



LITURGY & JUSTICE: MAKING THE CONNECTION

Part 1 “Just what is liturgy all about, anyway?”

We have experienced much liturgical renewal in these forty-five years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Worship in the common language of people, a deeper appreciation and use of scriptures, revisions of our sacramental rituals, a greater repertoire of music, and greater lay involvement in liturgical ministries, have all helped to achieve a major goal of the council, “the full, conscious, and active participation” of all in the celebration of liturgy.

What many of us perhaps did not know was that there was a liturgical movement many decades prior to Vatican II which prepared the way for the reforms and changes in the liturgy that the Council officially promulgated. What might also surprise us is that the liturgical movement in the early part of the 20th century, inspired by such leaders as the Benedictine Virgil Michel, was concerned not merely with matters of rubrics and ritual, but with how a greater participation in the liturgy by all of Christ’s faithful might bring about the transformation of the world. For Fr. Michel and other movement leaders, the reform of society in justice and peace would come about when the Church truly lived as the “Mystical Body of Christ” in the world. And the place where they saw that we are most tutored and prepared for that role as agents of social transformation is the liturgy. It is especially in the celebration of the Eucharist that we become the means by which Christ continues His saving work in the world.

Thus, liturgical renewal and the work of justice are inseparable. Unfortunately, sometimes this intimate connection has been lost. We have gotten so caught up in the “doing of liturgy” well, which is certainly important, that we have forgotten a major purpose of the liturgy, our becoming Christ and being sent (in Latin *missa*—which is where we get the word *Mass*) to renew and transform the world, thereby helping to build the Kingdom of God in our own time and place.

In 2004, Pope John Paul II, reminded us of this connection in *Mane nobiscum domine*, his Apostolic Letter for the Eucharistic Year (no. 28):

There is one other point which I would like to emphasize, since it significantly affects the authenticity of our communal sharing in the Eucharist. It is the impulse which the Eucharist gives to the community for a practical commitment to building a more just and fraternal society. In the Eucharist our God has shown love in the extreme, overturning all those criteria of power which too often govern human relations and radically affirming the criterion of service: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mc 9:35). It is not by chance that the Gospel of John contains no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead relates the “washing of feet” (cf. Jn 13:1-20): by bending down to wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus explains the meaning of the Eucharist unequivocally. Saint Paul vigorously reaffirms the impropriety of a Eucharistic celebration lacking charity expressed by practical sharing with the poor (cf. 1Cor 11:17-22, 27-34).

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est* (no. 22), writes:
...love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to the Church as the ministry of sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.

Even more recently, Benedict XVI issued the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*. In this wonderful and rich teaching on the Eucharist, based upon the reflections of the 2005 Synod of Bishops, the Pope reflects on the social implications of the Eucharistic Mystery (no. 89):

In discussing the social responsibility of all Christians, the Synod Fathers noted that the sacrifice of Christ is a mystery of liberation that constantly and insistently challenges us. I therefore urge all the faithful to be true promoters of peace and justice: "All who partake of the Eucharist must commit themselves to peacemaking in our world scarred by violence and war, and today in particular, by terrorism, economic corruption and sexual exploitation.

These powerful words provide us with a very clear and challenging answer to the question of "what is the liturgy is all about, anyway?"

They are especially fitting when we note that the very word "liturgy" literally means "public works". In Roman times, "leitourgia" referred to the public works and building projects of the empire—something funded by an individual or small group to benefit everyone. These provided the empire with such things as roadways which exist to this very day. Thus, our full participation in the liturgy is not only about the public work of giving worship to God, but being prepared and equipped for building the Kingdom of God through the public works of charity and justice—what we call the social mission of the Church.

Having established the connection between liturgy and justice, the next series of inserts will examine the major parts of the Mass and note the natural connections between these and Catholic social teaching. We'll look at the Liturgy of the Word, with an emphasis on the "Gathering Rite", "Proclamation of the Word", & "General Intercessions"; the Liturgy of the Eucharist, focusing upon the "Preparation of Gifts", "Eucharistic Prayer", & "Communion Rite", and, if I may take a little liberty to add a third major part to the Mass, the Liturgy of the World, which begins with the "Dismissal Rite". We will see the direct implications of what we do and celebrate at liturgy for our life and mission in the world. We will discover what the early liturgical reformers and our modern popes have consistently taught; namely, that the liturgy schools and forms us for the mission of establishing God's justice in the world, especially for the most poor and vulnerable in our human family, those whom the scriptures called in Hebrew God's beloved *anawim*.

Part 2 The challenge of the Liturgy of the Word

Part 3 The Liturgy of the Eucharist: sharing in the one bread and the one cup, we come to recognize one another as brothers and sisters.

Part 4 Dismissal for Mission

