

Catechism on the Liturgy I, 8

D. On how the Sacred Liturgy teaches us.

1. It would be a mistake to think about the liturgy as having a purely didactic nature, or to think of teaching or evangelizing as its primary purpose. As Cardinal Ratzinger put it in his excellent book The Spirit of the Liturgy, “That is why St. Augustine could say that the true ‘sacrifice’ is the *civitas Dei*, that is, love-transformed mankind, the divinization of creation and the surrender of all things to God: God all in all (cf. I Cor 15:28). This is the purpose of the world. That is the essence of sacrifice and worship.”

a. Pope John Paul II warned us about those attempts which seek to fashion the liturgy into a didactic exercise, where every implicit thing is made explicit, with endless explanation. Conscious participation, as he points out, does call for increased learning about what the liturgy means. However,

It does not mean a constant attempt within the liturgy itself to make the implicit explicit, since this often leads to a verbosity and informality which are alien to the Roman rite and end by trivializing the act of worship. Nor does it mean the suppression of all subconscious experience, which is vital in a liturgy that thrives on symbols that speak to the subconscious just as they speak to the conscious. (October 9, 1993 Address)

b. The teaching aspect of the liturgy again, is not its primary pur-

pose, and never has been. The ceremonies of the liturgy do many things, and “instruction for simple folk,” as Cardinal Bona is quoted by Pope Pius XII, is only one of them. Still, the liturgy does instruct, and does it well.

Exterior worship, finally, reveals and emphasizes the unity of the mystical Body, feeds new fuel to its holy zeal, fortifies its energy, intensifies its action day by day: “for although the ceremonies themselves can claim no perfection or sanctity in their own right, they are, nevertheless, the outward acts of religion, designed to rouse the heart, like signals of a sort, to veneration of the outward acts of religion, designed to rouse the heart, like signals of a sort, to veneration of the sacred realities, and to raise the mind to meditation on the supernatural. They serve to foster piety, to kindle the flame of charity, to increase our faith and deepen our devotion. They provide instruction for simple folk, decoration for divine worship, and continuity of religious practice. They make it possible to tell genuine Christians from their false or heretical counterparts. (Mediator Dei)

c. Let us look briefly at the fact that all men require some sort of liturgy, because it has always been a primary way to express their thoughts about life and death. Liturgy is, among other

things, a putting into action in gesture, movement, song, clothes and speech, what we think. And from the earliest time of history, men have been engaged in some sort of liturgy. As a Benedictine monk from Le Barroux put it:

The ripe fruits of a whole civilization, hanging heavy in beauty, are often caught up in the civilization's fall. Sometimes they survive it like a refined and fragile flower (think perhaps, for example, of the outdated etiquette of the French court). We forget that these sacred rites were first of all the poetry of mankind in his infancy, barbarous and crude but the expression of men who danced out their theology before they ever thought to write it down. These religious rites in their earliest manifestation from the very first graspable expression, from across the long night of the ages, to have come down to us from our remote ancestors. For well before we have any written inscription, any wall painting, any hieroglyph from primitive man, we discover in what survives of his funeral rites the first and moving witness to a belief in a reality beyond him. The dead man, his legs drawn up to his chest in a fetal position, is once more entrusted to mother earth like the seed of eternity.

d. It is clear as well, that liturgy is required by every culture or civilization, in order that its religion be apprehended, and moral duties demanded by the culture be inculcated beginning with the youngest

child. This is not exclusively a Western notion. It may be found in the East as well. From the same anonymous monk:

Every mode of religion, to make a deep and lasting impression on the human mind, must exercise our obedience, by enjoining practices of devotion; and must acquire our esteem, by inculcating moral duties analogous to the dictates of our own hearts. The religion of Zoroaster was abundantly provided with the former, and possessed a sufficient portion of the latter. At the age of puberty, the faithful Persian was invested with a mysterious girdle, the badge of the divine protection, and from that moment all the actions of his life, even the most indifferent, or the most necessary, were sanctified by their peculiar prayers, ejaculations, or genuflections; the omission of which, under any circumstances, was a grievous sin, not inferior in guilt to the violation of moral duties.

e. Not only in the religion of Zoroaster, but in every religion worthy of the name, one may find liturgy, where the actions, gestures, clothing and words are of paramount importance not only to the believer, but also to the honor of the deity begin worshipped. These ceremonies and the things that went with them taught the believer how to be faithful to the deity.