Introduction

It is 1935. A young Benedictine monk in Minnesota, reading the signs of the times, notes that economic life in the U.S. was “hard, merciless, and sinister” (Franklin, iii–iv). The Great Depression and accompanying unemployment are crushing the country, and—in a disproportionate way—the largely immigrant Catholic community. Father Virgil Michel, OSB (1890-1938), had studied in Europe and was at the forefront of the Liturgical Movement, an attempt within the Church to help the faithful rediscover and better understand the liturgy so as to see life and liturgy as intimately intertwined (Wilbricht, 37).

According to Michel, the “social question”—what we today call industrialization—was not primarily an issue of wages or the money system. The underlying problems that led to the depression ran deeper than that, to the soul: an overemphasis on the individual and on the acquisition of material wealth at the expense of the community and the common good. Unfortunately, not much has changed. He wondered: “could society be transformed unless hearts, souls, and persons were changed first” (Franklin, iv)? His answer? No. And at the heart of this needed transformation of hearts, souls, and persons stood the liturgy. He wrote: “Pius X tells us that the liturgy is the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit; Pius XI says that the true Christian spirit is indispensable for social regeneration. Hence the conclusion: The liturgy is the indispensable basis of Christian social regeneration” (Michel, 8).

For Virgil Michel, social justice and the liturgy were intimately connected, as they were for Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Sadly, the social justice and liturgy camps came to a parting of the ways after the Council. Such a parting would have been anathema to the pioneers of the Liturgical Movement, but we still see the fruits of this division in our parishes. There are “liturgy people” and “social action people,” and rarely do they overlap, let alone collaborate. There are some “liturgy people” who reduce all the Church’s activity to worship within the Church’s four walls; there are “social action people” who see the liturgy as an irrelevant distraction from what is really important. Yet, at the Second Vatican Council, the Bishops were clear: While “[t]he sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [CSL] #9), “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows” (CSL #10).

Source and summit: our works of charity and justice must be rooted in the liturgy and lead us back to the liturgy. This dynamic is brought out more explicitly by Pope Benedict XVI in Sacramentum caritatis [SC]. For this pope, the division between worship and service, liturgy and life, is a distortion of the Gospel:

Here it is important to consider what the Synod Fathers described as eucharistic consistency, a quality which our lives are objectively called to embody. Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith. (SC #83)

Our communities, when they celebrate the Eucharist, must become ever more conscious that the sacrifice of Christ is for all, and that the Eucharist thus compels all who believe in him to become "bread that is broken" for others, and to work for the building of a more just and fraternal world. (SC #88)
In the memorial of his sacrifice, the Lord strengthens our fraternal communion and, in a particular way, urges those in conflict to hasten their reconciliation by opening themselves to dialogue and a commitment to justice. Certainly, the restoration of justice, reconciliation and forgiveness are the conditions for building true peace. The recognition of this fact leads to a determination to transform unjust structures and to restore respect for the dignity of all men and women, created in God’s image and likeness. Through the concrete fulfilment of this responsibility, the Eucharist becomes in life what it signifies in its celebration.... Precisely because of the mystery we celebrate, we must denounce situations contrary to human dignity, since Christ shed his blood for all, and at the same time affirm the inestimable value of each individual person. (SC #89)

In other words, liturgy is not an “escape from the world’s anxieties and miseries” but the primary way that we experience—and are formed in—God’s ways of peace and justice (Wilbricht, 36). That is not to say that liturgy teaches about justice in a didactic fashion, like a classroom session. Being formed for life in what the late Mark Searle (1941-1992) called God’s Just Kingdom is not about singing more songs with justice themes or preaching more homilies that touch on hot-button issues or even holding special “social justice Masses” more often. No; the connection is less mechanical, and more intimate, than that. It is about encountering, in a privileged way, the justice of God in the liturgy (Wilbricht, 50-56).

Sources


