

Liturgy Matters: Liturgy and Scripture as the Mirrors of Catholicity

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Abstract: This article considers two recent debates about the reform of the liturgy in the light of the principle of *lex Orandi lex Credendi*. Liturgy is important because it nourishes and sustains belief, but a didactic approach to liturgy does not do full justice to the dynamic nature of the liturgy and its relation to the community. It examines the development of the canon of scripture from a phenomenological perspective, as a paradigmatic example of the dynamic relationship between the liturgy and the community. As “full, active and conscious” participants in the liturgy, the faithful also has a part to play in the recognition and acceptance of these reforms.

Key Words: Catholic liturgy; liturgical reform – reception; *lex Orandi lex Credendi*; biblical canonicity; liturgical participation; sacramentality; Christian worship

I. Recent Debates

Liturgy matters: even in a society as secular as Australia. Recent evidence of this can be seen in the reportage and public reaction to two media events concerning Roman Catholic liturgy over the last year. The first event was the leaking of the draft translation of the new Roman Missal – the Latin edition having been published in 2000 – by both the *Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Religion Report*¹ and *The Tablet*.² The second media event was the belated reporting of a controversial baptismal formula used in the South Brisbane Church of St Mary’s.³

In the editorial of *The Tablet*, Catherine Pepinster, identified the central issue,

The new translation of the Order of the Mass will affect English-speaking Catholics directly and immediately. As the Latin phrase has it, *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* – “what people pray, they believe”; the People of God must be confident that their liturgical prayers properly express their relationship with God and the image of the Church that flows from this.⁴

The traditional axiom cited by Pepinster is derived from the Prosper of Aquitaine’s (fifth century) axiom: “*Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (Let the law of prayer establish

¹ The *Religion Report* (28 April 2004), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/relrpt/stories/s1099661.htm>.

² *The Tablet*, 22 May 2005, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/cgi-bin/register.cgi/tablet-00897>.

³ It is beside the point that the reporting of the first event was possibly premature and that the reports of the second event hit the press after the matter had ostensibly resolved, St Mary’s having already responded positively to the Archbishop’s request to reinstate the traditional baptismal formula. The controversy over the baptismal formula at St. Mary’s, South Brisbane was first reported by *Online Catholics* 21 (13 October 2004), <http://onlinecatholics.com.au/issue21/news1.php>.

⁴ Editorial, “The Draft Order of the Mass” *The Tablet*, 22 May 2004.

the law of belief).”⁵ Liturgy matters because it touches upon the source and sustenance of Christian belief. But there is an inherent difficulty in using the axiom as a guide for liturgical reform. Prosper’s axiom is not entirely reversible. It does not advocate that we should also let the rule of belief establish the law of prayer. Although creedal formulas have been derived from theological reflection upon the practice and the experience of worship, it does not follow that creedal formulas can themselves operate as templates for ensuring the orthodoxy of worship. However, the Congregation for Divine Worship in its instruction *Liturgicam Authenticam* argues that:

The liturgical texts’ character as a very powerful *instrument* for instilling in the lives of the Christian faithful the elements of faith and Christian morality, is to be maintained in the translations with the utmost solicitude. The translation, furthermore, must always be in accord with sound doctrine.⁶

While this statement is undoubtedly correct, I am troubled by the use of the word “instrument” which also implies a hand to wield the instrument. As an instruction on the implementation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Liturgicam Authenticam* appropriately references *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in support of its approach. In the passage from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, however, it is God who instructs.

Although the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God speaks to His people and Christ is still proclaiming His gospel. And the people reply to God both by song and prayer.⁷

While it is of the very essence of the liturgy to nourish us in our faith, there is an inherent danger in attempting to use liturgy for didactic purposes.⁸ Consider the designations “Creator, Liberator, Sustainer” which were used in place of the traditional baptismal formula at South Brisbane. One of the shortcomings of the alternative formula is that it reduces the three persons of the Trinity to a function. Christians believe in a personal and relational God, and each person of the Trinity exceeds any designation of function. The Father is more than simply “creator” and the Son exceeds the single title “liberator.” The Son is also the agent of creation, and incarnate in Jesus is called the Christ. Likewise, the Holy Spirit does more than sustain us, she also calls us beyond ourselves, sanctifying, inspiring, and divinising us; making us sons and daughters in the Son. And while it is appropriate to differentiate the distinctive roles of the three persons of the Trinity, the actions of the Trinity in the economy of salvation are undivided.

This is the problem when we let theology dictate liturgy. Liturgy being largely symbolic is richer and therefore more adequate to the reality it describes than any subsequent conceptualisation of what we believe. To reverse the formula runs the risk of turning our liturgies into little more than a didactic exercise, an extended homily, rather than the prayer of the Church that forms us nourishes and sustains us as Church. The one

⁵ James T. Bretzke SJ, *Consecrated Phrases: A Latin Theological Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, Liturgical Press, 2003), 77.

⁶ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Liturgiam Authenticam: On The Use Of Vernacular Languages In The Publication Of The Books Of The Roman Liturgy* (2001), para. 26, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgia-authenticam_en.html. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para. 33. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

⁸ See Aidan Kavanaugh, “Scriptural Word and Liturgical Worship” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1995), 131-137.

is broader, more polysemic and inclusive than the other. James Alison makes a similar point with regards to the theory of atonement. Alison argues that the theory of atonement reduces the richness of the Christian understanding of salvation to a single dimension. Alison does not want to get rid of atonement, but for him it is properly a liturgy to be celebrated and a narrative to be lived rather than a problem to be solved with a mathematical formula.⁹

It seems to me that this mistake might be one thing that both the baptismal formula of the parish of South Brisbane and a narrow or ideologically driven reading of *Liturgiam Authenticam* might have in common. So what then should guide reform? It seems to me that one criterion by which the diverse parties have judged the success or otherwise of liturgical reform is one of recognition. Does the liturgy correspond to the nature of the liturgy as they understand it? And yet this is one criterion that *Liturgiam Authenticam* would seem to reject.

The words of the Sacred Scriptures, as well as the other words spoken in liturgical celebrations, especially in the celebration of the Sacraments, are not intended primarily to be a sort of mirror of the interior dispositions of the faithful; rather, they express truths that transcend the limits of time and space.¹⁰

My argument is that although the liturgy is not intended primarily as such, it is nonetheless a mirror. It is a mirror of both the local and the universal church and not simply of the dispositions peculiar to the individual. I suspect that the above passage simply seeks to rule out an excessive individualism, although without the individual the Church becomes an abstraction. The liturgy is, however, the mirror of the faith that the individual holds in common with the community. It transcends the limits of space and time not in an ahistorical and disembodied sense, but in so far as the faith of this person, and this community remain in communion with the church as a whole.¹¹

The members of the Congregation of Divine Worship are themselves looking for a hieratic style that mirrors their own understanding and experience of Christian faith as it is expressed in the liturgy.¹² It is a style that Catherine Pepinster in her editorial for *The Tablet* notes may alarm some readers.¹³ Hugh Lawrence responded by asking, "how can the language of the Mass liturgy be anything but 'hieratic' (your objection)? The Mass is a priestly act performed by a priestly people."¹⁴ The offering of the Mass is a priestly act, but it is also in the words of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* "a memorial of His death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us."¹⁵ The symbolic and sacramental power of the Eucharist is not exhausted by any single metaphor. It should surely be rich enough to accommodate a plurality of authentically

⁹ See James Alison, "Unpicking Atonement's Knots," in *On Being Liked* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 17-31.

¹⁰ *Liturgiam Authenticam*, para. 19.

¹¹ Indeed, as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states: "Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the 'sacrament of unity,' namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops." *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para. 26.

¹² "It will be seen that the observance of the principles set forth in this Instruction will contribute to the gradual development, in each vernacular, of a sacred style that will come to be recognized as proper to liturgical language." *Liturgiam Authenticam*, para. 27.

¹³ "Readers will notice many improvements on the Missal currently in use. But they may also be alarmed at the hieratic, archaic nature of God's relationship with humanity implicit in some of the prayers." Editorial, "The Draft Order of the Mass" *The Tablet*, 22nd May 2004.

¹⁴ Hugh Lawrence, letter to *The Tablet*, 29th May 2004.

¹⁵ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para. 47

Christian spiritualities and be “the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”¹⁶

Because the liturgy is meant to express in the lives of the faithful what it is to be Church, it must also express the self-understanding of the Christian as Church. In the rest of this article I will argue that the experience of recognition is intrinsic to the nature of the liturgy. Unless there is the element of recognition on the part of the faithful, no reform of the liturgy and no new translation will be successful. There is room for a didactic element in the liturgy but only in so far as it nourishes the community in the faith into which they already initiated, believe and are committed: in which the words and actions are able to made their own.

II. A Phenomenology of Christian Recognition

There is a passage from T.S. Eliot’s four quartets that for me expresses something at the heart of the Catholic sense of sacramentality and the constitutive role of the liturgy for Christian faith.

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness. I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations – not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable.¹⁷

I interpret Eliot as saying that the question of meaning is something that arises after the experience and raises it to a new level. It is only when we have grasped the meaning and significance of something that we are able to approach and reappropriate that experience. Meaning revives the experience and makes it transformative. And finally, this is not simply the work of an individual but of a community, across generations.

Christianity begins with an experience, the experience of the first Christians. But this experience does not simply remain something subjective and personal since it has come to be handed down the generations. The most basic experience here is the experience of forgiveness, peace and new life received in and through the encounter with the Risen Christ. This experience found concrete expression in what became the Church’s celebration of the sacraments: particularly baptism and Eucharist. How they attempted to understand and make sense of this experience is the beginning of Christian theology.

This sacramental experience is read back into the Gospels: most famously in John 6 where the Eucharist becomes a trope for interpreting the identity and mission of Christ and the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus where the encounter with the Risen Lord himself is situated within the celebration of the Eucharist where the disciples “recognised him at the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35).

From the disciples point of view they had received forgiveness and new life, both of which are gifts that only God can give. But what happened cannot be simply reduced to a subjective psychological phenomenon on the part of the disciples. Something objective had also happened to Jesus. In the various accounts of post-resurrectional confession, they do not say “I have seen Jesus” but “I have seen the Lord”. But, since Lord is a title reserved

¹⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para. 2.

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Savages, II,” in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 208.

for God, the evangelists are telling us that the witnesses not only enjoyed the sight of Jesus, but even more importantly they experienced insight into who and what he was. They saw that Jesus was transformed and was now in the realm of God. Here we have the beginning of Christology, as the first Christians try to make sense of what God had done in Jesus. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, they had had the experience, but had yet to discover the meaning. The first response then to the mystery of salvation revealed in Jesus was not theology but worship; worship as a way of integrating and appropriating the experience. The primacy of liturgy becomes even clearer when considering the development of the canon of scripture.

Engagement with Scripture has always been central to the identity of the Christian community. For both Judaism and Christianity, it one could say that the communities and their sacred books formed each other.¹⁸ For both Christianity and Israel, the original setting and context of scripture was in the liturgy, the ritual worship of the community. The formation of the scriptures for Israel really only received its impetus with the destruction of the temple that had been the centre and focus of Israel's spiritual life and identity. But even before then we can see the liturgical origins of many texts: the psalms; the first chapter of Genesis; the importance of sanctuaries and high places; festivals. It was in the narration and recounting of its great founding events that Israel reaffirmed its identity. The place in which Israel most directly experienced and received its identity was in the liturgical setting. The community gathered together to tell its story – consolidating the identity of the community. It was the liturgical remembrance that actually formed the basis by which previous oral and written traditions were preserved.

Louis-Marie Chauvet, whose approach I am following, describes how liturgical remembrance formed the basis by which previous oral and written traditions were preserved. Through their "liturgification" the stories about the earliest times continued to play a foundational role in the identity of Israel.¹⁹ In the act of remembrance, the event is made present. The text receives its authority in the public reading.

The same process is evident in the formation of the Christian identity as expressed in its scriptures, only in this case it is the Christ event that is foundational. Not only did the memory of the Christ event develop in the oral and written traditions, but the Jewish scriptures themselves were interpreted in the light of this memory. The focus of this process was in the eucharistic assembly. "The Christian meal is the place par excellence where the evangelical composition of history was crystallised. The gospel read in the Eucharistic celebration was born out of the celebration itself."²⁰ The original oral and written tradition is reread and rewritten on the basis of the events recognised as foundational.²¹ Initially, certain texts were chosen for use in the liturgy precisely because they were seen to express the faith of the worshipping community. Different communities had their own favoured "scriptures" some of which received "universal" acceptance more easily than others. The more the community "recognises itself in a text, the more the text

¹⁸ Unlike the case of Islam where the Qur'an is prior to the community.

¹⁹ Louis Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Interpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan SJ and Madeleine Beaumont. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 190 - 195.

There is some debate about whether the practice of liturgical reading does sufficiently explain the origin of the Hebrew scriptures. But as John Barton notes: "The possibility that the Gospels are texts for liturgical reading can stand on its own merits, without needing to be correlated strongly with precedents from the practice of the synagogue." John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), 93.

²⁰ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 197.

²¹ *Ibid*, 202.

manifests its essence as a text.”²² The book is nothing without the community, and the community finds in the book the mirror of its identity. Consequently, Chauvet argues, the Church thus “represents the impossibility of *sola scriptura*.”²³

The principle of recognition turns out to be critical in the formation of the canon. The formation of the scriptures turns out to be a dialogical process in which the scriptures became canonical to the extent that the community recognised their faith and considered it to be truthfully expressed in those documents. In the light of this, it would appear that fidelity to scripture and tradition consists in incarnating the process by which the scriptures were constituted in each generation in its own historical and cultural milieu.²⁴ The text and the experience of the community can only exist fruitfully in conversation.²⁵ The scriptures are normative not because they possess a privileged metaphysical status independent of the community of believers but because the early Church and generations of Christians have recognised in the reading of the text the definitive expression of their communal faith. The Word of God is a dialogical reality that is only actualised when addressed to women and men, in both its proclamation and its reception. It is for this reason that the Catholic Church teaches that the essence of scripture is most fully revealed when it is proclaimed in the liturgy. It is Christ who is present in the proclamation of the Gospel in the liturgy. The sacramental presence of Christ is the proclamation of the Word is on par with that of the Real Presence.²⁶

If we accept that the books of sacred scripture are inspired, then we must also accept that the community who recognised them as such must have also have been inspired. The appropriation of the scriptural text by the community is constitutive, not merely of the community, but of the canonicity of scripture itself. Lee Martin McDonald observes that: “the question of whether a book should be regarded as scripture and placed within the canon seems to have been determined ultimately by early Church use.”²⁷ In other words, could the text be prayed?

To clarify the point I would like to suggest a small thought experiment. Imagine that you are organising a liturgy for some special event in your family celebrating: a wedding, a baptism or a funeral. How do you go about choosing the texts to read at the liturgy? In all likelihood you will choose something that expresses your own faith and your own thought and feelings about the event to be celebrated. But this is also a community celebration, so if you are sensitive enough to your responsibilities and the needs of others, you will try to choose something that speaks not just to yourself, but to the whole community. This point is made by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*:

The pastoral effectiveness of a celebration will be greatly increased if the texts of the readings, the prayers, and the liturgical songs correspond as closely as possible to the

²² Ibid, 207.

²³ Ibid, 209.

²⁴ According to Chauvet, “fidelity to the Bible consists in reliving in ever-changing circumstances the same process that brought about its production” (ibid).

²⁵ Chauvet cites J.A. Sanders’ observation that, “hermeneutics, although unwritten, is also canonical.” *Identité de la Bible: Torah et Canon* (Paris: Cerf, 1975) 159-160. Cited in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 209.

²⁶ “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord, since from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the sacred liturgy” (*Dei Verbum*, para. 21). “Christians need to receive nourishment from God’s Word at the twofold table of sacred Scripture and the Eucharist” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, para. 18).

²⁷ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 160.

needs, spiritual preparation, and culture of those taking part. This is achieved by appropriate use of the wide options described below.

The priest, therefore, in planning the celebration of Mass, should have in mind the common spiritual good of the people of God, rather than his own inclinations. He should, moreover, remember that the selection of different parts is to be made in agreement with those who have some role in the celebration, including the faithful, in regard to the parts that more directly pertain to each.²⁸

In choosing and proclaiming the text, there is an element of recognition. In this text, I recognise my own faith and we recognised our shared faith. This experience of shared recognition helps to bind us together as a faith community.

This is why the Scriptures are normative for the faith of Christians, not only because they are the earliest written testimony to the Christian faith, but especially because countless other generations over two millennia have also recognised their own faith, the same faith, in these writings. Structurally, the same process is operating in the well-planned local liturgy as has operated in the Church as a whole. Only the scale is different, the process being refined through many liturgies, by many communities in many places and at many times. Accordingly, Chauvet argues that “Magisterial canonical sanction is nothing else but the decisive social expression of this process.”²⁹

III. Conclusion

When Martin Luther proclaimed that scripture alone - *sola scriptura* - is authoritative for Christians he was right in highlighting the normative status of scripture for all Christian life. From a Catholic perspective, however, he was mistaken in failing to acknowledge that the New Testament was in its essence the Church’s book. The problem with the idea of *sola scriptura*, as Chauvet has observed, is that it does not take adequate account of the process by which the scriptures themselves came into being. The New Testament is the Church’s book for two reasons: First, it arose from the communities themselves. Each of the evangelists wrote for their own respective communities with the concerns and perspectives of those communities in mind. Second, the gospels were received by those communities and it was the community who recognised the inspiration of those texts.

The old sixteenth century opposition between scripture and sacrament turns out to be little more than a polemical expression born of historical circumstances. The essence of scripture is sacramental just as the sacraments have their roots in scripture. We separate the two at our peril. Thank goodness both Catholics and Protestants are now learning from each other and bringing back together what should not have been separated in the first place. But as one ancient split appears to be healing others seems to be opening up.

As for the contemporary debates about the reform of the liturgy, the matter is not the sole preserve of any particular interest group, but will in time be resolved by the church as a whole. As with planning a liturgy, one may need to put personal preferences aside to consider the wellbeing of the congregation as a whole. Important as these issues are, the church will only be served if these debates, which are important to the life and vigour of the Church, are conducted with charity.

²⁸ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2002), para. 352, <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/current/chapter7.shtml>.

²⁹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 208.

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