse liturgical expressions of the people committed to justice and peace in an active way, the overall liturgical expression of the Church will be enhanced. A balance between or an integration of inductive and deductive liturgies can contribute to the Church's liturgical life. The creative potential of

action-based liturgy will be complemented by the preservation of enduring values and unity through the sacramental liturgies. Tensions will no doubt exist within the process, but with an eye to recognizing the values being preserved in each process, the Church will grow in its service to God's reign of justice and peace and its sacramental character as sign of the inauguration of this reign in Christ Jesus.