

***Sacramental Theology: Means of Grace, Way of Life*, by Fr. Kurt Stasiak (2001)**

CHAPTER 1 - Liturgy

Some First Thoughts

KEY QUESTIONS

- What is liturgy?
- Why is it important for the Church to have a liturgy?
- What is the purpose of liturgy?
- Who is involved in the Church's liturgy?

AS WE BEGIN

- Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the Second Vatican Council in January 1959. In his words, the Council was to be a *pastoral* one: a council that was less intent on defining new doctrines or presenting new teachings, and more attentive to explaining how Catholics were to live out their faith in today's world. The first of the Council's four sessions began in October 1962. Vatican Council II officially concluded on December 8, 1965.
- Published on December 4, 1963, *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, was the first document promulgated by the Council. That this document was published first shows how important the Council considered the liturgy to be to the pastoral life of the Church. The opening paragraph reflects this conviction: "The sacred Council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful... Accordingly it sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy" (#1).

An oft-cited passage from SC is that the liturgy "is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed [and] it is also the fount from which all her power flows" (#10). Earlier in this *Constitution*, we find a succinct explanation of why this is so:

For it is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, "the work of our redemption is accomplished," and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. (SC, #2)

Clearly, the liturgy is of the utmost importance! It accomplishes the work of our redemption. It enables us to witness to others who we are because of what Christ has done for us. The liturgy

does something *in* us, *for* us, *to* us, so that we may do something *in*, *for*, and *to* the world. The liturgy is of the utmost importance indeed! But what, exactly, does the word *liturgy* mean?

Liturgy Is the Work of the People

The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek words for “people” and “work.” As is the case with many religious or theological words we use today, *liturgy* originally had a secular or political meaning; it referred to a public work, such as a building project. Liturgy was also a work undertaken by the state to benefit its people, such as the establishment and maintenance of an educational system.

These originally secular meanings of the word *liturgy* shed light on our use of the word today. In fact, understanding our Catholic liturgy as a “public work done to benefit people” is not only appropriate, but it can help us understand what we mean by liturgy—and why we do liturgy—in an entirely new light. Let us consider what we mean when we say liturgy is “the work of the people.”

LITURGY IS WORK

Ordinarily, we don’t think of liturgy as work and, unfortunately, too many times for too many people, liturgy is anything *but* work. Liturgy is *sitting* in church or listening to a homily; liturgy is *receiving* a sacrament or *being* blessed by a priest. But liturgy as *work*?

My old *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines *work* as “physical or mental effort or activity directed toward the production or accomplishment of something.” A second definition states that work is “employment, a job.” These are secular definitions, but they suggest something important about the “holy work,” the “holy employment,” that our liturgy is—and that our liturgy demands of us.

Liturgy is work; it is something we do. Liturgy is an activity, an exercise that requires effort, not mere observation. Why do we celebrate liturgy? What is the work of liturgy? We celebrate liturgy because we believe certain things about God, our Church, and ourselves—and we celebrate liturgy because we want to make those beliefs known. To speak of the Church *celebrating* liturgy is to speak of the Church putting into practice what she professes to believe. The work of liturgy is our participating in the work of God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) says, “Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church” (#1069).

Our liturgy is work because it is our employment, our job—or, to use religious vocabulary, the liturgy is our *vocation*, our *calling*. Secularly, we seek employment in order to live. We hold a job not just to clean the streets or keep budgets in order or supply groceries to those around us. Rather, we work to get our lives in order, to bring in more money than we are obliged to give away, and to put food on our table. We work, in other words, so that we can support ourselves and live the best life we can.

Similarly, the work of liturgy is not just to “get things done”: to gather a congregation, to sing hymns, to collect money, to encourage fellowship. These things, of course, are part of the work of liturgy. But the primary reason we do the work of liturgy is to get our lives in order, to receive all that God has to offer so that we will have more than enough to give to others, and to nourish ourselves through the love and grace of God that the liturgy makes manifest to us. We do the work of liturgy because we are the Church, and the liturgy is the primary means by which our Church supports, defines, and guides herself spiritually and pastorally. Recall the words of SC: “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (#10).

The liturgy is the Church’s employment, her job. The liturgy is the Church’s vocation and calling. We celebrate liturgy because we are Church. *We celebrate liturgy so that we will be Church.*

This does not mean that the only activity the Church is involved in is liturgical celebrations and sacred rituals. Rather, it means that the Church is supported, strengthened, and guided in all her works through her work of liturgy. In fact, it is the liturgy that gives purpose to all the works of the Church, the two most important of which are the praise of God and our growing in holiness. What is often said of the Eucharist can be applied to the liturgy and to all the sacraments: “The Church makes the liturgy and the sacraments, and the liturgy and the sacraments do make the Church.”

Liturgy Is the Work of All the Faithful

The Second Vatican Council clearly distinguished the ministerial, or ordained, priesthood from the priesthood of all the faithful (see *Lumen Gentium* [LG] #10). It insisted, however, that all Catholics, by virtue of their Baptism, shared in some way in the priesthood of Christ. Fundamental to the liturgical renewal initiated by the Council is the notion that the liturgy of the Church is the work of the whole Church. SC describes the liturgy as “an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ” (#7). Liturgy is not the property or the domain of the clergy, and so the Council insists that:

All the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Pet. 2:9,4-5), have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.

(SC, #14)

The liturgy can be seen as the work of the people because each congregation shares in Christ’s own prayer to his Father (see CCC, #1073). Additionally, the liturgy is the work of the people of God as they exercise their share in the priestly office of Christ. The liturgy is the most important work—the most important employment—a Catholic can do. As SC reminds us,

Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.

(SC, #7)

Let us return once more to the notion that liturgy is the work of the people.

LITURGY IS, INDEED, WORK

Liturgy is work; to truly do the work of the liturgy is work! Liturgy is not something that takes place only within the church building. Liturgy is the building of the Church and, as the above citation makes clear, liturgy is the premier action of the Church.

A liturgical celebration may have a clearly defined beginning and end. But, because of its importance in and to the life of the Church, there is much that must come before that celebration, just as there is much that must take place because of it. The CCC reminds us that liturgy “must be preceded by evangelization, faith, and conversion.... [so that it] can then produce its fruits in the lives of the faithful: new life in the Spirit, involvement in the mission of the Church, and service to her unity” (#1072).

Liturgy is work because it demands preparation, commitment, and action. To understand the true nature and purpose of liturgy, we need to realize that our lives must be different outside of church because of what we do when we are in church. The Gospels are clear: religion—growing in holiness—is not simply about one’s relationship with God. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus offers two: “Love God with everything you have and are; love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matthew 22:37-39). Christians do not have the choice of specializing in one love or the other. They must be practitioners of both, for it is concerning both that they will be judged. To be baptized a Christian—that is, to be incorporated into Christ and into his Church—is to set aside forever the notion that the way to salvation is found only in our worship of God. The parable of the last judgment in Matthew’s Gospel (see ch. 25:31-46) paints a haunting picture of the absolute necessity of recognizing God in our neighbor. Those who are condemned are those who would have given food to the hungry or drink to the thirsty *if only* they had known that they were rendering praise to the Lord by tending to those in need.

What is liturgy? Liturgy is the work of the people of God. Liturgy is the people of God putting what they believe into practice. Liturgy is work because it demands “full and active participation”: preparation, commitment, and action.

Liturgy Is the Work of the Trinity

It would be difficult to overemphasize the notion that liturgy is the work of the people. As we have said, the liturgy is an action of the entire people of God as they exercise their share in the

priesthood of Christ. Yet, while we rightly emphasize the human responsibility that liturgy entails, we cannot neglect the other side of the coin. Liturgy is the work of the people, but it is first—and foremost—the work of God.

This dual or reciprocal understanding of liturgy as the work of God and the work of the people—as divine offering and human response—will be a constant element in our discussion of the Church’s liturgy and her sacraments. In fact, one way we can describe liturgy and the sacraments is to say that they are special times when the divine and the human come together, when what is invisible takes on a form that allows it to be seen, experienced, understood, and responded to.

LITURGY IS THE WORK OF GOD THE FATHER

In the opening lines of the Letter to the Ephesians, the writer says that God is truly blessed, for “he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him” (1:4). The original Greek text of this letter is even more significant, for it specifies what God did for us through Christ: we are God’s children because God *adopted* us. As we shall see in our discussion of infant Baptism, the concept of adoption is rich indeed. For now, we say that this act of adoption—an extraordinary act, undertaken solely at God’s initiative—gave us as pure gift a share in what Christ had by right and by nature. We rejoice in all that we have because it was given to us. That is why, even when we come together to celebrate the liturgy and the sacraments, and even though we rightly emphasize that the liturgy is the work of the people, our celebration and prayer is first of all a response of thanksgiving for the work God has done for us. It is no accident that *Eucharist*, the central liturgical action of our Church, comes from the Greek word that means “thanksgiving.” To *be* thankful is the fundamental Christian *attitude*. To give thanks is the fundamental Christian *work*.

The Father is the source of the liturgy, for the First Person of the Trinity is the Father—the provider, the giver—of all the blessings we enjoy:

In the Church’s liturgy the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated. The Father is acknowledged and adored as the source and the end of all the blessings of creation and salvation. In his Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.

(CCC, #1082)

But just as the liturgy is the source and summit of all the Church’s activity, so is the Father not only the source of the liturgy but also its goal. For the liturgy and the sacraments are, first of all, our response to God’s love and work. A passage from the Preface for Weekdays IV in *The Sacramentary* expresses this well:

You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through the liturgy we celebrate the blessings we have received from God. Through the liturgy, we offer God our gratitude, praise, and thanksgiving—and so continue to grow in God’s grace.

Again, this is the dual dimension, the reciprocal action, always present in our liturgical celebrations: our *recognition* of what we have been given, and our response to those gifts.

LITURGY IS THE WORK OF CHRIST THE SON

We saw above that through the liturgy and the sacraments, we participate in—and contribute to—the work of God. Indeed, we may consider Christ the “first sacrament” of God the Father. God so loved the world that he sent his Son: the clearest, most visible and, literally, most tangible sacrament (sign) of his love for the world. Christ is the sacrament that endures, for, in keeping with his promise in Matthew’s Gospel, he does not abandon his disciples when he ascends into heaven, but fills them with the Holy Spirit so that “they [themselves] became sacramental signs of Christ” (CCC, #1087).

This enduring presence of God’s primary sacrament, Jesus Christ, suggests an essential difference between the “public works” of the Catholic Church and those, for example, of the Charitable Works Club across town. Both Church and club may perform many of the same public services, and they often may do so at the same time: leading a clothing drive for the poor during the Christmas season, for example, or providing meals or shelter for the homeless at Thanksgiving. Both services are public and both are needed services. The key difference, however, is—or should be—that the public service of the Church is done explicitly in the name of Jesus Christ. When it comes to the Church’s charitable and apostolic works, we must answer two questions: “How can we meet people’s needs?” and “How can we meet these people so that what we do for them we do clearly in the name of him in whom we are baptized?” To put it another way, Jesus assures us that we will always have the poor with us. When it comes to public works, the Church’s task is to ensure that the poor know that Christ is always with them.

THE HOLY SPIRIT RECALLS AND MAKES PRESENT THE PERSON OF CHRIST

The Father is the source and goal of the Church’s liturgy. Through the liturgy, we encounter God’s great sacrament of love, Jesus Christ. *Anamnesis* and *epiclesis*, two technical words, suggest the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church’s liturgy.

Anamnesis is remembering the past, a calling to mind the blessings God has bestowed upon humankind throughout the history of our salvation. Remembering is an essential part in liturgy and the sacraments. In every Eucharistic Prayer, for example, the preface and the subsequent narrative leading to the words of institution recall what it is God has done for us. One feature of the postconciliar liturgy, in fact, is that in every sacramental celebration there is at least the opportunity to hear the Word of God—to hear, call to mind, and remember God’s work for us in the past.

During the Eucharist, we also pray for God to “send [his] Spirit upon these gifts to make them holy.” This is the *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Spirit to come down and instill power in the gifts of the Eucharist and in the lives of those celebrating. We come together as Church to “make” the Eucharist so that the Eucharist may make a difference in us as Church. Again, true liturgy is work:

The Church therefore asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to make the lives of the faithful a living sacrifice to God by their spiritual transformation into the image of Christ, by concern for the Church's unity, and by taking part in her mission through the witness and service of charity.

(CCC, #1109)

Liturgy Is an Encounter with God and with the Church

The Catholic Church teaches that there are seven sacraments. And yet we might say that, ultimately, there are two great, fundamental sacraments. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) is his primary sacrament, his greatest sign, of that love. And Christ, ever obedient to his Father's will, founded the Church to continue his presence and his saving work in and for the world. From these two great sacraments, Christ and the Church, come our seven sacraments: the most privileged and powerful of the Church's liturgical actions.

As we have seen, to be baptized is to put aside forever the notion that our relationship with God is an exclusive, individual, private affair. The Church does the work of her liturgy and sacraments so that Christ's work and saving presence will continue to be made known to the world:

The mission of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy of the Church is to prepare the assembly to encounter Christ; to recall and manifest Christ to the faith of the assembly; to make the saving work of Christ present and active by his transforming power; and to make the gift of communion bear fruit in the Church.

(CCC, #1112)

The liturgy and the sacraments are the great treasures of the Church. They are, however, treasures that often remain hidden. In the following chapter, we begin to consider how we might uncover, use, and share these riches we call sacraments—encounters with Christ in his Church.

SUMMARY

1. To be baptized is to put aside forever the notion that our relationship with God is strictly an exclusive, private matter. To be baptized is to be in communion, to be in the Church, and to do the work of the Church—liturgy.

2. The liturgy accomplishes “the work of our redemption” (SC, #2). It enables us to witness to others who we are because of what Christ has done for us. The liturgy does something *in us, for us, to us*, so that we may do something *in, for, and to* the world.

3. *Liturgy* comes from two Greek words that mean “the work of the people.” Liturgy is an activity that supports the Church. Liturgy is the work “of the people”: all are called to participate fully. And liturgy is “work”: it demands a response, not just observation.

4. As much as the liturgy and the sacraments are human responses, we must not forget that above all else liturgy is the work of Christ. We have liturgy for the same reason we have a Church: to carry on the work and continue to manifest the grace of Christ’s death and resurrection. Liturgy and the sacraments are the premier place and time when heaven and earth come together. The Church does human things in the name of Jesus Christ.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What, ideally, is the difference between a clothing drive for the poor that is sponsored by your parish and one that is sponsored by a private neighborhood club? How could this difference be expressed in practice? To take another example, how might the parish’s service program for youth look different from the service program sponsored by the local school or a civic organization?

2. How can we more effectively promote the understanding that liturgy is the work of the entire people of God, and not the primary or exclusive domain of the clergy?

3. Another dictionary definition of work is that it is “something that has been done, made, or performed as a result of one’s occupation, effort, or activity.” Considering that the liturgy is “work,” apply this as regards our liturgy.

4. Why should what we do in church make a difference in our lives when we leave church?