

“Daddy, why are there poor people?”

Amazing what 5-year-olds can come up with. Our daughter is now in high school, but the question remains: Why are there poor people? I was studying theology at St. John’s (Collegetown) when she asked the question. Maybe that’s why I didn’t give the usual answers: greed, maldistribution, corruption. I said, “There are poor people because we do not take the Mass seriously enough.”

In retrospect, perhaps that sounds a bit simplistic. But it does resonate with the Pope’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, or the Sacrament of Charity. In this February 2007 letter to all the faithful Pope Benedict exhorts the Church to what he calls “eucharistic consistency” (§83) – “encouraging the Christian people to deepen their understanding of the relationship between the *eucharistic mystery*, the *liturgical action*, and the *new spiritual worship* which derives from the Eucharist as the *sacrament of charity*” (§5; italics in original). The Eucharist, “as the source and summit of the Church’s life and mission, must be translated into spirituality, into a life lived ‘according to the Spirit’ ... a changed way of living and thinking...” (§77). The liturgy, as one monk at St. John’s said about the psalms, must soak into our bones.

His Holiness is echoing a theme near and dear to the hearts of the pioneers of the Liturgical Movement in this country, especially Virgil Michel, OSB. Our lives must be lived in a manner consistent with our eucharistic faith and celebrations. It is a great tragedy of the reforms of Vatican II that ministry became fractured, with social justice advocates and liturgists gravitating to their own isolated spheres. When I reviewed the social justice and liturgy documents from Rome and the U.S. Hierarchy from the past century there were few points of contact between the two worlds. Pope Benedict seems to want that changed: “‘worship’ itself,

Eucharistic communion, includes the reality of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented” (§82).

If we truly encounter Christ in the liturgy, if the liturgy is “the trysting place of God” (Fagerberg, 108), how can we not be transformed (§§71-72)? As David Fagerberg reminds us: “The liturgy does not exist to stimulate worshippers, but to make them over into new sons and daughters of God” (Fagerberg, 122). As Larry Madden, SJ, has stated: “The only reason for the transformation of the bread and wine is our transformation; and our transformation is not just for our sake but for the sake of the world” (FormReform Conference, 2006). As Sr. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, CPPS, has noted, the Eucharist does not compel us to do justice as something apart from Mass, rather “we do justice because the Eucharist transforms us into just persons” (Zimmerman, 81).

If liturgy “is a way of living and thinking expressed ritually” (Fagerberg, 22), a way of expressing “in ritual moment that which should be the basic stance of every moment of our lives” (Robert Taft as cited in Fagerberg, 116), what would that way of living and thinking look like? Pope Benedict offers us a glimpse:

- Unjust social structures would be transformed;
- The dignity of all men and women would be restored;
- Peacemaking would be a priority in a world “scarred by violence and war, and today in particular, by terrorism, economic corruption, and sexual exploitation” (§89);
- “Those who squander the earth’s riches, provoking inequalities that cry out to heaven” would be denounced, as would those “inhumane situations in which people starve to death because of injustice and exploitation” (§90);

- At the same time, we would also attend to situations of dire poverty for which we bear a “clear and disquieting responsibility” by working tirelessly to assist the needy in concrete material ways (§90); and
- Creation would be protected.

Louis-Marie Chauvet speaks of a relational dynamic to the liturgy in which the gift is given, received, and a return gift made. The gift of God’s great deeds in the past is recalled (a mystery to be believed), that gift is received in the present encounter through word and sacrament (a mystery to be celebrated), and the return gift is made in living a life consistent with the Reign (a mystery to be lived). Pope Benedict challenges us to embrace that dynamic. Let us pray that we do; that we learn to take the Mass seriously.

Sources

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