

Liturgy and Prayer

The Third Pastoral Letter of

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Introduction

The past few years I have approached liturgy and prayer with some natural “fear and trembling” (*Phil* 2:12). I ask myself whether my prayer is acceptable to God. At times I feel great consolation and peace. Other times I feel far from God and long for a closer union. Sometimes I feel I am really praying and at other times I am just passing time or reciting words. The Maronite Evening Prayer for Tuesday in Lent reminds:

There is a distinction between fast and true fast, prayer and true prayer. There are those whose fast is agreeable to Him and others who are reprovéd. There are false prayers and others which are a medicine of life.

To underscore the importance of prayer in the life of the Christian please refer to my first two Pastoral Letters, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, and *The Mystery of Penance*, both very personal and communal forms

of sacramental prayer. In this third Pastoral Letter, with the hope that my prayer and yours may indeed be a “medicine of life,” I offer a humble reflection on the topic of liturgy and prayer: Why we pray, how we pray, and what is liturgy?

The Prayer of Jesus

Jesus was asked by his disciples, “Teach us to pray” (*Lk* 11:1). He said, “When you pray go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private” (*Mt* 6:6). Jesus meant that going to God alone in prayer is crucial to deepening one’s relationship with Him. When He prayed alone, Jesus “spent the night in communion with God” (*Lk* 6:12). He would be found “praying in a certain place” (*Lk* 11:1). He would go to the Mount of Olives “as was his custom” (*Lk* 22:39). Quiet time alone with God, whether in a quiet church before the Divine Liturgy, in silent adoration before the Blessed Sacrament or in the quiet of our home strengthens our communion with Him.

Jesus also said “when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst” (*Mt* 18:20). When Jesus prayed with others He followed a certain pattern of prayer. Since His youth, He went to the Temple with His parents “as was their custom” (*Lk* 2:41). He observed the Sabbath by going to the Synagogue “as he was in the habit of doing” (*Lk* 4:16). He observed the Passover when He told Peter and John, “Go and prepare our Passover supper for us” (*Lk* 2:8). Throughout Scripture we find that our Lord prayed both alone *and* with others; it is His will that we do the same.

The Prayer of the Early Church

An account of the prayer life of the first Christians can be found in the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ instructions and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” (*Acts* 2:42) In the following chapter of Acts we also read: “The community of believers was one heart and one mind, none of them claimed anything as his own; rather everything was held in common” (*Acts* 4:32). Christian prayer was, from the beginning, a combination of prayer, sacrifice and doing what is right. Prayer is not just a ritual act or something done in memory of Christ, rather prayer and living a good ethical life based on Gospel principles, go hand in hand.

When he met with the U.S. Catholic Bishops on April 16, 2008 in Washington, DC, Pope Benedict said:

Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.

Whether we pray, alone or with others, the demands of a loving God always have claim over us. The fourth century Syriac writer, Aphrahat, in his **Demonstration on Prayer** says:

Purity of heart constitutes prayer more than do all the prayers that are uttered aloud, and silence to a mind that is sincere is better than the loud voice of someone crying out. (IV)

When Prayer Becomes Liturgy

Prayer becomes liturgy when it is the prayer of the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word *leiturgia* (λειτουργία) means “work” of the people, yet in this context work has a special meaning. As found in the Book of Genesis, God worked six days; He saw that what He made was good, and rested on the seventh day (cf. *Gen* 2:2). Thus, properly understood, liturgy is work as God works, neither rushed nor imposed, done consciously, willingly and deliberately, with reverence and respect.

The full meaning of Christian liturgy is not always appreciated in our modern world of fast food and instant self-gratification. Work is not something to finish quickly in order to enjoy leisure. In a biblical sense, liturgy is work *and* leisure together, since work properly understood is cooperation with God to build and create, and leisure is rest and renewal in God.

For the first Christians, and still for us today, the Eucharist is celebrated on the “eighth day,” the day of Resurrection, Sunday, which was also the “first day of the week,” (*Jn* 20:1) recounting that on the first day of creation God made the heavens and earth (*Gen* 1:3) and on the first day of the week Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday, the “day above all other days,” (Maronite Sunday Liturgy) is called the “Day of the Lord” and was thus seen as a continuation of the Lord’s work of creation and redemption.

What is it that we *do* when we celebrate liturgy? Is liturgy drama? Is it reading done in common? Is liturgy remembering, or performing

ritual? Is it speaking, listening, or silence? Are we spectators or participants? Is liturgy personal prayer or communal prayer? Liturgy is drama and common reading, ritual and remembering, listening, speaking, and silence. It is personal and communal, prayer. We are never spectators but participants. Yet, it is none of these, unless it is first and foremost *prayer*, in the power of the Holy Spirit, leading us to do what is holy and good.

We can define prayer as conversation with a loving God. The purpose of prayer is to praise, adore, thank and petition God, and to deepen our union with Christ and the Church. However, due to our imperfect human nature, prayer also means repentance and conversion. Thus the goal of all liturgy, like that of all prayer, is conversion. The Greek word for conversion is *metanoia* (μετάνοια) meaning, turning towards God. This includes contrition, openness to correction, listening to God, and being pruned by Him so that our relationship with Him can grow deeper and more fruitful, as the “branches from the vine” (*Jn 15:2*).

Liturgy presumes a life of personal prayer and study, a life defined by personal choices that not only conform to what is good, but oppose what is evil. When these spiritual habits are rooted in our personal lives, liturgy becomes more efficacious and meaningful.

The *Hoosoyo*, the catechetical prayer common to all Maronite liturgies, has for its expressed purpose, personal *metanoia*. Accompanied by incense and a petition for forgiveness, this prayer has a profound Old Testament background. The Syriac word *Hoosoyo* (ܚܘܫܘܝܘܐ) refers to the “mercy seat” which rested above the Ark of the Covenant in the Jewish Temple. It is there that the high priest would enter once a year to offer incense and implore God’s mercy. We now enter that “place” at every liturgy and instead of a “place” there is a prayer in which we acknowledge our sinfulness, our great need, and God’s great mercy. All prayer leads us to a humble request for forgiveness and the secure expectation of an awesome response of a merciful God.

The tenth century Syriac monk, Rabban Isho, who heard about the

exquisite harmonies, elaborate processions and beautiful ritual of the imperial court liturgy, asked this simple and much revealing question, “but does it bring anyone to repentance?” Liturgy can and should be beautiful, but unless it is also prayer, helping the worshipper to turn from sin towards God and to do what is good, it is not authentic.

Liturgy as Public Worship

Liturgy is public. The Church does not allow us to be rugged individualists. Even the interior work of personal conversion and repentance has a communal component because we are and always will be members of one another. As Saint Paul says, we are “one body in Christ”, (*1 Cor 12*) and as St. John says, “one who has no love for the brother he has seen, cannot love the God he has not seen” (*1 Jn 4:20*).

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council asked that our worship be “active, conscious and fruitful.” The more we learn about and appreciate liturgy, the more active and fruitful will be our prayer. Saint Jerome, the fourth century Scripture scholar, said, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” Since liturgy is based on and springs from the Scriptures, we can also add that ignorance of the Church’s liturgy is also ignorance of Christ for it is our way of meeting Christ and doing what He asked at the Last Supper when He said, “Do this in memory of me” (*Lk 22:19*).

Eucharist

The Church’s liturgical life takes its greatest inspiration from the Eucharist.

When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles.... Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke

it, and gave it to them, saying, “this is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me;” and likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you” (*Lk* 22:14–20).

The Eucharistic Liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows” (Second Vatican Council, **Document on the Liturgy** no.10).

In addition to recounting our Lord’s Last Supper, liturgy also includes the celebration of His “conception, birth, holy baptism, saving passion, life-giving death, burial for three days, glorious resurrection, ascension into heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father, wondrous, awesome and royal return” (Anaphora of St. Mark) and places their commemoration strategically throughout the year for one sole purpose: to praise God with the power of the Holy Spirit and to help the believer become more closely united to Christ.

Liturgy centers on the life of Christ. However, Old Testament events *before* the birth of Christ, such as the Passover, the Dedication of the Temple, the Forty Years in the Desert, and the Entering into the Promised Land, are celebrated as they pertain to the person and life of Christ. Likewise, *after* Christ’s earthly life, liturgy commemorates events in the life of the Church, such as the Martyrdom of Stephen, the Finding of the Cross, the Establishment of the Chair of Saint Peter in Antioch and Rome, and the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul, because the Church is a continuation of Christ’s presence in the world.

Also included in Christian liturgy are the Seven Mysteries (Sacraments): Baptism and Chrismation (Confirmation); Eucharist; Penance; Anointing of the Sick; Marriage; and Holy Orders. Since Christ’s ascension into heaven 40 days after His resurrection from the dead we no

longer encounter Him as did the apostles, in an earthly manner. Rather our meetings are sacramental, though nonetheless real, encounters with the Risen One who said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (*Rev* 3:20).

Liturgy also includes the Divine Office, which clergy, religious and many lay people pray each day, consisting of morning, evening, and noon prayers, as well as the other hours of the day (seven canonical hours in total). There are likewise other liturgical celebrations such as the Christmas Novena, observances of Fridays in Lent, Benedictions with icons on Feast Days of Mary and the Saints, and Funerals. Special note is given to Eucharistic Adoration, which is much more than personal devotion; it is an extension of Eucharistic awe and the worship of Christ outside of the Divine Liturgy. Lastly, we note the liturgical year with its unique rituals for every season. Liturgy defines who we are as faithful followers of Christ and liturgy defines His Church.

The Church

Liturgy is the “soul” of the Church. Each Particular Church has its own specific liturgy. For example, Maronites celebrate their own liturgical tradition, as do the Coptic, Chaldean, Armenian, Latin, and Byzantine Churches. Liturgy is what makes a Church fully “Herself,” and makes the Particular Church a gift to the Universal Church. For this reason, we must respect and protect the integrity of liturgy, safeguard its power to transform and pass this sacred work intact to the next generation, so that through the liturgy Christ may continue to do in others what He has done in us.

Christ Himself gave us the first Eucharistic liturgy at the Last Supper and once again at Emmaus, where “they came to know Him in the

breaking of the bread" (*Lk* 24:35). Liturgy was then expanded and refined by inspired writers, poets, mystics, scholars, bishops, priests and faithful who wrote and scripted this sacred work. Today, the celebrant and faithful are the last in the Church's historical line to have a hand in liturgy, and are thus bound to be faithful to the past and vigilant in the present, so as to pass this gift intact to the next generation.

The Church uses everything at Her disposal to convey the meaning and power of the events of Christ and His Church. Liturgy incorporates chant, procession, ritual, use of material goods, such as water, oil, incense, bread, wine and icons, and takes place in appropriately prepared surroundings. Liturgy draws the worshipper more deeply into union with the risen Christ engaging all five of the senses—touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste.

In liturgy, time stands still, events of the past become present again, and we appropriate their power and meaning for our lives today. In the Maronite Evening Prayer for Fridays in Easter we pray:

O Christ,
may we understand the meaning of your resurrection
so that we may not see in it a purely historical event
or only a foundation of our faith,
but a life which we must realize in ourselves every day,
a hope which we must draw each moment from our faith,
so that our souls may become just by your life,
and our hope may be united to your hope,
and in your kingdom we shall glorify you face to face.
both here and there we shall praise you with a ceaseless
love, forever.

The Paschal Mystery

The power and meaning of Christ's Paschal Mystery, His passion, death, resurrection and ascension, give meaning to our own life, death, suffering and future hope. In the Maronite Evening Prayer for Holy Week we pray:

O Christ, in recalling your passion we are saddened,
 but its memory also fills us with joy.
 For you and for us, it is both sorrowful and joyful;
 it kills and gives life;
 it brings humiliation and glory.
 For us it is necessary and there is nothing equal to it.
 For you, it is both feared and desired.
 Because of your passion may we feel the sadness, which
 brings repentance
 and the joy, which does not forget you.
 Thus, all sadness and joy will be for your glory,
 now and forever.

Through the writings of Saint Paul, we are reminded: "For me life means Christ; hence dying is so much gain" (*Phil* 1:21); "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me" (*Gal* 2:20); "Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread we break, a sharing in the body of Christ?" (*1 Cor* 10:16-17).

In Eucharistic liturgy we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection as a gift. In return, we give ourselves as a gift and we receive Christ, crucified and raised from the dead, as a gift under the veil of bread and wine. The Eucharist celebrates the Paschal Mystery in a most fitting way and is the most meaningful of all liturgical celebrations because it leads us to deeper union with Christ in His Paschal Mystery and to communion

with others in the Church. As Pope Benedict XVI stated so eloquently in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation entitled **The Sacrament of Charity**:

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular the *truth about the love*, which is the very essence of God. It is this evangelical truth, which challenges each of us and our whole being. For this reason, the Church, which finds in the Eucharist the very center of her life, is constantly concerned to proclaim to all, *opportune impo-rtune* (cf. *2 Tim* 4:2), that God is love. Precisely because Christ has become for us the food of truth, the Church turns to every man and woman, inviting them freely to accept God's gift.

So often in our utilitarian society we use people and produce things for personal advantage. Liturgy, on the other hand, as we see from the Acts of the Apostles, calls us to be "of one heart and one mind," and enables us to see beyond a utilitarian mentality to a new way of living where no one is 'used' and no product produced, rather, a person is encountered, and that person is Christ Jesus, and, as Saint Paul says, "Him crucified" (*1 Cor* 2:2).

The Crucified One invites us to follow Him, even at great cost to ourselves; yet we know that in Him our "souls will find rest, for [His] yoke is easy and [His] burden is light" (*Mt* 11:28-30).

Liturgy and Language

From the time of Jesus and the early disciples both Jewish and Christian liturgy incorporated different languages. Jesus, in the synagogue liturgies, was used to a combination of classical Hebrew and Aramaic, the

vernacular. The disciples of Jesus—Peter, the Apostles and Paul—also prayed in the vernacular, whether that was Greek, Latin or Aramaic, yet they also used the Psalms and the other Old Testament passages in classical Hebrew. Likewise, they included Greek expressions such as *Kyrios* (Κύριος, cf. *Phil 2*) that means “Lord”, and *Maranatha* (ܡܪܢܐ ܩܘܡ) an Aramaic expression, which means, “come Lord” (*Rev 22:20*).

Language was a bridge to others. Today, with the experience of the Maronite Church here in the United States, the same is true. English is the vernacular and so our prayer and liturgy should be mostly in English. However, we must also keep in mind that classical Syriac is our ancient heritage, so we must be familiar with some prayers in Syriac for example: the Qadishat, the entrance dialogue at the altar, the Words of Institution and the Invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, because many people have recently come from Lebanon and the Middle East and are used to Arabic, we must also accommodate their desire to pray in their own vernacular. The appropriate balance is a pastoral decision that must be made by the priest after considering the needs of the people. When we balance the languages of the liturgy, however, we must keep in mind not to exclude anyone, for not everyone is bi-lingual in Arabic and English. Therefore, those who know little or no Arabic must feel included, as well as those who know no English. All worshippers must be willing to accommodate a blend of English, Arabic and Syriac.

What Middle Eastern Christian family would invite to their table someone that they would not feed? The same is true of liturgical music and prayer. Language in liturgy must be a bridge, never a barrier.

Mary

The early Church, and the Church of today, has remembered that when entrusting His mother to the care of John at the Cross, Jesus gave her to each of us as well. Can you imagine Mary and the Apostle John at Ephesus, when they gathered for the “breaking of the bread”? Mary, who bore the Son of God, clothed Him with her own flesh and blood, and lovingly raised Him with Joseph, received in Holy Communion the One whose body was once part of hers! How can one fathom this?

Prayer is Marian. She received the Word, made Him part of her life, and gave Him to others as a gift. She inspires us to do the same. Her life is prayer: “May it be done to me according to your word” (*Lk* 1:38) she said, even before our Lord at Gethsemane.

At the Transfer of Gifts we pray: “Mary’s womb received Me like good earth a grain of wheat, behold the priest bears Me aloft to the altar.” We then pray, “With these offerings placed before us let us remember all who pleased the Lord from Adam to the present, especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and all the saints.” Liturgy is an exchange of gifts; we offer ourselves as did Mary, and God offers His divine life to us in exchange.

Divinity and Humanity

The more devoutly we enter into the divine work of liturgy, the more human we become. Saint Peter said that we are “sharers in the divine nature” (*2 Pt* 1:4). In the Maronite Divine Liturgy, the work of God and the response of man are described in this way:

You have united O Lord, Your divinity with our humanity, and our humanity with Your divinity; Your life with our mortality, and our mortality with Your life. You have

assumed what is ours, and have given us what is Yours, for the life and salvation of our souls. To You be glory forever.

Liturgy should re-create in us the desire to be holy as God is holy, to live in daily communion with Him. We are on the receiving end of His generosity; liturgy is participation in His gift and our frail and yet lofty attempt to enter into the Divine life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit and a willing heart are essential.

Liturgy and the Life of the Trinity

Saint John of Damascus, when responding to critics who mistakenly denounced Christians because they worship “three gods,” asked them what good is worshipping the One God who without a Word cannot speak to us, and without a Spirit cannot touch us? Liturgy helps us live in communion with this Triune God who speaks to us through His Word and touches us by His Spirit.

The invocation of the Holy Spirit on the waters of Baptism, recalls the Spirit on the waters of creation and on the Jordan River. The invocation of the Spirit on the consecration of Chrism and its use at Chrismation recalls the Spirit anointing the prophets and enabling them to prophecy and anointing Christ for his mission. The invocation of the Spirit at the Eucharistic celebration recalls the Spirit making Christ present in the womb of Mary. The energizing role of the Holy Spirit is found in all aspects of the Divine Liturgy and the celebration of the Mysteries.

The Spirit “leads us to all truth” (*Jn* 16:13) and the greatest vehicle for truth is liturgy. It is our way to “do this in memory” of Him (*1 Cor* 11:24) and is meant to make us pleasing to Him, “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, a spiritual worship” (*Rom* 12:1).

On April 19, 2008 Pope Benedict told 20,000 youth gathered in New York:

What matters most is that you develop your personal relationship with God. That relationship is expressed in prayer.... Friends, do not be afraid of silence or stillness, listen to God, adore Him in the Eucharist. Let His word shape your journey as an unfolding of holiness.... Through the liturgy, the ‘work of Jesus’ is continually brought into contact with history, with our lives in order to shape them.... Whenever you gather for Mass, when you go to Confession, whenever you celebrate any of the Sacraments, Jesus is at work.

When we enter the sacred work we call liturgy and begin “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,” we enter into God’s time and submit ourselves to the working of God’s Spirit.

Conclusion

How does a Christian pray? Prayer is a personal and communal conversation with God. We pray alone *and* with others, just as Jesus did. Prayer also has an important ethical and communal component if it is to be acceptable to God. Praying alone enables us to more readily and effectively pray with others. In prayer, we address God as “Our Father,” and we become brothers and sisters to one another.

Why do Christians pray? We pray in order to enter into the life of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—with the desire and hope to be one with Christ and to live true communion with Him and others. When we pray with true humility, we find ourselves naturally with some “fear and trembling,” for in prayer we come face to face with

the Living God whose great love for us obliges us to turn from sin to become more like Him.

What is *liturgy*? Liturgy is the prayer of the Church, the very soul of the Church; it is unique to Her, and animates all Her charitable and spiritual activity. Liturgy is public and communal even if done alone, as in the Divine Office. Liturgy is the gift of the Spirit to the Church and connects the praying Church to the Sacred Scriptures, the Apostles and to Jesus Christ Himself. The language of the liturgy serves as a bridge, and together, the people of God respond to Him with love saying:

Holy are You O God,
Holy are You O Strong One,
Holy are You O Immortal One,
O Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on us;
Lord teach us to pray!

✙ Gregory J. Mansour
Feast of the Holy Cross 2008