God bless Africa: Worship for a Time Like This

*Ekklesia Worship Conference 2015, Somerset West.*

**TRACK 6** - **Gathering and Going: Congregations that live their faith**

The Social Impact of Liturgy - by Thomas Plastow

**Abstract**

This presentation will attempt to show how the worship environment and the way that liturgy is structured will have an inevitable impact in the self-identity of the worshipping community and its behaviour once the worship service is over. Drawing from examples from various periods in the history of the Church, we will see how the place of the laity has been formed or malformed at various times through the clergy’s way of leading worship. The case study of the African inculturation or indigenization of the liturgy will be explored as a case in point, and reference will be made the present debate within Catholic liturgy caused by differing interpretations of the reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

**Introduction**

When I was approached late last year and asked to speak on this topic, what first caught my attention was the phrase “gathering and going”. Although I had not articulated it before, I now realise that the most important insights I gained through my formal liturgical studies twenty years ago might be captured by a phrase like “gathering and going” or, even better “gathering and being sent forth”.

A lot of Catholic liturgical study is taken up by history and rubrics, and liturgists risk identifying their specialisation solely with complex clerical rituals, forgetting that liturgy is meant to be communal worship. A liturgist’s underlying theology may be betrayed by his or her choice of words regarding the coming and going of the people. Are the chants and prayers before the scripture readings called “introductory rites” or “gathering rites”? Are the final words of the deacon or presiding priest a “dismissal” or a “commissioning”? All through my childhood our parish Eucharist ended with the priest’s imperative: “The Mass is ended. Go in peace.” The most recent English translation of the Roman Missal adds two alternatives which speak of the people’s ongoing mission:

1. Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.
2. Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.

Liturgy always has a social impact. When worship is truly communal it can become a spring that gives life to many projects and initiatives of the Church in the world. When liturgical ceremony attempts to be mysteriously other-worldly, and the people in the benches are reduced to being mere spectators, we foster a model of church is clerical, overly hierarchical and often suspicious of initiatives coming from the laity.

**Historical Overview**

Although we should never generalise and assume that all Christians of a certain era behaved and thought in the same way, we can certainly look at significant trends from different periods in Church history to see how both ritual and architecture has served to shape society.

The ancient Christian assertion *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) predates Prosper of Aquitaine who wrote on this topic at the beginning of the fifth century. The basic idea here is that Christian belief is shaped by the manner in which Christians pray. This maxim has been amplified in recent times to read: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* or, as we worship, so we believe, and so we live. This amplification is an positive attempt to link discipleship to prayer and belief, but it may be read in another way – that our manner of prayer and belief determine the manner in which we live – meaning that social structures within the Church are determined in no small part by the way liturgical worship is structured and executed.

In the first three centuries, Christians formed small groups in major towns in which people knew one another and built community together. Ritual was part of worship from the earliest days, taking up the Lord’s instruction to continue with the memorial meal begun at the Last Supper, but these rituals were not uniform or impervious to change. Groups met in domestic settings, though it seems that where peace prevailed, houses were soon being altered to better shape them as places of communal worship. A famous example is that of Dura Europos in east Syria.

The early Church is all too easily idealised. Conflicts undoubtedly existed as Christians sought to distinguish themselves from the Jews and then began to discern among themselves which early Christological and Pneumatological ideas were mainstream and which were beyond the pale. There is also the question of how apostolic these early communities were. Direct continuity with one of the twelve was soon claimed in diverse places, and there were strongly expressed attitudes (such as that of Hippolytus in c. 215) about which rituals had come down from the apostles.

Many disputes had to wait until the advent of the imperial church before neatly hammered out definitions and compromises could be reached. With Constantine began three hundred years of liturgical innovation. Bishops and deacons were granted some of the privileges accorded to civil officials such as distinctive dress and these, in turn, introduced greater hierarchy both during the ceremonial and afterwards.

While a great many Christians, and not just the Protestants, have felt that the co-opting of the Church by the fourth century Empire was disastrous for the Church’s mission, we should not dismiss all the changes of that period as grandiose and counter-productive. The basilica was adopted as the meeting place for Christian worship because it was from civil architecture and untainted by the pagan religions that were being replaced. Latin became the language of the liturgy because it was understood by the majority long after Aramaic and Greek had ceased to be understood in Western Europe and North Africa. It was the medieval Church that would see these things ossify until they appeared either wonderfully mystical or oppressively restrictive.

By the late Middle Ages there was little knowledge that things had ever been different from how they appeared to most of European Christendom. Liturgy was something done by priests and their assistants in a rarefied environment and in a language not commonly understood. The rank and file had become spectators whose presence was not necessary, strictly speaking, for the ritual to be validly celebrated. Legislation was passed in an attempt to ensure that the baptised attended and that they received the sacrament at least once a year. While early Protestantism quickly attempted to address the divorce between clergy and laity, the idea of statutory communion days remained – causing the Eucharist to be celebrated less frequently than before in several denominations.

The same could not be said of the Catholic Church which went through its own reformation in the second half of the sixteenth century. Aspects of Church belief and practice which had been denounced by Protestant reformers were often bolstered and made pre-eminent by the Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563). Greater devotion for the Mass resulted in the diminishing of Lauds and Vespers which became the preserve of the clergy and religious. The priest’s ability to preside at Mass and hear confessions meant that presbyteral ordination became the great divide between clergy and laity. The gradations between episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate were blurred, and lay participation in the liturgy virtually disappeared.

Once again, language betrayed people’s perceptions: The priest “said Mass” while the people “heard Mass” or “went to Mass”. One going entering the seminary was often said to be “joining the Church” as though this had not already happened at baptism. The social impact of this great divide meant that later philosophers and revolutionaries often did not distinguish between Church and Christianity, between anticlericalism and atheism. Nevertheless, this would be the time of sweeping changes in the Church. The liturgical worship of the baroque and subsequent period inspired many individuals to look beyond the chaos of this world and attempt to build a better one. Many charitable organisations were established, schooling and health care were rolled out for even the poorest and, by the late nineteenth century, a social teaching was taking hold that would champion the rights of workers.

**Twentieth Century Developments**

The Second Vatican Council, which met over several sessions from 1962 to 1965, was a gathering of all Catholic bishops from around the world, together with theological advisors and invited observers. It was called by Pope John XXIII who wished to usher in an age of *aggiornamento,* or a “bringing up to date” in order to give the Church a great impact on society.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (*CSL*) usually referred to by its Latin title *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*SC*) was the first major document of the Second Vatican Council, yet it should not be read as the seminal document of the Council. It was the first to be issued because the early drafts of the *Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* had been rejected by the bishops and while the drafts were completely reworked, the bishops went on to another topic. In hindsight it might have made more sense for the Council to have first debated the nature of the Church and, thereafter, produced a liturgical constitution to display the nature of this Church at prayer.

Even if things had been done this way around, however, it is likely that Vatican II would still have been most popularly equated with the rapid liturgical changes which followed the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Since the liturgy is celebrated daily, it is where changes and conflicts are most keenly felt. Though large parts of Germany, France and the Low Countries felt that liturgical changes were a long time in coming, some dioceses and even whole nations (such as Spain and Ireland) seemed to be caught off guard by these reforms. Not only had there been little alteration in the liturgy during the four hundred years following the Council of Trent and publication of the Missal of 1570, but many had been taught that no further change was possible, so the revisions, reforms and restorations of the 1970s seemed like a flood sweeping away all they held dear.

Most church documents begin with theological principles and citations from scripture, laying these down as a foundation on which to construct the body of the work. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* follows this model: its opening paragraphs and first chapter give the theology in which all its later norms and directives will be rooted. The Church itself sees its liturgy not as a pattern of human customs, but as the work of Christ (*SC* 7). The graces that Christ won for us through his death and resurrection are understood as being communicated to us through the liturgy, ‘making the work of our redemption a present reality’ (*SC* 2). The daily celebration of the liturgy is said to build up the people into a holy temple, while strengthening them to proclaim Christ to others. With such a high view of the liturgy, it makes sense that church authorities would be very hesitant about altering it, yet the *Constitution* states that all the liturgical rites are to be carefully revised so as to ensure they are authentic to the early sources (*SC* 4), and that they are given new vigour for modern times.

This, then, would be the two-fold thrust of the subsequent reform: restoration and invigoration. Firstly the liturgical books would be scrutinised against the earliest texts available. Aspects of the early rites which had fallen into disuse would be restored, for example the ‘Prayers of the Faithful’ (*SC* 53), and the adult catechumenate (*SC* 64). What many would perceive to be innovations were actually ancient practices being restored. Secondly, the liturgy would be given a new lease of life. This was done through peeling away unnecessary repetitions (*SC* 50), ensuring that all devotions are in keeping with the liturgy (*SC* 13), enabling a wider use of scripture (*SC* 24, 35.4, 51), allowing the use of vernacular languages (*SC* 36, 54, 63) and even absorbing aspects of indigenous cultures in what were called ‘mission lands’ (*SC* 37-40).

If a single paragraph were to be held up as the epitome of the *Constitution on The Sacred Liturgy*, it might well be paragraph 14 which includes the words:

The Church desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people… is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

For the first time in hundreds of years, the highest teaching authority in the Catholic Church stated that the assembly of the baptised faithful was of primary concern, since the liturgy is organised public worship of the People of God.

The fundamental insight here is that baptism is more important than ordination. This comes as a surprise to many Catholics and Orthodox laity who often assume that their priests are closer to God than they are. Yet it is the people who make up the liturgical assembly. Catholics tend to forget that every baptised person shares in the mission of worship and intercessory prayer. The priesthood of all believers means that every member of the Church shares in the priestly ministry of Christ. Furthermore, Christians are people who gather together - c.f.: *qahal YHWH*; convocation (called together); congregation; assembly; ecclesia (being “called out”). Christians should never be an audience at a ritual run by the ordained ministers. Although not all Catholic theologians would agree, I maintain that, when he stands at the altar table, the ordained priest does not mediate or intercede for the people in his care, but he presides over the prayer of the entire assembly. Can the priest “say Mass” when alone? Technically, yes, but this is actively discouraged by the Church, and is not how liturgy is intended to be celebrated.

Another insight, this time one which is sometimes missing from Protestant worship, is that the liturgical gathering is of the people as one body. Worship is not a coming together of individually saved persons looking for like-minded people with whom to praise God, but is a corporate act that is undertaken by the entire Church, the Body of Christ. The wheat and weeds are growing together, and not all in attendance at Sunday worship are bearing good fruit! They are, nonetheless, called to be there and the ministers must endeavour to encourage them to give themselves to it more and more.

In 1997, the former Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahoney wrote his flock a letter entitled *Gather Faithfully Together* in which he encouraged them to give themselves to worship and so allow worship to shape them into people who have an impact on society. In paragraphs 89 to 98 he picks up on our “epitome” of the *Constitution on The Sacred Liturgy* cited above:

1. Full participation means coming to the liturgy body and soul, preparing for it, making it the priority and not just another “Sunday thing”.
2. Conscious participation means not weaving in and out, but being mentally present and alert throughout. Be open to what is going on and enter into it - sing, chant, pray, listen, process, keep silence, become aware of who we are.
3. Active participation does not mean “being busy”, but nor is it the opposite of contemplation. Some parts of liturgy call for silence and contemplation, but we should enter into these as actively as we do in song and acclamation. There are various liturgical ministries done by non-ordained members, but the assembly as a whole also has a collective ministry (convocation) which we tend to overlook.

Just as he encourages a meaningful *gathering*, so the cardinal stresses the need to continue in this spirit after *going.* In paragraphs 108 and 109 he tells his people to be the Church when in church and to continue being the Church after church! The Church is to be a community of fraternal love than makes a change in the world. The liturgy sends us forth to make a social impact.

Church architecture since the Second World War has attempted to balance two opposing concepts. Places of worship in eastern religions are often called temples. The devotee enters into the temple or shrine where he or she meets the god or goddess in a special way - as though the god dwelt in that place. Places of worship in most Protestant denominations are meeting houses, a building erected as a gathering place for worship, with the building itself having no sacred quality. Catholic church buildings have to balance these two aspects: they must be places that allow for the communal celebration of the liturgy, yet they must also allow for individual devotion. In different periods of history we have veered more in one direction and then in another, but most contemporary Catholic theologians would agree that places for liturgy should be shaped for their primary use: the gathering of the people for sacred worship. They should reflect who we are as Church - the People of God born anew in baptism, gathered together to hear the Word proclaimed, in communion together at the altar table. A modern fan-shaped church, or a circular cathedral, shows that we gather around for worship together. Renovations and reordering have also attempted to show this (e.g.: bringing the sanctuary forwards so that people can be seated on three sides of the altar).

Cardinal Mahoney writes: “The best floor plans manifest the entire assembly as the body enacting this liturgy.” (*Gather* #103) Another author states that putting benches into the church is like putting the stands onto the football pitch… the people must feel that they are players, not spectators! They must be active participants.

The 1978 document of the United States Catholic bishops’ conference entitled *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* explains some of these points:

#11: hospitality is most important… do people feel at ease in this place of worship?

#12: a sense mystery comes in simplicity and beauty, not in deliberate “otherworldliness”.

#24: the whole environment (lighting, sound, furniture, porch) is to suit its purpose

#39-41: the building is for the people who make it a sacred space through their use of it

#52: the scale of the building must enable people to feel at home and never dominate them

Sadly this document was never accepted by traditionalists who have been campaigning to have it superseded. Critics of the post-Vatican II liturgical revisions sometimes comment that in stressing the primacy of the assembly (the important role of the people), we have lost our sense of the sacred. They say that we fail to venerate Christ, but instead we are celebrating ourselves. Instead of a *domus ecclesia*, they want to build the *domus Dei*, perhaps failing to understand paragraph seven of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* which tells us that while Christ is indeed present in the consecrated and reserved Eucharistic elements, he is also present in the minister, in the Word, and in the people.

**Liturgical Inculturation in Africa**

The relationship of a people’s culture to their mode of worship – what detractors might term self-celebration over authentic worship – is nowhere more apparent than in the contemporary drive towards liturgical inculturation, especially in Asia and Africa. This is a two-way process: not only does the inculturated liturgy have an impact on society, but social movements, especially since decolonization, have impacted upon ritual worship.

Liturgical inculturation is usually taken as being a method of adapting Catholic rituals so as to make them more easily understood by people of indigenous cultures outside of Europe. But the idea of inculturation has been more radically expressed in many local churches, sometimes embodying radical liturgical and even theological changes. This variety is due in some part to what is expected of inculturation. With regard to liturgical inculturation in Africa, for example, is the expectation to bring Christianity to Africa (by adapting Christian liturgy so that it is better understood) or are we Africanising the church (by absorbing traditional African beliefs and practices)?

In a masterful piece of writing, the late Filipino monk Anscar Chupungco identified and categorised three methods of liturgical inculturation which have proven an excellent means of understanding most of what has been happening in the dioceses of the developing world over the past forty years. Chupungco (1992) calls the three methods dynamic equivalence, organic progression, and creative assimilation. These terms describe actual ways in which the liturgy has been and continues to be inculturated.

**Dynamic Equivalence**

This method is usually the first that is tried. Just as the scriptures and liturgical texts get translated from ancient languages into the modern vernacular, so are liturgical gestures and symbols “translated” into local cultural art and idiom. This translation should always remain dynamic so that the liturgy speaks to the people. An element of the Roman liturgy is replaced with something from the local culture that expresses the same idea: a greeting gesture, for example, or mark of reverence from the local culture would be used at the times indicated by the Roman ritual books.

Pope Paul VI’s 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (#20), states that the evangelization of cultures is not to be superficial, as though applying a thin veneer, but must be vital and go to the very roots of the culture. Though the Gospel and culture are not identical, they are not necessarily incompatible. The Gospel is always proclaimed in a culture and so will borrow elements of that culture so as to build up the kingdom of God.

The strength of the methodology of dynamic equivalence is in its move away from earlier missionary efforts which often maligned and destroyed local cultures. Its weakness lies in its positivist or mechanical understanding of culture in which all peoples are thought to have equitable means of expressing the same concerns.

**Organic Progression**

Organic progression seeks to maximise the opportunities given in the liturgy for cultural expression. It sees the Roman ritual books as templates which can be enlarged and improved upon, drawing in cultural elements and expressions. This method is seen as supplementing and completing the work of Vatican II. In the introductory paragraphsto the liturgical books, and in the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, there are many suggested places for adaptation. In the *Rite of Christian Marriage*, for example, nothing is specified as regards the procession into the church, the seating arrangements for those involved, the clothes to be worn, the specific colour of the vestments, the choice of scriptural readings and so on. In each of these areas, therefore, the bridal couple and the minister may choose to fit the liturgy to local customs.

**Creative Assimilation**

Although the methodologies of dynamic equivalence and organic progression have assisted local liturgies, Chupungco states that this kind of inculturation alone will not suffice, but that contextualization is necessary. Contextualization of the liturgy may be done through a method Chupungco calls ‘creative assimilation’ (1992: 44-47). Chupungco states that the object of liturgical inculturation is ‘to graft liturgical texts and rites onto the cultural pattern of the local church’(1992: 37). This is an interesting analogy since the image implies the growth of a new variety of plant through the bonding together of two separate shoots.

As its name implies, creative assimilation means the incorporation of cultural rituals into Christian liturgy resulting in something new. This procedure has precedents in the Patristic period and in the Frankish church of the early Middle Ages when Christian meanings were given to non-Christian traditions through the use of biblical typology. Now the challenge is to add to the Byzantine, Roman and Gallican contributions by complementing them with African, Asian, and other contemporary insights.

This last method is perhaps the most “gung ho” of the three and is often the one presumed by African enthusiasts determined to bring elements of their cultural practices into church. This model is the closest to contextual theology, for it starts with the observation of a practice regarded as important to a cultural identity and then attempts to accommodate it within Christian liturgy. This implies a departure from the Roman rituals, for creative assimilation means the absorption into the Christian liturgy of the rites and practices of contemporary cultures.

One of the hallmarks of African cultures is their respect for the ancestors and their understanding that those people of goodwill who have gone before remain involved in the lives of their descendants. These aspects of local cultures remain controversial in Christian circles, yet there is a growing sense that unless Christianity can accommodate aspects of ancestral veneration, African Christians will continue living a dual spirituality. Could a future use of creative assimilation mean the “christening” of cultural practices such as animal slaying, or the pouring of libations, publishing Christian prayers and catechesis that situate these cultural practices within a Christian understanding that maintains the central role of Jesus Christ and shows all spirits and souls as being subject to him?

It is important to note here that although creative assimilation has been identified, named and documented, it has yet to be officially sanctioned by the Roman department charged with liturgical and sacramental matters.

Can Christianity can be separated from western cultural tradition and then be recast in an African or Asian context by finding cultural patterns and practices which parallel those of the West? Firstly there is a real fear among some that this will lead to relativism – thinking of the Gospel as one good message among several, or even of syncretism. Secondly, to assume that Christianity can be extracted from one culture and inserted into another may be to assume that Christianity stands above all cultures – a highly debatable topic! Before being elected pope, Benedict XVI doubted this. He saw Christianity as being a culture in its own right, with its own language (Latin!), cultures and traditions. (Pecklers, 2003:126-7) He doubted that inculturation was possible or desirable, preferring to speak of “inter-culturation” is which Christian culture and indigenous culture meet and dialogue. This different approach puts a greater emphasis on preserving the artistic, literary and musical heritage of the Roman Rite, but this may hamper effective evangelization. When Saints Cyril and Methodius evangelized the Slavs in the ninth century they jettisoned Greek and Latin in favour of Old Slavonic and were accused by some German churchmen of tampering with the Catholic faith. (Pecklers, 2003:129) How slow we are to learn from history!

**Conclusion**

In the preceding historical overview, the examination of some twentieth century movement in Catholic liturgy, and in the case study of liturgical inculturation, my aim has been to show that the manner in which ritual and ceremonial are practised will influence the way in which those worshipping things about themselves and their society. Medieval liturgy with all its splendour served to underpin a feudal social fabric in which people were arranged hierarchically and each had a defined role to play. The theatrical liturgy of the Baroque period demanded an audience just as much as the operas of the period. Laity were herded into pews for the first time and became spectators whose personal worship was then limited to devotions and pious works.

The rapid growth in missionary evangelization in the colonial period in Latin America, Asia and Africa won new flocks for Christ, but the last fifty years have seen calls for diversity in Catholic worship so as to allow local Churches to use their own cultural ceremonies, even if some of these are based on pre-Christian practices. Finding some way of doing this may be as crucial as allowing first century Gentiles to come to Christ without first having to adopt the Mosaic law. African and Asian Catholics wish to be seen as equal to their Italian, French and Irish brothers and sisters. The symbols and rituals used to embody what the sacraments are all about must speak directly to the people and not have to be filtered through a book-learned catechetical programme. But all this remains controversial. From 1994 onwards, officials in Rome have been trying to rein in some of the more imaginative experiments, especially from India and central Africa. Future changes in liturgy, whether official or informally done cannot but have an enormous social impact.

It would be fascinating to see whether there is, indeed, a correlation between types of liturgy and types of social impact. Does the more traditional, ceremonial, clerical liturgy result, at best, in the laity channelling their efforts into charitable works (such as soup kitchens) that alleviate the symptoms of social problems? Do contemporary forms of worship in which all play a vital part tend to result more in social outreach that seeks radical reform? Is this perception no more than a caricature, or is there enough evidence to support this as a thesis?

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