

## LANGUAGE, LITURGY, AND THEOLOGY: *LEX ORANDI-LEX CREDENDI* REVISITED

The workshop was entitled "*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* Revisited." Margaret Mary Kelleher of Catholic University read a paper, "Thoughts on Language and Liturgy," while Robert Imbelli of Boston College shared reflections on "Language and Theology." Both presentations used as background reading Geoffrey Wainwright's "A Language in Which We Speak to God" (*Worship* 57 (1983).) A lively and extended discussion ensued after each of the presentations. A synopsis of each paper follows.

Kelleher, in developing the *lex orandi*, stressed that liturgical worship mediates the church's belief and that liturgy itself, as an ecclesial action, comprises a complex ritual system with many elements. The "language" of liturgy embraces many modalities: the verbal, the environmental, the silent. It thus constitutes a multi-valent world of meaning which structures the horizons of the person entering it, offering possibilities, achievements, ambiguities, inauthenticities.

The church appears here as a social reality, whose common meanings liturgy embodies. Moreover, the church is continually being realized: not in the abstract, but in particular assemblies which mediate common meanings to the members through their liturgical participation (or relative lack thereof).

Kelleher called special attention to the crucial role of images and symbols in the mediation of cognitive meaning and the promotion of insights, decisions, and actions. Indeed, the conversion process itself can be either fostered or hindered by the images employed in liturgical performance.

In this regard she called attention to Lonergan's notion of "censoring," a selective activity which can be productive, but also exclusionary. Hence the language of liturgy itself serves as censor of the ecclesial imagination regarding God, Christ, self. For example, the present sacramentary (at least in its English translation) in an overwhelming number of instances addresses God as "Father" in the opening prayer of the Sunday eucharist. Here, clearly, one image is being selected and other possibilities omitted.

A further illustration may be found in the very evocative prayer for the dedication of an altar, abounding in images such as "sign of Christ," "table of joy." However, the question was posed: how such images "connect" to the actual celebration, which so often bespeaks not a communal celebration, but a solitary performance. Another illustration is the prayer for the consecration of chrism, a prayer splendidly rich in baptismal imagery, yet celebrated most often in the ritual context of bishop and priests gathered to express their unity in the ordained ministry. In these and other instances the liturgist must critically question the meaning communicated by the ritual action.

Kelleher concluded that the present time calls for a nuanced reflection upon the language of liturgy and upon the tradition being mediated therein. Among the ultimate (and as yet unanswered) questions: whose language is the language of liturgy? who bears responsibility for shaping it?

Robert Imbelli agreed that liturgy is the context in which the language of faith "works"; and he affirmed, with Wainwright, that it provided "the connatural context for reflective interpretation of the Scriptures" (p. 312). He concurred with the crucial importance of image in engaging affect and bearing insight. But, as his contribution to the *lex credendi* pole of the discussion, he insisted that there can be "image-fixation" as well as "dogmatic deformation." He thus found Wainwright's caution important: "the Hebrew and Christian faiths have justifiably been chary of image-making" (p. 315). This "aneikonic" dimension of faith has received classic expression in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as well as in the works of St. John of the Cross; while Karl Rahner's stress on God as "incomprehensible Mystery" offers a contemporary restatement. Thus the importance for Imbelli of Wainwright's insistence upon "a strict christological criterion" in the sifting and discerning of images.

The central affirmation of the *lex credendi* concerns, therefore, the "Christological grammar" of Christian language. Christian liturgy, whatever the place and importance of images, must adhere to a "Christo-logic." In face of some too facile attempts to separate "faith" and "beliefs," one might consider that Christian faith is itself "christologically charged." Baptism and eucharist plunge the faithful into the paschal mystery of Christ, initiating and extending a progressive christening whereby we are transformed in Christ.

We are led, thereby, beyond images and words to the real presence of persons, which, in faith, is our incorporation into Christ. In the sedate terminology of scholasticism: not the *sacramentum tantum*, but the *res et sacramentum*. Or, in the more colorful prose of a modern novelist: "above all to hell with the imagined that does not say, not only in, but behind the images, the real."

Imbelli expressed concern that much of the post-conciliar reform, liturgical and other, seemed to lack christological depth. The inevitable reaction against a one-sided christology "from above" or a dominantly hierarchical ecclesiology or a unique insistence upon a sacramental *ex opere operato* risked itself becoming one-sided. For him a telling instance of such christological forgetfulness is the widespread assumption that the title of the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, refers to the church; whereas, textually, its referent is Christ! On the other hand, as an example of a rebirth of images, which both illustrates christological depth and is governed by a christological grammar, he cited Hopkins' poem, "The Windhover."

A last consideration, under the rubric of *lex credendi*, concerns the usage of the Rahnerian distinction between transcendental and predicamental or categorical revelation. Contrary to a prevailing emphasis in contemporary Catholic theology upon the transcendental dimension of revelation, Imbelli, somewhat in line with Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, suggested that the matrix of both liturgical and systematic theology must be Christian predicamental revelation. One begins here and not with an abstract universalism. One begins with the concreteness of immersion into Christ and anointing with the Spirit. Only in this milieu does one

then appreciate that all our discourse in liturgy and theology inevitably remains soundings upon the Unspeakable, whose last, least inadequate utterance is praise. This recognition guides the only true thrust to the Transcendent which remains rooted in earth, in Incarnation. Imbelli thus concluded with the *theologia prima* of the poem cited by Wainwright and serving to title his article:

*Christ is a language in which we speak to God  
And also God, so that we speak in truth;  
He in us, we in him, speaking  
To one another, to him, the City of God.*

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