

“The Liturgy and Daily Living”¹

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Several weeks ago I had the wonderful opportunity to offer a set of conferences for a group of diocesan clergy. I was asked to address what many of them perceived to be the fundamental challenge for the liturgical life of the church today, a loss of the sacred in the liturgy. Their voices joined with many others who have a similar concern. They noted the declining importance of regular Sunday mass attendance, a lack of what we might call church etiquette especially among the youth, diminished respect for the blessed sacrament, tepid liturgical music, informality on the part of both liturgical presiders and the assembly, etc. Recent articles, and indeed, whole new journals and organizations, have appeared which call for a “resacralization of the liturgy.”² On the one hand I am somewhat sympathetic to these concerns, but the way the issue is generally framed, “a loss of the sacred in the liturgy,” has bothered me for reasons that have only gradually become clear. One concern I have is that, as Nathan Mitchell recently observed, “it is astonishingly easy to mistake manners for mystery....,”³ and thereby assume that re-establishing certain norms for appropriate behavior will solve the loss of the sacred. But my primary difficulty lies with the final clause, “in the liturgy.” The expressed concern is not with a

¹ This essay is an adaptation of an address given at the Southwest Liturgical Conference in San Antonio, Texas, January 24, 1997.

² Two new journals that, in spite of significant ideological differences, might fit this description are *Adoremus* and *Antiphon*.

³ Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgical Correctness,” *Worship* 71 (January, 1977): 62-71 at 64.

general loss of the sacred, what James Bacik describes as the “eclipse of mystery” in our world,⁴ but rather with a loss of the sacred *in the liturgy*. The implicit assumption seems to be that it is primarily to the liturgy that we must look for the experience of the sacred.

What is at work here is the classic distinction which human societies have made between the sacred and the profane since time immemorial. It is a distinction which is shot through our own religious vocabulary as Catholic Christians. Yet at its heart, is not the doctrine of the Incarnation the fundamental subversion of this distinction? Did not Jesus Christ come, not just to save individual souls, but to redeem the world? It is with these questions in mind that I would like to explore in this reflection, not the loss of the sacred in the liturgy, but rather the struggle of relating what goes on in the liturgy with the basic patterns of daily living.

My basic argument consists of three points. First, I contend that Christianity suffers today from a failure of the religious imagination. This failure of the religious imagination is evident both in the way we view God’s relationship to the world and in the way we imagine the life of grace. Second, I believe that this failure can be rectified only by retrieving a trinitarian spirituality in which the God who comes to us in Christ as love, draws us into communion through the power of the Holy Spirit. Third, I believe that only a true trinitarian spirituality has the potential for making connections between who we are in the liturgical assembly as a eucharistic community drawn into *koinonia* with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and who we are as Christians called to live out our baptism in the life of communion. Trinitarian spirituality will always undergird an authentic liturgical spirituality.

⁴ James Bacik, *Apologetics and the Eclipse of Mystery: Mystagogy According to Karl Rahner* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

I. A Failure of the Religious Imagination

I am increasingly inclined to believe that most significant theological disputes emerge not out of doctrinal differences but rather out of different structures of the religious imagination. Put simply, many Christians who would profess the same faith and the same religious doctrines, use their imaginations to bring that faith to life in fundamentally different ways. They operate out of different models, different imaginative constructs of how God is related to the world. I would like to discuss two alternative models that I believe can be found in Christianity today. Each shape in profound ways how people use their religious imaginations in the life of faith.⁵ These two models might be called first, unitarian or solitary theism, and second, trinitarian or relational theism.

A. Unitarian or “Solitary” Theism

In this model, the distinction and indeed, distance, between God and the world is stressed. This model will draw on a wide range of metaphors. God is King, Lord, Master of the Universe, Father-Patriarch. The language of Divine Kingship, attributed to both the first and second persons of the trinity are found in the Bible and throughout much of the Christian tradition. This set of metaphors places the stress not on our world but on “another kingdom which is not of this world.” This “other kingdom” is the “place” where God abides.

The image of God operative in this model is at least functionally unitarian. That is, God is conceived as an individual being who is bigger, better and more powerful than ourselves (for those of you who are *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans, you might think of this image of God

⁵ I am indebted to the exploration of “models of God” in Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

as “Q” with a conscience!), but an individual being nevertheless. The other alternative, which actually differs little, is that God is viewed as a community of *three* individual beings, one of whom we will tend to address in prayer. In either case, God will always be another individual being “out there somewhere.” I believe this to be true however much Christians may continue to use orthodox trinitarian language which would never admit three individual beings in God. It is quite possible to have our language say one thing while we continue to act out of an alternative imaginative framework. This unitarian framework I believe, actually dominates the religious imagination of most Christians today. It is why Karl Rahner, in a famous observation, remarked that most Christians are, in spite of their professed belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, practical monotheists (read unitarians) in their actual religious experience.⁶

This unitarian theism has been reinforced by a philosophical approach to God that emerged gradually several centuries ago. With the rise of modern science people no longer needed to appeal to God to explain natural events like the movement of the planets or weather patterns. Modern science seemed to make God irrelevant for understanding our world. What was left was an image of God as the divine “clockmaker.” God first builds and then winds up that great clock which is our universe, and then stands back to allow the clock to mark time on its own, intervening only occasionally to make the necessary adjustment of the hands. This portrait of God has no place for Christ, no place for the church and no place for religious experience.⁷

⁶ Karl Rahner, “Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise ‘De Trinitate’,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 79.

⁷ See Michael J. Buckley’s magisterial work on this topic, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

Another factor which reinforces this unitarian model is modern individualism. After the seventeenth century, much political theory begins with a consideration of the solitary individual who possesses a set of human rights over against other solitary individuals. Human society and the demand for human community arise only as a way of insuring that each individual's rights are preserved. It is impossible to overestimate the influence of modern individualism on our imaginations. It shapes the thought of both atheists and devout Christians. As but one example, I would propose the current debate in our society on abortion, a debate in which two extremist camps garner most of the media attention and, consequently, define the terms of the debate. The intractability of this debate stems not from the obvious differences between the two camps (generally, though somewhat inaccurately characterized as pro-life and pro-choice), but from what they share. Both pro-life extremists and pro-choice zealots tend to rely on the same moral language of individual rights. One group stresses the rights of the unborn to the exclusion of any real concern for the mother and the social and economic circumstances that might lead a woman to make such a difficult decision. The other group stresses the reproductive rights of the mother to the exclusion of any recognition of a decent society's obligation to show special regard to the defenseless and vulnerable, among whom the unborn must certainly be included. The faithful Catholic ought to lament the shocking absence of any serious discussion of the "common good" in this debate, given that notion's pedigree in Catholic moral theology.⁸

Given the influence of modern individualism, we should not be surprised if our religious imaginations have not also been shaped by the individualistic bent of our culture. A unitarian theism which sees God as a solitary, self-contained individual being is a most natural theology for

⁸ See Todd David Whitmore, "Notes for a 'New, Fresh, Compelling' Statement," *America* (October 8, 1994): 14-8.

modern Americans who interpret every feature of their existence through the lens of individualism.

Two practical consequences follow from this. First, if God is an individual being among other individual beings, another individual in the “larger household of all reality,”⁹ then God will inevitably have to compete for our love and attention. My whole life will then be an endless tug-of-war between the matters that demand my attention in the daily course of human affairs--preparing classes, buying groceries, playing with my children, talking with my wife—and my religious obligations to God. Regrettably, there are theologies of committed celibacy that assume this perspective and consequently suggest that the committed celibate, free from the “distractions” of marriage and family, is better able to love God.

Second, because in this view God is an individual outside my ordinary world, my encounter with God will depend on some kind of episodic intervention. In this view I encounter God only in response to prayer or through the reception of the sacraments, or some such thing. My life is construed as essentially profane and Godless, punctuated by brief encounters with the sacred. The spiritual life will be a mad attempt to insert as many “sacred” moments into the profane structure of daily life with the hope of thereby sanctifying that life. This “episodic” spirituality is supported by the “thingification” of grace, that is, the tendency to imagine divine grace as a kind of spiritual fuel, and the church and its ministers as sacramental grace dispensers.

In conclusion, I believe that this unitarian or “solitary” theism leads to an episodic spirituality, the thingification of grace and the mechanization of the church’s sacramental life. It

⁹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 63.

is an imaginative framework incapable of sustaining an adequate liturgical spirituality. For that, we will need to consider a second model, what I have called a trinitarian or “relational” theism.

B. Trinitarian or “Relational” Theism

This alternative model imagines God not as another individual being competing for our attention but as the loving and creative ground of our existence, the very atmosphere in whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It is a model grounded in an appreciation of the basic insights of Trinitarian doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity has been for so long neglected in Christian life because in popular thought it has often been viewed as an insoluble math problem, how is it that 3=1. Yet this misses the insight of trinitarian doctrine completely. What we need is a more dynamic perspective that imagines God not as an individual, or three individuals bound together in some way, but rather as a pulsing divine movement toward us in love.¹⁰ Long before trinitarian doctrine was formalized in the definitions of the early ecumenical councils, the church possessed a lived trinitarian faith in which God was encountered precisely as a dynamic movement toward humanity in the life of love. It was in the actual experience of salvation that the doctrine of the trinity was born. Emerging trinitarian language marked out the “shape” or “rhythm,” if you will, of this divine movement. This trinitarian shape of the experience of God might be outlined as follows: 1) the God of the covenant reveals the depths of divine

¹⁰ Kilian McDonnell, describes this movement well. “The issue is not just Trinity of persons, but the trinitarian dynamic, the trinitarian movement, God reaches through the Son in the Spirit to touch and transform the world and church to lead them in the Spirit through the Son back to God. Within the rhythm, the dynamic of life from the Father to the Father, salvation is effected, the Church lives. The Son and the Spirit function as the two hands of the Father to open the way back to the source and goal of all, the Father. Naked threeness, therefore, is not enough.” Kilian P. McDonnell, “Pneumatology Overview: Trinitarian Guidelines for Speaking about the Holy Spirit,” *CTSA Proceedings* 51 (1996): 189. For a profound exposition of a trinitarian spirituality see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), especially Part Two; idem, “God in Communion with Us,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 83-114.

love by communicating God's self in all of human history in the power of the Spirit. This self-communication reaches unsurpassable expression in Jesus of Nazareth. 2) God the Holy Spirit draws us to Christ and effects our conversion and transformation in that encounter. 3) God the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ so that 4) we might offer praise and glory to God. Note that in this divine movement it is the Spirit that is the agent of our encounter with God from two perspectives. The first two moments describe God's movement toward us in redeeming love. Here it is the Spirit that works as an interior impulse to bring us to the recognition and acceptance of Jesus as God's definitive Word in history and the means to our redemption. In the final two moments it is we who are drawn toward God through Christ in praise and worship, again by the power of the Spirit. The trinity is about the divine movement toward us in love and God's desire to draw us into life-giving relationship.

Conceiving the triune life of God as a divine movement toward us in love points toward the essential insight of trinitarian doctrine, namely that God's very being, what it is for God to be, is loving, life-giving relationality. God does not just *have* a love relationship with us, God *is* loving relationality. There is no self-contained, divine individual residing in heaven far away from us, there is simply a dynamic movement of divine love which *is* God. The Greek Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, describes this trinitarian vision of God as Being-as-Communion.¹¹ This model suggests an alternative way of conceiving the life of grace, a vision of God's way of being present with us which is revealed in the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, the trinity.

¹¹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

II. Retrieving a Trinitarian Spirituality

Our understanding of the doctrine of the trinity does not end with God for the doctrine of the trinity says something important about ourselves as well. If God's very essence is loving relationality, Being-as-Communion, and if we are persons created in the image and likeness of God, then we discover ourselves only in the life of communion. Just as God is no self-contained individual being, so too, each of us, as persons created in the image and likeness of God, are not self-contained individuals. We discover our true identity as persons only when we abandon the secure cocoon of a privatized existence and reach out to attend to the world around us. When we stand in awe of the wonders of God's creation, when we find ourselves grasped by a piece of music or a beautiful painting, we become persons-in-relation--we are living the life of communion. In a particularly profound way we realize the life of communion when we attend to others as persons of infinite worth and dignity. It may be something dramatic and monumentally difficult, as in forgiving our enemies, or it may be something as simple as making sustained eye-contact and sincerely greeting the person taking our order over a MacDonald's counter. These are all acts of communion.

This life of communion finds a wonderful development in the thought of the Hasidic philosopher and theologian Martin Buber.¹² According to Buber, there is no autonomous 'I' or self, but rather only persons in relation. Furthermore, as persons in relation, only two basic kinds of relation are possible: I-It, and I-Thou. The I-It relation is that quality of relation in which we objectify the world around us, placing everything into distinct categories--in short, in the I-It relation, we impose order on our world. Now the I-It relation is not a bad thing. In fact it is

¹² Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

absolutely necessary if we are going to function in this world. As a teacher, on the first day of school, I walk into the classroom and immediately categorize those seated in the room as 'students'. It is this kind of basic categorization that allows us to function in our world and it certainly has its place. However, Buber contends that we humans have a unique capacity to transcend the I-It relation and enter into another kind of relation, what he calls the I-Thou relation. In the I-Thou relation I no longer seek to objectify the world around me, making it accessible for manipulation and control, but rather I forget myself in moving out to the world around me in a stance of attentiveness. Here I simply become present to the world around me; I become vulnerable, receptive, to what the world has to offer. The I-Thou relation is possible in my engagement with creation itself, but it is manifested in a particularly dramatic way in an encounter with another human person. In the inter-personal I-Thou encounter the other person becomes a subject possessing mysterious depths, a person to be encountered not controlled.

Let us return to the person who takes my order at the local MacDonald's. As I walk into the store, either relation is possible. If I do what I normally do, I will walk into the door and as I approach the counter my eyes are already fixed on the menu overhead. I am greeted by the employee but my eyes never leave the menu and I begin to rattle off my order. Four minutes later, I have my food and the store has my money. This was a classic I-It encounter. My encounter with the employee on the other side of the counter was no more than a functional transaction. But let us say that instead, as I walk into the store and am greeted by the employee I stop, look her in the eye and offer a greeting in return. In that momentary exchange I note that she is likely a new employee. She seems nervous. As she takes my order I see her struggling to enter the proper code into the electronic register as an impatient supervisor hovers near by. Moreover, I note her overall haggard demeanor; she is middle aged and unlikely to have the

energy of her school-age co-workers. I wonder if she is a single mother, if this is her second job. Do I detect a fleeting glimpse of despair in her eyes? She hands me my food and I her money and as we wish each other a good day, I allow my eye contact to linger a fraction longer than I normally would and hope, perhaps in vain but perhaps not, that in it she sees understanding and compassion. This is a moment in the life of communion.

This life of communion is more than just an imitation of Christ. When we engage in the life of communion, when we move beyond ourselves to attend to the world around us in an event of communion, when we orient ourselves to the needs and concerns of others, we are being drawn by the Holy Spirit into the divine life of God. This is one of the most radical convictions of authentic trinitarian faith. Recall that within the functional unitarian perspective God as individual competes with the other concerns in our lives for attention and love. In an authentic trinitarian faith, however, God does not compete with my love for my wife and children. God is not an alternative to my attending to the MacDonald's employee. In my entrance into communion with others and the world around me I am simultaneously drawn into communion with God who makes all love, all authentic relationship possible. I believe this is at the heart of Jesus' message regarding the unity of the first two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor and it is developed in the mystical love tradition of the Johannine epistles:

No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit....God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him (I John 4: 12, 13, 16b).

Note that it is the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who is the source of all love. In the practice of trinitarian spirituality it is not necessary to inject God into our everyday lives because in every

event of loving communion the Spirit of God is already present, rising up within us as both the source and goal of all love and the interior principle and agent of all authentic communion.

Recall that when we imagine God as a solitary individual, grace often becomes a kind of supernatural “stuff” and the life of grace becomes a matter of petitioning God as frequently as possible to bring this “spiritual fuel” into our lives. However, a whole new way of conceiving of the life of grace follows from this trinitarian perspective. I am suggesting to you today that another way of talking about grace is to speak of “communion.” In other words, grace is not so much a divine substance as it is a quality of relation in which the presence of God emerges as we give ourselves over to the way of love. If God is love, and grace is the presence of God in our midst, then grace is a word we give to what happens to us whenever we are drawn into communion with God and one another. Quite simply, the life of communion *is* the life of grace.

III. The Liturgy and the Life of Communion

So what does all of this have to do with the liturgy? First we must recall that at its root the liturgy is a *celebration* of the Christian faith. This is quite different from saying that the liturgy is the *entirety* of the Christian faith or even the unique *preserve* of the Christian faith. Rather, it is in the liturgy that we enact in ritual and symbol the life of communion. Put simply, the liturgy celebrates and reveals the true meaning of our daily lives. This is why the liturgy consists of symbols like bread and wine, gestural actions like eating, drinking, embracing one another, standing, sitting, kneeling-- all of which are drawn from ordinary life. So too in the liturgy we come, not so much to escape our daily life as to celebrate it, and further its transformation into a life which is the life of communion.

It is ironic that the so called “high churches” like Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy and the various Anglican communions are referred to in this way because they are thought to have a strong sense of the sacred as it is encountered in ritual and symbol. I say ironic, because I believe that the true nature of the liturgy does not lie in its being a “sacred act of worship” radically distinct from our ordinary human activities.¹³ After all, it is in the liturgy that we recall the entrance of God in history. In the incarnation God abides with us in the most insignificant and mundane, even homely circumstances. In Jesus Christ God embraced all of creation as a suitable abode for the divine. The Incarnation brought an end to any division between the sacred and the secular or profane. Jesus himself said that the only profane “realities” were those which issued from human sin, “nothing that enters one from the outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile (cf. Mark 7:15).” With the coming of Christ the inner transformation of the whole world has begun.

This transformation of all profane existence into the dwelling place of God is taken up in the liturgy. The Christian liturgy celebrates the paschal mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the unique pattern by which all enter into spiritual communion. In the liturgy we unite ourselves with Christ who gives himself “for the life of the world” in such a way that the liturgy becomes itself a ritual pedagogy that schools us in the life of communion. The great Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann writes that the liturgy “is not an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.”¹⁴ Consequently as another Orthodox theologian puts it, we are sent forth to

¹³ Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1973), 24-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

celebrate “the liturgy after the liturgy.”¹⁵ The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner had much the same thing in mind when he wrote of the “liturgy of the world.”¹⁶ This liturgy is nothing less than the transformation of the world as the arena in which we might enter into communion with one another and all creation as a sacrament of God’s presence.

How does the liturgy accomplish this? Again, through the Holy Spirit in the liturgy we are drawn together in eucharistic *koinonia* or fellowship to unite ourselves in Christ’s great paschal offering. In the whole pattern of the liturgy, in its overall shape, we are formed by the paschal pattern of life-death-life which was revealed to us by Christ in his life and teaching as the only way to human fulfillment.¹⁷ As Nathan Mitchell once observed, “At its deepest root, Christian liturgy is *parable*—a provocative assault on our customary way of viewing life, world, and others.”¹⁸ The liturgy, when faithfully enacted, calls for the recovery of a way of living, an attentiveness to the unpredictable eruptions of grace and blessing in the midst of daily life which are too often eclipsed and defaced by sin. When we enter into the liturgy, our engagement with the liturgical symbols and rituals, themselves drawn from daily life, break open our daily lives and reveal both the hidden possibilities for communion which can be found there and the obstacles which impede the life of communion. This is what Mitchell calls “ritual engagement.” The ritual action changes

¹⁵ Cf. Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy* (Geneva: WCC, 1996).

¹⁶ Cf. Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of Worship,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 19 (New York: Crossroads, 1983), 141-9; idem, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976), 161-84. See also Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner’s Theology of Worship* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Irmgard Pahl, “The Paschal Mystery in its Central Meaning for the Shape of Christian Liturgy,” *Studia Liturgica* 26 (1996): 16-38.

¹⁸ Nathan Mitchell, “The Sense of the Sacred,” in *Parish: A Place for Worship*, edited by Mark Searle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 80.

us. It re-configures the way we view our world, giving us “new eyes to see.” Mitchell observes that “[w]e become hospitable, for instance, not by analyzing hospitality but by greeting guests, offering them the kiss of peace, washing their feet, serving them food, adoring Christ’s presence in them.”¹⁹ Eucharistic communion opens up the possibility of living communion in our daily lives.

We are all called to live the life of communion, the life of grace, *every moment of our lives*. Our relationship to God is not called to be episodic and interventionist. That means, that our encounter with God must go beyond those times and opportunities when we explicitly “call God to mind.” We live this life of communion as at the same time, the life of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who draws us into communion with God through Christ as we enter into authentic communion with God’s creatures. This same Spirit draws us together as a eucharistic assembly or communion—a church. In the liturgy that same Spirit, working through the ritual action of the community both reveals the distinctive paschal pattern of the life of communion and draws us into that pattern. As Christ is in our midst at the altar offering himself for the life of the world, we unite ourselves with Christ through our participation in the liturgy and so offer our lives to God in loving service of one another. At the table of the Lord we are drawn by the Spirit into eucharistic *koinonia*, eucharistic communion. At the conclusion of the liturgy we are sent forth to live the life of communion. And so we live--from communion to communion, ever born by the Holy Spirit who is the love of God abiding in us.

¹⁹ Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgical Correctness,” 71.