

LITURGY/SACRAMENTS – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Labor, Giving, and Thanksgiving: Biblical, Theological, and Liturgical Perspectives
- Convener: David A. Stosur, Cardinal Stritch University
- Moderator: Xavier Montecel, Boston College
- Presenters: Kristen Drahos, Briar Cliff University
Benjamin Durham, College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University
Andrew Benjamin Salzmann, Benedictine College

In “Pass the Plate: The Joban Sacramentality of the Offertory,” Kristen Drahos proposes that the collection at Mass be considered an act of charity that is itself sacramental. Noting that this act is a frequent source of “existential discomfort,” she utilizes Gary Anderson’s analysis of charity and Kierkegaard’s discussion of Abraham’s “leap” in the *akedah* to highlight several Old Testament figures (Ben Sira, Tobit, Abraham, Job), whose sacrifices and charitable giving prefigure Christian liturgical giving as sign of divine transcendence (vertical dimension) entering the human domain (horizontal dimension), as gifts to the poor might replace sacrifice to God. The “absurdity” and excess of such charitable acts transcend “Deuteronomistic logic,” an “aporetic and interruptive presence” that defies the “prosperity gospel” approach in which “giving results in reaping.” Our unease with the collection may assist breaking down such logic. First, the dramatic element to this action, which is not necessarily about our feelings, resonates with the theo-drama demonstrated in the stories of those ancient figures of faith. Second, the aporia of faith, as Kierkegaard’s Abraham reminds us, has “negative spaces,” unseen elements that correspond to the sacramentality of charity. Finally, the concrete “risk” of this liturgical act of giving, the commitment it represents, prevents faith from becoming too abstract.

Benjamin Durham’s paper, “Labor and Liturgy: Virgil Michel and a Liturgical Theology of Meaningful Work,” proposes a way of connecting liturgy and labor grounded in a liturgical theology of the Mystical Body. For Michel, liturgy forms the Body sacramentally, and teaches it pedagogically. The 1930s church struggled to appreciate this due to individualism and thirst for profit, leading to the disintegration of the human. Concepts like a just wage or solidarity with workers become irrelevant. Michel’s solution was to see the eucharistic elements (“work of human hands”) and the sacrifice of the Mass (self-offering of Christ but also of the liturgical assembly) as the point of connection between liturgy and labor, with three consequences: 1) liturgy and liturgical theology have political, social, and economic implications outside of the sanctuary; 2) “a living family wage,” not merely a just wage, is a liturgical concern because the family is at the center of parish/ecclesial life; 3) if the eucharistic sacrifice gives meaning to human labor, then justice, mercy, and love will be infused into the social context. The twenty-first century context differs not only because of technological advances, but because we can no longer assume that people “are regularly immersed in the symbolic system of which the Mystical Body is a part.” Durham offers three suggestions: 1) assist particular communities in becoming familiar again with the language of symbolization; 2) preaching and prayer such as prayers of the faithful that consistently refer to the meaning of Christian labor; 3)

develop liturgical blessings for “field and factory” (Michel), for contemporary workplaces and those who both lose and obtain employment.

Andrew Salzmänn’s paper, “Liturgical Blessings of Agricultural Labor: A Critical History & Constructive Proposal,” notes that prayers for agricultural labor and thanksgiving for its fruits, once a significant dimension of the Roman Rite, in the post-Vatican II context take place outside of official liturgy if at all, reflecting a “cosmological disengagement of the liturgy.” He overviewed selected historical and structural aspects of rites addressing these agricultural needs, the Ember Days and the Major and Minor Rogations Days. The Major Rogation (Feast of St. Mark, April 25) had Roman roots in the procession to the fields during the festival of Robigalia, entering Christian practice c. mid-fifth century. It took the characteristic liturgical form of a litany (petition/*kyrie eleison* response). The Minor Rogations, on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Thursday, originated in fifth-century Gaul. Rather than *kyrie eleison*, short responses such as “*Ora pro nobis*” or “*Te rogamus audi nos*” were used. By the eighth century, invocation of the saints was added (this rather than the original core of petitions for church, society, and natural world eventually become the major form of liturgical litany). Ember Days are the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday during four weeks of the year at the beginnings of each season: Pentecost, Holy Cross (September 14), Third Week of Advent, and first full week of Lent. Their exact origins are unclear, but they date back at least to third-century Rome. Salzmänn proposes three initial Embertides: summer, autumn, and winter (spring already had Lenten fasting). Liturgically, the ritual structure (fasting/Saturday vigil) suggests that the Easter vigil served as a model. Anthropologically, the reprisal of the Easter vigil extended to the other seasons a “grand threshold rite” to negotiate the liminal period of seasonal change and establish cosmic order. Suggestions toward a renewal of these rites include reviving Ember Days as Saturday vigil Masses aligning with the seasons, Rogation Days that process to/through a field, recognition that growing seasons vary across the globe, and utilizing prayers that address the Holy Spirit as focus of divine *creatio continua*.

Discussion among participants involved several topics: the value/loss of symbolism when electronic withdrawals replace the collection; eco-justice (as in *Laudato Si*’); the urban need to reconnect with the agricultural/“natural” context, and to connect liturgy with other (non-agriculturally based) forms of labor; and the place of vigils/litanies for saints/martyrs as potential alternative origins of the rogation days.

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