

Catechism on the Liturgy III, 4

The play of children has no purpose; it does not aim at anything. I was a guest at some parishioners' house for dinner, and the children insisted I watch their play. "Not quite like Shakespeare," they said. Chairs were arranged, props were assembled, and the dialogue began, with much audience participation. There was a dinosaur, a castle, "Lady Lava", birds, plenty of chatter and laughter, and an indecipherable plot. This was life! It was life pouring itself out without aim, drawing from riches in its storehouse of humor and story and dance and rhyme. It was wonderful.

But as life progresses, conflicts arise, and it appears at times to grow ugly and discordant. Man sets himself a goal, but many obstacles are in his way, and it is very seldom that he can attain his ideal. He tries to reconcile the contradiction between what he wishes to be and what he is, and this is the vision of good art. People who contemplate art should not expect immediate results, or great lessons, or advice about their troubles. But they should be able to linger before it, moving freely, becoming conscious of their own better nature.

The liturgy is this, but much more. With the aid of grace, a man is given the opportunity of becoming that which according to divine destiny he should be and longs to be, a child of God. In the liturgy, he goes to the altar. "I will go unto the altar of God. Unto God who giveth joy to my youth."

This is not work. It is play in the highest and most profound sense. To be at play on this supernatural plane, is not to create, but to exist. Profound earnestness and divine joyfulness are mingled. The fact that the liturgy gives a thousand careful directions about language, color, vestments, gestures and instruments can only

be understood by those who take play seriously. Children gravely draw up the rules for their games, and the meaning for this stick and that tree. They don't have to be taught this, they do it instinctively. Similarly, the liturgy lays down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God.

Only those who are not scandalized by this will understand the liturgy. The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the Church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim than to live and exist in His sight. It means to become as a little child. It means to confine oneself to play for a while, as David did when he danced before the Ark.

It is in this very aspect of the liturgy that its didactic aim is bound, that of teaching the soul not to see purposes everywhere, not to be too conscious of the end it wishes to attain, not to be desirous of being over-clever and grown-up, but to understand simplicity in life. The soul must learn to abandon, at least in prayer, the restlessness of purposeful activity; it must learn to waste time for the sake of God, and to be prepared for the sacred game with sayings and thoughts and gestures, without always immediately asking "why?" and "wherefore?" It must learn not to be continually yearning to do something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy. (Guardini)

With these things being said about the liturgy, we must look at the building in which it is celebrated in a similar fashion. To do so, it is wise to go back to the middle ages, which are the best ages for serious play. The gothic cathedrals of the

13th century were masterpieces of serious play.

Of all the guides for this, my favorite is William Durandus, a 13c bishop in France. He was influenced by many holy sources, such as St. Isidore of Seville. He wrote a great work called the *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, the first book of which is on the church building. He sees a great connection between the building, the vestments, the things used in the liturgy, the music... a great harmony. He explains these things by their symbolism. I've stated this before, but modernist liturgical scientists will dismiss this kind of explanation. They prefer explanations like, "The reason for the chalice veil was to protect the chalice from bat dung, since bats were a real problem in the big medieval churches. But we no longer have that problem so that's why the veil is obsolete." I actually heard this once. There is some logic to it, in that if that's all there really is to the veil, then the heck with it (or death to bats). But what if the veil is supposed to symbolize the stripping of the garments before the crucifixion? Then it has great meaning, but little purpose. Listen for a moment to the good bishop talk about the serious play of the divine things of the liturgy.

All things, as many as pertain to offices and matters ecclesiastical, be full of divine significations and mysteries, and overflow with a celestial sweetness; if so be that a man be diligent in his study of them, and know how to 'draw honey from the rock and oil from the hardest stone'.

But 'who knoweth the ordinances of heaven or can fix the reasons thereof on the earth'? For he that prieth into their majesty, is overwhelmed by the glory of them. Of a truth 'the well is deep and I have nothing to draw with': unless He giveth it unto me Who 'giveth unto all men liberally and upbraideth not': so that 'while I journey through the mountains' I may 'draw water with joy out of the wells of salvation.' Wherefore, albeit of the things handed down from our forefathers, capable we are not to explain all, yet if among them there be anything which is done without reason, it should forthwith be put away.

I'm using an Anglican translation, by the way, which relies on the KJV of the Bible for the passages of scripture. The translation is excellent, and the KJV is probably the most beautiful of all English Bibles. Keep in mind when you read Durandus, that the medieval ecclesiastics knew large portions of Scripture by heart, so that when they write, it just flows out of them.

This paragraph sums up what I hope (and pray) will be done in all these inserts about the liturgy – that we will be able to see the significations and mysteries as overflowing with celestial sweetness, but at the same time if we find something without reason, it shall be put away.