

## SEMINAR ON SACRAMENTAL AND LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

In accord with the decision of those attending the 1987 seminar on sacramental and liturgical theology, the sessions of this year's seminar focused on issues raised by two works in progress written by seminar members on the topic of liturgy as a source for sacramental theology. The first paper to be discussed was by Kevin W. Irwin on "Liturgical Theology: A Methodological Proposal"; the second was by Margaret Mary Kelleher on "Liturgical-Sacramental Theology: Some Issues and Questions."

In his paper Kevin Irwin argued the thesis that to have an adequate liturgical theology one must examine the component parts of liturgical rites—texts, symbols, actions and gestures—in light of the times and place of the communities which engaged in them in the past or are engaged in them today because liturgical rites are adequately understood and interpreted only in relation to their experienced context. This means that liturgical context is text in the sense that context provides the source (text) for developing liturgical theology. Here context means the following three things. First, the historical evolution of a given liturgical rite in order to determine its origin, component parts, and historical variations. The purpose of this study is to uncover the theological meanings which the rite has traditionally conveyed and to distinguish between essential and peripheral aspects of the rite. Second, an examination of today's reformed rites is undertaken to determine whether the contemporary celebration of these rites in specific contexts expresses what is actually envisioned in the published rites. This means examining liturgical acts as a whole so that words, symbols and gestures are interpreted and understood in relation to each other. In addition, it means trying to determine the extent to which the setting for liturgy (i.e., assembly, environment) and the conducting of liturgy (i.e., music, participation) facilitates and enhances the assembly's appropriation and understanding of the prayers, symbols and gestures of the liturgy. The third notion of context shifts attention to what is often termed the critical function of liturgical theology. Here the contemporary cultural and theological context of liturgical celebration is noted in order to explore ways of determining the adequacy of the present liturgical rites and of adapting them to a variety of changing ecclesial and cultural contexts.

To state that liturgical context is text means shifting the attention of those who do liturgical theology away from the exclusive compilation and comparison of liturgical texts (e.g., sacramentaries, pontificals, ordos) to the discussion of these sources in the context of their celebration. Irwin's proposal is intended to recontextualize liturgical sources and thus provide a more adequate approach to liturgical theology. Irwin argued that when context is understood to comprise historical evolution, reformed rites and contemporary critical function (including the on-

going agenda of inculturation of rites), it becomes the text, that is, the primary source for liturgical theology.

In her paper Margaret Kelleher presented some issues that have emerged in her attempts to use liturgy as a source for theological reflection. After noting that many works on sacramental theology do not include liturgy as a source and that those which do usually focus on the historical development and content of ritual texts, she took the position that, since liturgy is a form of action, the use of liturgy as a source for sacramental theology must include the task of studying sacraments as they are actually performed in various ecclesial contexts.

In order to use liturgical performance as a source one needs both a theoretical understanding of liturgy that recognizes its performative nature and a method for studying the mediation of meaning in liturgical performance. Kelleher briefly summarized some of the questions she uses in her own method which is based on an understanding of liturgy as a form of ecclesial ritual praxis, a social symbolic process which can communicate, create and transform meaning. The method seeks to objectify or thematize the public horizon that is symbolically mediated in the liturgical praxis of local assemblies. Data gathered from liturgical performance through participant-observation are interpreted within an expanding context of other data taken from such sources as liturgical texts, church documents, historical and theological studies. A more complete presentation of this method can be found in her article "Liturgical Theology: A Task and a Method," *Worship* 62 (1988) 2-25.

Kelleher referred to a study of the communion rite which she had presented in more detail at the 1986 meeting of the seminar. She then described a study of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in which she was attempting to objectify the vision of what it means to be incorporated into Christ and the church as this was set out in the actual performance of the rite in a particular parish.

In the remainder of her paper she identified some of the consequences of using liturgical praxis as a source for sacramental theology. First, the boundaries within which the theologian looks for meaning are greatly expanded because he or she is studying in a complex ritual field, one in which meaning is carried or embodied in objects, actions, persons, gestures, words, arrangement of space and relationships. Second, as a result of attending to these diverse elements, one becomes more aware of the ambiguity of symbolic action and the fact that there may be conflicting messages and elements of inauthenticity set out in the church's sacramental praxis. How do we incorporate this into our theological reflection? Kelleher described how her attention to an expanded field in her study of the RCIA revealed two different ecclesial images being presented in the same rite. Third, the study of liturgical praxis necessarily calls for attention to and reflection on the assembly which is acting as the subject of the liturgical action. She suggested that more attention must be given to the way in which sacramental meaning is affected by such factors as the history of an assembly, its socio-cultural context, its manner of ordering itself, etc. Finally, she indicated that those who make decisions about the content and shape of liturgical celebrations and those who preside and preach do, in fact, influence the meaning that is made available in the public horizon of any assembly. The use of liturgy as a source for sacramental theology leads to the con-

clusion that more serious attention must be given to the significance of human subjects, both individual and collective, in the mediation of sacramental meaning and grace.

It was decided by the seminar participants that for the next few years the group would discuss recent works on sacramental and liturgical theology that are already published, and are therefore more readily accessible than having to distribute copies of work in progress, especially from the perspective of the method employed in such studies.

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