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Liturgy as Prophetic Imagination: A Form of Church Curriculum

Abstract

Liturgy, the ritual prayer of the community, is a centuries old way of giving thanks and praise to God. Researched from a Roman Catholic point of view, this paper explores the practice of liturgy “as a component of the curriculum of educational ministry,”¹ and in turn, explores the profound elements of the prophetic imagination that are present in and through liturgy.

This research draws its educational insights from the work of Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran. In addition, its theological and liturgical insight is profoundly influenced by Karl Rahner's theology of worship.

LITURGY: PROPHETIC WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

Liturgy proclaims and celebrates what God is doing among us and for us. This ritual tradition can give order, meaning, and guidance to life's quest to live more fully and re-appropriate insight and practice for a new worldview. “For Rahner,” writes Michael Skelley, “the beauty of true worship is that it shows just how graced our lives really are.”²

Liturgy connects us to the ever-present mystery of God and offers a hope-filled pattern for living and dying. This hope-filled pattern, encountered in the paschal mystery, is the point of departure for all ritual prayer, and much like art and poetry, the ritual prayer of the church expresses what ordinary speech cannot. It is for this reason that Mark Searle aptly asserts liturgy is “an act of the imagination.”³

This profound action of the church, that gathers a people together, discloses rich meaning when we dare to leave the comfort zone of the rational and enter into the imaginative sphere where we can find the hidden embrace of God's presence. Taking place within

¹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 94-95.

² Michael Skelley, S.J., *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 105.

³ Mark Searle, “Images in Worship,” in *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, ed. Anne Y. Koester and Barbara Searle, 126-137 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 126.

time and space, this centuries old prayer is prayer for the hope of the world. From age to age the prayer of the church is the “hope-filled language of prophecy.”⁴ The act of liturgy is analogous to that of what Walter Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination. He writes, “The task of prophetic imagination ... is to bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there.”⁵ Liturgy, at its very core, has the potential to bring forth this expression. Fundamentally God’s work, liturgy is human dialogue with the living God.⁶ And, notably, liturgy’s aim is to transform the world. Ritual activity symbolizes resistance to current patterns of injustice, or what Brueggemann refers to as the dominant culture or *royal consciousness*.⁷ Rather, it embodies what he refers to as an *alternative community* that replaces despair with “the public presentation of hope.”⁸

Re-appropriating the vast implications and prophetic nature of liturgy blends meaning and memory and ultimately reveals that Christian ritual is animated by God’s action and presence in the world. In this regard, liturgy is a way to touch and be touched by the mystery of God’s self-communication. Illustrative of Karl Rahner’s theology of worship, Skelley writes, “... worship is an experience of interpersonal communion in which God shares our lives and we participate in the life of God.”⁹ Sealed in baptism, we are “ordained of God to be people of hope”¹⁰ in and through liturgy we remember such prophetic hope.

This community life of prayer is commonly referred to as the work of the church. Reflecting on this understanding, Gabriel Moran suggests, “The work that is liturgy is not a metaphorical extension of the forty-hour week but a call to center all other forms of work within the origin of the meaning of work: ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good’ (Genesis 1:31).”¹¹ Moreover, “Rahner is convinced that the liturgy will become a life-giving encounter with the absolute mystery only if we first discover the experience of God hidden in the midst of our daily lives.”¹² Images of ritual prayer season us in this mystery and aid in the unveiling of the depth of human experience.

Referring to Liturgy as one form of church curriculum, Maria Harris gives depth and meaning to the church’s life of prayer. She writes, “We are educated *to* prayer, and we are educated *by* prayer. And that education can happen anywhere and everywhere, not

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 67.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World*, 43.

⁷ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹ Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World*, 43.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 66.

¹¹ Gabriel Moran, *Fashioning A People Today: The Educational Insights of Maria Harris* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007), 72.

¹² Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World*, 75.

only in classrooms.”¹³ In relation to liturgy, Harris’s thought complements Karl Rahner’s view “... that the experience of God, if it is to be found at all, will be found in the joys and struggles of ‘real’ life ...”¹⁴

According to The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) the liturgy of the church is the “summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed;” and “... the fount from which all her power flows” (SC 10).¹⁵ This statement, which today, roles limply off the tongue needs to be revitalized in our time. It is for this reason that the educational ministry of the church must work more effectively to make this statement, which percolated in the hearts and minds of prophetic thinkers during the nineteenth century, confirmed only a little over fifty years ago at the dawn of the Second Vatican Council, vibrant to worshippers once again. Insight into the rich background of the first conciliar document provides a deeper understanding of the prophetic work that brought about the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The Liturgical Movement: Context for Reform

On December 4, 1963 The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was the first document to emerge from the Second Vatican Council. It is important, and very significant, to realize that the context of this document is reflective of the passionate work of an earlier time. What we recognize as the early liturgical movement, which began in Europe, established the groundwork for reform - the official changes sanctioned by the church at Vatican II.

Attempts at reform can be traced back to 1563 following the Council of Trent. However, enthusiasm for the Roman Rite grew in the early eighteen hundreds with Louis Pascal Guéranger (1805-1875), a French monk who founded the abbey at Solesmes in France. The work at Solesmes influenced the liturgical reforms of Pius X in the early twentieth century. In addition to the abbey in France, German and Belgium monasteries were also considered great liturgical centers for learning. Keith Pecklers notes that Odo Casel (1886-1948), from the Maria Laach monastery in Germany, wrote countless articles and books that were initially considered controversial. Significantly, Casel expressed noble insight into sacramental participation and the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.¹⁶ In Belgium, there was a more pastoral focus on the liturgy. Exemplifying this, in 1909 Lambert Beauduin, OSB (1873-1960), of Mont César Abbey, claimed “‘active participation in the liturgical life of a Church’ to be the most fundamental factor in the

¹³ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church*, 95.

¹⁴ Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World*, 17.

¹⁵ References to Vatican II documents are from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1987).

¹⁶ Keith Pecklers, *The Unread Vision: The Liturgical Movement in the United States of America: 1926-1955* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 6.

life of a Christian.”¹⁷ Significantly, a common thread in all of the attempts toward reform was the call to active participation of all in the liturgy. These early attempts at reform reflect a distinct shift in liturgical scholarship toward patristic principles.

While the roots of the liturgical movement took place in Europe, there were many highly motivated American students who were sent to study at the great liturgical centers. Among these scholars was Virgil Michel, OSB (1888-1938) of St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, who is regarded as the founder of the liturgical movement in the United States (1926-1955). It is interesting to note that he was also the founder of Liturgical Press and *Orate Fratres* (*Worship* today). Remarkably, Michel’s legacy continues to this day through both of these venues. Against the backdrop of the individualism of the 1920’s and the Great Depression of the 1930’s, Michel drew his own thinking and plans from the practice of the early church. He is best known for making the profound connection of liturgy to the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which in turn promoted the profound connection of liturgy with social justice. According to Pecklers, “Michel believed that American Catholics had become too materialistic and individualistic: ... Liturgy was the solution to individualism, capable of opening the eyes of American worshippers to the possibilities of a truly Christian culture. For this reason, he saw the liturgical movement as the primary apostolate.”¹⁸

Another important aspect of the early liturgical movement was education toward liturgy. Lack of knowledge often led to resistance to change. People had to be educated about the meaning of their baptism and consequently the role they played in the Mystical Body of Christ. Such liturgical catechesis flourished during the 1930’s and 1940’s in schools and among families.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, the pioneers of the early liturgical movement were prophetic thinkers. Their aim to bring the ideal of full, active participation of all people in the liturgy to the forefront was met with resistance. However, this call for participation in the liturgy of the church was a hopeful call not only to recover a deeper sense of tradition but a call for an alternative way of being in the world. The celebration of the liturgy was meant to stir within the Christian a deeper sense of discipleship – a radical call to be Christ in the world and, in turn, a call to live for others. The generative work of this movement nourished and evoked a new consciousness against the dominant culture. It attempted to raise hope in a world recovering from the ravages of war. Michel’s prophetic voice had to penetrate, among other things, the lamentation of the Great Depression in the United States. In this regard, Pecklers notes, “For Virgil Michel the labor encyclicals of Leo XIII and the liturgical reforms of Pius X did not just by accident happen within one generation, but were responses to cries of the masses for Christ, who had power and gave the good tidings. They belonged together.”²⁰

¹⁷ Katharine Harmon, *There Were Also Women There: Lay Women in the Liturgical Movement in the United States 1926-59* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 17.

¹⁸ Pecklers, *The Unread Vision*, 128-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which was so valued by the early reformers, was not commonly accepted until Pius XII gave it credence in his 1943 encyclical, *On the Mystical Body of Christ (Mystici Corporis Christi)*. Notably, Pius XII also gave expression to this profound theme in his 1947 encyclical, *On the Sacred Liturgy (Mediator Dei)*. Essentially, Pius XII put “the seal of his supreme authority” on the liturgical movement.²¹ The official project for liturgical reform began in 1948 with the appointment of a commission that accomplished enormous work during a twelve-year time frame. It is interesting to note, “The first fruit of the commission’s work was the restoration of the Easter Vigil (1951), which elicited an explosion of joy throughout the Church. It was a signal that the liturgy was at last launched decisively on a pastoral course.”²² In addition, as noted by Annibale Bugnini, during the proceedings of the First International Congress of Pastoral Liturgy held in Assisi in 1956, Pius XII made a historic remark, “The liturgical movement is ... a sign of the providential dispositions of God for the present time [and] of the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”²³

The seeds of a movement that fostered the ideal of full, active participation in the liturgy of all the members of the Body of Christ flowered when Paul VI brought about liturgical reforms confirmed at Vatican II.

The Second Vatican Council and Liturgical Reform

On January 25, 1959 Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council. Preparation for this “epoch-making”²⁴ event began immediately and lasted until the opening session on October 11, 1962. In his opening address, *Mother Church Rejoices (Gaudet Mater)*, John XXIII proclaimed, “It is but natural that in opening this universal council we should like to look to the past and to listen to its voices, ... These are solemn and venerable voices, throughout the East and West, from the fourth century to the Middle Ages, and from there to modern times,”²⁵ Clearly, the intent of Vatican II was to re-appropriate the richness of the past in order to find meaning for the present. In addition, as noted above, and as Julia Upton writes, “Radical as the changes were, it is a mistake to look to the Vatican Council II as the beginning for our consideration of

²¹ Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), 1.

²⁵ John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater: Mother Church Rejoices: Opening Address of John XXIII at the Council*. <http://conciliaria.com/2012/10mother-church-rejoice-opening-address-of-john-xxi>(accessed 7-23-15).

liturgical studies ...”²⁶ Therefore, the liturgical reforms set in motion as a result of Vatican II can only be properly understood within their historical context. Notes and journals from those who served the council’s various commissions are invaluable resources for understanding. In regard to liturgy, Bugnini, secretary to the preparatory commission of the liturgy under Pius XII, brings together his personal notes and valuable recollections in *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*. For twelve years (1948-1960) the commission held eighty-two meetings, the first fruits of which were the reform of the Easter Vigil in 1951 followed by the complete reform of Holy Week in 1955. Interestingly, three years before Vatican II, in 1956, a congress was held in Assisi to discuss the pastoral nature of the liturgy.²⁷

After official announcement of the council in 1959 another commission was formed in 1960, which included theological, spiritual, pastoral, musical, and artistic scholars and experts from all over the world. Sub-commissions explored various topics, for example, “The mystery of the sacred liturgy and its relation to the life of the Church,” “The Mass,” “Sacramental concelebration,” “Divine Office,” “Sacraments and sacramentals,” “Revision of the calendar,” “Use of Latin,” “Liturgical formation,” “Participation of the faithful in the sacred liturgy,” “Sacred music,” and “Sacred art.”²⁸ Among the most debated issues were the use of Latin and sacred music.²⁹ Before the opening of the council these commissions met several times and by the summer of 1962 a draft of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was ready.

In the fall of 1962 the schema on the sacred liturgy was well prepared and considered to be among the most important topics for the council. Therefore, liturgy appeared first on the council’s agenda.³⁰ Bugnini notes the words of Pope John XXIII on December 8, 1962 at the close of the first session:

It was no accident that the first *schema* to be considered was the one dealing with the sacred liturgy. The liturgy has to do with man’s relationship with God. This relationship is of the utmost importance. It must be based on the solid foundation of revelation and apostolic teaching, so as to contribute to man’s spiritual good; and that, with a broadness of vision which avoids the superficiality and haste often characterizing relationships among men.³¹

²⁶ Julia Ann Upton, R.S.M., “*Carpe Momentum: Liturgical Studies at the Threshold of the Third Millennium*,” in *At the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, ed. Francis A. Eigo, O.S.A., 103-138 (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1998), 103.

²⁷ Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁰ John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 128.

³¹ Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy*, 33.

Sadly, Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963 and did not live to see the completion of the liturgy document. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first document of the council, was voted on – “ 2147 for, 4 against.”³² Promulgated on December 4, 1963, in the presence of Pope Paul VI, this profoundly significant document, is not only a design for liturgical reform, but it also holds within it significance, beyond liturgy, that impacted the rest of the council, and in turn the identity of Catholic Christians throughout the world.

LITURGY: A FORM OF CHURCH CURRICULUM

Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran consciously imagine religious education as an artistic process of shaping, forming, and fashioning a people within (and between) our ordinary forms of life (family, classroom, job, leisure). Religious education, then, is a life-long, life-wide process of interactions occurring within and between several forms of life.³³ These forms embody the values, purpose, and experiences of one’s lifetime. They suggest a relational aspect that unites family with community, classroom with knowledge, job with work, and leisure with wisdom. Thus, religious education is a movement toward community, knowledge, work, and wisdom.³⁴ Although each form takes on importance at different times during the individual’s life, each continues to be part of the dynamic of human life. In and through these experiences, religious education discloses meaning and nourishes one’s vision for future possibilities.

Harris sites Acts 2; 42, 44-47 as a portrait of the church’s educational curriculum.³⁵ The educational work of the church, as described by Harris, supports the interplay of life’s forms. Religious education, then, viewed from this perspective, affirms the value of a group and sees a particular event, such as the celebration of the liturgy, as a manifestation of deeper possibilities. “One way to summarize this picture,” writes Moran, “is to say that education is about ‘tradition,’ that it is about the transmission of what is most valuable from one generation to the next Education does not hand on tradition; education *is* tradition, the process of handing on,”³⁶ And, at its core, liturgy *is* traditioning.

The educational ministry of the church must continually strive to uncover deep insights for patterns of hope experienced through Word, symbol, and sacrament. In addition, it is imperative to understand that liturgy - the ritual prayer of the church does not take place in isolation. Liturgy is celebrated for the life of the world. As Nathan Mitchell asserts, “. . . ritual is principally about *connections*, about discovering what links us to God, to one

³² Ibid., 37.

³³ See Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

³⁴ Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education Development: Images for the Future* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1983), 166.

³⁵ Harris, *Fashion Me a People*, 16-17.

³⁶ Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 49.

another, to space, time, and history, to world and planet, to memory, desire, and expectation. ... The point of our coming together in prayer is not congratulations and comfort but challenge and change.”³⁷ In much the same way, as Harris points out, education through prayer must “refuse to divorce prayer and action for justice.”³⁸

CONCLUSION

The Second Vatican Council was a watershed moment in the life of the church. Perhaps for young people it is merely a piece of history. For some it was an exciting time, and for others it continues to be a source of confusion. It is for this reason that greater attention to liturgical research and education (both pastoral and academic) is crucial. The visionary story of liturgical reform must be remembered and appropriately rediscovered in our time. If not, the prophetic insight of Vatican II runs the risk of being overshadowed by, as Andrea Grillo remarks, ... “enemies of the reform,” who, “... with cunning and more than a little wordplay... prefer to weaken the very terrain on which the reform stands.”³⁹

Today, there is a marked conflict of interpretations in liturgical matters, one reason being that the context of Vatican II reform has been forgotten.⁴⁰ The norms established through the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy are based on the educative and pastoral nature of the liturgy. “Although the sacred liturgy is principally 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” (SC33). Liturgy, in its commemoration of dying and rising, stands firm against despair and brings to public expression a reason for our hope.

³⁷ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 279.

³⁸ Harris, *Fashion Me A People*, 102.

³⁹ Andrea Grillo, *Beyond Pius V: Conflicting Interpretations of the Liturgical Reform* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), xiv.

⁴⁰ See Grillo, chapter 3. Grillo contends that the liturgical movement includes Vatican II, rather than concludes with Vatican II.

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The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, informally the Presanctified Liturgy, is a liturgical service for the distribution of the Holy Gifts on the weekdays of Great Lent. Because Great Lent is a season of repentance, fasting, and intensified prayer, the Orthodox Church regards more frequent reception of communion as especially desirable at that time. However, the Divine Liturgy has a festal character not in keeping with the season. Thus, the Presanctified Liturgy is celebrated instead; the Divine Most important liturgy is Eucharist. Liturgy is all sacraments as a whole and liturgies that are not sacraments. particular mass or liturgical celebration. focal point in our participation in God's work. Liturgy guidelines. Not just every public prayer, needs to be official.Â uses our thoughts, imagination and emotion to get in touch with God. we use scripture or rosary or icons or creation as a way to focus hearts and minds on Him. contemplation.Â the established form of the words and actions for a ceremony that is repeated often. the actions have a symbolic meaning. pattern of actions. ex handshake and Olympic opening ceremony. liturgy sacraments are rituals. Why are we symbol makers and sacrament doers? Holy Thursday Typika and Liturgy of St Basil. Holy Friday Matins " will be served on Thursday evening " Passion Gospels. Passion Gospels " SLAVONIC. Holy Friday Royal Hours. Holy Friday Vespers. Holy Saturday Matins " for Friday evening " Burial Shroud. Holy Saturday Typika and Liturgy of St Basil. Order of Service for the Holy and Great Sunday of Pascha. The Agape Vespers. Bright week. Liturgy variables. The Ascension Of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ / Vigil variables. The Ascension Of Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ / Liturgy variables. The Sunday of Holy Pentecost / Vigil Variab