

Catechism on the Liturgy III, 3

To understand the concept of play in the liturgy, I'm going to use some of the thought of Fr. Romano Guardini (a favorite author of Pope Benedict XVI), which is in a fine little book called The Spirit of the Liturgy.

Certain grave and very serious people who see moral problems in everything, and demand a definite purpose to all things at all times, are inclined to regard the liturgy as superfluous pageantry that is somewhat aimless. What is the purpose of it all? Why not just have the sacrifice and the following meal and be done with it? A number of theologians proposed just this in Europe a number of years ago – bored with the *Novus Ordo* – calling for a *Missa Simplex*, a simple Mass. It would consist of the Sign of the Cross, one reading from Scripture, the Consecration, an Our Father, Communion, and a blessing...ten minutes at most. The proposal went nowhere, thank heaven.

People who long for this want purpose – in the ordinary sense of that word – where that which is subordinate has value only in so far as it capable of serving the end, which is superior. In other words according to this thinking, if something is non-essential to the purpose of a thing, then that thing is more or less wasteful, or at least trivial and beside the point.

But look at nature for a moment. Are the various kinds of leaves or the myriads of varieties of flowers useful? According to this kind of mindset they are to some extent, but *not* the seemingly indiscriminate extravaganza of nature, which gives us an endless variety of shapes, colors, sizes and scents of flowers. It simply is not necessary that apples be red or green, and the fact that an apple is red does not seem to serve any real purpose (unless Eve had a particular fancy for that color, but that's another subject). It is a fact that some

things might not have a purpose. But they could have meaning, or significance. And their significance consists in being what they are. So what is the meaning of that which exists? That it should be the image of eternal God.

The U.S. Congress has a purpose. It is supposed to enact legislation to make life better, as foreseen by the Constitution. But jurisprudence has no such purpose; it merely indicates where truth lies in questions of law. Yet both are good.

Take another example. Art (when at its best) has no purpose. But it is full of meaning. Idealists in the Enlightenment wanted to force it to have purpose – so that art would teach virtue say – but the more they succeeded in this the uglier was the art. It reminds me of those dreary games sold by Toys-R-Us, which insist that all play must be a “learning moment.” Anxious parents buy these, frightened that the children might not be getting a leg up on the other kids as they prepare for Harvard.

So both purpose and meaning are needed in life. When life lacks purpose, it degenerates into pseudo-aestheticism. When it is forced into a rigid framework of purpose, it droops and withers with dryness. Purpose is the goal of all effort, labor and organization; meaning is the essence of existence, and the Church is organized with both of these. Canon Law gives a whole system of purposes, constitution and government. Thus sacraments act as channels of graces, and their mediation is accomplished easily and quickly when the necessary conditions are present.

But the liturgy has no thought-out, detailed, systematic plan of instruction. It's like comparing a gymnasium to an open field with some woods. In the gym, eve-

rything is organized to a particular development and discipline. But the field and woods are filled with life, and rather unorganized. The abundance of prayers, ideas, symbols, and gestures in the liturgy create a world where the soul is rather free to wander about at will, and to develop itself there. Like taking a walk in the woods and the field, the soul can stop at any time and marvel at a flower, or the color of the grass or the smell of the forest, or in the liturgy to linger at this prayer or wonder about that vestment.

So our liturgy does not have a purpose – existing essentially for the sake of humanity – but it exists for the sake of God. It's like the small flower turned toward the sun, delighting in its Maker. In the liturgy man is no longer concerned about himself (thank God), but for a brief time his gaze is turned toward God. He is in a forest of sacred life, in the midst of a thousand, thousand adorations. This is described in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, when the saintly prophet saw the flaming cherubim.

“And I saw, and behold a whirlwind came out of the north, and a great cloud, and a fire infolding it. And in the midst thereof the likeness of four living creatures...And every one of them went straight forward. Whither the impulse of the spirit was to go, thither they went... This was the vision running to and fro in

the midst of the living creatures, a bright fire and lightening going forth from the fire. And the living creatures ran and returned like flashes of lightening...And I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of many waters...And when they stood, their wings were let down...As the appearance of the rainbow when it is in a cloud on a rainy day...”

These angels will not be neatly fitted into purpose. How aimless their action appears! They are pure motion, powerful and splendid, acting immediately according to the Spirit, desiring nothing except to express the inner drift and glow and force of the majesty of God. They are the living image of the liturgy.

There is another image from Sacred Scripture; a favorite passage of mine, used in the feast days of Our Lady about her Child, with Whom she is eternally united. “I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; playing in the world. And my delights were with the children of men.” (Prov. 8.30, 31) This is the delight of the Eternal Father that the Wisdom (the Logos, the Son, the perfect Fullness of Truth) should pour out its essence before Him in all His ineffable splendor. We are not talking about purpose here; the Son “plays” before the Father.