



Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: The Word of God in the Celebration of the Sacraments

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God. . . .
And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth.*
—John 1:1-2, 14

The Prologue of the Gospel according to John articulates concisely the theology of the Incarnation: Jesus is one with the Father from the beginning (true God), and he became flesh and lived as one of us (true man). The Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer for Christmas also articulates the mystery of the Incarnation: “In the wonder of the incarnation, your eternal Word has brought to the eyes of faith a new and radiant vision of your glory. In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see” (Sacramentary, P3). When the Church encounters Christ in the celebration of the sacraments, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, an “incarnation” takes place; a “word” becomes “flesh.” And as a particular word is expressed, an aspect of the faith is articulated in matter and form. This is the nature of the Church’s liturgy, in which the faithful encounter Christ in sacramental signs: tangible expressions or “incarnations” of the presence of Christ. This essay explores the place of the Word in the liturgical life of the Church, focusing especially on two particular aspects: the proclamation and witness of the faith in the liturgical context, and the use of Scripture in the celebration of the liturgy.

Lex orandi, lex credendi has become something of a tenet of liturgical theology, especially in the years since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Literally translated, it means “the law of prayer [is] the law of belief.” This axiom is an adaptation of words of Prosper of Aquitaine, a fifth-century Christian writer and a contemporary of St. Augustine. The original version of the phrase, *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (“that the law of praying establishes the law of believing”), highlighted the understanding that the Church’s teaching (*lex credendi*) is articulated and made manifest in the celebration of the liturgy and prayer (*lex orandi*).¹ We understand this to mean that prayer and worship is the first articulation of the faith. The liturgy engages belief in a way that simply thinking about God or studying the faith does not naturally do. In other words, in an act of worship, the faithful are in dialogue with God and are engaged in an active and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and every individual member of the liturgical assembly is connected to one another as members of the mystical Body of Christ in the Holy Spirit, as they look together with hope for the salvation promised in the Kingdom of Heaven. Theology, christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and eschatology are all expressed in word and deed, in sign and symbol, in liturgical acts.

The earliest preaching of the Word of God by the Apostles, the *kerygma*, was understood to be manifest in a particular way in the liturgy, in the celebration of the Eucharist. St. Paul

¹ For a more thorough study of Prosper of Aquitaine’s text, see Kevin Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

expresses this function of the liturgy: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The Church understands this close relationship between liturgy and the faith even today. In the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) states that “faith and worship are as closely related to one another as they were in the early Church: faith gathers the community for worship, and worship renews the faith of the community” (§ 32 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005]).

The restored catechumenate in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) anticipates an instruction that, “while presenting Catholic teaching in its entirety also enlightens faith, directs the heart toward God, fosters participation in the liturgy, inspires apostolic activity, and nurtures a life completely in accord with the spirit of Christ” (no. 78 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1988]). Thus the goal of the catechumenate is to promote an understanding that the liturgy and the sacraments catechize not only in the proclamation of the Word and in preaching, but in the celebration of the rites themselves. The RCIA restored an ancient custom for sacramental catechesis that, in many places in the Church today, is somewhat unknown. If the ancient tradition is followed, catechesis on the sacraments not only is provided during the catechumenate but also follows after the celebration of the sacraments as “mystagogical catechesis,” which is the unfolding of the “mysteries” that have been celebrated. The RCIA explains that, during the period of mystagogical catechesis, the neophytes (that is, the newly initiated) are “introduced into a fuller and more effective understanding of the mysteries through the Gospel message they have learned and above all through their experience of the sacraments they have received” (no. 245). This process highlights the mysteries themselves as a source of proclamation and instruction in the faith.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, a fourth-century bishop of Jerusalem, wrote and delivered an extended catechesis surrounding the Sacraments of Initiation. Some of the lectures were given to candidates for Baptism (catechumens) in the weeks prior to Baptism, while other lectures were delivered after Baptism. Prior to Baptism, his instruction focused on the Creed. The post-baptismal catechesis, St. Cyril’s *Mystagogical Catechesis*, provided instruction on the nature of the sacraments themselves. At the beginning of the first of those lectures, St. Cyril states,

I long ago desired, true-born and dearly beloved children of the Church, to discourse to you concerning these spiritual and heavenly Mysteries; but knowing well, that seeing is far more persuasive than hearing, I waited till this season; that finding you more open to the influence of my words from this your experience, I might take and lead you to the brighter and more fragrant meadow of this present paradise; especially as ye have been made fit to receive the more sacred Mysteries, having been counted worthy of divine and life-giving Baptism. It remaining therefore to dress for you a board of more perfect instruction, let us now teach you exactly about these things, that ye may know the deep meaning to you-ward of what was done on that evening of your baptism. (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, in *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, ed. F. L. Cross [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995], § I.1)

What St. Cyril demonstrates is that instruction on the sacraments benefits from the perspective of having celebrated them. The grace given in the sacraments is what enlightens; merely to talk about them is not sufficient. And although he was preaching to adults who were newly baptized, St. Cyril’s method can be applied to the Sacraments of Initiation celebrated with young people (children of catechetical age and adolescents) and the broad range of the faithful in ongoing formation

and catechesis as well. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *The Sacrament of Charity (Sacramentum Caritatis)*, explains well the relationship between the sacraments and our understanding of the faith:

The Church's faith is essentially a eucharistic faith, and it is especially nourished at the table of the Eucharist. Faith and the sacraments are two complementary aspects of ecclesial life. Awakened by the preaching of God's word, faith is nourished and grows in the grace-filled encounter with the Risen Lord which takes place in the sacraments: "faith is expressed in the rite, while the rite reinforces and strengthens faith." (no. 6 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007])

In addition to the rites themselves (*lex orandi*), which communicate what the Church believes (*lex credendi*), the liturgy also makes extensive use of the written Word of God in the Scriptures. Every liturgical rite (including the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, and other rites of the *Rituale Romanum*) includes the proclamation of one or more biblical readings, especially readings from the Gospels. The liturgical texts themselves—orations, exhortations, and blessings—draw from the Scriptures, too: particular images, sayings, and expressions are often quoted directly from biblical texts. The book of Psalms, the first "prayer book" of the Church, has always been a source of the language of liturgical prayer. The relationship between the liturgy and the written Word of God does not, however, end here. There is evidence that some texts of both the Old and New Testaments were themselves influenced by liturgical worship. In the Old Testament, for example, the accounts of the first Passover in the book of Exodus were first passed down in oral tradition in the ritual celebration of Passover before being recorded in written form. In the New Testament, the letters of St. Paul contain expressions that were likely already used in liturgical prayer, such as the account of the Eucharist in

the first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-26), and early hymns of praise such as the christological hymn in the letter to the Philippians (2:6-11).

Among the many changes brought about by the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council was the expanded place of the Scriptures in the liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, notes specifically the place of the Scriptures in the Liturgy:

Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning. Hence in order to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy it is essential to promote that warm and lively appreciation of sacred scripture to which the venerable tradition of Eastern and Western rites gives testimony. (no. 24, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996])

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* later sets forth the goal of the formation of the *Lectionary for Mass*: "the treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative part of the sacred scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years" (SC, no. 51). The result of this decision was the expansion of the cycle of Scripture readings for Sundays from one year to three years, as well as the addition of readings from the Old Testament, so that there are now three Scripture readings (plus the Responsorial Psalm) at Masses on Sundays and solemnities.

The major part of the Liturgy of the Word in the celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) is the proclamation of the Scripture readings. The homily that follows the readings is meant to open up the Scriptures and make connections to the lives of the faithful. The homily is for the “nurturing of the Christian life” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003], no. 65). There is, however, more to the Liturgy of the Word than proclamation. The faithful are called to respond to that Word in the liturgical acts that follow, as they “affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith. Finally, having been nourished by it, they pour out their petitions in the Prayer of the Faithful” (GIRM, no. 55). In these liturgical actions, the Lord’s healing of Jairus’s daughter and the woman with a hemorrhage is enacted—that “word” is “enfleshed”—as the liturgical assembly confesses faith and finds salvation in it: “your faith has saved you” (see Mk 5:21-43; Mt 9:18-26; Lk 8:40-56).

Lex orandi, lex credendi expresses concisely the relationship between the celebration of the liturgy in worship and the formation (catechesis) of the faithful. On the one hand, the liturgy proclaims, not only in word but in sign and symbol, the Word of God. The faithful, in celebrating the liturgy, profess their faith. Those responsible for catechesis, therefore, can use the experience of worship as a starting point for mystagogy, as the *National Directory for Catechesis* explains: “[catechesis] stems from the Liturgy insofar as it helps people to worship God and to reflect on their experience of the words, signs, rituals, and symbols expressed in the Liturgy; to discern the implications of their participation in the Liturgy; and to respond to its missionary summons to bear witness and offer service” (NDC, § 33). On the other hand, in order for liturgy to be effective as a source of formation, the faithful must be prepared to encounter Christ in the mysteries and to deepen their own understanding of that faith. Catechesis should set the stage for that encounter (see NDC, no. 33). Those responsible for catechesis, however, should not attempt to explain everything in such detail that the experience of the mystery itself suffers. Preparation for

the sacraments should be about enabling the faithful to *experience* the grace of the mysteries being celebrated. Pope Benedict XVI calls the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, “encounters with the Risen Lord” (*The Sacrament of Charity*, no. 6). Preparation for the sacraments, then, must prepare candidates to encounter Christ.

The celebration of the rites themselves must be carried out in such a way as to enable the faithful’s encounter with Christ. How well we prepare for, enact, and celebrate the rites can contribute to the experience of the sacred. The sacraments are not magic; they are meant to be experienced. As Pope Benedict explains in *The Sacrament of Charity*, “‘The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well.’ By its nature, the liturgy can be pedagogically effective in helping the faithful to enter more deeply into the mystery being celebrated. That is why, in the Church’s most ancient tradition, the process of Christian formation always had an experiential character” (no. 64). The Second Vatican Council’s call for “full, conscious, and active participation” is primarily about an interior participation in—an encounter with—the mystery being celebrated (see *The Sacrament of Charity*, no. 52). Catechetical formation and preparation should help one to engage in an interior way, at the level of the heart and soul.

In the early Church, it was the celebration of the liturgy and the Church’s prayer that led to the development of articulated statements of faith—not the other way around. In light of that development, it is clear that sacraments celebrated well and experienced profoundly have the power to enlighten and to teach, to witness to what the Church professes and believes as we celebrate Christ and the power of his saving death and Resurrection in our lives. Those who prepare for and celebrate the liturgy, *lex orandi*, as well as those responsible for catechesis, *lex credendi*, need to trust that the sacraments can and will do so: that the living Word of God will inspire the faithful to more authentic Christian living, *lex vivendi*.

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