

THE LITURGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY

It is really quite incredible that anyone would seriously attempt to discuss such a topic in thirty minutes. But here I am, standing before you, to make that attempt. I candidly confess my brashness, my presumption, but more, my trust in God's mercy and your good will. At a time when the Church lives in transition, when her evolutionary and revolutionary life is so apparent, perhaps such naive boldness may have a place. In any case, I am grateful to be here.

Each of us is aware of the profound influence ideas such as personalism and incarnationalism have in contemporary theology. We appreciate the force of Paul Tillich's perceptive title, *The Shaking of the Foundations*,¹ as our concern moves from the being of things to the being of man, from the quantitative and static to the relational and dynamic, from the given to the changing. We live and reflect within a world of "I-Thou" and not merely "I-It" relationships. We view the Church not so much as an institution of law, an organization with juridical structure, but more as a fellowship of love, an organism indwelt by the Spirit. Grace is seen as a love-relation more than as a quantified something or an electrical current. We live the sacraments as personal encounters with Christ and not simply as mechanized operations effective *ex opere operato*. The eucharist thrills us as action and meal within which and not outside which we find real presence and sacrifice.

But all this, of course, is not meant to imply that we make options that are "Either-Or"; it is rather a quest for balance and an acceptance of "Both-And." If anything is happening in the contemporary theological renewal, it is an experience of becoming more whole, more human, more real. To be Christian is to be profoundly

Although the following references do not appear in the footnotes they should be cited: C. Vagaggini, *Initiation theologique a la liturgie*, Vol. II, 4me partie: *Liturgie, foi et theologie*, pp. 49-141 (Bruges: St. Andre, 1963); M. O'Connell, "New Perspectives in Sacramental Theology," *Worship* 39 (1965) 195-206; C. Davis, "Episcopate and Eucharist," *Ibid.*, 502-15.

¹ A book of sermons published by Scribner's Sons, New York, 1948.

personal. To be Christian is to be utterly incarnational. In our own way, in our own day, we are taking Christ seriously.

Against this background, I speak to the problematic of the present paper. What does liturgy, as experience more than as study, have to do with scriptural and/or theological study? *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* insists that professors of scripture and theology, as they treat the mystery of Christ and salvation history, give adequate attention to the liturgical dimensions involved.² But what can this mean?

I should like, first of all, to sketch my understanding of the Christian mystery, the life we live, and then to suggest lines of reflection regarding our noetic effort to grasp the meaning of that mystery. My concern throughout will be the distinction and interplay between experiential and reflective consciousness. And as I speak, I will become ever more impressed with Dante's magnificent line: "O Speech! How feeble and how faint art thou to give conception birth!"³

THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

Christianity is a mystery of salvation; it is an all-embracing salvation-event, narrated and recorded in scripture, proclaimed and celebrated in liturgy, and reflected upon in theology. It is ultimately a mystery of *person, love, and community*.

The unique God relates to man as a self-manifesting, self-offering Love-Community of Persons. Albrecht Oepke in his remarkable treatment of *apokalypsis* in the *TWNT* calls revelation self-offering or self-gift (*Selbstdarbietung*).⁴ This gracious God, through word and event, has become progressively more present, more at-one, with his people, climaxing his self-gift in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Jesus in the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of his death as the *Ebed-Yahweh* (Servant of God) and the *theosis* (exaltation and divinization) of his resurrection as *Kyrios* (Risen Lord) has fulfilled God's eternal purpose: *henosis*—at-onement—communion.

² Cf. no. 16.

³ *The Divine Comedy*, Paradise, Canto 33.

⁴ "Offenbarung im nt. lichen Sinn ist, ganz kurz gesagt, die Selbstdarbietung des Vaters Jesu Christi zur Gemeinschaft." *TWNT*, III, p. 596.

This is the Christ-event, the Father's perfect word to man, calling forth *metanoia*—a dying to selfishness and sin and rising to a life of selflessness and love. By means of this response man is introduced to *koinonia*, that common life with the Father and his Son, Jesus, in the Spirit. St. John sums up the entire purpose of the Gospel in this way:

It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life. This life was made visible; we have seen it and bear our testimony; we here declare to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we declare to you, *so that* you and we together may share a common life (*koinonia*), that life which we share with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. And we write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete (1 Jn. 1,1-4; cf. also Jn. 17,21-23; 20,30-31).

I find it interesting to discover in contemporary psychoanalytic writing, in men such as Erich Fromm, for example, the insistence that man's nature is radically a thrust toward communion, at-onement, with another person or persons.⁵ Because this is precisely what Christianity offers to man. God calls man out of his alienation, isolation, and aloneness into communion with himself. God, as a Love-Community of Persons, wants to make of man a love-community of persons with and in himself: "That they may be one as I, Father, in you and you in me . . . that they may be one in us . . . and that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them" (Jn. 17,21.23.26).

The Church on earth, therefore, is to reflect the Love-Community of Persons in God: "By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13,35). But this requires continual conversion. We are persons in process and our *metanoia* (or *metabasis*, if you prefer) is never completed here. That is why in current theologizing the emphasis is placed upon *Ebed-Christology* (Christ as Servant), *Ebed-Ecclesiology* (the

⁵ *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963—first publ. by Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 8.

Church as Servant), *Ebed*-Morality (the Christian as Servant) and in what we are doing here these days, *Ebed*-Theology (the theologian as servant). "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve" (Mk. 10,45; Mt. 20,28; Lk. 22,27).⁶ And Christians, as individuals or as an entire people, can have no other pattern by which to live. We are baptized into Christ in his Paschal (passover) Mystery and therefore into a life of continual conversion, a progressive dying to self and rising to become, like Christ, persons for others.

The mystery we live is eminently simple but how frequently we complicate it: it is God's offer of himself in *koinonia* and our response of *metanoia*, that progressive, continual conversion in the likeness of his Son. This is what we celebrate in all liturgy, what we are plunged into each time we contact Christ in the sacraments. *Koinonia—metanoia*: such is the Christian mystery. And the mystery is forever Christocentric. In the words of Karl Barth:

In Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God nor of God from man. Rather, in Him we encounter the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together, the reality of the covenant *mutually* contracted, preserved, and fulfilled by them. Jesus Christ is in His one Person, as true *God*, *man's* loyal partner, and as true *man*, *God's*. He is the Lord humbled for communion with man and likewise the Servant exalted to communion with God. He is the Word spoken from the loftiest, most luminous transcendence and likewise the Word heard in the deepest, darkest immanence. He is both, without their being confused but also without their being divided; He is wholly the one and wholly the other. Thus in this oneness Jesus Christ is the Mediator, the Reconciler, between God and man. Thus He comes forward to *man* on behalf of *God* calling for and awakening faith, love and hope, and to *God* on behalf of *man* representing man, making satisfaction and interceding. Thus He attests and guarantees to man God's free *grace* and at the same time attests and guarantees to God man's free *gratitude* . . .

⁶ Cf. W. Zimmerli & J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, Inc.) with its excellent bibliography; also the articles by A. Kavanagh in *Worship* 39 (1965): "Liturgy as Service," pp. 5-11, "Sacrament as an Act of Service," pp. 89-96, "The Christian as Servant," pp. 131-38, and "The Minister as Servant," pp. 218-25.

He is in his Person the covenant in its fullness, the Kingdom of heaven which is at hand, in which God speaks and man hears, God gives and man receives, God commands and man obeys, God's glory shines in the heights and thence into the depths, and peace on earth comes to pass among men in whom He is well pleased. Moreover, exactly in this way Jesus Christ, as this Mediator and Reconciler between God and man, is also the *Revealer* of them both.⁷

THE NOETIC EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND THE MYSTERY

If the liturgy, the ecclesial action of God's priestly people, is the privileged site of proclamation and realization of the Christian mystery, how does it relate to theological effort? How can the experience of Christian worship affect the exegesis of the normative witness, scriptural study, and the many-faceted quest for theological understanding? Are these not two completely different worlds?

In a sense they are, but the theologian is one person and his intellectual efforts will become sterile and unreal unless they rise from and return to his experience of Christian life, ultimately that moment when Christian life is most perfectly event, the eucharist. As Father Alexander Schmemmann suggests:

Eucharist, whether it is expressly referred to or not, is the organic source and necessary "term of reference" of theology, for if theology is bearing witness to the faith and the life of the Church, to the Church as Salvation and the new life in Christ, it bears witness primarily to the experience of the Church manifested, communicated, and actualized in the eucharist. It is in the eucharist that the Church ceases to be "institution, doctrine, system" and becomes Life, Vision, Salvation . . . Here then is the source of theology, of *words about God*, the "event" which transforms our human speculation into a message of Divine Truth.⁸

The eucharist as the acme of all liturgy is theology's moment of truth. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread (Lk. 24,30-31). Here the objective, impersonal, speculative character of theological reflection is replaced

⁷ "Humanity of God," *Cross Currents*. 10 (1960), p. 75.

⁸ "Theology and Eucharist," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*. 5 (1961), p. 21.

or, better, completed by the intersubjective and personal character of experience. Here the continuity of intellectual effort becomes life and event; the partial becomes total; the noetic, personal; the reflective, experiential.

I am sure that one's appreciation of such insistence depends upon his particular view of theological epistemology. In this connection, Father Joseph Cahill's excellent analysis of Lonergan's notion of primary affirmation is extremely helpful,⁹ as is also Professor John MacMurray's thesis that all "meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship."¹⁰ Such a statement from the personalist creed fits admirably into the gospel objective of *koinonia* and suggests an addition to Plato's dictum: "The unexamined life is not worth living."¹¹ The addition, as someone recently remarked, is that the un-lived life is not worth examining.

What I am trying to say, however haltingly, is as old as Aristotle. Reflection takes its rise from, and returns to, experience. Christian reflection begins, therefore, in the experience of the Christ-event and must return there. And the Church becomes the Christ-event in its sacrament *par excellence*, the eucharist. All theological activity or study must consequently be radically eucharistic.

Let us examine more carefully, however, what scriptural and theological study suggest in the title of this paper. Before we can really grasp what liturgy means to such study, we must understand the nature of that study. Quite frankly I have serious difficulty here. In what way does scriptural study differ from theological study? When we speak of exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, etc., are we not seriously fragmenting the theological enterprise? Perhaps I can distinguish between the narrowest type of exegesis, so very important in itself, and theology proper but I have qualms even here. Is it all merely a question of different categories? For example, whether we use biblical, patristic, scholastic, modern, or existential categories, they are still categories, evoking a variety of

⁹ "A Primary Affirmation," *Continuum*. 2 (1964) 189-96.

¹⁰ *The Self as Agent* (Vol. I of *Form of the Personal*) (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), p. 16.

¹¹ *The Apology* 38 A 5-6.

overtones perhaps but remaining categories. In any case, I believe we must get back in some way, no matter how impossible this might seem to be, to the integral theologian and see in his task the relation of liturgy to his study.

Everyone knows, of course, that scripture includes in its structure numerous liturgical pericopes. For example, there are those who suggest that Phil. 2,5-11 is a liturgical hymn, that the first letter of Peter is a baptismal liturgy, that the Song of Songs is a collection of texts sung at a marriage feast, etc. There are other examples but listing them is beyond our purpose here.¹² At the same time, in a post-scriptural or post-apostolic world, God's word in scripture is properly proclaimed in liturgy. Quite obviously, then, purely scriptural study involves awareness of liturgy. But more important, it seems to me, is that the entire scriptural record is ordered to presenting the great dual mystery of *koinonia* and *metanoia* celebrated in all liturgy. And in this sense all scriptural study must serve to make that mystery intelligible and to prepare the Christian to live it.

If we look more closely at the broader sweep of theological study, the same thing must be said. In the positive efforts of *fides quaerens documentum*—faith seeking documentation (the *an ita sit* or *an sit verum* of St. Thomas¹³)—as well as in the freer task of *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding (the *quomodo sit verum* of St. Thomas¹⁴) the theologian is always engaged in a faith seeking relevance. And this means a relevance to his Christian experience. That experience will forever be entrance into and continuance within *koinonia*, the love-community of God's people, and this always by means of the *metanoia* pledged and renewed in every sacramental celebration.

¹² Cf. the following books with their respective bibliographies: A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960); C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London: Adam & Chas. Black, 1962); *Id.*, *Worship in the New Testament* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961); M. H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960); also C. Stuhlmueller, "Baptism: New Life Through the Blood of Jesus," *Worship*. 39 (1965) 207-17; *Id.*, "Old Testament Liturgy" and "The Sacraments in Scripture" in C. Luke Salm (ed.), *Studies in Salvation History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964) 81-91 & 128-46.

¹³ *Quaest. Quodl.* IV, q. 9, a. 3 (18), c.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Theological effort, of course, is always an extremely humble task. Even though, as St. Thomas so rightly insists, *actus credentis (vel scientis) non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*¹⁵ (the act of the believer (or the knower) does not terminate in the proposition but in the thing)—and here the *res* or thing is really Person or Persons—how inadequate this must always remain. As St. Paul in a rare moment of theological modesty confessed to the Corinthians: “Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror . . . my knowledge now is partial” (1 Cor. 13,12-13). Which means that not only are theological formulations inadequate (remember the words Pope John used in his first address to the Council¹⁶) but the grasp or insight which they are meant to express is also imperfect. All this, coupled with the fact that the reality of the Christian mystery—the growth of the whole Christ—is also in some sense in process, indicates how respectful and how modest we theologians must be. What I am saying simply shows that theology, like Christian life itself, is a conversion-process, forever in evolution, until faith gives way to vision and the total mystery of person, love, and community is fulfilled.

The Church is indeed in evolution. In St. Bernard’s phrase, it is *ecclesia ante et retro oculata*—the Church with eyes looking backward and forward. It must always look back to its calling and forward to its goal in a search for continuity and progress, purity and plenitude. Only then can the Church be faithful to what it is, a priestly people hearing in scripture the story of God’s saving love, celebrating that saving love in liturgy, and reflecting upon its meaning in theology.

Christianity has been referred to as neither a set of doctrines nor a moral code, but a Person and a Life. In the words of Professor Lightfoot: “Though the Gospel is capable of doctrinal exposition, though it is eminently fertile in moral results, yet its substance is neither a dogmatic system nor an ethical code, but a Person and a Life.”¹⁷ But such a remark should not lead us to anti-intellectual or

¹⁵ *S.T.*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2m.

¹⁶ “*Est enim aliud ipsum depositum Fidei, seu veritates, quae veneranda doctrina nostra continentur, aliud modus, quo eadem enuntiantur . . .*” AAS, 54 (1962), p. 792.

¹⁷ *Philippians* (1908 edition), p. ix as cited by G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics* (London: SPCK, 1948), p. 170.

antinomian conclusions. Rather it should preclude forever our being lost in the noetic, partial world of reflection, when Christ is calling us and awaiting us in the personal, total world of experience.¹⁸

My conclusion, therefore, is this: scriptural and theological study must always deepen our thirst for *koinonia* and prompt in us both an understanding of and a desire for continual *metanoia*. But throughout our study we must always be mindful that the privileged site where both are most adequately realized is within the Christian community at worship. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* makes this quite emphatic: *Liturgia est culmen ad quod actio Ecclesiae tendit et simul fons unde omnis eius virtus emanat*¹⁹—Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and at the same time the source from which all its power flows.²⁰ In every liturgical celebration, the Christian is lead through progressive *metanoia* to ever deeper *koinonia* as the worshipping-community becomes like God—through him and with him and in him—a love-community “for the life of the world.”

KIERAN CONLEY, O.S.B.*
St. Meinrad Seminary
St. Meinrad, Indiana

¹⁸ For a discussion of what has been called the intellectualist illusion and the need for a return to experience, see R. Johann, “Return to Experience,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 17 (1964) 319-39.

¹⁹ n. 10.

²⁰ It may be misleading to refer to liturgy as the summit (*culmen*) when it is really more a beginning than a term. Cf. D. Gray, “Liturgy and Morality,” *Worship*, 39 (1965) 28-35.

* Father Conley died on January 17, 1966 at Baltimore, Maryland, at the age of 38.