

# Liturgy and devotions

*Lawrence S. Cunningham*

IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT FOR MANY ORDINARY Catholics of a certain age, popular devotions were one of the shaping experiences of their identities as Catholics. From the many popular devotions, characteristic of Catholic life after Trent, derived ways of looking at and thinking about our relationship to God, how we understood the person and work of Christ, how we shaped our prayers. One proof of that fact is to make a visit to any older Catholic church (built, say, before 1960) where one still finds elaborate tableau-style stations of the cross, racks for devotional candles, shrines to various saints, pamphlets for various devotions, an altar dedicated to the Blessed Mother, and so on. Many of the devotional practices reflected in those religious artefacts fell into disuse in the decades after Vatican II. When my undergraduate students read Joyce's *Portrait of the artist as a young man*, with its rich pages redolent of old Catholic practices (fasting before communion, 'First Fridays', novenas, etc.), they feel that his allusions are alien as the various forms of Hindu *puja*.

This essay will argue that such a sea change may have been inevitable, but will also ask if there has been any discernible trend today that makes up for the lack of such a rich devotional life, since it could be argued that such devotions did shape Catholics spiritually, pedagogically and morally.

Early in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*) the fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressly stipulate the importance of devotions in relationship to the liturgy:

Popular devotions (*pia exercitia*) of the Christian people are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the church. Such is especially the case with devotions called for by the Apostolic See. Devotions (*sacra exercitia*) proper to individual churches also have a special dignity if they are conducted by mandate of the bishops in accord with customs or books lawfully approved. (1.13)

The same paragraph goes on to say that such exercises should harmonize with the liturgical season and the liturgical books, since many devotional practices derive from the liturgy and lead people to

the liturgy since ‘the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them’ (*ibid.*).

Despite that brief section in the first chapter of the Constitution on the Liturgy a number of noteworthy things are being stipulated in the document. First, there is an affirmation of the value of devotions. Second, there is an acknowledgement that many pious exercises have some link to the liturgy. Third, however, the motive behind the notation about either papal or episcopal oversight with respect to devotions was a desire to distinguish devotion from liturgy so that the former would not somehow begin to bleed into the latter. There was the fear, in the words of the late Josef Andreas Jungmann, that the ‘entire wild growth of very peripheral forms of devotion, prevalent in some countries, might find its way into the well-tended garden of the liturgy’.<sup>1</sup> Jungmann uses a decision made by the Congregation of Rites in 1959 to shed further light on matters at issue in the conciliar declaration. The Congregation answered a query from an Austrian bishop about modifications in the Corpus Christi processions in his diocese. The congregation answered that since the procession did not have liturgical status but was a *pium exercitium*, the modifications fell under the authority of the bishop. In other words, the Corpus Christi procession arrangements fell under the rubric of ‘devotion’ and, as such, were not the concern of the dicastery which deals with matters of the liturgy.

The matter then seems rather straightforward: liturgy is the public work of the Church manifested in the liturgy of the eucharist, the celebration of the other sacraments, and in the public prayer of the Church – the *opus Dei*. Pious exercises, by contrast, are all of those forms of devotion which are not in the ‘well-tended garden’ which is the liturgy. Such pious exercises may have (or have had) a universal appeal (the rosary, the stations of the cross, etc.) or they may be exercises peculiar to a given locale (a pilgrimage to this or that shrine) or exercised under the purview of a particular religious congregation (novenas in honour of the seven sorrows of Mary). In certain cases the distinction between devotional practices and the liturgy are clear enough. One need not think back much farther than the once common practice of people reciting the rosary during the celebration of mass. It does not require detailed analysis to show that there was a clear disjunction in such a practice, no matter how easy it is to show how such a usage might have come about.

On the other hand, we do notice that participation in the liturgy often carries with it gestures of piety which are not intrinsic to hearing the Word and breaking the bread: striking the breast, extending the hands

for the Lord's Prayer, etc. In fact, one notices many gestures of piety that have taken on highly symbolic force. The most conspicuous example of such a gesture is the practice of standing as opposed to kneeling during the eucharistic prayer. In parts of the United States the mark of a 'liberal' congregation is one in which the participants stand, while the resolute decision to kneel demonstrates that a congregation is 'obedient to Rome' or has a high eucharistic theology or whatever. The happiest solution seems to be the one I have noticed occasionally in our on-campus church: some stand and some kneel but they all give each other the kiss of peace at the appropriate moment!

### ***Liturgy and devotion linked***

It is not difficult to think of examples where devotion and liturgy intersect. One could make the argument that the liturgical plays of the Middle Ages (which in themselves could be understood as devotional practices) have their root in the liturgy. From the simple practice of inserting tropes into the introit of the mass with the subsequent elaboration of such tropes into short dialogues (the so-called *Quem quaeritis* trope of Easter) and, by the middle of the tenth century, actual performance of the tropes by monks in white albs, one sees the direction of a liturgical action which would soon be elaborate enough to be taken from the mass and 'performed' after matins until it then moved to the church and, finally, to the pageant wagons outside the churchyard. One could argue that until there was an elaboration such that space outside liturgical services and liturgical space were distinguished for these separate functions, the tropes and their elaborated dialogue were part of the liturgy. The devotional cycle of plays common in the Middle Ages is, then, simply an elaboration of liturgical gestures. It would be an interesting exercise to think about when such performances became 'devotional' and not 'liturgical' and, again, when they passed from being 'devotional' to 'secular'.

The question is raised because it sheds light on some contemporary practices where devotion and liturgy are hardly impermeable to one another. The old cathedral of San Fernando in San Antonio (Texas) has developed a set of practices where the life of devotion and the celebration of the liturgy are intimately connected.<sup>2</sup> Their Sunday mass (in Spanish) is televised over large areas of the United States, Mexico and Central America. With a congregation of Mexican Americans who trace their ancestry in Texas back generations, the celebrations at the cathedral take on the character of public manifestations in which, for example, the traditional Mexican *posadas* (processions through neigh-

bourhoods nine days before Christmas) end on Christmas Eve when the celebrants finally enter the cathedral to enthrone the Infant Christ just before mass is celebrated. When does the devotional practice of the *posadas* end and the liturgy begin? In the same way, when the men of San Fernando begin building the *calvario* at midnight before Good Friday, their work – in anticipation of the Way of the Cross through the city before the liturgy begins – is described as ‘a vital part of the liturgy, rather than simply preparation or the setting of a stage’.<sup>3</sup>

There is a sense, it seems to me, in which such elaborations of the liturgy can be seen as extensions of the liturgy at least in the sense that they are ‘performative acts’ which serve as a kind of extension of the preaching of the Word which is, as most would agree, integral to any coherent eucharistic liturgy. Only on examination based on particular cases would it become clear where liturgy ends and devotionalism begins.

### *Devotionalism as context for liturgy*

In the previous section the argument was made that in certain settings the distinguishing of devotion from liturgy occurs on a continuum where devotional acts become patently detached from liturgical acts. In other instances, however, one can think of activities where devotional acts provide an anticipation for or the completion of liturgical acts. The activities of the priest who celebrated the Tridentine rite before the reforms of Vatican II is a case in point. The authorized (*editio typica*) Roman missal had precise prayers for the celebrant which could be recited as preparation for mass (garnished with indulgences) which consisted not only of psalms but devotional prayers drawn from classical authors like Ss Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius of Loyola as well as devotional prayers offered to the Blessed Mother and St Joseph. There is no doubt that these prayers were meant to make explicit a sense of piety, holy attention and so on as a priest readied himself to celebrate mass.

The lay equivalent of such prayers was the standard practice of the congregation to enter church before mass, kneel for at least a space of time, in order to pray and make ready to participate in the liturgy once it began. Was the thanksgiving after mass as the priest finished distribution of communion part of the liturgy or a devotional practice inserted in the middle of the ceremony? There was an expectation, not always honoured, that persons take a moment or two after the priest left the sanctuary to ‘make a thanksgiving’. When that practice occurred, one could say that attendance at mass was framed by two devotional

moments: silent prayer and attention before mass and a moment of thanksgiving after mass. Those moments were intensified when the Blessed Sacrament was exposed after mass and benediction celebrated as a kind of devotional conclusion to the liturgy. Anne Taves has argued that one can distinguish in modern Catholic life devotionalism connected (however tenuously) to the mass and to the sacrament of penance (e.g. parish mission sermons/devotions as a prelude to making a ‘good’ confession) from those which are more individual or ‘less’ sacramental (e.g. novenas).<sup>4</sup>

### *Devotions and performance*

In a first-year undergraduate class in theology we were reading the passion narrative of St John. John 19:1 tells how Pilate had Jesus ‘scourged’. I looked at my puzzled students (there were eighteen of them) and asked who knew what scourging meant. Not one student could answer my question. It only struck me in retrospect that the reason they did not know the word (these are very bright students) is that they no longer made the ‘stations of the cross’ or knew the ‘sorrowful’ mysteries of the rosary. In other words, a rich and varied vocabulary and iconography, familiar to me from the time I entered primary school, was simply not part of their experience.

That anecdote is not meant to introduce a lament about religious ignorance but, rather, to point out that a whole skein of religious language, image and prayer formulas that was part and parcel of informal Catholic education has been lost for most young people with the decline of a certain kind of Catholic devotionalism. In its place (at least for the students at our university) there has been a kind of performative Christian activism that either explicitly or implicitly ‘acts out’ the imperatives of Christian faith. The new forms of devotionalism, in short, orbit around volunteers working on their academic breaks on inner-city projects, extended times of volunteer service, tutoring the handicapped, helping at the local homeless shelter, and so on. This impulse to serve gets reinforced by a series of ‘Notre Dame Encounters’ in which young people do an intensive weekend retreat to reflect upon and make decisions about how they will live their lives in a Christian manner.

My hypothesis would be that these various forms of Christian performance are the new forms of devotionalism for at least some young Christian people. To give these activities some serious basis they are usually linked with some kind of retreat experience like the Notre Dame Encounter or the offering of the Ignatian Exercises for those

students who come from Jesuit schools. The service projects and the retreat or encounter opportunities get some extension through pious exercises such as sessions of Taizé prayer or through Bible study groups. What may be intuited in these contexts is a new model of devotional practice which is still in the process of becoming.

What is not so clear to me is how this form of performative devotionalism is linked to the liturgical life. A former student, working in a poor rural school in the American South, wrote to me recently about how meaningful her work was. The one thing that bothered her was that she saw no connection between that work and her (reluctant) presence at mass on Sunday at a local parish which she described – her words – as dull, uninspired and mechanical. She told me that all the inspiring talk (some of it by me!) about the relationship of liturgy and service did not seem to be the case. In fact, what kept her alive spiritually was the informal (devotional!) prayer of her companions at table, their common reading of Scripture, and her own spiritual reading. In other words, an old form of devotional practice energized this new form of devotional service while the liturgy seemed to her peripheral. Her situation, *mutatis mutandis*, seems not unlike the situation of older Catholics whose lives were shaped by devotionalism but whose ‘obligation’ was Sunday mass.

### *Traditional devotional practices*

Some forms of traditional devotional practice are in decline as simple observation tells us.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, there is a kind of nostalgia for at least some of these pious exercises, which leads to a desire for their reintroduction. Again, my own university may serve as an example. Over the past few years there has been an active movement, almost totally student-inspired, to encourage weekly exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in one of the residence hall chapters. Students have actually taken out full-page advertisements in the campus newspapers urging students to participate even though some of the advertisements rest on dubious theological foundations ('Jesus must not be left alone' one of them said). Similarly, there has been an upsurge of interest in making, outdoors, the stations of the cross during Lent with special emphasis (and elaborations of the ceremony) on Good Friday. Finally, students can almost always be found, singly or in small groups, at the grotto of the Blessed Mother behind the university church. For reasons rooted in the university's tradition, it is the place for marriage proposals to take place, for

graduating seniors to make a visit en masse, and for throngs to appear in anticipation of final examinations!

It is my impression that interest in some traditional forms of devotion is growing in non-university communities and in many parishes around the United States. In the burgeoning Hispanic Catholic community there is an old tradition of such devotionalism which is still strong. Indeed, some of the central interests of Hispanic-American theologians have been to give serious theological consideration to the 'popular religion' of the older Hispanic communities (some of which, in the South-West, were long settled before the American Revolution) and to those of the new immigrant groups.<sup>6</sup> What is not so clear is how this kind of 'popular religion' will endure among newer immigrant groups as people move, inevitably, into the middle class.

The recovery of practices such as eucharistic adoration is also on the rise more generally. How does one account for this latter recovery? It may be partially explained by the influence of the Pope himself who practises and encourages a vigorous devotional life. The widespread return of Eucharistic Congresses in the USA can only be understood as a response to the encouragement of Pope John Paul II. Whether such a movement will prove vigorous or not in the long run is still an open question.

Revitalization of older devotional practices may also be seen in the light of certain trends in the post-Vatican II Church. There exists a widespread perception that the reforms (especially liturgical reforms) after Vatican II were too 'word'-orientated with a commensurate diminution of the iconic, the visual and the sacramental. This orientation had its impact on church architecture and art. A shorthand way of seeing that shift might be observed in the change from statues and pictures to banners – with the latter having *written* messages on them. One also sees an increasing demand for more decoration inside churches, a demand reinforced by various episcopal directions insisting on a place for honouring the Blessed Mother, for the patron of the parish and a recognizable area for the tabernacle.

One can also detect attempts to reorientate certain devotional practices with regard to the insights developed out of the newer theological insights afforded the Church after Vatican II. One striking example of such a newer orientation may be seen in the handbook of prayer prepared by the committee charged with the events of the Great Jubilee for pilgrims coming to Rome.<sup>7</sup> To the traditional fourteen stations of the cross have been added fourteen stations of the *Via lucis* which commemorate events in the post-resurrectional life of Jesus

ending with the sending of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is set in the context of scriptural selections to enrich adoration. The meditations for the mysteries of the rosary are accompanied with scriptural passages. Finally, allowances are made for the more liturgical practice of morning and evening prayer. None of these practices is new, but one sees throughout the manual a serious attempt to focus more clearly on the Word of God.

### *The future of devotions*

The very word ‘devotion’ carries with it so much baggage that it might be useful to remember that ‘devout’ and ‘devotion’ had quasi-technical meanings in the early modern period. ‘Devotion’, Francis de Sales wrote,

is nothing else but that spiritual alertness and vivacity which enables us to co-operate with charity promptly and wholeheartedly; and as it is the work of charity to make us keep generally and universally all God’s commandments, so it is the work of devotion that makes us do so promptly and diligently.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of his treatise on the devout life de Sales sums up his work by discussing the renewal and preservation of the devout life in eighteen short considerations. It is clear that he understands devotion as aversion from sin and growth in Christian virtue accomplished by God’s love in general and the love of Christ in particular. The devout life is, in short, the Christian life.

While ‘devotion’ has taken on many other meanings since the time de Sales wrote his classic work, it does not seem out of place to apply his insights when thinking about devotions today. Within that perspective we can ask whether a given exercise, linked explicitly to the liturgy or not, actually aids and fosters the Christian life both in its ‘no’ to sin and in its affirmation of the way of Christ. By engaging in such an interrogation we might further explore whether any particular devotion in actuality really aids the Christian life. Such an inquiry helps us sort out those forms of devotion that might too easily degenerate into quasi-magical gestures (making novenas for this or that ‘favour’), that make too emphatic a move towards one-sided considerations (adoration of the eucharist at the expense of eucharistic participation), and so on.

The Salesian understanding of devotion might also help us understand how certain traditions in fact do help the Christian life. The many

popular exercises that cluster around major feasts – the crèche at Christmas; the familiar customs at Easter for certain ethnic groups – can be read as builders of communities of memory as well as bonds which hold generations together. The popular denigration (I have heard it from pulpits) of those who only come to church for midnight mass at Christmas fails to understand that the devotional cluster around such moments does bring people to the believing community at least for that time. Is that something at which we should scoff? Is not part of the attraction the happy mixture of the liturgy itself in tandem with the reassurance of the crèche which is also part of the gestalt of Christmas?

Many of these devotional practices have profound roots in common culture. They arise from the need to feel, express and perform elements of faith that are intertwined with family practice. Their success depends in large part on how they are received by people. When they lose their religious significance they empty out into mere pageantry as the carry-over processions and patronal feasts in many European cities attest.

There is a deep impulse in people that causes them to create, at times almost spontaneously, devotional gestures. There is a good book to be written analysing the quasi-liturgical (devotional) actions of people when confronted with tragedy as they manifest their deepest feelings in words, music and symbolic acts – the outpourings after the death of Princess Diana or after the Columbine high school massacre come readily to mind. Such devotional practices are quite common in my own country. Our larger community has had its share of the murder of young people. After such sorrowful events groups go to the place of such killings to erect small white crosses, to demonstrate against violence, to pray and read the Scriptures. Similar overtly religious devotional dramas take place outside our penitentiary walls before every execution in all those states where capital punishment exists.

Such devotional practices, of course, have a certain ad hoc quality about them; they arise in response to a specific need but fade as the occasion fades or is remedied. A far more subtle issue would be to ask about the creation of devotional practices which tie more closely to ‘ordinary’ Catholic life. It is not all that clear that anyone can successfully create such practices simply by sheer determination. Most devotional practices spring from some cultural pressure or theological trend which flourishes into practices. One needed a new form of monastic practice before the Taizé prayer became a possibility, just as prayer groups only became easy to form when certain charismatic groups made them an attractive possibility.

The question, it seems to me, is to ask what is the reality of present-day Catholic life to which expressions of devotion can respond. Obviously, such expressions will vary since the reality of rural life is not the same as the reality of urban life. That new forms of devotion should arise (will arise!) seems to be an empirical lesson from our historical past. That such devotions would contribute to our faith life seems certain. What those devotional practices will look like is not clear. They may build on past practices or they may derive from new impulses and exigent needs of the culture. Every person is an *ens symbolicum* and that truth is even more the case for a Christian who possesses at the heart of faith a basic conviction which is the incarnation. The ways we flesh out our incarnational faith as meaningful gestures of prayer and performance provide the deepest meaning of devotions. Devotional activity, furthermore, constitutes the essential democratization of faith – it is the activity of the whole People of God where class, rank or status is irrelevant.

It is said of St John Vianney that he used to see an old peasant, at the end of the working day, sitting in the back of the church facing the tabernacle on the altar. The saintly curé once asked the old farmer what he was doing. ‘I look at the Good God and the Good God looks at me.’ It is hard to think of an anecdote that sums up the meaning of devotion better than that.

**Lawrence S. Cunningham** is Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana (USA). The author and editor of seventeen books, his most recent work is *Thomas Merton and the monastic tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999). He is currently working on a study of the lives of the saints as a theological resource.

#### NOTES

1 Josef Andreas Jungmann, ‘The Constitution on the Liturgy’ in *Commentary on the documents of Vatican II* Vol I (New York: Herder & Herder/London: Burns & Oates, 1967), p 17.

2 The material on this remarkable church is drawn from Virgilio Elizondo and Timothy M. Matovina, *San Fernando Cathedral: soul of the city* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

3 *San Fernando*, p 90.

4 Anne Taves, *The household of the faith: Roman Catholic devotions in mid-nineteenth century America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp 7ff.

5 I am in debt in this section to the useful survey done by my colleague Michael Driscoll: ‘Liturgy and devotions: back to the future’ in *The renewal that awaits us*, ed Eleanor Bernstein and Martin F. Connell (Chicago: LTP Publications, 1997), pp 68–90.

6 See, for a brief but sophisticated reflection, Robert Goizueta, 'U.S. Hispanic popular Catholicism as theopoetics' in *Hispanic/Latino theology*, ed Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando Segovia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), pp 261–288.

7 *Pellegrini in preghiera* (Milano: Mondadori, 1999).

8 *Introduction to the devout life*, trans Michael Day (London: Burns & Oates, 1956), p 10.