

## Catechism on the Liturgy I, 4

### C. Four Benefits of the Liturgy

#### 1. Transcendence.

a. Pagan religion in the West had in its favor that it was waiting. One can recall the statue dedicated to *the unknown god* by the Athenians (Acts 17.23), which St. Paul used to tell them that God is Christ – He was the one they longed for. God’s mercy on the pagans in lavishing such great saints upon them, like Sts. Peter and Paul, seems to indicate that He prefers to be adored without being known, rather than our times, in which He is known but not adored.

b. What is adoration? In the widest sense it is a free and loving submission of the whole being to God, Who has sovereign rights over His creature. Revelation adds to this however:

1. It corrects the idea of the supernatural. Rather than the Divinity appearing as a superior force in nature, such as Zeus, Divinity appears as being infinitely superior to all nature. And “supernatural” does not carry in this thought some banal, modern connotation meaning the unexplainable or unusual. It means a reality which is infinitely above all natural conceptions of sanctity that man is capable of having. The word *sanctus* (usually translated as “holy”) in Latin means “separated.” Our Lord spoke forcefully about this in the Gospels. “You are from beneath, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world.” (Jn.8.23)

2. From this, we see a second effect of revelation (a Latin word which means “to draw aside the veil”) is that this God, is three times holy, thrice separated from the nature which He created. The burn-

ing bush on Mt. Sinai is enough to get Moses on his knees immediately. But far from crushing us with His splendor, He reveals Himself as a Father, and raises us to the dignity of a son through our baptism. Therefore adoration does not exclude tenderness: such is the power of the liturgy which has both – the awfulness of the Consecration, the tenderness of Communion.

c. The world has turned away from God’s transcendence. And we are living perhaps in the beginning of the great apostasy spoken of in the Scriptures. Just in this country, Catholic apostates (from a Greek word meaning “to stand outside of”) are the second largest denomination after practicing Catholics. But the state of this world is worse than the old paganism. The ancient pagans rejected Christ from ignorance. Modern pagans reject Him from contempt. Modern man glorifies himself, and this naturalism has entered even into prayer. It appears in liturgy as a hunger for novelty and adaptation; the invasion of modern forms of music and flat, vulgar language; and creativity which is one of the subtlest forms of human pride. Modern man has given into the temptation to adapt religion to man, rather than what the Church has always striven to do: to adapt man to religion.

d. If we turn our backs on this naturalism, we see in our liturgy an expression, an unfolding of the delight of baptism which transcends the fashions and peculiarities of the moment. It is perfectly adapted to that instinct for the sacred and that thirst for adoration that man carries within himself. That which never

rises to God will never descend to man. “He that is of the earth, of the earth he is, and of the earth he speaketh.” (Jn 3.31) The language of the liturgy must come down from God before we can expect it to make us ascend toward Him.

e. To remedy this danger, not only does the Sacred Liturgy avoid spontaneous or made-up-at-the-spur-of-the-moment prayers, it gives us the theocentrism of the altar. The altar ascends to God. The priest and people face the altar. Our liturgy is about adoration, and “Mass facing the people” is not capable of expressing this. “There is a danger when the communitarian character tends to transform the assembly into a closed circle. The community must not enter into dialogue with itself; it is a collective force turned towards

the coming of the Lord.” (Cardinal Ratzinger)

f. This turning to the Lord, to the thrice holy God, is symbolized by the priest and faithful facing the crucifix (ideally all facing the East, from whence will come the Lord), facing the Lord. “How greatly it is to be desired that Christianity should once more come to discover this primary meaning of the Mass: its theocentric meaning, and the reorientation of the whole of mankind, of the whole universe, towards its true center: this universal return, wrought in Christ crucified and ascended up to heaven; this resumption of all things in the immense flood of divine love, flowing back finally in filial love towards its source, the Father.” (Fr. Louis Bouyer)