

PART ONE

Foundations

ALL BELONGS TO YOU,
AND YOU BELONG TO CHRIST,
AND CHRIST BELONGS TO GOD.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:22–23

Liturgy in the Cosmic Plan of God

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PLAN IN GOD'S MIND, one leading all persons and all creation to fullness. The first book of the Bible, with its two accounts of creation, speaks to us of the original realization of that plan. The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, shows us future realities, the "mystery of the will" of God (Ephesians 1:9ff), which will be fulfilled when God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). The time from creation to parousia—the time in which we live—is the time of history that flows into the full realization of the kingdom of God. From creation to parousia is the time when the kingdom is being built through God's initiative, which seeks out humankind because it is with humanity that God's plan will be accomplished.

The range of God's plan is cosmic, embracing all things that are in heaven and on earth (Ephesians 1:10). And "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" is called to participate in the universal praise of God (Revelation 5:13). In this all-encompassing framework of time and space, what is liturgy's function during the period of history in which we are living?

In order to understand this point, it might be helpful to pause a moment and ponder the work of the creation of the world. Let's imagine that we were witnesses to this: We saw the formless world being born, and then we saw it gradually take shape and become organized. We saw vegetable and animal life begin. With admiration we contemplated the world as it grew continually more beautiful, and, moved by wonder, we asked ourselves, "Why? What is the purpose of all this?"

Despite everything, the world would have given us the impression of being static and incomplete. For example, what is

the use of a fossil forest if no one can profit from it? Who will mine the coal hidden in the depths of the earth if no one is capable of getting it out? Who is able to enjoy the beauty of flowers? How could a fibrous plant such as cotton or flax reach the purpose inherent in its nature? At the beginning of the sixth day of creation, the world is finished and incomplete at one and the same time. A certain perfection has been achieved, but it is still waiting for something. It is waiting for someone.

When creation was completed, "God created human-kind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Having made the world full of wonderful things, God now places it in the hands of human creatures so that they will fill it with their industrious presence, so that they will "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Creation is entrusted to the human creatures so that they will "till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Creation was waiting for human creatures so that its components could achieve the purpose for which they were created, so that everything would become dynamic and have meaning.

Creation was waiting for human creatures, for their capacity to enjoy and work in the world in order to transform it and slowly bring it to completion. Human creatures, by their own work, take possession of the earth's goods, have dominion over them — according to the words of Genesis — while at the same time making it possible for these goods to carry out the tasks assigned to them in God's great plan. This phenomenon continues today before our eyes as we see elements of nature we considered devoid of usefulness which, refined by human effort, render great service to humanity. For example, penicillin is a mold, strictly a waste component of nature. Once it came into contact with the human spirit, we can say that it changed its state and acquired meaning; it achieved its goal.

With the human creature on the scene, we are now able to answer the question we asked ourselves: Why creation? It

was given to the created or subhuman world¹ to reach a level that in some way transcends it; with the appearance of man and woman, it is fulfilled. By means of their diligent hands, the various elements of the world find their fulfillment and assume a place and significance in the universe of creation, which somehow raises the created world above the level it occupied before the appearance of man and woman.

Now our question shifts and is expressed like this: Why man and woman? Would human creatures be restricted to their own level — however high and exalted — and thus be shut off from the possibility of access to a level of greater fulfillment and richer meaning? If so, these creatures that crown creation would be in a position inferior to irrational creatures. They would be denied the possibility that subhuman creatures have. Is there not a passage open to human beings leading to a higher world? Will they not be given wings to fly above their own human world?

THE MEDIATOR OF OUR WORK

Obviously the answer is yes, and we know that the world that opens up to humanity is the world of God. Human beings, however, are not able to penetrate it by their own powers alone. The subhuman world needs someone to bring it to fulfillment. This someone has to be the human creature, who, while physiologically belonging to the lower world and at the same time transcending it as a rational being, thus establishes a kind of bridge between the subhuman world and the world of humanity.

Humanity too needs a mediator in order to enter the world of God. That is, humanity needs a person who belongs both to the world of God and to our own human world and therefore is in a position to join these two shores together. This person is the God-Man, Jesus, whose function is eminently that of mediator. It will be a special kind of work that will effect humanity's attainment of its true purpose and also its becoming

part of God's world. This particular kind of work is called *worship* or *liturgy*, a term that means precisely *work*. It is significant that Hebrew, Greek and Latin, all languages which form the basis of our civilization, use the same word for work and worship. This demonstrates a substantial affinity between these two activities even though they are performed on different planes. Worship is the work that we human creatures do but cannot carry out by ourselves; we can do it only when the "sap" of God runs in our veins (John 15). It is work we perform when new wings are given to us as a gift for the conquest, not only of this world but of the divine world as well. It is work we can perform when we are given new capabilities, new potential, and these capabilities and potential are God's life in us.

Just as in the garden of Eden, where man and woman were called to work, so too throughout human history we have been called to worship God, becoming whole and complete not only on the natural, human plane, but on the supernatural or divine level as well.

In the worship of God, we bring our whole lives with us, even that activity in which we use and enjoy the goods of this world. In worship we also bring elements of the lower scale of nature with us that are transformed by the work of our hands and mind. In worship, the human person brings what Paul synthesizes by calling it "all." Therefore, in worship the vital circuit is completed: "All belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3:22–23). The person who carries within "all" the goods of this world becomes part of Jesus, and Jesus "is God's." Thus, worship which the human creature performs in Christ makes us part of him, consecrates us to God. And in worship, the human creature, through Christ, consecrates the whole universe to God. The action that worship enacts is cosmic. It is not restricted to the human world but reaches all that is created in its depth and breadth, reinstating the harmony that reigned in creation before humanity disrupted it with sin.

Liturgy in the Biblical Tradition: The Memorial

THE PEOPLE OF GOD — THE HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN branches — has its own way of living liturgy because it has its own way of living history. In the biblical tradition, history is the place of the encounter with God. God is present in all history, but throughout the course of this history, certain events have assumed special importance as particular manifestations of God's eternal will to bring the human creature to the fullness of completion. There are events in the biblical tradition that have taken on the nature of a paradigm of God's will for salvation.

Let us consider the main events: creation, the choosing of the Jewish people in the person of Abraham, the liberation of the chosen people in the Exodus, the incarnation of the Son of God in the midst of this people, and the death and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, God's plan reaches a fullness which is not, however, intended to be confined only to his person; rather, it will embrace all humanity and the whole of creation.

The major points in the history of salvation are therefore creation, the calling of the patriarchs, the Exodus, the incarnation and the parousia. All these events took place in the past, with the exception of the parousia; the parousia is still something we are hoping for and awaiting. A historical occurrence is bound by the time and place in which it happened; if I was not there, I am still able to know about it and recall it, but I cannot truly participate in it. Not even the death and resurrection of Jesus can escape this law: Christ's death and resurrection is a historical event that occurred on a certain day, in a certain place, outside the walls of Jerusalem. And I was not there.

Does that mean that I am irremediably cut off, forever left out of the event that is the foundational event of our salvation? Faced with this particular presence of God in the midst of humanity, should I say: It was a marvelous thing, but I was

born too late? Could I, living now, somehow manage to get into that flow of divine life that the death and resurrection of Christ brought into the world? Jewish believers could address a similar question to themselves: How is it possible now, after about two and a half thousand years, to be participants in the liberation that the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob worked for the people of Israel? How can Jews living today be freed in the same way Moses and his contemporaries were?

THE TODAY OF LITURGY

The Jew finds the answer in the Passover ritual (the *haggadah* of Passover, to which we will return later), where it is written: "Every Jew must consider oneself as having come out of Egypt," that is, as actually present at the moment of liberation.

The Christian who in the eucharist proclaims the "mystery of faith" does not only articulate two past events — the death and resurrection — and the coming of Christ in glory, which lies in the future. The Christian's "mystery of faith" is the presence, the *today* of the supreme event of the life of Jesus, the Christ, which offers each one of us who comes into history the possibility of taking part in it.

Thus, rewording in Christian terms the Jewish liturgical passage just cited, we could say: "Let every Christian consider oneself as actually present at the death and resurrection of Christ." In proclaiming the mystery of faith, the Christian points to that which one is doing in this present celebration as well as to that which one expects to occur in the future.

Liturgy as an act of the human creature and also, most importantly, as an act of God, frees the historical occurrence from its limits in time and space and constantly re-presents it throughout all time. In this way, persons of every age, as each one enters into history, can become active participants in this event and can enjoy the richness of divine life that springs forth from it. We can say that liturgy takes the historical event it is celebrating and pulls it out of the time and place where it

happened in order to make it present, offering to every person the possibility of becoming actively involved in it.

This is the way the people of the biblical tradition live history in the liturgy. Liturgy is the *memorial* of the events of salvation. *Memorial* does not mean memory, the mental process by which I go back to some past happening and think about it today in a subjective way. *Memorial* renders the event it celebrates objectively present, thereby making it possible for me to participate in it today. The memorial is an objective reality, a fact that is being actualized objectively, today.

Exodus 12, with its prescriptions for the celebration of the Pasch, recalls the events of the coming out of Egypt and says: "*This* day [of celebration] shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout your generations" (v. 14). As the proclamation is given to new generations, each Jew must say that the celebration takes place "because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). Deuteronomy 5:3 is even more explicit: "Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today."

The Christian eucharistic liturgy also expresses the meaning of the celebration in an explicit way with the words: "Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption. We recall Christ's death . . . his resurrection . . . and, looking forward to his coming in glory, we offer. . . ." Because we are present and actively participating today in the death and resurrection of Christ, we can do with him today what he has done and still does: We are able to *offer*. The memorial is the *actualization* of the historical events that without it would be solely in the past and hence unreachable for us. In the celebration, these events become *actual*. The memorial, therefore, shows itself to be free from the restrictions of time and space. In the liturgical celebration, the human person lives that freedom.

THE TOMORROW OF LITURGY

We ask ourselves now if this freedom pertains only to the past, that is, whether liturgy breaks through the limits of time and space only with respect to the past, or if we can say that this is true in relation to the future as well. What place does eschatology occupy in the liturgical celebration? Is it only something to be longed for with desire and hope, and as such only an inner subjective attitude? Or is the fullness we are waiting to be completed at the end of time in some way being realized already, here and now, in the liturgical celebration? Is liturgy only an actualization of the past, or is it also an anticipation of the future? Is the future an insurmountable barrier for the liturgy?

We will try to find answers by once again considering the paradigmatic points of biblical history we mentioned above and seeing how they are lived in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

We will begin with creation. The memorial of creation has a particular place in the Jewish liturgy for the Sabbath. We read in the prayer for the Sabbath evening: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished . . ." (Genesis 2:1); and at the conclusion of this domestic ritual in the home,³ there is a prayer that blesses the Lord for giving the Sabbath — "the memorial of the work of creation" — as an inheritance to the people of Israel. Abstaining from work — a very important element of the festive day — is connected with the creation, which God gave humanity as a gift, a totally gratuitous gift.⁴ The Sabbath is the *sign* of the fact that the Lord made the heavens and the earth for the human creature, and the one who keeps the Sabbath is giving witness to it. On the day of Sabbath, we are to enjoy creation free from all duty except that of praising God. Consequently, the Sabbath liturgy is full of praise and thanksgiving for what we are now enjoying in creation.

However, the Sabbath liturgy does not stop merely with invoking the past that is being enjoyed in the present. In the thanksgiving for food, especially, one turns toward the future in the many invocations of the coming of the Messiah and of that

day which the Merciful One will give to Israel, that day which will be "all Sabbath and rest in life everlasting."⁵ The Jew, then, who celebrates the Sabbath is linked through the present fruition of goods gratuitously given to the beginning of creation and is living already, though temporarily for now, the eschatological day in which all that makes the Sabbath a special day will have no more limits.

The Sabbath is a reminder of two worlds: this world and the future one — it is an example of both worlds. The Sabbath is actually joy, holiness and rest; joy is part of this world, holiness and rest are part of the future world!⁶

The past, present and future, therefore, all have a basis in the celebration.

Another cardinal point in biblical history is the calling of the patriarchs and the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham. The patriarchs are frequently mentioned in Jewish liturgy because through them, Israel today becomes, in a special way, part of that relationship with God that began with Abraham. During the celebration of circumcision, there is a prayer of blessing to the Lord "who commanded us to bring [the child] into the covenant of Abraham our father." Circumcision is the moment when the Jew is joined to what happened between Abraham and God about 1800 years before Christ, enabling the child who is born today to live that covenant and thus making that covenant forever actual. Here too there is no stopping at just the present and the past. One only needs to look at the importance given in this celebration to the "throne of Elijah," the prophet who is considered the precursor of the Messiah. The hymn that concludes the liturgy (and dates from the eleventh century) prays:

May God send us his faultless Messiah . . .
May God send us Elijah the true priest,
Concealed till his bright throne be ready . . .⁷

Here, too, the liturgy is taken as *memorial*, the actualization of a past event reaching out toward the end of history.

Moving on to the Exodus, another cardinal moment in the history of Israel, we have already quoted a passage from the Passover liturgy that highlights the importance for every Jew to remain present, now, to that faraway moment. As we will see more clearly further on, all the ritual elements (unleavened bread, bitter herbs, lamb) of the Passover celebration tend to re-create the conditions of the Exodus so that the Jew today can participate in it. The eschatological tension is very prominent in this celebration, and it is expressed by the repeated invocation that the Messiah “come quickly to our days” (see *The Jewish Passover Banquet*, page 73).

Thus, liturgy is always articulated in the three dimensions of past, present and future because this is biblical time, time which is not a fragment but a “chain”⁸ held together by the thought of God. “The present event is like a taut rope that cannot be imagined without knots of impact in the past and future”⁹ because time is history, and history is the realization of God’s plan, and liturgy is the particular way in which people of the biblical tradition live history. In every celebration, all of history, in a concentrated form, is lived, although in every celebration a certain event in particular is highlighted.

In some sense, as we mentioned already, this is common both to Jews and to Christians. In fact, if we look at Christian liturgy we will find there the same movement in time. The prayer for the consecration of the water during the rite of baptism goes back to creation, enumerates the principal events of *past* history, and asks the Father to send the Spirit now, today, to vivify the water in the font, so that “all who have died through the baptism in his death will rise again to life with him.” Those present are asked to make an explicit profession of faith in the “resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” The candle given to the one being baptized points out that this person is a “child of light,” and it is given so as to be able to “go out to meet the Lord who comes with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.”

Eucharistic Prayer IV also begins with creation, mentioning several essential elements of past history. As already mentioned, even the death and resurrection we proclaim would be merely a recollection of past deeds if the celebration did not actualize them as we turn toward eschatological waiting: “looking forward to your coming.” The “all glory and honor” that concludes all the eucharistic prayers is the expression of cosmic praise that all creatures give, together with the Mother of God, the apostles and saints, to the Father “through, with and in” Christ for ever and ever. The “Amen” with which we conclude the eucharistic prayer is the inclusion, today, of our own voice in that chorus of praise, a chorus in which we are waiting for the participation of “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” (Revelation 5:13).

From the Jewish viewpoint, the Christian celebrates a new event which, the Christian believes, leads to union with God in the person of Jesus the Christ. Nonetheless, the method by which both the Christian and the Jew live history in the liturgical celebration is the same. Christians and Jews are living in a period of rupture, considering the events that already have been realized in history, even though not yet to their fullest: The redemption of Israel happens in the Exodus; the redemption of Christians is in Jesus Christ. Yet Jews and Christians have a point of meeting in turning together in hope toward that moment when the Christ “will come,” according to the Jews, and “will come again,” according to Christians. The period of rupture begins to mend as Jews and Christians strain toward that moment: “The longed-for Messiah, then, is not merely a point of divergence, but he who somehow is already reuniting one with the other in that shared waiting.”¹⁰

Liturgy in the Christian Tradition: The Priesthood of Christ

HAVING CONSIDERED THE PLACE AND FUNCTION OF liturgy in the cosmos and in history, and having seen how it is lived in the biblical tradition, we ask ourselves: Who performs the liturgy? Who are the actors in the liturgical celebration?

The whole of Christian tradition proclaims the centrality of the person of Christ in the cosmos and in history. The purpose of Christ's coming into the world is the divinization of humanity, a process in which the entire cosmos is involved because it originates from the human body of Christ. The risen body of Christ "is the firstfruits not only of humanity but of all creation."¹¹ Heaven and earth are united in the sacred humanity of Christ, in that person who by right belongs to two worlds: the world of God and the world of humanity. Christ possesses, in the uniqueness of his person, the divine and human nature. This mystery is called the hypostatic union.

At the center of the history of salvation, Jesus appears essentially as unifier and mediator. A communion comes about in Christ that we can call *vertical*, that is, between God and humanity, to which is added a communion we can call *horizontal*, that is, among persons in Christ. Furthermore, in Christ all the power lines of past history converge, and all those of the future emanate from him.

This comprehensive function has been seen to be symbolized in the figure of the cross itself, which rises toward heaven, penetrates the depths of the earth and embraces east and west. Thus in Christ we have those "firstfruits" of the cosmic communion that will be the complete accomplishment of God's plan. Jesus speaks of his mediating and unifying function, which can be defined as his priestly function, even though this aspect of Christ is not abundantly evident in the New Testament except in the Letter to the Hebrews, where it becomes central.

That letter was addressed to a group of Jews who had recognized the Messiah, the Son of God, in Jesus of Nazareth, and who, perhaps after an early period of enthusiasm, were going through a time of doubt and discouragement. The text refers to the Temple liturgy as a present reality (10:1 – 3), and as such would have had to precede the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

As well as establishing the bond between Christ the priest and Moses (3:2) and Aaron (5:4), this letter, given its nature and audience, tends to underline the differences between the Hebraic Levite priesthood and the priesthood of Christ. A unity exists between the Old and New testaments, yet in the priesthood of Christ certain traits are specified that constitute something absolutely new.

While in the Levite priesthood a man becomes a priest by right of birth if he is born into the tribe of Levi, Jesus, who belongs to the tribe of Judah, is a priest by "the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16), that is, by being the Son of the Father who is made human. Christ is a priest by right. He, and only he, is in the ideal position to build the bridge which unites God's world with the world of humanity. In order to establish himself as mediator between humanity and the Father, Jesus, who is God, had to become in every way like us, as if for this purpose it was not enough to be God. Jesus came, it says in the Letter to the Hebrews, not to help angels but rather "the descendants of Abraham" (2:16), and so he had to assume all the poverty of human flesh — except sin — in order to become "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17).

The priesthood of Christ is eternal: While "there were many priests" (the priests of the Old Testament), "they were prevented by death from continuing in office," whereas the risen Jesus lives forever and is always interceding for humanity (7:25). Christ "entered once for all into the sanctuary" and "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood" (9:11ff). The offering he makes to the Father is not something outside

his person; rather, it is his very self. As such, the sacrifice of Christ is unique and does not have to be repeated. The multiplicity of victims offered by the Levite priesthood would seem to betray an anxiety about the insufficiency of what was being offered, “but when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet’” (10:12 – 14).

1. By the term “subhuman world” I mean everything in the created world that belongs to a level inferior to, or lower than, the human level.

2. Eucharistic Prayer IV.

3. *Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977), 221ff.

4. See A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989).

5. *Daily Prayer Book*, 768.

6. A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 19.

7. *Daily Prayer Book*, 750.

8. A. Neher, *L'Existence Juive* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 18.

9. *Ibid.*, 32.

10. *Toward Christian Unity* (Diocese of Rome, 1983), v. 140.

11. C. Vagaggini, OSB, *The Flesh, Instrument of Salvation* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1969), 140.