



Liturgy Has the Power To Change Us

Like a Text, It Offers an Alternate World of Risk and Growth

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To be human is to experience change. We are creatures who grow and mature at every level of our personhood: body, mind and spirit. Although physical change, whether it be growth or decline, has a certain inevitability about it, other dimensions of the human experience are more open ended. Even if the outer landscape of our lives stays somewhat the same over a lifetime (and this is surely not the norm), our inner landscape experiences significant growth and change as we relate to others and to the world. Truly, any life experience has the potential to bring about human transformation as new insights and knowledge alter our way of seeing the world and ourselves and, ultimately, our way of being in the world.

We might even say that the human person has an inherent drive toward change and growth. When are all our questions about the world fully answered? When can we say we have enough insight into the workings of nature, of individuals or of society? Just as our minds constantly crave new knowledge, we have within us, according to the Christian understanding of personhood, a drive toward the infinite (which we call God). Christians understand the human person to be a transcendent being. At our best, we are always seeking and yearning for the “more” that life can give us: more insight, more truth, more love, a greater experience of the real. When we achieve this “more,” we are transformed. Our hearts can grow bigger, our desire for the good increase, our spirits soar, and our behaviors change as we integrate new experiences and understandings.

Yet we know from past experience that such experiences leave us only temporarily satisfied. In our infinite quest for the divine in this life and the

next, we find ourselves once again longing for more as the effects of our new insights and experiences diminish.

Further, our curiosity is not quenched merely in knowing that we can change. We want to know how it happens. What facilitates transformation for the good? What can we participate in, what can we immerse ourselves in that will stretch our minds and spirits and change our behavior accordingly?

In particular, we might ask what religion in general and Christianity in particular bring to our quest for transformation. What spiritual disciplines have the potential to transform us? Perhaps the most obvious of these is the practice of corporate prayer, or liturgy.

LITURGY AS ENCOUNTER WITH RISK

Christianity in all its varieties shares a common tradition of gathering on Sundays for corporate prayer, praise and petition for the world and for each individual. Although the structure of the worship assembly may differ from denomination to denomination, nearly all share common elements. These include readings from the Scriptures and responses of praise, professions of belief and requests for forgiveness and blessing, as well as ritual acts of offering and sharing of a ritual meal. Whatever the particular complexions of the religious services, we can call them “liturgical services” or “liturgies” for our purposes here. (While Roman Catholics tend to call the celebration of the Eucharist or Mass “liturgy,” there are many more kinds of Catholic services, all of which go by the general term liturgy; for example, Liturgy of the Hours, Communion services, celebrations of other sacraments).

Having clarified our terms, we can turn to exploring what it is that makes liturgical services transformative for us.



The question can be answered from two perspectives: the phenomenological — that is, how do liturgical events affect those who participate in them, and the theological — how do Christian communities understand God’s action in the liturgy.

The second perspective is the more profound because Christianity posits that the spirit of God, who is our source and our end, drives all transformation for good. The “more” we can grow toward and into divinity, the more we can thus become the singular person God created us to be. And because that growth is God’s ultimate desire for us, God actively relates to us in varied circumstances to facilitate this growth and change.

As for the phenomenological dimension, the field of hermeneutics, or interpretation theory, has much to teach us, and it has been richly employed in the field of liturgical theology in recent years. From both a linguistic and a philosophical perspective, hermeneutics explores the interaction between a person and a “text,” whether the text consists of words on a page or a work of art, music or dance, or a liturgical celebration. Hermeneutics asks: How does the text, which stands on its own, come to be understood by a thinking, feeling person? How, in an encounter with a text, is a person changed?

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his writings on hermeneutics, speaks of the encounter between a human subject and a text (let’s call it *Hamlet*) as an event of interpretation. In this event, the text with its horizon or meaning comes into contact



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with a human subject, or person, with her or his own horizon of meaning and experience.¹ In a true encounter, a person does not simply impose a meaning on *Hamlet* from the outside, or from her or his own limited perspective alone. Rather, the encounter consists of a dynamic interchange between the text, which has something to offer, and the individual, who likewise has something to give.

Ricoeur suggests that every text projects a world in which to live. The interpreter, then, is invited to take a risk and enter the world that is presented. It is in this leap of faith and openness that we and our worlds can change. We open ourselves to the possibility of the *new* that the text offers us and, in doing so, risk that we will never be the same again. Whether the change will be for good or ill depends upon which worlds we allow to enter our horizon. It matters with *what* we interact, and it matters *how* we integrate it.

In exploring how we can be transformed by liturgy, we need to think of it as our text. It projects a world and invites each one of us to take it on as her or his own. The Scriptures, for instance,

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propose a world of hope in the face of death and gloom; they offer a word of reconciliation for the sinner and healing for those ill; they offer love and redemption for the Earth and its people, especially those most despised by our societies.

Because liturgical participation is holistic, meaning that it engages our whole person, it has great potential to change us. We take in that world not just with our minds, but also with our senses. The sounds, the smells, the sights of the liturgy have profound effects upon our inner emotional, psychic and spiritual life.

Beyond the Word, the liturgy invites us to participate in ritual acts, and these, too, project a possible world. For example, the most revered Christian action is to remember in ritual form the great things our God has done, especially in Christ Jesus, “who on the night before he died took bread, said the blessing and gave it to his disciples” As Catholics understand this ritual, we take bread and wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. We offer this bread and wine back to the God who has first offered it to us, who then blesses and transforms them into the Body and Blood of Christ and returns them to us as gift so that we may become one with Him and with each other.

In other words, at the end of this dialogue of offer and counteroffer, we ritually take into our own bodies the body of the Lord presented to us in sacramental form. We take the risk of allowing His body to become ours.

As with the interpretation of *Hamlet*, where we let the world that Shakespeare imagined shape our own, in the liturgy we allow the world of God shown forth in Christ Jesus in Word and sacrament to become our world. In offering ourselves for the sake of another, even to the point of death, we live out in ritual the way of life that we call Christian. And our participation in that ritual, from a strictly phenomenological perspective, comes with strings. To place oneself in dialogue with the world projected by the Christian liturgy (be that Eucharist, reconciliation, marriage) is to risk allowing that world to become ours. The very process of interpretation engages us in a dialogue that begs for our vulnerability to the new, and thus to transformation.

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world not just with our minds, but also with our senses. The sounds, the smells, the sights of the liturgy have profound effects upon our inner emotional, psychic and spiritual life. We don't just give voice to our belief that the cross of Christ is a sign of salvation; we sign ourselves repeatedly with our hands, with oil or with ashes. We sing the meaning of Christmas and Easter with hymnody that sounds through our body in ways that speaking alone cannot do. We walk in procession with the bodies of our beloved dead, blessing them with the holy water of baptism.

The liturgy presents Christians not only with God's Word, but also with God's offer of divine relationship. To that offer we are asked to make a response. We can accept that offer and move deeper into the transformation that is at the heart of our lives. Or we can reject the offer and stay the same, or worse, retreat from the “more” we are called to be.

GOD MEETS US WHERE WE ARE

But what, exactly, is the theology of this transformation? What is the Christian, and more specifically, the Catholic view?

We already adverted to some issues when we spoke about the Eucharist and its ability to transform those who participate in the ritual enactment. By freely entering into the ritual event, we “buy into” its meaning, appropriate it, and are transformed. Further, we noted earlier that God is both our source and our end, and intends to incorporate us into God's own life. The church has consistently taught that God achieves this by taking the human experience deeply into account. God respects what God has made.

As early as the second century, Christian theologians, in continuity with the Hebrew tradition, have insisted on the role of the body, and the material world, in salvation. The Christian writer Tertullian, for example, claimed “the body is the hinge of salvation.” By this he meant that, because we are embodied creatures, God works with us according to the capacities of our bodies. Thus Tertullian writes that we wash the body so that the soul may be cleansed; we anoint the body so that the spirit may be sanctified. There is no other way for God to relate to us but through the very constitution of our person — through body, soul and spirit and, by extension, through the materiality of the world.

Against those who would argue that creation is evil, as various groups have done over time, early Christian practice affirmed the goodness of the



“Our duty, as men and women, is to proceed as if limits to our ability did not exist. We are collaborators in creation.”

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material world. In our ritual remembrance of Christ Jesus, we use very material gifts of bread and wine. In fact, an "offertory procession" with these gifts was inserted into the Eucharistic celebration by the end of the 2nd century to stress that God works with us through physical realities.

What we find in Tertullian is the beginning of what we call a sacramental theology. In other words, God, who desires union with us now and in the life to come, uses our ritual celebrations to achieve the kind of transformation God desires for us and that we long for. The Christian community began with the faith statement, made manifest in Jesus, that God desires our transformation into the divine, and then, gradually, developed a theology of how this is accomplished. The community came to understand and teach that through ritual participation, through liturgy, we participate in the reality signified, which is always God's desire for our salvation. Through ritual washing, for instance, we image in ourselves Jesus' experience of being called God's beloved. As Paul described it in a metaphor, we die with Christ in baptism and are raised with him. In Eucharistic sharing, we come to share in the very divinity of Christ and so come into union with him and with his whole mystical body, the Christian community. Through the laying on of hands and anointing, we are given the Spirit.

PARTICIPATION COMES WITH STRINGS

The church, as agent of Christ on Earth, continually celebrates through ritual words and actions

the mighty works of God for our salvation. In doing so it provides the means through which Christians can participate in that reality. God's grace operates through human means. As stated previously, through appropriation of divine realities, we are invited to integrate them with our whole person and modify accordingly our behavior in the world.

From a theological perspective, then, we can say the liturgical participation comes with strings. Ethical behavior flows from ritual transformation. By acting in the world as God would have us act, we have the potential for transforming not only ourselves, but also all our relationships and the world we share. That too we accomplish with God's grace. Not only does God work transformation *in* us through liturgical participation, God works *through* us for the transformation of the world. ■



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NOTE

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), passim, and "The Hermeneutics of Symbol I and II" in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 287-334.