

THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN THEOLOGY

“THE ART OF PREACHING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE ART OF RITUAL”

“We miss the mystery!” That’s what a good number of Catholics are saying about Vatican II liturgical reform and renewal. Active participation of the assembly has, indeed, made more people busy doing more things. But, has it more effectively created the conditions of possibility for people to express and experience the sacred? External participation is meant to deepen and enrich interior participation. Yet many say of the reformed ritual: “How can we experience the presence of God, the Holy, in this new, active, indeed almost overly busy liturgy?”

What precisely is this “sense of the sacred” which many claim we have lost. What is missed is honest mystery, i.e., the felt consciousness that we are being grasped by a reality greater than and, indeed, beyond ourselves, individually and collectively. The Holy is a reality which is felt as objective and outside the self. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.

To retrieve the sense of the sacred we must recover the true expressive form of ritual which is aesthetic. Our liturgical renewal has been founded too much upon the research of historians and theologians but it is not yet sufficiently grounded in the art of ritual enactment. Ritual is a performing art. To lift ritual off the pages of texts into energized celebrations calls for a sense of conception, creation, composition and choreography which resembles the rhythms of the performing arts.

The conciliar reform of ritual called for three values to be emphasized: active participation; comprehension; and communication. This, in turn, called for the use of words as a major vehicle for ritual meaning. Words actively spoken and sung by the ministers and assembly became the bearers of the expression and experience of mystery.

Herein lies the heart of the problem. This represents a major misconception of the nature of ritual. Words cannot be the primary forms of expression in ritual. They are inadequate to express the incomprehensible mystery of Christ. Words address and engage discursive reason. They allow us to *explain* about the Holy One. They are not the best ways to open believers to *explore* the presence of the sacred.

Good ritual opens people to experience the presence of mystery by engaging the human imaginative system through the non-discursive languages of image, symbol, myth and ritual action. These allow participants to explore the mystery of Christ as it merges and meshes with each one’s personal mystery as well as with the mystery of the community present.

This mode of celebration can more readily grasp the imaginations of active worshipers so that they may experience the presence of the Holy One in all of creation. Such faith, such alertness to mystery, begins not primarily in notions or concepts, but in images or symbols. Faith is nurtured and is celebrated through engagement in the symbolic rituals of a community. Imagination is the seat of spirituality and the heart of wisdom.

Jesus used forms of imagination such as parables and symbolic actions because he understood that faith begins, develops, and grows more through the mind imagining than through the mind reasoning. He tried to engage imaginations not to communicate new information, nor to obfuscate the truth, nor to decorate the truth. He used imaginative forms so that people might *participate* in the truth. Such participation in the truth is precisely what is meant to happen to liturgy. Through imaginative forms, participants' imaginations are grasped to link life and liturgy.

The rhythmized enactment of symbols can disclose spiritual truth to the imagination. It can create *the conditions of possibility* for the assembly to experience presence/mystery/sacred/the Holy. Ritual cannot, of course, *create* that experience itself since the awareness of divine presence is a free gift of God. However, when ritual appeals to the imagination, it is more likely to open people to the presence of mystery than when it looks, feels and sounds like a communal recipe-reading of words engaging our reasoning powers and creating boredom.

This aesthetic approach to liturgy as a performing art has at least one potential danger. It could become a performance by ministers for a passive assembly. Ritual must be conceived, created, composed and choreographed as *an art of a performing audience*. The artists of ritual are ultimately the members of the assembly.

Liturgical renewal is surely not completed. It remains a long twilight struggle, a struggle to drink more deeply of God's word and sacraments, a struggle for the nourishment to live meaningfully in a secularized world. In the struggle, the liturgical expression and the experience of the presence of the sacred plays an indispensable role. The retrieval of the sense of the sacred can support people living without hope in an ever more profane world.

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