

Liturgy: An Introduction

The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. ~ John 4:23-24

THE TERM “liturgy” is a Greek word that originally meant any work or service done in the name of the people. In the Christian Tradition liturgy refers to the Church’s participation in Christ’s work of salvation through her worship of God, proclamation of the Gospel, and active life of charity. This broad understanding of liturgy is reflected in St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans: *“I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* (Rom 12:1).

In a narrower sense, liturgy refers to all the rites and ceremonies that constitute the Church’s corporate worship: the Mass, celebration of the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (known by most as simply RCIA), and blessings. Because the Eucharist is the preeminent act of worship toward which all the other works of the Church are oriented, often when people speak of “the liturgy” they are speaking about the Mass.

Liturgy is a special kind of work or service that is rendered to God. The chief liturgist at every celebration liturgy is Christ himself, who as eternal high priest, pleads continuously on our behalf in the presence of the Father. The Church, brought together in faith by the Holy Spirit under the headship of Christ to give worship to the Father, offers her thanks,



Smoke of incense rising from a thurible (or censer) symbolizes the prayers of the faithful rising to God

praise, and love to God in union with Christ. God in turn blesses, sanctifies, and loves his people through his beloved Son by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Seen from above, liturgy is the work of the Blessed Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the source of all blessing who through Christ and by the activity of the Holy Spirit sanctifies the Church. Seen from below, liturgy is the work of the Church which, as the Body of Christ united to her Head and, by the activity of the Holy Spirit, renders true worship back to the Father.

Jesus is always present in the liturgy of the Church as its principal actor. He is present in his Word, in his minister the priest, in the people gathered in his name, and in a unique way in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is his very body and blood, soul and divinity. In the liturgy Christ both signifies and makes present his own Paschal mystery, that is, the saving events of his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. Christian liturgy not only recalls these events but actually makes them present so that we may share in them by faith. Christ who, *“by a single offering ... perfected for all time those who are sanctified”* (Heb 10:14), makes the effects of his offering available to those called into the communion of the Church.

There is another reality happening in Heaven to which the liturgy of the Church is united. Jesus

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standing before the Father in Heaven offers himself eternally. In the vision of this Heavenly liturgy, Jesus is not alone but is joined by all the angels and saints of Heaven as they sing the “thrice holy” hymn of praise to God the Father and cry out: “*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen*” (Rv 7:12). The sacramental liturgy and, more specifically, the Mass are foretastes of this Heavenly liturgy and a real participation in it. When we adore, sing praise, and give thanks in the sacramental celebration of the Paschal mystery, we are united with the great multitude of Heaven worshipping the Lamb of God (see Rv 7:9-12).

While the celebration of the Eucharist is at the summit of the Church’s liturgy, the celebration of the other six sacraments also constitutes the core of the Church’s liturgical life. Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony, as well as the Eucharist, are all celebrations of the Paschal mystery made effective by the power of the Holy Spirit who is always present in the Church. Sacraments are powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. The sacraments effect what they signify, that is, they do what they symbolize. They are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us” (CCC 1131).

The celebration of liturgy not only sanctifies the People of God but also sanctifies time, both the calendar year and the time of each individual day. The liturgical calendar transforms the weeks and days of the year into a perpetual celebration of the Paschal mystery. The liturgical year follows the life of Christ and makes present the saving mysteries of his life. Advent lovingly recalls Christ’s coming in the flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation and anticipates his glorious return at the end of time. The Christmas season recalls the Lord’s birth of the Virgin Mary and his early manifestations as the Son of God made man. Easter



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Lilies are used by the Church as a symbol of the Resurrection

commemorates the Lord’s suffering, death, and Resurrection, the central mysteries that brought about our salvation. The Easter season that stretches for fifty days after Easter recalls the Lord’s appearance to his disciples after the Resurrection until the time of his Ascension and the glorious descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost. Lent serves as a time of preparation for the celebration of

Easter that disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the Paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own Baptism and through penitential practices.

Every hour of the day is also transformed by the liturgy of the Church in its daily office of prayer called the Liturgy of the Hours. This public prayer of the Church can be said individually or in a group and is organized around the key moments of the day (morning, evening, and night) so that the whole day is sanctified, making daily life a living prayer. The Divine Office, as it is also called, is structured by the Word of God, especially by the Psalms, which are a tremendous help when we struggle to express our adoration, praise, and thanksgiving to God. This prayer is pleasing to God and another treasure of the Church willed by Christ.

The Church’s celebration of the Paschal mystery is intimately united with her profession of faith. As the Church prays, so she believes. Her unity of faith is sustained by the unity of her celebration and worship. This unity is not a strict uniformity but instead incorporates the rich cultural diversity of peoples throughout the world. The Church’s ability to integrate these various cultural elements into her liturgical life while purifying them is a sign of her catholicity and greatness. It is also a source of enrichment and renewal for the life of the Church and bears witness that human culture can be redeemed as it is brought into contact with the mystery of Christ and used as a means to express it in liturgy.

(CCC 1066-1109, 1113-1130, 1135-1186, 1200-1206, 2698)