

Liturgy : The Way to Unity ?

IN asking the question whether a deeper understanding of the Church's worship might lead to that reunion of the Church for which all pray, I am not unaware of the difficulties involved in using two such controversial and misunderstood terms as ' *liturgy* ' and ' *unity* '. ' *Unity* ' has become a very provocative word to those critical of some of the assumptions and activities within the modern ecumenical movement ; and ' *unity* ', Biblically interpreted, without uniformity, is very perplexing to describe. Again, no word is more immediately misunderstood in the Church of Scotland than is ' *liturgy* ', a term likely to arouse deep racial memories and prejudices which echo a woman's voice more than three centuries back affirming : " You'll no say mass in my lug ! "

It is unfortunate that to speak of ' *liturgy* ' immediately suggests to some Presbyterian minds nothing more than prayer-books, vestments, candles, ritual and general formalism—an utterly dreary picture of an entirely undesirable church life ! Yet we stand within the Reformed tradition of worship, which is, of course, one particular and authentic *liturgical* tradition, if we are using words correctly. This is the sense in which ' *liturgy* ', the cultic element at the heart of the Church's life, is to be examined and assessed, to discover a deeper unity within the real spiritual life of the Body of Christ.

The Greek word, *leitourgia*, ' *liturgy* ', meaning originally ' public service ' in the widest sense, was in the usage of the Septuagint more specifically attached to the services of the Temple ; and this led on to the particular Christian understanding of ' *liturgy* ', as ' the divine service ', that is the divine service of Almighty God through His corporate worship. Sometimes Christian usage has limited the term ' *liturgy* ' to the Church's eucharistic worship : this, however, is not intended exclusively, I think, but rather derives from the Lord's Supper being recognized as the Church's supreme act of worship, the divine service *par excellence* ; and also from all corporate worship of Almighty God being basically eucharistic and ancillary to Holy Communion. The Reformed Churches and the Presbyterian tradition have always given the place of priority in the Church to the public wor-

ship of Almighty God, with its sovereign elements of Word and Sacrament.

In thus affirming the primacy for the Church of 'liturgy', or the corporate worship of the People of God, we are really saying that the public worship of Almighty God, especially when His People are met at the Lords's Table, is that point in space and time where the Church as the Body of Christ is realized. The real significance of the liturgy is that the liturgical and eucharistic assembly of the baptized community is the manifestation within history of the mystery of the Church. Professor von Allmen quotes with approval the words of Philip Brunner: "Church worship, as an assembly in the name of Jesus, of the Christian community, is what might be described as the true manifestation of the Church on earth. The occurrence of such a meeting is the epiphany of the Church."

"Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever": liturgy, the divine service of Almighty God in the response of gratitude or eucharist, is the vital expression of our calling as the redeemed of God; as the Church, the *ecclesia*, the called of God, the fellowship called forth by grace to glorify Him and to find joy in Him. According to such an understanding of the Church of God, the divine service of God carries its own intrinsic significance, value and worth, and is never to be measured by reference to its effects, or influence or outcome. Liturgy is marked by its intrinsic and unique worthwhileness or worth, for it is response to the "worth-ship" of God Himself, God as entire, whole and complete Beauty, Truth and Goodness. Worship or liturgy, the divine service of Almighty God, is of unique and eternal significance, its meaning and value inherent in itself. It is, if you like, an end in itself, for it has its end in God, God Who is Love and Who is to be gratefully adored, so to say, for His own sake. *Deo soli gloria*: that is the ultimate significance of the liturgy.

Whenever in Christian history, this truth of the centrality of the divine service of God, of the pre-eminence of the Eucharist, and of the intrinsic significance of the liturgy, has been discerned, there has been renewal of the Church. This insight strengthens the Church as authentically the Church, 'that wonderful and sacred mystery', or 'revealed secret' of the Gospel. Anything obscuring this centrality of the liturgy constitutes an urgent call for renewal of the Church through the Holy Spirit and in obedience to the Word of God.

This is an aspect of the sixteenth century Reformation too little noticed in our age, perplexed as we sometimes now are by the steps taken and adjustments made by the Protestant Reformers in doctrine and church order, and in the forms of worship as distinct from its content and significance. In fact, the emphasis of the Reformed Church in Scotland on the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the two sacraments of the Gospel, and the cultivation of the Christian life through a godly discipline, was a reforming of a central emphasis on Jesus Christ's offer of Himself in redeeming grace, the offer given in the corporate worship of the People of God ; in the liturgy, although the word was suspect because of some of its associations ; in the divine service of Almighty God.

The liturgy then is response, Christian worship a response to Jesus Christ Who offers Himself in grace—the liturgy, a grateful, thankful or eucharistic response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is Head within His Body, the Church, and accordingly, He is the ultimate celebrant of all Christian worship, very especially, the Lord's Supper. The members of the Body, under the authority of the Head, make their liturgical response to Jesus Christ Who has offered Himself once and for all, a ransom for many. The only possible response to the mighty acts of God, supremely the act of redemption in Christ, is the response of wondering gratitude, which is the keynote of the Church's worship. All being offered in gratitude, the faithful must never intrude upon the sovereignty and sufficiency of Christ Who gives. Jesus Christ is Lord, in the liturgy as in the entire universe. The Lordship of Christ means that the basic prayer in the Church's eucharistic worship remains the prayer of the Primitive Church ; *maranatha*, 'Come, Lord Jesus'. This *maranatha* is the real genesis of the Epiclesis, the Invocation of the Holy Spirit, quite fundamental to the liturgy, and, through all other changes and developments, part of the Scottish Communion Service. If at the time of the Westminster Assembly in the mid-seventeenth century, Presbyterian 'liturgy' was at its least 'liturgical' in the popular sense of that word, it is noteworthy that the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* prescribed in the celebration of Communion, the prayer to God "to vouchsafe his gracious presence, and the effectual working of his spirit in us ; and so to sanctify these elements both of bread and wine, and to bless his own ordinance, that we may receive by faith the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified

for us, and so to feed upon him, that he may be one with us, and we one with him.” The Lordship of Christ in and over liturgy, as its ultimate sole Celebrant, is affirmed in the Epiclesis, in the *maranatha*; “Come, Lord Jesus”; “*Veni, Creator Spiritus*”. Grace is always in one direction, heaven to earth, God to man; and this Sovereignty of the God of all Grace must be manifest in the Church’s entire liturgy.

It is from this emphasis on the one Gospel of the Sovereign Grace and Love of God that the Reformed tradition of relating so closely Word and Sacrament, Sermon and Eucharist, is derived. The Gospel proclaimed in the preaching of the Word is sealed through participation in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the Church, Who is ever anew creating the Church through the initiative of grace, proclaimed, offered and sealed in Baptism, offers Himself as Saviour through the Church’s preaching office, Christian preaching always to be interpreted, so to say, sacramentally; and this offer of salvation in the *kerugma* of the Church, Christ’s offer of Himself as Saviour, is sealed in the Bread and Wine of His own Broken Body and Shed Blood. The One Saviour acts and offers Himself to save and redeem, in Word and Sacrament. The liturgy mediates the one Gospel, and therein the One Lord and Saviour is sovereign in Grace.

This thought of one Gospel for all men (and the stress is on that ‘all’)—for all men, requires for the truest celebration of the eucharist, the participation of the whole family—the positive witness which I believe to be embodied in our infrequent but largely attended Church of Scotland Communion services. The half-yearly and quarterly Communion tradition was built up on the understanding of there being an adequate preparation of the whole community (the Communion season was the parish’s fast season), leading to the wholeness of the Christian congregation actually communicating in bread and wine. It is true that those Scottish Presbyterian infrequent celebrations were contrary to John Calvin’s desire for weekly communions and John Knox’s hope for monthly celebrations; but many of us hold, that in now very properly moving towards more frequent celebrations, we must be at pains to preserve our witness to the truth of the wholeness of the fellowship’s participation—something required as the obverse to the Sovereign Grace of the Gospel being for all. All the faithful must actively participate in the Church’s eucharistic worship and all receive the bread and the wine.

This accent on the *communio fidelium*, this recognition of the wholeness, and ultimately the catholicity of the Body in and with Christ the Head in the liturgy, is closely linked to the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, in the worship of the Lord's Table. In our Church of Scotland Communion Service, within the Eucharistic Prayer, which in every Christian rite is the heart of the celebration, the *Triumphal Hymn* "Holy, Holy, Holy", is introduced thus: "With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we worship and adore Thy glorious name, evermore praising Thee, and saying: " then follows the *Sanctus* and the *Benedictus qui venit*. "With all the company of Heaven", horizontally across history in one family of faith, as well as vertically with the Living Lord vouchsafing His Divine Presence, we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

This is what gives significance and importance to the traditional structure and order of the Communion Service, a structure wherein Presbyterian Lord's Supper and Roman Catholic Mass walk largely in step—the historic form of the eucharistic rite is token of this fellowship of all the faithful in the One Sovereign Gospel of Christ's Self-offering in Grace.

What then of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper? At this point terminology divides the separated traditions more perhaps than belief. It seems to me that many of the controversies and problems which have arisen around the term, the Real Presence, are due to an unwarranted tendency to, as it were, imprison the Sovereign Lord within the elements of bread and wine, which are essential to but only one part of the total sacrament or mystery. There is no eucharist without a believing, gathered fellowship and an authorized celebrant, a whole liturgical or cultic setting, as well as bread and wine, divinely appointed sacramental elements, and for this divine mystery, consecrated by the Word and prayer for the Spirit. In this total liturgy, the Living Lord is really present.

The Church of Scotland position is defined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* thus: "Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do also then inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine, yet as really, but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses."

This view of the eucharist takes ‘mystery’ seriously; a better word than ‘sacrament’, to designate this central Christian rite. The Supper of our Lord is to be understood as mystery, *mysterion* in the New Testament sense, of God revealed and mediated to faith. This standpoint obviates any exclusive emphasis on the physical presence in the elements of bread and wine, something which is philosophically vexingly difficult to define or describe, and also, misleading, in its proclivity to compromise the Sovereignty of Grace. Jesus Christ, offering Himself as all-sufficient Saviour, is the Real Presence in the Church’s liturgy and eucharist; Real Presence must never be regarded as an entity manipulated by the ecclesiastical celebrant. The only celebrant is Christ Himself, really present.

“Thou art alone the Victim,
Thou only art the Priest.”

The late Dr. Henry Wotherspoon has a useful comment on a position extremely difficult to define. “The whole transaction of the Sacrament takes place, not as an episode of earthly event, but on the plane of our Lord’s present existence: it is among the *epourania*, the Heavens, in which the conditions of our fleshly existence do not apply, and all is as Christ sees it, and as Christ wills. It is not the Elements—it is we and the whole action and the Elements in the setting of that action which are taken into the atmosphere of the supernal: we are “lifted into some apprehension of the Eternal:” we taste the powers of the coming age and look upon the invisible. It is no objection that such a statement is mystical—if it were not, it could not hope to be true: the sacramental cannot be discussed in material terms—it is only in mystical apprehension that faith can approach some literalness of understanding.”

It is surely in the real and personal presence of Jesus Christ in His own ordinance, rather than the philosophical issue of the relation of that presence to the elements, that the reality of the liturgy is found—the Eucharist, the God-given and God-appointed occasion of vital personal relationship between the Redeemer and His People. When Jesus Christ gives Himself, it cannot be by bits or pieces; there cannot be greater and lesser dosages of grace; there cannot be degrees of the Real Presence; when Jesus Christ gives Himself, He the Sovereign and Sufficient Saviour, God Incarnate, gives Himself, just that, only that, that than which no greater or more superlative can be offered; and it is in this sovereign

action of the One Gospel of Salvation, that the supreme value and importance of the liturgy consists.

It often seems that the Table of the Lord, the Eucharist, constitutes the place of greatest separation among Christians; and division in its liturgy, in the divine service of Almighty God through One Saviour, is the real yardstick of the sinfulness of a divided Church. Yet, the hope for unity, I believe, lies in the renewal of liturgy, the reformation of worship, more than in the exploratory examination of disagreements in faith and order, important as such examination is. The hope for unity through liturgy is held out by the sovereignty of the One Lord and Saviour, Who is transcendent over the worship of His Body, the Church.

That liturgical renewal carries a real hope for ecumenical advance seems to be a conviction shared by at least the more forward-looking of our Roman Catholic brethren. The Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* has this to say on the Eucharist in the non-Roman churches :

“ Ecclesial communities separated from us may be lacking the full unity with us which derives from baptism ; we may believe them to have failed to preserve the whole, authentic substance of the mystery of the Eucharist, especially in view of their lack of the sacrament of order. Nevertheless, they do enact the memorial at the Last Supper of the Lord's death and resurrection and, in so doing, they proclaim that its meaning is life in the fellowship of Christ and they are looking forward to his coming in glory. For this reason, the teaching on the Lord's Supper, the other sacraments, the worship and ministry of the Church should constitute the subject matter of the dialogue.”

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper must indeed be the subject of our dialogue with Rome, and also a foremost subject in all our ecumenical conversation. Herein lies the hope of Liturgy becoming the way to Unity ! When Anglicans and Presbyterians sat down together in regional discussion over the past few years, their eucharistic agreement proved capable of this summary in the joint report now presented to the four conferring churches :

“ In regard to the doctrine of Holy Communion it is possible briefly to record a very large measure of agreement in such points as these :

In the Sacrament Christ himself acts and is present with his people.

It is not necessary, and perhaps not possible, to give an exact account of the manner of this presence.

This presence is to be related not only to the elements of bread and wine but also to the whole action of minister and people together.

The people's faith does not create the presence but simply acknowledges it.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is a memorial and proclamation afresh of Christ's one sacrifice of himself, once offered, by which he has presented us, now presents us, and will present us incorporated in him before the Father.

Christ as the great High Priest is the true minister and celebrant who gives himself in the Sacrament with all his benefits to us."

One more external point of divergence between the churches arises in the name used for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. It is probably around the term, Mass, that most of the more bitter and hostile Anti-Roman feelings have grown up, and Presbyterians find it difficult to understand the insistence on a term derived from 5th or 6th century usage for dismissal after any act of public worship: '*ite, missa est*', hence '*Mass*'. The sense in which the Mass is a sacrifice may be misunderstood outside the Roman fold, but the element of sacrifice in the Lord's supper is requiring re-examination and re-definition in all traditions. We are told in the report already quoted that "the phrase, 'pleading his eternal sacrifice', which appears in the Church of Scotland's *Book of Common Order* raised doubts in some minds" !

Well, if not '*Mass*', what? Protestant use in all its traditions inclines toward's '*the Lord's Supper*', *kuriakon deipnon*, very ancient, a good title in affirming the origin of the Church's supreme act of worship, instituted by her Lord at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. The earliest Anglican separatists made the best of all worlds, for the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* speaks of '*The Supper of the Lord and the Holy Communion called the Mass.*' Holy Communion is common to all our traditions, a term rooted in the Pauline understanding of the broken bread and the cup of blessing as communion in the Body and Blood of Christ, Holy Communion. But am I correct in feeling that '*Holy Communion*' stresses one aspect of the ordinance, namely, the important one of the participation of the faithful—a very vital element, this receiving of what the Lord offers of Himself?

Eucharist has become the commonest term employed by all our Biblical scholars, again expedient in being so close to the New Testament origins of the rite : ‘ Jesus took bread and gave thanks ’ ; He made eucharist. Eucharist was in current Christian usage as early as when the *Didache* was compiled, possibly by 100 A.D. I am interested to note that in Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the chapter expounding the rite itself is headed, *Of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist*. Does this also mean that the present-day Roman Church is beginning to prefer the Greek, *mysterion* or ‘ mystery ’, with its profound New Testament emphases, to the Latin *sacramentum* or sacrament which has sometimes sacrificed Gospel for law ?

But we have just stumbled on what may have to become our common terms in the present growing mutual understanding, namely, eucharist or ‘ liturgy ’, i.e. Holy Eucharist or Divine Liturgy. This specialized use of the word ‘ liturgy ’ for the Lord’s Supper is of course characteristic of the Orthodox tradition, to which all our churches are in such deep debt.

The Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* may prove a vital mile-stone on the way to unity through liturgy. Protestants welcome the new emphasis on the people’s part in the eucharistic office : “ Mother Church earnestly desires 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 liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people . . . is their right and duty by reason of their baptism ”. Again, there is fresh common ground in the recognition of “ the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy ” being “ one single act of worship ” ; and in the new stress on the Scriptures : “ The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word ”.

The chapter, *Of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist*, setting forth the heart of current Roman understanding of the Lord’s Supper, opens with a statement which would command a remarkable degree of acceptance throughout most of Christendom :

“ At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Saviour instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again ; and he wished to entrust his beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection, a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond

of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace and a pledge of future glory is given to us.”

At the same time, the Liturgical Movement in the Roman Communion, which was making an ever wider impact before Pope John XXIII had ever called the Second Vatican Council, has built up a modern eucharistic practice much more acceptable in the eyes of Protestants. The bringing forward of the altar and the priest's westward position (which has always been the position of the Pope celebrating Mass in St. Peter's, Rome !), are making the Roman Mass more recognizable as the people's eucharist, with the symbolism portraying Calvary seen of all, something of deep evangelical significance within our tradition.

If the Church Unreformed in the 16th century had placed greater emphasis on the people's communicating rather than just on their hearing of mass ; on the use of the vernacular languages in the divine services ; and on the hearing and expounding of the Bible, the course of Church history might have been very different. In such things today, we can welcome signs of greater unity in depth.

The deeper, doctrinally and spiritually, we go in liturgy, the more unity, given unity, we discover. Unity is given in the objective reality of the Eucharist, which is Jesus Christ giving Himself in salvation—objective in the sense of real, and in contrast to all religious and human subjectivity ; although, of course, in the divine service, the Sovereign Lord Himself is Subject not an object, as He is also ultimate Celebrant.

Through renewal and reformation in its liturgy, in its cultic life where the Church is truly Church before God, the promise of the unity of the Body is held up to the vision of faith. In our liturgical expressions, obeying the One Lord, “ we do show the Lord's death till He come ” ; hence we pray, *maranatha*, ‘ Come, Lord Jesus ’, basic to all liturgy. One of the expectations from His real Presence, which is sovereign and not within our manipulation and control, is that He will make His people One.

Let St. Paul define for us the meaning of the liturgy and the nature of our unity : “ When we bless ‘ the cup of blessing ’, is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the Body of Christ ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body ; for it is one loaf of which we all partake ”.

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