

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## Liturgy in Search of Religion

David N. Power, O.M.I.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 28, no. 3 (1980) 344–353

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Notes and Comments

### Liturgy in Search of Religion

DAVID N. POWER, O.M.I.

The liturgical movement reached its peak at the Second Vatican Council, in so far as liturgical principles of active participation and adaptation are concerned. The Constitution on the Liturgy centered the Church's life around the traditional image of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It showed the relationship between worship and the realities of the life of faith, between cult and community in love. It presented the ideal of a liturgy which could no longer be called the work of the priest, but rather the community's celebration. Accordingly, it fostered the conscious and active participation of all the faithful, as well as a diversification of ministries in the assembly. This dream has continued to be pursued in the revision of the liturgical books, which do indeed place an immense treasure in the hands of Christian communities.

#### AFTER VATICAN II

The book, however, is not the sacrament. From the Council onwards, those who have endeavoured to follow out its guidelines have also experienced how difficult it is in practice to realize that perfect worship, in which all present act out of a keen knowledge of the Christian faith, a keen sense of Christian community, and a keen appreciation of the liturgical books' measured forms. Over the past fifteen years, several questions have arisen from the attempts to realize in practice what Vatican II set down in theory. These questions do not merely pose problems for pastors and educators. They have also been taken up by theologians of the liturgy, who realize that they have to be taken into account at the

level of understanding, if the discipline of the liturgy is to serve the community of faith.

One of the first things which struck promoters of a more perfect and pure liturgy was that what was considered an ideal did not always hit a responsive chord among the people. Certainly, there was a good amount of enthusiasm about a vernacular liturgy and about hymns tuned to contemporary melodies (however artistically appalling!) and it took a surprisingly short time to increase the numbers receiving communion at Sunday Mass. But people cling a long time to such things as the bells in the middle of the eucharistic prayer, and it does not take too keen an eye to see how restless a congregation becomes during some of the scriptural readings, which might as well be read in Hebrew or Greek for all the impact they have on a congregation.

Another thing which struck home quite early in the reform was the truism that gathering a number of people into one building for an act of worship does not turn them into a community. Looking beyond the immediate and practical problem of how to get people to participate in a Sunday Mass or an infant baptism, it became obvious in many instances that the reality whereby the liturgy is defined did not exist. In the absence of both the human and the faith dimension of community, liturgy descends to ritual of rather doubtful meaning.

If it were only a question of developing a greater sense of community, the matter would be relatively simple. Since theologians often live in cities, it was perhaps too easy for them to draw a connection between liturgical problems and the anonymous life of the modern metropolis. A look, however, at the barrios around cities or at rural populations gives a different perspective. In such areas, people still possess and express fellow-feeling, on the basis of long-standing customs and values, as well as of human sympathy. It is not, however, in the forms suggested by the liturgical books that their customs and values are expressed, or their fellow-feeling encouraged. The fiesta of the Santo Niño or of San Roque draws people into a sense of oneness far more effectively than a well-ordered sacrament.

The gap between liturgy and those devotions which draw and touch people is perhaps most obvious at a time such as Holy Week. On the one hand, the liturgical ceremonies give an improved representation of the Paschal Mystery. On the other, the crowds are

more numerous and involved in such manifestations as the procession of the dead Christ, or the 'encuentro' between the Risen Jesus and his Mother, which for the people is the real climax of this week.

Not that it is necessary to wait until Holy Week to observe this gap. On any Sunday morning in the Quiapo church in Manila, it is possible to take note of the abyss that separates the priest in the sanctuary celebrating Mass from the line of people doing reverence to the Black Nazarene at the rear of the church. They feel closer to the Lord in kissing his suffering feet than they do at the moment of the eucharistic memorial.

Another observation made in practice was that the times at which ideally Christians are drawn together into one as God's people are paradoxically the times at which a local population splits up into the smaller units of family and kin. Having a child baptized is a worry to parents and grandparents, and the occasion to provide it with sponsors or patrons more socially powerful than themselves. Who dares to make of a wedding in the family an occasion for a parish celebration? In a word, the great events of the Church's worship, the sacraments, are either private matters or the concern of a closely knit kinship. The desire and request for sacrament expressed by many people simply does not correspond to what an official presentation would make of it.

#### EVANGELIZATION AND SACRAMENT: A PROGRAM

In face of these observations, the reaction was to stress the need to ground piety more firmly in the knowledge of the gospels and of Christian teaching. The negative side of popular devotion was stressed, a side described in the papal exhortation on evangelization as follows:

Popular religiosity is often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and even superstitions. It frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance by faith. It can even lead to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 48).

Hence, pastoral theologians and episcopal conferences throughout the world began to suggest programs of evangelization among baptized Christians, which would lead to better sacramental prac-

tice. The main ingredients in such programs were a better education in the knowledge of the scriptures, teaching people how to pray such forms as the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, the development of a true sense of Christian service and Christian witness, better instruction in the meaning of liturgical symbols and ceremonies. Sacramental seminars, however, based on these elements often turned out to be abortive. And, of course, there was always the problem of what to do when people did not wish, or were not able, to follow the prescribed courses prior to reception of the sacraments, yet persevered in their request to be admitted to them, and continued to turn up faithfully for fiestas and novenas.

An element was apparently missing in the efforts to renew liturgical life. Pastors and educators were addressing people without knowing them properly, and theologians were writing only about ideal forms. People were being corrected on their forms of piety, but nobody had bothered very much to inquire into the significance of these forms. What was lacking was a real grasp of the nature, roots and meaning of popular religion.

#### PEOPLE'S RELIGION

Popular religion is an expression of piety which needs understanding. It has strong foundations in history and in the conditions of life under which many people live. Perhaps it needs to be educated, its potential drawn forth, but it cannot be banished. On the other hand, liturgy itself cannot be seen as the celebration of ideal forms of worship. Its own renewal has only to gain from being more closely in tune with some of the practices of popular piety.

From a purely historical viewpoint, studies now claim that for long centuries Christianity has known two types of religious practice, that of the "*savants*" and that of the common people. Sometimes, a similar distinction is made between clerical and lay religious attitudes. A perfect and complete typology is hard to give, and the relation between knowledge, social class and piety is quite mixed. For present purposes, one can simply say that one's religious status in the church affects one's piety, but so does one's place in the social spectrum. Liturgical forms, as they are found in the books, have been largely determined by a more educated clergy. Other kinds of religious devotion come from the people,

aided by clergy closely associated with their religious needs. Sometimes members of the higher clergy have accommodated themselves to the people, perhaps in the hope of influencing them, but the split is always there.

From early Christian centuries in Europe, the religious needs of the common people have been influenced by pre-Christian cult and by economic and social conditions. The division of the Church into rural parishes, with their own set of ministers, responded to the agricultural economy of the time. Many a devotion to a saint took the place of a pagan divinity or spirit's cult. The four seasons of the year and the four seasons or stages of a person's life acquired in Christianity a vast number of rituals which had their precedents in pre-Christian times.

The same sort of thing happened when the Church went along with the armies and administrators to the colonies. Economic affairs had a big influence on ecclesiastical divisions, and pre-Christian cults were accommodated in one way or another in the new religion. In the Philippines, for example, some continuity exists between devotion to Batalak and devotion to the Santo Niño. The creator who needs to be pleased and respected takes the form of the child, who has the advantage that he brings the godhead closer to people, but can also be cajoled. The respect for the dead and for elders, the use of herbs for healing, the needs of social patronage, a strong sense of community and kin, vivid still among the religious practices of the Filipino peoples, all have roots in the pre-Christian past.

Beyond the mere facts, one has to see how much such religious developments or attitudes bespeak the historical realities of the people, in a rather two-edged fashion. On the one hand, religious devotions can help people to face the daily grind, with a certain resignation or with some small hope that immediate needs will be met. On the other hand, the same devotions can have an undertow of protest against the facts of history, especially against conquest. In Latin America, it cannot be denied that the Virgin of Guadalupe and St. Thomas are expected to intervene in many a family quarrel, in many a day of hunger, in many a peril or sickness. On the other hand, they are a significant replacement of Spanish Madonnas, and of a Spanish St. James, by local personages. The people, though conquered, still lay claim to their own history, cultural and religious. In Brazil, St. Benedict the Moor teaches people

to imbibe the spirit of resignation and strength in hardship, thought appropriate to the spirits of African slaves in the cult of spiritism, but he also keeps them conscious of their own racial and historical distinctiveness, so that the African heritage is not totally swallowed up by the claims of supra-racialism. The people at the back of the church in Quiapo are no doubt hoping for favors, but they are also showing that they feel closer in their state of daily want and lack of power to a crucified and even dead Christ, than to a Christ whose power is assimilated to the country's controlling forces.

The resonance which sections of the Old Testament have for many Asian, African and Latin American Christians is no cause for wonder. Fiercely proud of their origins and culture, the Israelites nonetheless found themselves often relegated to the position of being a "non-people." They looked to Yahweh for the promise that they who were "not a people" would be a people. The history was there, but it was in need of redemption. The formal and official cult of the temple waned in such times. It was not only materially inaccessible. It was also religiously out of tune. The priests may have well felt vexed by prophetic denunciations of injustice. Good men, they tried. But their sin was their insensitivity to the injustice of a cult which remained ignorant of the poor and the needy, of social, political and economic oppressions.

Amongst many Christian people today, when the liturgy expresses God's power, the folk are trying to express the absence of power. In such circumstances, is liturgy of redemption a challenge to an ethics of redemption? Or is it a mask?

For the twain to meet, for the clerical religion and people's religion to encounter one another rather than juxtapose, much attention has to be given to the meaning which people attached to their preferred symbols. They are not simply to be weaned from them, or forbidden them. What they express is serious, for it shows both the power of their belief and the lack of power which encumbers their existence. They are saying something which demands hearing and response.

Liturgical adaptation may not always be perceptive enough about this. A striking symbol may be taken over into the liturgy, on too ready an assumption that it fits. It may, for example, be a fine thing to integrate the 'encuentro' between Son and Mother into the paschal liturgy, but this can be done in many ways. It

might simply be used, because it is a ceremony which draws people. Or the effort might be made to build it into the paschal context, educating the people to its meaning. All of this, however, could be done while missing the point that in their fervor for the 'encuentro' of their beloved statues, the people know that they are dealing with their own Christ and their own Madonna. Perhaps, indeed, this might mean a more manageable Christ and Virgin, but it could also mean a Christ and Virgin whom they can trust, whatever their misgivings about the foreigner's gods who surround the fire and the altar and the strange sounds of the Church liturgy. The Filipinos always assert themselves, however deferential they may be about it.

#### AN EXAMPLE: INFANT BAPTISM

During my short ten weeks in the Philippines, many things were drawn to my attention which seem to me to be of the utmost importance. I am sure they need to be verified further, but they are worth considering even in the form in which I can relate them. The example I will take is that of infant or child baptism.

What happens, or what is expressed, when a family brings a child to be baptized? What do the rites say to the family, rather than to the clergy? Is the clergy's position one of mere resignation, in face of the inevitable? Is it one of severity, a demand for seminars, a push for a purer faith? Is it their own piety that the clergy satisfy, a pious hope that whatever the circumstances they save the child from original sin? Or, over the years, do they eventually succeed in hearing the voice of the people, and with them turning to God and to his word for a light in the darkness?

For a people who suffer much poverty, sickness and child mortality, God is a whimsical person. People may feel him close, love him truly, but yet know the need to handle him gingerly. The Santo Niño is the creator God dressed up and cajoled. There is nothing shocking about that. The same sort of attitude, it seems, attaches often to infant baptism. If the child is not cleansed, as the ritual demands, God in his whimsy may allow it to be stricken by some disease, or even let it die. If he is pleased, then he protects the child. A whole life is made whole by a cleansing act. In its own way, this is a more powerful notion than the pure doctrine of original sin, and the desire is addressed to the claims of the Gospel

to bring total redemption. Of course, it is not a desire that the pastors of the Church can answer, if they stick too closely to the supposed purities of rite and doctrine. It looks for a more forceful, an ethical response, a message of liberation, and thus an involvement on the part of the preacher and minister.

The child who is brought for baptism is often bedecked with charms of various sorts, as a protection against spirits or in deference to ancestors. This goes back to the animism of pre-Christian days. The link with animism is frowned upon so much that sometimes the people themselves will feel offended if the term is used. There is no need for that, because while the religions of animism may be things of the past, the strong sense of affinity with the world of spirits and with the dead is a positive and important cultural and spiritual attitude.

These attitudes which I have here mentioned, are not so very far removed from the origins of the traditional meanings of Christian baptismal symbolism. It is because of its cleansing power and its reality as a life-force that water is used in baptism. It is within the nature of symbols that they dig deep into the human subconscious, and help formulate needs, concerns, anxieties, hopes. When the people find that the cleansing offer of baptism, the patronage guaranteed by sponsors, or the protection afforded by charms and medals, speak to their concerns about staying alive and well, protected against the ills of daily life and uncertain future, it is to be recognized that this address to the depth and to the actuality of human affliction is intended by the sacrament, and is within the expected power of the sacramental symbols.

#### CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

If the people get no more out of this and other rituals than a quieting of immediate anxieties, and if they show what is deemed excessive dependence on the sheer performance of ritual, this may be because the Church which offers baptism fails to address itself to the harm and sorrow which invade their lives and jeopardize their existence. The one arm of ritual reaches into the depths of human anxiety and shared sinfulness, the other is meant to point to hope, a hope built out of a communion in the good. This hope, however, has to materialize in a community. The words of the rite

which express hope, liberation, redemption, life, require verification in the body whose words they become through its enactment.

It is all too true that the frequent alliance of the power of the Church with the powerful of society means that "Christendom" offers no liberation or redemption to the masses of people. Their present existence is not affected. It is no wonder then that they take what little consolation they can out of a Christ or a Virgin or a saint or an ancestor who looks over a child's cradle, be it no more than a manger.

In recent years, in the Philippines as elsewhere, many of the people have begun to form church communities more in touch with the realities of their own lives. These are communities formed by the people themselves, guided by their own members, dealing with matters affecting their common existence. This is where the real evangelization, felt necessary but not well deciphered by previous programs, is taking place. It is not merely a teaching, but is a formation of community in which the people themselves are the foundation and the fabric. The resort to Christ or to the saints and spirits for immediate care will be transformed into the hope of liberation only where this hope is lived out in common action by the people themselves. When the word of the Gospel is found to respond with promise to the people's fears and oppression, and where they unite in hearing this promise, then ritual can reach out its second arm toward a greater hope and consolidate people in their faith in Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Appealing mostly to one example, I have said that true liturgical renewal cannot take place in a church where the Gospel is not addressed to the historical reality and present powerlessness of a people. The people's part of the dialogue has already been spoken. In their religious devotions and in the way in which they approach the sacraments, they speak. They may not always understand themselves, but they cannot be accused of keeping silent.

The possibilities for a Christian church which is one with the historical peoples of the Philippines already has a good foundation. The house can be erected on a strong sense of community among the living, especially where this matures into basic Christian

communities. It can be erected on a rich familiarity with God, with the dead, with the inhabitants of the realm of the spirit. It can be erected on the ease with which the people identify with the suffering, even dead, Christ, for it is truly in the bearing of humanity's affliction and in a loud cry with tears that he showed that he is not ashamed to call the poor and suffering his family. It can be erected on the pride which the Filipino people take in their cultural traditions and in their own past, as well as on their respect for the variety of traditions which make up the islands. But it has to continue to build the added foundation of commitment to a process of liberation, to the strength of the people to bring about this liberation. Without this foundation, the Church's liturgy has no real promise, it cannot be renewed, it will not respond to the dialogue of the people's religion.