

Sent Forth by God's Blessing:

Liturgy and Witness

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"Liturgy and witness." Not liturgy as a means to witness or even, closer, *the* means to witness. For liturgy is an end, and the worship of the living God needs no other justification for creatures loved, redeemed, enlightened. But "liturgy *and* witness." Liturgy *as* witness and liturgy as formation, orientation, inspiration for the living of witness lives, both corporately as church and individually as members.

Thank God that even in the limits of our language these realities are joined, are not totally distinct. For, it seems to me, if they were not joined, if they were distinct, sometimes the church would bear no witness at all, would evidence no service in and for the world, no mission, no ministry that is credible in our time. For the way we live in the world and for the world is our witness, service, mission, ministry. And that, as we all know so well, is shaped by many forces besides our faith and worship. We have a great tolerance--to put it mildly--for allowing these other forces (habits, mores, economic/political/military institutions, etc.) to shape the way we live, corporately and individually, with an effectiveness we deny to faith and worship. While a strong life of witness and mission is never totally absent in the community of the biblical covenant, Jewish or Christian, it often appears to be absent, because prophets, saints, consciousness-raisers are not only an affront to the rest of the world but also an embarrassment in the church.

Through this normal but agonizing historical process, the liturgy is celebrated, the worship of one God, alone. It is this saving witness which offers the world a constant and abiding hope, however ugly the face of the church may be at any given time and in any particular place. In that worship, a community of faith, a church, is created and orientated, and that orientation to God, to God's reign, enables a strong, articulated witness capable of discerning God's work in the signs of our own times to emerge. That is where the symbols--word and sacrament--at

a deep, classical level, overthrow the existing order, claim us for God's purposes, make present God's reign. If other forces take over in the rest of our lives, if our weakness prevails, at least that witness remains, always giving off its sparks, sometimes catching believers into flame. That's why the Lord asks us again and again and again to be repenting, not hanging on to the past, but awake, alert, ready.

One of our sages, Joseph Sittler, describes part of the worship experience in this way:

Unless our Christian moral discourse permits the power of the parables to question and then correct that central perversion (i.e., sin's corruption of humanity's relationship to God), we will continue to regard them merely as interesting illustrations, and in the process, pull the teeth of their intention. For they all say that the absolute permeation of our human condition by the power of sin, which all of us are loath to acknowledge, is the only acknowledgment whereby our redemption can be envisioned and received. The parables shock the mind into opening to the unenvisioned possible; they madly exaggerate in order to jolt the consciousness of the religiously secure; they are an assault upon the obvious. The entire momentum of conventional piety is brought into question: the man sells everything for the other thing; the shepherd leaves the 99 undefended in order to find the lost one; in defiance of common sense, the woman takes the house apart to find the lost coin; the master condemns the unjust steward for his canny perception of the truth. Is it not possible that the accounts of the miracles are enacted forms of the parables? The parables are spoken miracles; the miracles are enacted parables.¹

The liturgy is not only our ecclesial sharing in the parables, the word, but also and in the context of regular

1. Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 109-110.

Sunday gatherings, where new members are bathed from head to foot and clothed in new garments, where all share and share alike in holy plate and holy cup, where nothing else but our dignity and commonness as God's daughters and God's sons can matter. Where we *are* commonly *somebody*. And where we see that not only in the liturgy but in the living out we need each other, the church, the rest of the community of believers, with all of our different approaches, gifts, insights, angles, as well as the rest of the world and the signs of the times. Only in this solidarity does a strong witness to the covenant of faith and to God's purposes emerge.

In such an organic process, no pastoral teaching authority (still less an ecclesiastical service agency) can or should substitute for a corporate and communitarian building of a *sensus ecclesiae*. The consensus (rather than majority vote) at which Christians aim is a painfully slow, patient struggle on the part of all of us different types to arrive at common understandings (appropriate to one's own time and place) about the living out of the good news. Indeed the traditional authority of pastors, whether bishops or local, is an aspect of their pastoral role: being close to the rest of the community, close to what the Spirit is doing in the church. Our whole Jewish and Christian tradition bears witness to the process nature of this mission: a process of growth, development, refinement, pilgrimage, which cannot be hurried or precipitated, even by nervous ecclesiastics. We have to admit that it is hard to do that patient work and to undertake that arduous struggle and refinement, when human progress in communications brings the answers of nervous ecclesiastics to us even before we have had a chance to meditate the questions and to be the part of their solution God calls us all to be.

Our biblical and church tradition assures us that God deals with us as we are and where we are. It is a pilgrimage. It is an evolution. And we are always growing up. Repentance (that biblical refrain) is not a guilt trip and not a bargaining chip, but the appropriate characteristic of a life that is open to the guidance of the Spirit, open to change, that realizes it has not arrived. Like Judaism, the church is a process, unfinished, pilgrim--a living tradition with a past to be grateful for, a future

to be hoped for, but a total preoccupation with the present, with living today in the light of the faith.

Such a witness is not only on our part, but involves a mutual relation with the rest of the world. What kind of world, what kind of humanity is being created in this stream of revelation? For whatever witness we are called to, whatever ministry we have, whatever corporate and individual life baptism commits us to lead--these can be discussed only if we have some grasp of the kind of world, the kind of humanity God is in the process of fashioning. Our repentance, and God's call to us to become what we are not yet, are communicated in faith's vision of two basic aspects of life in the light: first, *freedom* from idolatry, from an enslavement, from all the masters and claims that would freeze us in time, that would stop the pilgrimage in its tracks, that would make the relative absolute and the provisional final; and second, *solidarity* with and in the world God loves and with our neighbors everywhere, with a human family whose gifts are no less stunning than when we first came to be.

Whether we name this vision freedom and solidarity, or justice and peace, or liberation and unification, it is the substance of God's call to us and of the mission we accept. The call to repentance, from covenant and Law to prophets to Jesus the Lord, is unflinchingly aimed at a new creation, a reign of God, in which both freedom and solidarity are inseparably realized. Therefore to believe is not merely to find in God's revelation an individual meaning for my life and being. It is to enter into a new relation with everything that is, to see the world and live in it and be part of it with new eyes, animated and moved and drawn and compelled by faith's vision, by this purposefulness.

If we are alienated from the world we live in, it is idle to even *talk* about witness. Much Christian effort is wasted on this account. Some approach the relation of faith to world from the other direction, as Robert Penn Warren wrote:

We must try / to love so well the world that
we may believe, in the end, in God.²

Believers have the help of a higher power, but we have managed to reject the help and distort the message its liturgical symbols communicate. The late Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, writing about the sacraments, put it this way:

Are these "symbols" merely "symbolic"? Or is this failure perhaps to be explained precisely by the symbolic value attached to them by Christians themselves, who ceased to understand their true nature? And did they not cease to understand this nature because at one time (it would take too long to elaborate on this here) Christians came to think that "religion" has nothing to do with time, is in fact salvation from time? Before we gain the right to dispose of the old "symbols" we must understand that the real tragedy of Christianity is not its "compromise" with the world and progressive "materialism," but, on the contrary, its "spiritualization" as transformation into "religion." And religion--as we know already--has thus come to mean a world of pure spirituality, a concentration of attention on matters pertaining to the "soul." Christians were tempted to reject time altogether and replace it with "mysticism" and "spiritual" pursuits, to live as Christians out of time and thereby escape its frustrations, to insist that time has no real meaning from the point of view of the Kingdom, which is "beyond time." And they finally succeeded. They left time meaningless indeed, although full of Christian "symbols," and today they themselves do not know what to do with these symbols. For it is impossible to "put Christ back into Christmas" if he

2. Robert Penn Warren, "Masts at Dawn," *Selected Poems 1923-1975* (New York: Random House, 1976) 116.

has not redeemed--that is, made meaningful--time
itself.³

Assuming we start work on that problem--turning our attention to time, to God's world and creation--the way of living indicated is classical, ambiguous, general, basic, applicable to every time and place. Revelation and its vision stop there. We poor sinners have to flesh it out in ways and means and programs and politics and institutions appropriate to our time and place. To live in God, in the light, is to know the moral imperative, to assert the purposefulness and meaning of creation. It is not to have the answers to the ways and means, the programs and the politics, as if they were God's word. The consensus we seek in the church community, on the basis of belief, has to go to work with the rest of the human family to create the institutions our world needs for the freedom and the oneness of us all. At best, the church's only advantage and gift in this common enterprise is that of faith: the clarity of its vision, the strength of its moral imperative, and the conviction that every means used, every concrete and provisional step taken, must be like an end in that it is comformable to love. Our basic witness, the gift, is where we are going. But the inching along, the baby step, the concrete act or institution is the travail, the groaning and struggling and challenge of humanity's common life.

It seems to me, therefore, that to worship the God revealed in covenant, Law, prophets and Jesus Christ is to place ourselves, the church, clearly in an historical struggle for human freedom and human solidarity--the two inseparable elements of one truth about the shape of God's will. It is to understand our lives, our witness and mission, our pilgrimage and progress, as steps, however tiny, toward the freedom of all people from oppressions, addictions, idols, powers and principalities, and toward

3. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: National Student Christian Federation, 1963) 32.

the solidarity of all people in the face of the prejudices, competitiveness, hostilities, barriers and exclusions that mark our past and present stages of development. Remember what Sittler said about parables and miracles, and the familiar words of the Book of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord
has anointed me;
Has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to
heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to
the prisoners,
To announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day
of vindication by our God,
To comfort all who mourn
As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden
makes its growth spring up,
So will the Lord God make justice and praise spring
up before all the nations. (61:1-2, 11)

It is no secret that a world dazed by its own scientific, technical, artistic achievements, groping for a vision, a moral consciousness adequate to its discoveries, does not see the church or the church's witness in this way. We ourselves do not see it in this way--at least generally and for the most part. How has it come about that we have so trivialized conversion and the witness of life in God, to make it look as if the building up of the church itself were our primary mission, or as if our business were the proclamation of a definitive sexology, or as if human pleasures were the enemy we seek to vanquish, or as if redemption were for a merely *post mortem* happiness, or as if the conventions of mainline and polite society were the stuff of God's reign?

How can our eyes be opened--more generally, at least --to the new life, the quality of life, the vision of life in the world, which we celebrate in the Sunday assembly? Working hard on that assembly itself, so that it grips and moves and is experiential, can and must provide a basis, but it cannot do everything. If we could start from scratch, it might be different. But we can only move on from where we are. None of us is unaffected by the blind alleys and the pitfalls into which our history has dumped us time and time again. A living tradition has to be

sorted out all the time, constantly reforming. To get back on the pilgrim path we have to climb out of our pits and retrace the steps that brought us into cul-de-sacs. Humbled, we have to search for the way. Those who are confident of their own sight are really blind, says Jesus.

I know no facile answers, but I list here briefly a few efforts which I think are in the right direction, under the headings: location, initiation, responsibility, collectivity and imagination.

Location

We have to ask ourselves--are we trying to construct a church-world, or are we trying to help each other, as church, to live in the real world? The Schmemmann text I quoted earlier points out the problem. We cannot understand the mysteries, the liturgy, the sacramental word and deed unless we see them planted firmly in the world, like the incarnation. But whether in retreat or in defense, we have constructed a church-world sufficient unto itself, a ghetto in which the lives, the time, the energy of its members are consumed, rather than energized and inspired for a life in the world. So we have to start honoring, celebrating, electing to our various ministries, not the people who hang around the church building all the time, but the people who are formed in the liturgical assembly for a life elsewhere, who are exercising some leadership in economic, political, cultural and community affairs and structures.

And in the liturgy--especially in preaching, intercessions and the designation of part of the money offerings for witness purposes beyond our local needs--the same location must be clear and felt and lived. Else the liturgy's supra-cultural and counter-cultural message becomes, not our struggle at this time, but a quaint recitation of another people's struggles at another time. And we must not be afraid of the difference between our world and the world of biblical times, for in our awareness and competence we occupy a new stage of human development, one even more capable of receiving the gift of revelation. Teilhard de Chardin describes a bit of the difference this way:

Up to now, human beings have lived apart from each other, scattered around and closed in upon themselves. They have been like passengers who accidentally meet in the hold of a ship, not even suspecting the ship's motion. Clustered together on the earth, they found nothing better to do than to fight or to amuse themselves. Now, by chance, or better, as a natural result of organization, our eyes are beginning to open. The most daring among us have climbed to the bridge. They have seen the ship that carries us all. They have glimpsed the ship's prow cutting the waves. They have noticed that a boiler keeps the ship going and a rudder keeps it on course. And, most important of all, they have seen clouds floating above and caught the scent of distant islands on the horizon. It is no longer agitation down in the hold, just drifting along; the time has come to pilot the ship. It is inevitable that a different humanity must emerge from this vision.⁴

Initiation

"Joining the church" must be recovered, understood, experienced and celebrated as, in Aidan Kavanagh's phrase, "conversion therapy," that is, as a new orientation of life, requiring a new support system. Previously, our support system had been the status quo and its relationship. Now our support system is the church, our joined hands and hearts both in the liturgy and in living it out. Not that we reject the world. It is ours. But we are no longer subject to its status quo; in fact, we are committed to change it, having chosen the reign of God.

What a revolution for the local church as we still know it in most places! Given the processes of gaining and receiving new members, processes which have obtained during the last thousand and more years, one could expect little of the faith community that resulted. It tended to

4. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin "The Rise of the Other," *Activation of Energy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971) 73-74.

be merely the pious face of the status quo, the sanctification and divine approbation of our habits, ways and mores. Its liturgy, an occasional nod to a distant god, added impressive ceremony to the status quo's holidays.

Only when newcomers and old timers alike are in continuous engagement in a catechumenate that becomes the life of the parish will we have a situation enabling and demanding the kind of witness we are talking about. To form ourselves with our new members, or our new members with ourselves, in the gospel's thirst for the freedom of every person we find in God and for the equal right of all people to share the world's resources and production as daughters and sons of God--this is the project of initiation. And it can't be done with a catechism, or a book of theology, or a guru. It has to be a social process in the bosom of a faith community that accepts the covenant and is forever seeking.

Responsibility

To assume the responsibility of witness in and for the world, Christians generally must be nourished at the sources (the liturgy), rather than spoon-fed with the do's and don't's and the applications of interpreters, however gifted. Our job in the parish is to help one another grow up, mature, assume responsibility for our own lives and witness and for a corporate witness as church, and contribute our parts to the formation of a consensus about the ways and means.

It is that equal and common access of all the baptized to full participation in the liturgy, the ritual experience of the reign of God, which enables our development as adults in the church, respecting and loving conscience, willing to enter into the give and take, the different interpretations which different persons come to, always for the purpose of refining a position we can take together, a common witness. Humility before God and before one another is a part of this wisdom. But if we are alienated from the primary sources, from the liturgy, not only our humility but the whole process suffers--as we are seeing in our own momentarily reactionary times. That alienation throws us on the not always tender mercies of secondary sources: pastoral interpreters, ecclesiastical

offices and the like (the stars of churchdom--and we live in a culture that idolizes stars of every sort, dominated by mass media that do the same). It takes commitment and responsibility indeed, in the face of a media barrage of instant interpretations from our stars, to keep plugging away, to keep gaining a little bit and a little bit more light, in the liturgy, "the primary and indispensable source."

Even some who view the liturgy from outside have sensed this primacy. One example is the lyric that interrupts the scriptural proclamation in Leonard Bernstein's and Stephen Schwarz's *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers*:

You can lock up the bold
And hold them in tow,
You can stifle all adventure
For a century or so,
But you cannot imprison the Word of the Lord . . .
So we wait in silent treason until reason is
restored.
And we wait for the season of the Word of the Lord.⁵

Collectivity

Another blind alley in which we languish is the West's unbalanced emphasis on the isolated individual. Along with its many precious gifts, this way of regarding the person has alienated us from each other and from our world. In doing so, it has blighted half the face of God, blinded us to the vision of God's reign, and made faith, like everything else, a private matter. It has imprisoned us in an economic system whose ideal is not the common good but rather the individual's acquisition of obscenely private wealth. This love affair with self-discovery, self-improvement, self-fulfilment--this privatization so infects and erodes our understanding not only of what the

5. Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Schwartz, *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players and Dancers* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1971) 11-12.

world is about but also of church and liturgy as to make the latter, for all practical purposes, at best ineffectual and at worst mere props of the status quo. Its Jewish and Christian victims, instead of helping to correct privatization's ghastly deformation of the human person, instead of being part of the solution, are part of the problem. When we come into the Sunday assembly as private individuals, having lived another week of private life, we are thereby almost incapable of celebrating liturgy, incapable of the collective sense which liturgy requires.

What sense of humanity's oneness, what thirst for it, even what sense of the church as the body of Christ do we bring? We continue to regard our ministry as one of reconciliation. We continue to use the words--"peace," "oneness," "solidarity." We continue to go through the motions of eating together from a common plate and drinking together from a common cup. But the words and deeds are buried in an avalanche of contradiction. How, then, *can* we fully participate?

For Christians to be taken in by the Reagans or the Gorbachevs, by capitalist ideology or by communist ideology, so that we accept and, yielding further, begin to credit a dichotomy between the individual good and the common good is to flatly reject the biblical covenant's revelation that they are inseparable. We know that liturgy requires coming together, assembly, transcending all our differences of sex, sexual orientation, class, color, age, national origin, lifestyle, vocation, ideology, etc. We can't yet seem to grasp its meaning--that it is the pattern for living out the reign of God in the structures and institutions and relationships of the world. Listen to Joseph Sittler again, just for a minute:

Our neighbors, in the biblical sense, are those persons who live in God's creation with us in the solidarity of our life together on earth. Though I cannot will myself to feel an oceanic affection for all people, I can acknowledge my bond with the whole of creation. In that bond I am to recognize the authenticity, the *thereness*, the concrete life and existence of the other. In the broad context of human solidarity, the exercise of love is realized

in transaffectional justice Justice is love
operating at a distance.⁶

Imagination

Liturgy is our "primary and indispensable source" not only because it is where scripture and assembly meet in living proclamation and assent and where the kingdom scene and banquet are present realities in our action, but also because its communication is so total, exceeding the limits of the merely verbal and rational. It touches every sense and faculty which we possess. We say it is a "body language" to indicate this comprehensiveness. And therefore it evokes faculties which may be atrophied in our rationalistic, literalistic, pragmatic culture--especially the faculty of imagination.

More than any other human faculty, it is imagination which frees us from the heavy hand of our habits, our formulations, our status quo, so that we can envision new possibilities--in this case the reign of God. Harvey Cox brings us the work of some French psychologists on this subject:

Why do we need imagination? We need it because the substance of the universe of thought is just too changing and too complex to be appropriated in a merely rational manner. Therefore, it is the job of the imagination "to operate a dialectic of the real and the possible." Without it, "discursive thought would become incurably crippled in a closed and ossified system."

Our cultural literalism and pragmatism, our preference for utility over meaning, our inability to stand back and

6. *Gravity and Grace* 116.

7. Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1969) 66.

let things speak to us in the language of their being--these are not only liturgical handicaps but also stiflers of witness and of hope. Jesus the Lord struggled against just such "closed and ossified" systems through his whole public ministry. Only active imagination frees us from what is, so that we can accept or discover or create something that is new, like our life in Christ, like every shadowy step on the path of pilgrim witness.

If this is true, then it is the pastoral task in the church to elicit gifts, not to suppress them; to invite new thoughts, not to discourage them; to seek non-mainstream points of view, not to exclude them; to cultivate imagination in all, not to freeze us where we are. And, although this might seem strange to some of the newly-awakened and superficially-engrossed among us, this is precisely why it is both appropriate and necessary that the liturgical celebration of the assembly should be profoundly traditional and classical--a scriptural-sacramental communication that refuses to lay upon us a blueprint of action but rather activates our imaginations.

As appealing as the dictation of a "party line" might be--and it certainly has captured many in this momentarily reactionary period, especially in the leadership of my own church--the liturgy breathes a saving wisdom, the wisdom of too much respect and love for person and community, too much historical awareness of the fallibility of human judgment, to fall into the trap of becoming a mere tool of ideological indoctrination. Liturgy is satisfied to celebrate the gospel's thirst for our freedom and our solidarity in God, and to leave us the common task of bringing that thirst to bear upon a time and a place and a status quo which are new in every generation and indeed with the dawn of every morning.

I think these considerations are critical for the liturgy/witness relationship we are here to examine. Because it is Jesus' Way we preach, and not a list of previously articulated doctrines. Because it is Jesus' Way we try to follow, and not a media star nor an ecclesiastical official. Because it is Jesus' Way to which our life, both corporate and individual, must witness, and not the well-worn paths of the Jews and Christians of our past. Because it is Jesus' Way--always new and always

pilgrim. That is why orthodoxy (if we can escape the current reduction of great terms to the level of media slogans) means "right worship."

Where else but in the liturgy can you and I--female or male, old or young, rich or poor, hungry or well-fed, sheltered or living on the street, jobless or with a place in the working scene, of whatever color and class, lesbian or straight or gay, in caring relationships or alone, smart or slow, good-looking or plain, left or right, mainstream or on the outside looking in, influential or without the currency of power--where else but in the liturgy can you and I experience a witness (and a base for further witness) to our commonness, our humanity, and to the possibility of a conversion that will make us free, that will make the freedom already given us in faith a shared gift for all?

The liturgy assumes we are--and thereby invites us to be--part of the pilgrimage to freedom/solidarity. With Isaiah, it is never wearied of assaulting the deafness of the world:

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim; redress the wronged Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord. (1:16-17)

In our belated urgency, we do not forget the great gifts of our past, the pilgrims, progress we have made. What historian Christopher Dawson wrote early in this century is the long view, the bird's eye view, the confidence we need so much:

Why is it that Europe alone among the civilizations of the world has been continually shaken and transformed by an energy of spiritual unrest that refuses to be content with the unchanging law of social tradition which rules the oriental cultures? It is because its ideal has been not the worship of timeless and changeless perfection but a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world. In the West the spiritual power has not been immobilized in a sacred social order

like the Confucian state in China and the Indian caste system. It has acquired social freedom and autonomy and consequently its activity has not been confined to the religious sphere but has had far-reaching effects on every aspect of social and intellectual life.⁸

As true and reassuring (especially for us church professionals) as Dawson's judgment is, only the leisured, the comfortable and well-fed, can appreciate its solace. Most of the human race lives daily with hearts so burdened that only concrete changes in the economic/political/cultural conditions of life can lift despair. Living and preaching the good news, we are beginning to understand, is nothing less than changing radically our hearts and our social systems, structures and institutions. So witness cannot be defined, even in these pious surroundings, by the likes of us. Witness can be defined, as Jesus defines it, only by "the lowly," "the brokenhearted," "captives," "prisoners," and "all who mourn."

8. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950) 8.