

Liturgy - 'just bells and smells'?

BY

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Good evening, everybody. Today's Hot Topic is one that has an obvious answer. Is liturgy just smells and bells? Hopefully, I think we would all agree that the answer is "no". However, since you've all taken time out of your Sunday evening to come to this short talk, it would be rude of me to leave the answer there. So, sorry, you can't go home quite yet!

My wife will tell you all, in her weary, "oh-no-not-this-again" voice, that I am quite passionate about the liturgy. Speaking personally, the liturgy was a key part of my conversion to Catholicism from evangelical Protestantism a couple of years back. In fact, the whole Christian life is bound up in the liturgy, as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal says:

"The celebration of Mass, as the action of Christ and the People of God arrayed hierarchically, is the centre of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the Father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit. In it, moreover, during the course of the year, the mysteries of redemption are recalled so as in some way to be made present.

Furthermore, the other sacred actions and all the activities of the Christian life are bound up with it, flow from it, and are ordered to it." (GIRM 16)

Sacrosanctum Concilium, the constitution on the sacred liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, calls the liturgy "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows." (San. Con. 10) Quite clearly, then, the liturgy is an exceptionally important part of the Church's life, and our lives as members of the Church.

What, then, is liturgy? Though the word can be used with reference to the Liturgy of the Hours, it is more often used to refer to the Mass. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “in Christian tradition it [i.e. liturgy] means the participation of the people of God in ‘the work of God’. Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of redemption in, with and through his Church.” (CCC 1069)

Though the phrase “work of God” can mean various things, the central aspect of this work is sacrifice. We were created to offer a continual sacrifice of adoration and worship, to offer our life and work, our very selves, to God. At the fall, we withheld part of that sacrifice: we wished to take that which rightly belonged to God in order that we might become like gods ourselves (Gen. 3:5). By disobeying God’s command, man chose himself over God (CCC 398); death and sin enter into the world, and all mankind is stained with the effects of this first sin. (We have already discussed this original sin of our first parents in a previous Hot Topic, so we need not dwell on it.)

In spite of our radical disobedience, God did not abandon us—in the words of the Exsultet, sung after the Paschal Candle is lit during the Easter Vigil Mass, “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!” Christ our Redeemer has saved us through His own sacrifice on the cross; it is this sacrifice that is made present to us in the liturgy, this sacrifice that He calls us to participate in at and through the liturgy.

At this point, you may be asking just what all this has to do with ‘bells and smells’. Surely they distract from our participation in the Mass? If there were no-one wearing opulent vestments at the Last Supper, why should we have people wearing them now? Shouldn’t we strip away all the additions to the liturgy that have accumulated over the centuries and get back to a more primitive liturgy, the true liturgy of the apostles and earliest Church? Though I can understand the sentiments behind them, I believe that such questions are thoroughly wrong-headed, and ultimately lead away from the essence of the liturgy.

Those actions and elements that may seem to us to be unnecessary and perhaps at times over-the-top are, in fact, signs and symbols of the sacrifice and mystery of Christ. The liturgy, in every aspect, should be teaching us about this mystery—as the Catechism puts it, “[l]iturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ (it is ‘mystagogy’) by proceeding from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the ‘sacraments’ to the ‘mysteries’.” (CCC 1075) ‘Mystagogy’ is the process of leading those who have been initiated into a mystery into its deeper meaning and significance for their lives. Thus, the ‘bells and smells’ are themselves mystagogic elements that can show us the invisible aspects—the mysteries—of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and help us to cultivate its spiritual fruit in our lives. To an extent, the liturgy speaks with the clothes it wears: the incense, bells, vestments, artwork, music, etc.—all of this ‘liturgical dress’ should be mystagogic.

The Church knows what people are like. She knows that our senses are key to our perception and understanding of what is objectively true. “The liturgy of the Church presupposes,

integrates and sanctifies elements from creation and human culture, conferring on them the dignity of signs of grace, of the new creation in Jesus Christ.” (CCC 1149) The bread and wine, the spoken and sung words of the liturgy, the sacred images, the ringing of bells, the incense, our bodily actions (e.g. standing, kneeling, beating our breast)—in Catholic liturgy, the whole person, body and spirit, participates in the liturgy. Each of these sensual, physical signs points us towards the truth and mystery of the liturgy; by them, we are drawn further into the meaning of the mystery, and they are thus vital to our Catholic spirituality.

One of the famous calls of the Second Vatican Council was for the *participatio actuosa* of the laity—“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations, which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.” (Sacro. Con. 14) But after the Council, there were many things done in the name of ‘active participation’ that were in no way called for by the Council documents themselves. The virtual abolition of Gregorian chant; having the

priest face the congregation rather than ad orientum (facing east); the almost total elimination of Latin from the Mass; the removal of altar rails from churches. We can perhaps discuss these things later on, but I am talking about 'bells and smells', and what is particularly disturbing in this regard is the stripping out of beauty that has happened in the Mass and in the prevailing culture since the Council.

We live in a utilitarian age, where beauty, for the most part, is not important. If things are manufactured with the intention of being beautiful, it is merely because they are saleable, consumable, and profitable. Beauty, such as it is in culture today, is marketed to us: today this thing is beautiful and therefore desirable; tomorrow it is an entirely different thing. This distortion of the concept of beauty goes hand-in-hand with the cultural relativism of today. We are all, I hope, familiar with the phrase "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", which is a roundabout way of saying what one person considers beautiful another person could think ugly, and both (or, more accurately, neither) of them is right. Far from being a good thing, this sort of

relativism means that one can never make objective truth claims about what is beautiful or ugly, the effect being that it no longer really matters. It is a sort of feedback loop: utilitarianism encourages relativism, and vice versa.

This sort of thinking has, sadly if not unexpectedly, made its way into the Church. As our culture has turned away from the faith, the faith has taken refuge in historicism, the copying of the past, and, at worst, compromise with the prevailing culture. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it in his book *The Feast of Faith*, written in 1981 when he was a cardinal:

"The Church must not settle down with what is merely comfortable and serviceable at the parish level; she must arouse the voice of the cosmos and, by glorifying the Creator, elicit the glory of the cosmos itself, making it also glorious, beautiful, habitable and beloved... The Church is to transform, improve, 'humanize' the world—but how can she do that if she turns her back on beauty, which is so closely allied to love? For together, beauty and love form the true consolation in this world, bringing it as near as

possible to the resurrection. The Church must maintain high standards; she must be a place where beauty can be at home..." (The Feast of Faith [Ignatius Press, 1986], pp. 124-5)

The Pope has liturgical music as his focus here, but the sentiments can be quite easily applied to all church art. The fact that the Church has an objective sense of beauty makes her infinitely more counter-cultural than any so-called avant-garde artist. For us to dismiss this liturgical beauty as 'just bells and smells' is very damaging to our witness of our Catholic faith, and also very damaging to our very Catholic identity:

"Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour." (Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis* 35)

This whole question about liturgy can be seen as a question of Catholic identity. There are so many examples one can think of where it seems clear

that we Catholics have lost our identity. What percentage of Catholics regularly go to confession? (Indeed, in how many parishes do priests even offer a regular time to go?) How many of those who call themselves Catholics see no problem with contraception, or even abortion? How many Catholics feel perfectly free to ignore the Church's teachings on (e.g.) homosexuality, or the impossibility of women priests? All of this dissent stems from a loss of our Catholic identity, and my opinion is that a lot of the blame for this stems from the hermeneutic of rupture—that way of interpreting the Council's liturgical reforms as a break from the past, rather than a continuation of her traditions.

For example, one could quote *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 34, and say that since the Second Vatican Council mandated that the reformed rites "should be distinguished by a noble simplicity", we no longer need luxurious vestments, or expensive artwork and stained glass, or ornate chalices and altars, etc. But this interpretation would be one of rupture, discarding the Church's long traditions of the beauty and splendour of the liturgical action. Indeed, the very desire to return

to simplicity in the liturgy becomes impossible when one loses the traditions of the Church. There is precious little beauty in modern culture—the last thing we should be doing in the Church is sacrificing our precious heritage to the idol of cultural relevance. Neglecting beauty hinders that active participation the Council called for, and in fact makes it almost impossible.

We need a clearer liturgical worship of God in keeping with our tradition, not in opposition to it: a hermeneutic of continuity, not of rupture. As well as regaining a proper sense of liturgical beauty (which is what I have focussed on tonight), this also involves things like ad orientum worship, putting into practice the General Instruction and the Church's other liturgical norms and laws, singing the Mass rather than singing at the Mass, etc. Our Catholic identity depends on it to the point that, if our worship is not sound and faithful to the Church's prescriptions, and in continuity with our tradition, it is hard to make the claim that we are Catholic.

So, in conclusion, is liturgy just smells and bells? Of course not—but if it does not involve them,

their mystagogy, and the beauty that they entail, then we are robbing ourselves of our distinctively Catholic understanding of the liturgy, hindering our active participation in the sacrifice of Christ, and severely damaging our very identity.