Part One: Transformative Encounter

Broadly speaking, the term “the Liturgical Movement” refers to a series of developments in the study and practice of Catholic liturgy that began in the late 19th century and reached its zenith in the liturgical reforms called for by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Scholars have described the stages phases of the Movement in the variety of ways. In his final work, published posthumously, Mark Searle wrote instead of “two liturgical movements”—each with a distinct emphasis (Searle 2006, 1). In shorthand, the first movement sought to bring people to the liturgy; the second sought to bring the liturgy to the people (Wilbricht, 38).

The “first” movement sought to change people. By the 19th century, Catholic spirituality had become infected with “the spirit and tastes of the age” (Searle 2006, 5): individualistic and focused on devotions which tended to support the status quo. The pioneers of the liturgical movement wanted to bring the people back to the historical center of Catholic spirituality—the liturgy—and so help form them into a counter-cultural force for change in a troubled (and increasingly secular) world.

The “second” movement sought to change the liturgy itself. If the liturgy was going to have the transformative effect that the early reformers thought it should have, then the liturgy itself was going to have to be more accessible to, more easily understood by, the faithful. Accommodating the liturgy to the faithful began before the Council, but was given specific direction and impetus in Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium. For example, rites were reformed and simplified, and the vernacular languages quickly replaced Latin.

For a number of reasons, over time, the close link between liturgy and social action which had marked the “first” liturgical movement was lost. On the one hand, the Conciliar documents on the Church failed to make the connection between liturgy and life explicit. At the same time, a great deal of time and energy was being spent on the mechanics of change (revising the rites, translating texts, and the like). Formation of the faithful in regards to the revised liturgy, when done at all, tended to reduce participation to externals; the internal dynamic of the liturgy seemed to be getting lost.

Prophetically, in 1964, Romano Guardini—a liturgical theologian who had been instrumental in the period prior to the Council—warned the Church that making changes in the externals of liturgy was not enough; if the reforms were to have their desired effect—drawing people into the liturgy so they could have a transformative encounter with Christ—then the faithful themselves would have to “relearn a forgotten way of doing things and recapture lost attitudes” (Searle 2006, 47).

What are these lost attitudes and forgotten ways of doing things? Searle comments: “By ‘lost attitudes’ and ‘a forgotten way of doing things’ he seems to suggest a way of approaching the liturgy and engaging in its sights and sounds, its words and gestures, that had been eclipsed by the rise of individualism and the split between inner and outer dimensions of the self” (Searle 2006, 47). In other words, we all need to understand that “participation” is not just a matter of externals, but of our whole being; that liturgy is not just participation in ritual behavior, but in the work of Christ being carried out in and through the Church (as his Body) and, ultimately, participation in the very Trinitarian life of God (Searle 2006, 44). Participation in the liturgy, which, for Searle, is ultimately a surrender of the self (Wilbricht, 9-10). Such a surrender requires both an openness to encounter (that is, mystery) and a capacity for ritual (and all that it entails).
Encounter → Transformation → Sacrifice

In the liturgy we encounter Christ in the word proclaimed and the sacrament shared, in the person of the presider and the assembly gathered. All of these are “modes” of one very real presence—the presence of Christ in our midst (CSL #7). This encounter, week after week, year after year, changes us. In a sense, the liturgy “soaks into our bones.” The traditional language for this loving presence given to us as transformative gift is “grace.”

The eucharistic mystery thus gives rise to a service of charity towards neighbor, which "consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, affecting even my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ." (240) In all those I meet, I recognize brothers or sisters for whom the Lord gave his life, loving them "to the end" (Jn 13:1). (SC #88)

In other words, in God’s drawing close to us, we are changed. Changed, we are able to live lives marked by charity and justice, in imitation of Christ. Or, as Louis-Marie Chauvet has put it, God gives us the gift of God’s abiding presence mediated through Scripture and Sacrament. The reception of those gifts is “verified” by our living of Eucharistic lives: lives characterized by service, by sacrifice (what Chauvet calls Ethics). It is this “tripod” of Scripture, Sacrament, and Ethics that constitutes the Christian life.¹

But grace is not magic; the encounter and transformation to which I am referring are mediated through ritual: the words we speak and hear, the actions we undertake, the materials and objects we use. On the one hand, God is faithful. The offer of Christ’s transformative presence is always “there” for us in the liturgy. On the other, liturgy is a human activity—and, as such, will never perfectly mediate that encounter with Christ. As ministers, we may make it easier or harder for members of the assembly to experience the divine encounter. So, if liturgy is to have its transformative effects, it is incumbent on those who minister in the liturgy to celebrate the liturgy well. We will discuss this matter as part of our exploration of the parts of the Mass in this series. Suffice it to say at this point that we—liturgical ministers as well as other members of the liturgical assembly—need to take the objective nature of liturgy more seriously, rather than reducing liturgy to subjective desires and feelings. As Mark Searle put it (Searle 2006, 13):

Perhaps instead of asking what will engage the assembly, we could begin to ask what the liturgy demands. Instead of asserting our ownership of the liturgy, we might ask how we can surrender to Christ’s prayer and work. Instead of asking what we should choose to sing, perhaps we could start imagining how we might sing in such a way that it is no longer we who sing, but Christ who sings in us.

¹ Chauvet (ch. 5.5) defines these three terms broadly. For example, “Scripture” includes everything concerned with understanding the faith (such as the creeds and theology) in addition to the Bible and “Sacraments” includes all aspects of liturgy, not just the Seven Sacraments as listed by the Catholic Church. “Ethics” includes all actions of Christians in the world as testimony to the Gospel, whether done as individuals or as a community.
In addition, as members if the assembly, we need to be open to this encounter if we are to be transformed. Perhaps we have grown distrustful of ritual in a scientific world. Perhaps our prevalent cultural emphases on the individual and on material gain make us resistant to the radical demands of the liturgy—and of the Gospel. Whether we have difficulty being open to encounter, or are resistant to it because we are afraid of the demands it will make on us, it is not surprising that many Catholics have reacted negatively to Pope Francis’ message of justice, of right relationship with God, with one another, and with creation.

Sources


Vatican II. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium)*. December 4, 1963.