THE RITES AND WRONGS OF LITURGY

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Why Good Liturgy Matters

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For Mary Paul Clarke, OSC
—in gratitude for all her support

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Preface

"What's worth doing, is worth doing well!" is a maxim that has rung in my ears since my childhood, and we all know that it's true! Yet, when it comes to celebrating the liturgy, doing it well can be very difficult. Even when a great deal of effort has been expended, it may still not achieve the ends we as disciples desire. Over the centuries many have pondered what constitutes the criterion of what we should do when we celebrate. For many Catholics, this has been scrupulous observance of the laws; for many Protestants, what was warranted or enjoined by the Bible. Both assumed that a good liturgy was a function of the appropriate authority: if the authority mandated it, then that will work! In the mid-twentieth century, faced with the obvious faults of their inherited liturgies, churches sought renewal and reform and often in the process invoked antiquity as the criterion: if it worked in that pristine moment, then it should be good for us now. This little book takes a different approach—one borrowed from the world of architecture and design—and suggests that we use a set of interlocking principles as a way to evaluate what we are doing now and what we might do in our unending task of renewing the liturgy so that it may be a fitting celebration of our discipleship, a proclamation of the Gospel, and a living fountain from which we draw life.

As this book begins its public career I want to thank all those groups of Christians who have invited me to speak

to them about liturgy, with whom I have run workshops on various aspects of our celebration, from whom I have learned so much, and with whom I have shared the Lord's loaf, cup, and love.

T.O'L
Nottingham
Ascension Day 2017

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Why Is Good Liturgy Important?

The waitress came with the coffee, placed one cup in front of each of us, and inquired if there was anything else we needed. We shook our heads, and she finished her task with a smile saying: "Enjoy!"

This tiny incident lasted less than a minute and was in no way special. Goodness knows how many times I have been part of such a scene, but the interesting thing is that you, beginning to read a book on liturgy, are probably just as familiar with the scene as I am. The reason both of us can relate to this incident is that it is a perfect instance of how ritual impinges on us and is an everyday part of life. We tend to think that ritual is elaborate, arcane, and clearly marked off from the rest of experience. It comes with its own sights and sounds such as gorgeous vestments and ringing bells; it has its own soundtrack, probably played on an organ, and even its own smells with clouds of incense. It is far from the everyday practical, real life. Indeed, we sometimes use the word *ritual* to indicate mere play-acting: going through the

motions without real sincerity as in the cry, "He was not really sorry; he just went through the ritual."

Like it or not, however, ritual is virtually always present when human beings interact with one another. Surprising as it may sound to many, it is terribly important to us, and when a ritual fails we sometimes get very mad indeed! Likewise, we all like to do things well. It is actually very hard to set out to be deliberately and consistently negative and underperforming, so we like to do our rituals well. But discovering how to do a ritual well—especially rituals that are as multilayered in significance as the Christian liturgy—is not as easy as it sounds. That is why I have written this book, and probably why you are reading it.

Before we go any further, let's think about that moment in the restaurant. When I went with my friend into the café we both knew what was going to happen: we had done it before and we expected the pattern of events to repeat itself. We not only knew what we wanted—a cup of coffee—but we understood how to order it, whether one finds a seat and then orders or vice versa, that in this situation one sits down at a table, and we knew that we would have to wait for the coffee to be brewed and brought to us. This knowledge was not just common to the two of us—though it was a private cup of coffee and our conversation was both private and off the record—but was known to the staff and everyone else there. Someone who did not share all these expectations, who did not know the procedure, would be simply lost, and others in the café might consider that person a nuisance.

We went for coffee. That's what we said to each other, "OK, let's get some coffee," but was that the real reason we went there? Did we go for coffee together just to fulfill a biological need for regular hydration? Coffee is more than hydration! It is a social event, a bonding between people that

they enjoy doing just for the sake of it. It is something we share, and we like to share with one another. We were saying to each other, without words, that we humans like relating to each other. Even if we are having a business meeting, we know that somehow life is more than that and that sharing a cup of coffee may be as close as we can get to saying to each other that life is larger than our jobs and much more complex.

Having coffee is a shorthand for all these things that are both important and taken for granted. We only know that they mean something if the pattern is interrupted; we would be suspicious of someone who would *not* be willing to have coffee with us. Now we are sitting waiting for the coffee to come and we engage in bits of conversation that mark a boundary separating this shared cup of coffee from the formal meeting we have just been to. We may return to "talking shop," but we won't do it at the coffee table the way we did it around the boardroom table. We know this is time just focused on us and who we are. If we do not know each other well, then we will talk about the big game last night, the game everyone knew was being played, or the weather. We are aware of the ambiance: a café must feel right and look right. We might drink a hot drink in any situation, but if we are "going for coffee" we expect the café to be laid out so that we can talk, with good chairs, and appropriate décor: it might have old coffee pots on shelves or pictures of an actual eighteenth-century coffeehouse on the walls. Having coffee is part of our culture; we sometimes even call it "café society." This is not only known to us but to every global coffee franchise. (Marketing experts are often more attuned to humans as ritual-using social animals than religious ministers!) Indeed, the actual cup of coffee can often be just an excuse for all that goes on when we say, "Let's meet for coffee!"

Then the waitress came with the coffee. This was much more than pressing a button on a vending machine. Human beings were interacting, but we did not know each other's names and we did not really have the opportunity to have elaborate introductions. She had many people to serve and we were sitting there wanting to chat, but could I act as if she were a robot? That would be barbaric. We humans have to relate to one another because we are basically decent toward one another and like to help and be helped. Being relational is hardwired into us. As a theist I believe the Creator is responsible for this, and thus we cannot just ignore one another, so we use ritual. The waitress checked out that we had what we needed to have a successful cup of coffee, we acknowledged that we were humans by smiling as we answered, and she brought this moment of human exchange to a conclusion with just a single word: "Enjoy." Technically, if you asked a grammarian, she had just used the imperative. "Enjoy!" is parallel to a "Halt" or "Stick up your hands," but we understood it to be a special word just for such a situation as having coffee.

That whole trip to the restaurant involved a set of shared expectations ("having coffee" would be a good idea that we would like and find useful). There was a task to be performed (going there, getting the coffee and drinking it). There were technical tasks (clean tables, have cups, make coffee, clear up afterward), and it all took place in a culture, with shared assumptions and understandings, and with many levels of interpersonal codes. This whole complex event was made simple because one of our everyday rituals is "having coffee." Indeed, we know these various parts of the ritual without ever thinking about them because if any of them failed we would know it, seek to put it right, and would remember it. If we went for coffee and the other person did not speak we

would know that either something was wrong or that this would not be something we would do again. Likewise, if the seats were uncomfortable, or there was a smell of stale food or old cooking oil, or the décor was wrong, we might say, before ordering, "Let's try somewhere else." If the coffee was cold or had tasted wrong or the service was surly, we would have finished quickly and not returned there again. When the little ritual of having a cup of coffee with a friend has been done well, we simply know it but do not even alert ourselves to this fact. When something goes wrong with the ritual, we are very conscious of the fact and might locate all our misgivings on the liquid in the cup: "I've tasted better!" Likewise, if you are in the business of facilitating this ritual, then you take care that the ritual goes according to plan and fulfills people's expectations. You want the satisfaction that you are doing right and that everyone who comes to have coffee eventually goes away satisfied. But the ritual of coffee, though important, is relatively straightforward; the rituals of faith are far more complex, touch all sorts of deep emotions, are very idiosyncratic, and have to satisfy a dizzying range of criteria if they are to meet expectations.

So why is good liturgy important and why should we study it? We are creatures who relate to one another and who communicate with one another, and ritual is central to these human activities. Similarly, we want to carry out these encounters well, and we want them to succeed in fulfilling our highest expectations. So it is important for all who plan or take leadership roles in Christian rituals to ask themselves whether they are doing them well, what constitutes doing rituals well, and how can they be done better? Moreover, if people running a café ask how the "coffee experience" can be improved, then religious people—who make the bold claim that they act in the presence of the living God—should see

doing it well as part of the honor of being a human being acting in that presence. When the memory of the dedication of the first Jerusalem temple was written up, for example, the writers showed the importance of what they were doing by listing the quantities of gold, silver, bronze, and jewels used, and how everything had been made as richly and beautifully as possible (1 Chr 22:14-16). This desire is still with us! This human desire to do well can manifest itself in our liturgy by

- how we set high goals for the way we relate as sisters and brothers in faith,
- how we remember the great acts of God,
- how we model our relationships on God's love for us now, and
- how we proclaim our hope in God's redeeming love in the future.

Good liturgy—and improving the way we celebrate—is a core activity. How we celebrate is not a fuddy-duddy issue for an elite few whose "thing" is liturgy. Why? Because we are all ritual beings.[1]

Experiencing Church

We can also list more specific reasons why Christians just cannot "let the liturgy happen" but must think about what is expected by people, how well we celebrate, and what the side effects are of poor ritual. Mention the words "Chris-

1. See Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), on ritual in everyday human exchanges.

tianity," "Christian discipleship," or "church" to most people and they immediately think of a building, attending worship there, and the rituals that they could take part in. The most obvious way we experience the church is in the liturgy. This is often what people choose when they opt to identify publicly as practicing Christians, and it is often that which they move away from as they drift from corporate discipleship. Looking at the liturgy, we have to constantly keep in mind what people experienced when they formally interacted with the church as part of its liturgy. Was it an experience that they—usually without putting anything into words—found life-enhancing? Did they feel welcomed and valued or did they go away thinking that it was a little inner clique who puffed themselves up by making themselves an exclusive group? Did they feel that the group around them was an open or closed group? Did it seem to be a very smug group sitting on its laurels or a group that was alert and growing?

But there are even simpler questions. Was it all such a muddle that no one knew why they were there? They were just there because they had always been there, and no one could relate to what was happening? Did its concerns somehow overlap with my concerns? Or were they just fooling themselves? It is so easy to self-deceive in religion that we can become unaware of our blind spots. The simplest way this happens is when we confuse the emotion of *solemnity*, a very powerful emotion that can be easily manufactured, with *sanctity*, the still small voice of the Spirit that can be found in the simplest of situations. If we as the church want to make high claims for ourselves as "the Body of Christ" and the "sacrament of salvation," then we need to be careful that what people experience is something of God—of love and mercy and hope—not just a mash-up of an opera (whether well or poorly performed) and a military display

voiced over in a fuzzy religious language. If we claim to be the Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:8), then people deserve a lot more from us than that!

But the liturgy is also where most people experience not only "the church" but also "being church." When we gather for liturgy we *are* the church gathered in God's presence, but does that come through to those making up the assembly? Do I feel that I am just a spectator; others are the actors? Did I appreciate that I was part of what was happening? It is all too easy for the experience to be one of accessing a commodity or of getting something done. "Being church" is about identity: my having a sense of who I am as one of the baptized. "Being church" is about relationships with the God who is rich in mercy and with others who form a redeemed people of sisters and brothers, and it is about hope and mission. God's love transforms situations and calls on us to be agents of love and hope. I should come away energized, ready for a challenge, and empowered. But if I leave the gathering feeling alienated ("They don't want the likes of me"), or come away thinking that God is vindictive or has turned away from me, or that I am of little or no importance in the scheme of things, then the Good News has not been celebrated.

While it is true that even in the most careful liturgy the people can go away with false impressions, the sad fact is that it is often the case that the silent body language of how we do liturgy sends out signals that are the very opposite to what we say in the words we use and what we profess in our creeds. The simple fact is this: many people reject the Gospel because they have felt rejected by the experience of worship. They have been alienated from the church because their experience of "church" has been so alienating.

Liturgy is there to tune us in to the real. Worship should alert us to what is going on in the depths of our lives, link

us afresh in our relationships with other people in the community of faith, and open us to mystery. In a traditional society—traditional in the sense that the structures of living are handed on between generations—this is not a big issue. Each generation of old women praying and lighting candles in the church is followed by the next generation. In such cases it is only those who leave the society (usually through migration to a city) who face the option of "opting out." In a modern society, faith is an option; faith and worship call us to opt in. Contemporary urban Christians face a decision: Will we tune in to the message of the Gospel and then choose to make a commitment to belong? For us, both *believing* and *belonging* are invitations, not assumptions. This makes us different from most Christians down the centuries and so confronts leaders of liturgy with challenges hardly ever faced by ministers even a few decades ago. This puts a stress and importance on good liturgy that is quite new within our history. We are like those early followers of Jesus who used the *Didache*. Before each of us lie two roads—one toward life and the other toward death—and we have to make a decision.[2] Liturgy should help to affirm us in our decision to walk in the Way (see Acts 9:2), support us on the journey, and help make that journey a joyful one. If liturgy turns us off, or gives us a confused idea of the conversion called for by the Way, then worship has become self-destructive.

Growing in Faith

Faith in the Good News and belonging to the people of God are not static. Despite what lots of people think,

2. See Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

believing is not simply checking a box marked, "Do you accept?" Likewise, being part of a community is not the same as having the card that shows you are a member of the club. Growth in faith and belonging is growth in a relationship with God. It can become more intimate, more enriching, more demanding, and more rewarding. Alternatively, it can become a matter of convention or can wither and die completely, even when the person continues to perform all the demands with punctilious care. Good liturgy can feed this life of faith, renew it and deepen it, and most people whose own faith-journeys have grown deeper affirm that this has been sustained and supported—among many other ways—by the liturgy. "Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration."[3] But, equally, people whose growth is fertilized by bad liturgy can have that growth stunted and can develop weird ideas, ones that are the opposite of the Gospel.

Our understanding of God is of a mystery that is totally generous, totally loving, and we pray, "Our desire to thank you is itself your gift." Most ancient peoples thought of the divine as a force whose anger could be bought-off by fixed patterns of gifts and sacrifices, and indeed whose favor could be purchased in the same way. They had made a simple, understandable anthropomorphism: they made God in their own image. They took the power-relationship between a despotic master and a servant/slave, then maximized it to a cosmic size and acted accordingly. This is still a potent understanding of "god"—both among those who reject the idea of God and belief *and* among those who believe and indeed invoke the name of Jesus. For this latter group, the Christian liturgy often became the currency with which they paid their

3. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship* (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference, 1972), 6.

dues to "god," and many practices such as having "Masses said," numbers of this and that, or fixed prayers/actions to obtain that effect actually stunted their growth beyond these false views of "god." Liturgy is important. Positively, it can open up mystery. Negatively, it can bolster the very ideas from which the Good News should liberate us. When the latter happens, not only is the liturgy a disservice to those whose growth is deformed, but since our liturgy serves as our shop window to those who are not yet disciples of Jesus, when they see what is offered, they can easily decide that it's not worth looking any further! Bad liturgy is a failure to witness to the Way revealed to us, and a betrayal of the command of mission to "[g]o, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).

If we think about liturgy's importance in this way, then reflecting on what can make every one of us better "celebrants" of our liturgy takes on a new urgency. And we can appreciate afresh this little dictum:

> Good celebrations foster and nourish faith.
> Poor celebrations weaken and destroy it.[4]

4. Ibid. This statement has evolved in several other documents on the liturgy; see Thomas O'Loughlin, *Washing Feet: Imitating the Example of Jesus in the Liturgy Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2015), 118, for details.