

## DOES LITURGY CALL FOR THE CHURCH?

I would like to make my own Martin Luther's insight that to talk about forms and polity in the abstract is neither helpful nor useful, and I would add, even when taking the liturgy as one's point of departure. Therefore, I will speak of the liturgical imperative with reference to a present trend in Roman Catholic polity, namely away from hierarchically structured patterns towards the Free Church model. I will indicate the roots of the liturgical imperative but will give most of my attention to the meaning of those roots in relation to the trend toward the Free Church model. A central thematic concern will be the ontologizing function of liturgy in the Roman Catholic ecclesiology. I would like to show what happens and what adjustments are made in terms of structural relationships and power when there is no liturgy to exercise this ontologizing function, such as in the Free Church.

For the purposes of this paper I would define the Free Church tradition to mean a radical congregational polity and voluntary association. The trend towards the patterns of the Free Churches has much to commend it. My purpose is not to suggest that the trend is ill advised but to suggest that these patterns be not taken over uncritically that we should at least look at the criticisms which the Free Churches themselves make of their own structural patterns before we make them our own. Obviously I am not concerned about all the variant patterns in the Free Church tradition but only with one of the more dominant patterns: the radical autonomy of the local church.

The purpose of the liturgy is to give historical expression to the divine sovereignty through the mediation of sanctification, the invitation to conversion, forgiveness of sins, the proclamation of the risen Christ, and the demonstration of the power of his Spirit. The purposes of the religious society as a whole are determined in large part by the claims of the Lordship of Christ and the power of his Spirit. As the society attempts to give historical expression to that sovereignty, so it builds its structures. Whatever the patterns of these structures

they are judged by their fidelity to the mediation of the sovereignty of Christ and the power of his Spirit.

At the present I am not concerned to specify in theological and sacramental terms the permanently established ways if any in which this sovereignty is expressed and reconciliation is exercised. It is my contention that what is normative are not matters of structural origin or order, but of the divine purpose and mission, which can be realized in a number of structural arrangements, arrangements which are in part determined by divine purpose and mission, in part by socio-cultural factors.

Both liturgy and church are responses to the claims of sovereignty and the needs of reconciliation and sanctification. Indeed the Church is never more church than when it gathers for liturgical action. If we have no need of this work of the people of God, then we have no need of the Church. This is not to identify only with eucharistic action, much less with fidelity to given texts or ritual acts. In this context liturgy is the work of the people of God in praise of the Father through the Lordship of Christ and in the mediation of his reconciling power in the Spirit.

There are problems which arise out of the close relationship of liturgy to the structures of the Church. Sociologically, liturgy functions by legitimatizing social institutions. This liturgy does by bestowing upon social institutions an ontological status, that is, locating these social institutions within the sacred and cosmic frame of reference, usually as reflections of the divine structure of the cosmos. Especially in the more liturgical churches this means that the liturgical endeavor functions in such a way as to give ontological status to present institutional forms or relationships, with the result that the present historical forms, or even the present style in which the forms operate, are seen as eternal and unchanging reflections of a cosmic divine order. When popes enter into their office by the liturgy of coronation, this means that the whole ritual of coronation lends to the theological content of papacy an ontological status and even an ontological style, which it would be difficult to locate in the biblical witness or even in early papal history. The same could be said of the liturgy of consecration with regard to the monarchical episcopacy. This is not to deny that episcopacy (or papacy) is a true expression

of the ministerial reality found ultimately in Christ and then in the whole Church. But the liturgy of consecration, the ritual conferral of sacred functions, may invest that function with an ontological status which goes beyond New Testament evidence, and also goes beyond a valid theological development. When functions and even styles of functions are ontologized by their liturgical context, then the present historical forms or structural relationships of forms are looked upon as expressions of eternal and ultimate essences. One could argue that in a given socio-cultural moment papal centralism or a monarchical style of episcopacy are best suited to the mediating and reconciling function of the Church. But there have been a number of papal styles and certainly more than one style of episcopē within the history of the Church. The ontologizing of structural functions through ritualization makes us forget history and turn our attention to ontology.

It is not my purpose to say anything, pro or con, apropos the discussion of the ontological nature of either the episcopal or priestly office. My purpose is to remind ourselves that all churches, but especially the liturgical churches, tend to transform functions into essences, facts into structural ultimates, and history into metaphysical conditions. And it is precisely through liturgical action that these transformations take place. Whatever ontological realities (to use the old rhetoric) are or are not present in episcopacy and priesthood, it should be recognized that the ontologizing of functions, the transformation of ecclesiastical facts into sacred essences is one of the enduring temptations of Roman Catholicism, a temptation liturgical action keeps actual. It is a temptation which might be called creeping ontologization because it tends not only to transform functions, facts, and history into eternal images of divine order, but also attaches ontological significance even to the style in which these supposed structural ultimates, essences, and metaphysical conditions deport themselves. In other words, the process of ontologizing through liturgical action touches central historical facts and functions; it also touches the cultural baggage which these facts and functions pass through history. Cultural baggage is not a pejorative term. It simply means those accumulated effects of our historical existence, effects which are culturally determined and have a built-in obsolescence. The

dynamics of ritualization, the taking up of peripheral impediments (crowns, tiara, mitres, rings) into the liturgical conferral of function, tends to destroy the historical obsolescence of cultural forms and turn the baggage into trans-historical essences. Through the liturgy ontology is bestowed upon the cultural baggage of the papacy, conciliar procedures, episcopacy, priesthood, relationships between pope and bishops, relationships between bishops and priests. It also touches the relationships between the laity and the whole ecclesiastical culture, diocesan structures, parish forms, lay expectations and responsibilities. Unless the baggage and the liturgical process by which it is transformed into sacred essences are subjected to critical analysis the gospel itself becomes distorted. The failure to grasp this has contributed to many a sad chapter in church history. By the transformation of facts into essences and cultural baggage into a metaphysical aura sacred myths are born.

Specific liturgical conceptions invite specific conceptions of church order, which is another way of saying that form follows function. Years ago (1904, 1924) Walter Lowrie pointed out that it was the liturgical imperative of having someone preside at the local eucharistic celebration that called for the episcopal function and led to a monarchical episcopacy. Franklin Littell on the other hand has shown that the rejection by the Anabaptists of real presence in the then current sense was based not on a dogmatic argument but rather on the liturgical sense of the eucharistic act. The Anabaptists wanted to insist that the celebration of the Eucharist was an act of the community. For historical reasons they tied real presence to a specialized clergy and when they rejected the one they had to reject the other. It was this liturgical conception of eucharistic action which contributed to the lay polity of the Free Church tradition.

Whether one proceeds from a process of ritualization or from laws of social organization one is faced with the certitude that organizational imperatives are inevitable. There is in fact no way in which people can gather to achieve a given goal or purpose without submitting in some degree to organizational imperatives. When people gather for a given purpose over a long period of time certain laws of social organization become operative, and when they gather over a long period for liturgical action these laws of social organization im-

pose a certain texture on community life. Further, these laws become operative even when the original purpose was expressly and vehemently anti-liturgical, anti-organizational, anti-structural, anti-authority. The history of such charismatic groups as the Assemblies of God is a case in point. Or one could point to the tighter organizational structures which developed within New Testament times, from the charismatic order at Corinth to the more precise and controlled order of the pastoral epistles.

Further, one has to deal with those other laws of social organization by virtue of which the organization creates needs of its own which must be met before the group can attend to the goals for which it was established, transforming the organization from a means to an end. Max Weber called the displacement of goals by organizational means the process of rationalization. In this process the preservation of the organization itself becomes an ultimate goal. One thinks that this affliction is properly found in a church sacramentally and hierarchically founded. Indeed the ontologizing of functions and offices through liturgical action makes them susceptible to the process of rationalization. One looks to the looser structural forms of the Free Church for a solution. But Paul M. Harrison's *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* has shown that the process of rationalization, the substitution of organizational means for ultimate goals, is found in aggravated form in the non-liturgical Free Church tradition where there is no liturgy to ontologize functions and offices. Even before the formal formation of one of the well known conventions there developed within it the doctrine of efficiency, which focused the attention not on interior realities but on the instruments of power and organization, even though these had no formal legal authority. The Free Church polity is based on the assumption that religion is a limited possibility because it is incarnated in sinful flesh. Further it assumed that any form of ecclesiasticism, including liturgical action, was a limitation of the freedom of God. Many in the Free Church tradition attempted to avoid all ecclesiasticism by giving no formal legal authority to church officials. Authority is vested in the local congregation. The Free Church tradition has developed a mystique of Christian democracy which is an idealization of autonomy for everyone. In effect this mystique of autonomy for everyone has

meant autonomy for that group which comes to effective leadership. The criticism from within the Free Church tradition is that the mystique is a way of looking upon organized disarray and naming it democracy.

Because the organization must move on the state and national levels but has no real authority to do so, and because the structures are set up to make it impossible for the leader to have ecclesiastical authority in the strict sense, he tends either to become a dictator or he does nothing (Harrison, 116). In order to avoid even the appearance of ecclesiasticism, the chief responsibility of the leader is to avoid seeking enough authority to meet his responsibilities. If he is a charismatic personality he will develop an informal, non-legal power base from which he can exercise an ecclesiasticism as unlimited in its coercive force as any ecclesiasticism which is sacramentally constituted and liturgically conferred. One then reaches the anomalous situation where power becomes unrestricted precisely because authority is so limited. It is without the advantages of the sacramental liturgical ecclesiasticism in that the informal, non-legal ecclesiasticism, because of its unstructured nature, is without the built-in instruments of recourse which are components of the formal, legal authority. For all its rejection of the ecclesiasticism which arises out of the trappings of liturgical forms, the Free Church tradition is learning that when people gather repeatedly over a long period of time for purposes of mediating the Christ event, then ecclesiasticism, whether dressed in a violet cassock with pectoral cross or in a business suit, comes to the fore. The Free Church tradition has the disadvantage that its ecclesiasticism is in business suits, without structural legal authority, without the particularity of authority conferred in a liturgical context, and is therefore less easily located and less effectively dealt with than that which is unmistakably present in crosier and mitre conferred with anointings and incense. Like death and taxes, bishops are inevitable.

Further, one would have to accept, I think, the proposition that the possession of power, with all of its inherent dangers, does not necessarily extinguish noble purpose. The informal, non-legal authority of the Free Church official which has not been ontologized by liturgical conferral is as susceptible to absolute corruption as the

formal legal power of the highly liturgically oriented hierarchy. For instance, Sidney Mead has pointed out that the fundamentalist controversy in a number of the Free Churches was brought to an end (with the defeat of the fundamentalists) not so much by free discussion and debate as by the "effective political manipulations directed by denominational leaders to the sterilizing of this 'divisive' element."<sup>1</sup>

The highly structured liturgical churches are faced with the threat of an ecclesiological spiritualism. This form of docetism suggests that the Church may no longer be able to be present in visible sociological forms. This kind of a critique of an ecclesiastical presence in a form larger than the local unit keeps surfacing at given moments of ecclesiastical history. Sebastian Franck (1499-1542), that friendly but critical commentator on Anabaptism, wanted the dissolution of any visible church because he feared the identification of Christianity with cultural patterns and with political power.

Many within the Free Church tradition have had an abiding fear of any organizational unit larger than the local church. This is related to the worship which was conceived of as radically local and personal and non-liturgical. But originally the issue behind the suspicion of more extensive organizational structures was the issue of freedom. However, the issue was not the freedom of man or the autonomy of the local church, but the freedom of God. The freedom of man and the autonomy of the local church were instruments directed to the achievement of the free access of the Holy Spirit to the work of the Church, a work which was specifically and consciously non-liturgical. The primacy of God's sovereign freedom had, by the beginning of the nineteenth century been displaced by the sovereignty of man and the free autonomous local congregation. The focus of ecclesiastical authority became the Holy Spirit in the midst of his covenanted local congregation; and the supposition grew that the Holy Spirit was operative only at the level of the local worshiping church. Anything above the local level was so much organizational scaffolding. In this dichotomized strutralization, the local community was idealized in

<sup>1</sup> "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History*, vol. 23 (December, 1954) p. 300.

a rhetoric of pneumatology which was highly sacral in content while the larger state or national units were spoken of in specific secular categories.

These are the patterns, more or less, that Roman Catholics are adopting as they re-think their structural problems.

The history of the highly liturgical and hierarchical churches has given sufficient cause to think about the issue of power in terms of the size of the organization. This history makes it understandable that some identify large structures with tyranny. However, as a researcher into the most unstructured non-liturgical groups within the Free Church tradition, I was struck with the frequency with which one meets tyranny in these unstructured situations. It was not that tyranny there was any more pronounced than in my own highly liturgical and structured tradition; it was only that I was surprised to find it there. And it was a tyranny against which there was no recourse because the unstructured situation had no structured instruments of recourse.

Structures can be tyrannical and when they are they must be changed. But tyranny is essentially in the heart of man whatever the nature of the ecclesiastical framework in which he works. The ontologizing of functions through liturgical action may give the tyrant aid and comfort but a tyrant can operate quite effectively without the aura of eternal essences which liturgical bestowal of function seems to confer. The absence of strong universal structures is not a guarantee against tyranny. Tyranny can be exercised by informal non-legal power which has not been ontologized by liturgical conferral (such as exists in the Free Church tradition). It can be tyrannical because it does not have the checks present when authority is legal and power clearly defined. Further, the process of rationalization by which the organization substitutes means for goals, or in which the task of self-preservation displaces the original purpose, is not a process limited to liturgically constituted hierarchical institutions of national or international scope; it can also afflict familial and domestic institutions locally constituted.

There is a great concern within Roman Catholicism for ecclesial units in which a vital liturgical and community life is possible. In the



search of such a life some are opting for an autonomous church free of structural ties with the larger community and the world Church.<sup>2</sup> This has all the earmarks of liturgical and cultural regression. If the liturgy is that cosmic celebration of the Word which the Father addresses to his sons, and if the liturgy expresses the wholeness of man's answer made in Christ, this assumes that the Church is essentially corporate in the sense of the whole inhabited world. The liturgical sense is a sense of the international community as well as the *circumstantes*. And the social dimensions of the liturgy are as extensive as the actualities of pain. The archetypal universalism of the Easter Vigil makes anything less than an international social conscience inadequate.

When institutional and structural ties are being demanded in terms of world government and in the programs of economic and social development, it seems strange to hear the local worshiping church saying that its horizons are sufficient unto itself. When Marshall McLuhan feels compelled to speak of the world as a global village, then it seems no mark of achievement to recommend an ecclesial and liturgical isolationism.

It was Rudolf Bultmann who reminded us that in the New Testament the union of the local congregations into the total *ecclesia* was not imposed by empirical facts or by the necessities of interchange, mutual help, much less by a will to power. Rather this union was brought about by the self-understanding of the Church according to which the total Church takes precedence over the local congregation, no matter whether the Church concept is oriented more toward the idea of the people of God or more toward that of the Body of Christ. This does not place the local church in opposition to the universal Church.

"The 'autonomy' of the local congregations is no contradiction of the idea of the total Church; it cannot be, because in each local congregation the total Church presents itself."<sup>3</sup> The particularity of the

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Reuther, who speaks about her own Community of Christ, rejects the "adolescent syndrome of negative thinking toward the historical Church." "Catholicity and the Local Congregation," *Dialog*, vol. 9 (Spring, 1970), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1955), 96-97.

liturgy as to locale, and its liturgical sense of being in a given place never overshadowed the deeper conviction that what was being celebrated here was done in union with the whole Church: The second prayer of the Roman Canon begins: "In union with the whole Church we honor Mary. . ." Neither the liturgy nor the New Testament knows anything about an isolated believer or an isolated congregation or an isolated liturgy.

The whole elaboration of the doctrine of collegiality as seen first in the Constitution on the Liturgy and then in the Constitution on the Church is a function of the re-evaluation of the local liturgy and the local regional churches. Despite the large attention Vatican II gave to the problems of local and regional churches (Decrees on the Eastern Churches; bishops' conferences with greater powers; national liturgies) the Church as a whole must be in a position to act in regard to the world as a unity. And the repeated references to the unity of mankind in the Constitutions on the Liturgy and the Church raises some issues about the local church's ability to deal effectively through new organs and institutions with world problems of underdevelopment, minority groups, peace movements, and contacts with the UN and UNESCO. Obviously the small intimate congregation cannot possess the resources to deal with issues of this magnitude. Closer to home, the small familial liturgical community cannot even provide the resources for the missionary programs which are imposed by the gospel imperatives. International issues call for international institutions. Some in the Free Churches who were brought up in the non-liturgical tradition of individual religious experience and the autonomous congregation are saying (and have been saying for some time) that if one is to bring the gospel to the age of institutions then the gospel has to be incarnated in institutional forms.

Without some kind of structural international cohesion religion cannot fulfill the traditional sociological function (which is also a liturgical function) of building a universe of meaning in which social patterns take on a commonality of value, and are accepted as generally binding. Religion functions both sociologically and liturgically by gathering the horizons of human possibilities and shaping them into coherent and patterned meanings. This process of social validation is founded on the liturgical claim of religion to relate

the *humanum*, the proximate, and the individual to the divine, to the ultimate, to the universal, in a word, to a kind of cosmic sacrality. To attain these ends it will not suffice to substitute a bodiless elan for a visible solidarity. Neither the privatized nor the localized religion has the resources to fulfill this function adequately. The privatized and the individualized religion is restricted by the very limitations of its familial geography. It seldom gets beyond the building of little contra-cultures and contra-worlds. The arc of its heaven is too geographically and culturally private to enable privatized and individualized religion to locate the archtypes of existence in a cosmic frame of reference. And when the attempt is made it is found that the contra-worlds are not viable in a socio-cultural sense.

In pre-Vatican II Catholicism we were afflicted with a triumphalism of the universal Church. The discussion on the Constitutions on the Liturgy and the Church helped to bring this period to an end. In our typical fashion of running from absolute to absolute, now we have displaced the triumphalism of the universal Church with the triumphalism of the local church. The locus of this displacement, strange to say, is frequently the liturgy. The motivations behind this displacement are unimpeachable in their authenticity: the desire for religious contacts on a human scale; the rejection of liturgical mechanism, the demand that in liturgical prayer there be a mutual exposure of real faces, the pursuit of a new quality of familial repose and inwardness in liturgical celebration. That this movement from a grand ecclesiastical internationalism to the proud poverty of the de-institutionalized local church should be found in aggravated form here in the United States with its traditions of Jeffersonian individualism cannot be surprising. The American experience, together with the theological principle of voluntary association, gives large support to the absolutizing of the autonomous congregation, even liturgical congregations. The de-institutionalization of even the local church is a quite understandable reaction to the rigid, indeed implacable, structuralization of the international community, with absolute control vested in the international headquarters, in this case in Rome. This was reflected in the liturgy by an aggressive and rigid control of sanctuary etiquette on an international level by the Congregation of Rites in Rome. What Paul Goodman had to say about the necessity of de-

centralizing American institutions (because over-centralization represents various degrees of dehumanization) can be applied in measure to international ecclesiastical institutions and to the liturgy itself. There is abroad the suspicion that the structures of control and the politics of manipulation which typify organized religion on the national and international level compromise the gospel. The anatomy of institutionalized power reveals that though it is not necessarily devoid of noble purpose, it easily impairs that freedom with which man goes to God. Further, sacramental ritualization raises the procedures of institutionalized power into metaphysical conditions; pure reflections of the eternal paradigm. The earthly liturgy transubstantiates procedures and organizational relationships into a super-substantial Golden Calf.

However, the Free Churches, whose offices do not have a sacramental liturgical substratum, have not always found their experience of non-formal, non-legal power less a compromise of the gospel. Paul M. Harrison, himself a child of and believer in the Free Church tradition had said: "Autonomy, separation, and disunity have generally proved to be an even greater burden [than organized Christianity], if for no other reason than the greater susceptibility of a divided church to the values of Caesar than to the teachings of Christ."<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, the presence of power, however conceived, carries with it the possibility of becoming an end in itself. The liturgical conferral of power lends credence to the mythology of an eternal paradigm; and eternal paradigms easily become idols. To make power an end in itself is to arrive at a pornographic conception of power. The Free Church tradition has had as many problems with pornographic power as the hierarchically and liturgically structured churches.

I would want to be assured that the present remarks are not construed to be a rejection of the Free Church tradition as a paradigm for the future. Within contemporary Catholicism the re-thinking of structural forms and liturgical action has consciously or unconsciously taken over the forms and procedures which have a long history in the Free Church tradition. As a matter of fact, I too, think that the

<sup>4</sup> *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 204.

liturgical churches have a model, though not the model, in the Free Churches. This is the direction in which the sacramentally structured churches will go. But we should not take over these patterns uncritically and so condemn ourselves to make the same mistakes which they have made. Any criticisms of the Free Church tradition which I have made have already been made by members of the Free Churches themselves and can be substantiated from their literature.

Lest I leave my friends in the Free Churches (that is, if I have any friends left at this point) with the impression that I have an eagle eye only for their problem areas, I would like to mention some of their areas of strength.

Many in the Free Church tradition have kept close to the sources of the Christian life in a way that is not true of the liturgically structured churches. They have a devotion to the Sacred Scripture and to the presence of the Holy Spirit which, whatever other historical difficulties they encounter, enables them to recover their spiritual vitality. In other words, the sources of renewal are more immediately present and less juridically prevented from operating within the Free Church ethos.

Because they have in their history this closeness to the sources of renewal, Sacred Scripture and the awareness of the presence of the Spirit, they have not generally lost that missionary imperative so typical of the New Testament Christianity. They are a community of missionary people. They know how to evangelize in terms of what is central to the Kingdom: salvation, repentance, conversion, forgiveness of sin, Christ as Crucified and Risen Savior.

They have a high sense of discipline. They have not adopted patterns of promiscuous membership. When they broke with the Constantinian social order they restored the personal moment in faith to its rightful place. There is, they rightfully point out, no Christianity by proxy. Without a deep personal commitment there can be Christian posturings and Christian fictions, but there can be no true faith relationship to Christ. They live with long spiritual tradition but they only appropriate that tradition by a personal act. No one else can appropriate their history for an adult Christian. For this reason they have a deep sense of discipleship and the vocation to witness.

An attempt has been made to see how the liturgy calls for the Church. The liturgical imperative has been related to present trends toward a Free Church pattern. Since what is normative is not a matter of structural origin, or Church order, or liturgically constituted offices, but a matter of divine purpose and mission, one should be hesitant about making absolute statements about structures and forms. The liturgy calls for the Church and it may invite one structural arrangement more insistently than another. But if the primary locus of ministry, order and structure is in Christ, and then in the Church as a whole seen as divine purpose and mission, one would want to treat with some care the force with which one argues from liturgy to the nature of the Church. This can still be done; but it should be done with the awareness of the limitations of the methodology.

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