

TRADITION AND RENEWAL

Recent liturgical work in the Church of Norway

Part I

1. Time and conditions for reform

1.1 Introduction. Why write about liturgical work in Norway?

The Church of Norway is in the midst of a complete revision of all its liturgical books, i.e. its Service Book, Lectionary and Hymnal. As from 1977 a new order for the Mass or Holy Communion, together with a new Lectionary, has been in use in nearly all the congregations of our church, use of the order for the main Sunday service being compulsory.

The preparation of this article was started when the new liturgy was introduced. It seemed an appropriate time to sum up experiences from the work of liturgical renewal in Norway. It soon became apparent, however, that there were new, heated stages of the debate in the offing, thus the final outcome of the revision was as yet uncertain.

Whether this is a more appropriate time for a discussion of the subject is a moot point; all the same, there is still a lot that can be said about the reactions to our attempt at reform.

Our reason for accepting an invitation to write about liturgical work in Norway is not a conviction that Norway has made any original contribution to liturgical history, past or present. But one might assume that it is not without interest to see how recent liturgical ideas are reflected in our particular situation. Further, although people in Norway will probably react to liturgical reform in much the same way as people do in other countries, the situation in Norway may have some special features. We are thinking, for example, of the fact that the Norwegian Lutheran Church is a State Church having nearly all of the population as its nominal members. All in all, this may perhaps justify our liturgical case-study.

In this article we shall concentrate upon the work connected with the revision of the Liturgy, and mainly the revision of the Order for the Mass.

We do not thereby intend to say that no other liturgical work has been done in the Church of Norway. For example, one might have wished to comment on the work done by groups interested in various types of experimental services on particular themes and for particular occasions. In that connection it would have been interesting to discuss the fact that the explicitly political Service

has played a comparatively small part in contemporary Norwegian worship. However, since liturgical work and liturgical debate in Norway has centred upon the ordered Sunday morning service, our restriction of theme seems justified.

1.2 Worship in the Church of Norway

The Norwegian Church has retained the name "High Mass" ("hogmesse") for its main service. As the name indicates, this service is, according to its structure, basically a "mass", with Ordinary and Propers. Thus the Norwegian Church, like the Lutheran Church in general, has wished to preserve the tradition of the Old Church in its main service, only stripping it of those features which the Reformers thought to be un-evangelical.

The service called "High Mass" retains the name, irrespective of whether Communion is celebrated or not, i.e. also when there is no liturgy of the Communion Meal (the case on most Sundays in many congregations, at least until recent years). We shall therefore use the term "Mass" in this looser sense, referring to the main service of our church.

This service, with its Mass-structure, has been the dominating feature of Norwegian ordered worship, to so great an extent that also evening services, family services and other services for particular occasions have been conceived as shortened "masses", although they bear no relation to the celebration of communion. It is indeed one of the hopes of the present Liturgy Commission that a new variety in our worship will arise with morning and evening services built on the Hours, a particular "preaching" service, etc.

Until 1887 the Norwegian service was essentially a "hymn" Mass, i.e. the Ordinary was sung in metrical form to hymn tunes, following the tradition from Luther's German Mass. The Order of Service of 1887 meant a minor liturgical revolution, first of all by introducing a "prose" Mass for the first time in two centuries, and for the first time one totally in the vernacular. The 1887 order was, of course, a Norwegian reflection of the liturgical movement of the nineteenth century. In astonishingly short time, thirty years, it completely won the field in all congregations in Norway. The 1920-revision of the liturgy which was in use till 1977, meant no essential change in the 1887-order.

Thanks to the monopoly of the Mass and to the strict adherence of minister and congregation to the official Order of Service, down to the exact wording of the prayers, worship in the Norwegian Church has been uniform in character. One positive result of this has been that any church member in Norway could feel at home with the Liturgy in any congregation in the country.

To speak of the Mass and its central position in Norwegian

worship is, however, to speak of only half the truth. Worship in the Church of Norway cannot be understood only from the point of view of ordered worship. The other focus of the ellipse of Norwegian church life besides that of the official, institutional church, is the work of the independent lay organisations for home and foreign mission. In addition to the church building most places in Norway have their religious "meeting house" with its frequent devotional gatherings.

A great number of the most faithful participants in the Sunday morning church service are also active in the various "free" meetings. They seem to appreciate the combination of simplicity and improvisation in one context and more elaborate, strict liturgical order in another. That is, they may at one and the same time be spokesmen of devotional spontaneity and ardent watchdogs over details of the prescribed liturgy. That interest in the liturgy is, obviously, not only determined by a personal liking for that kind of worship, but the conviction that liturgy is the bearer of doctrine.

1.3 The need for liturgical reform

Soon after 1920 there were advocates for a revision of the liturgy. The war and post-war period was undoubtedly a time for consolidation in many respects, so the urge for liturgical reform subsided. In the last decades it has arisen again. To a certain extent this rise has followed in the wake of the world-wide liturgical interest which has caused liturgical upheaval even in the Roman Church and produced a number of new liturgies in many churches.

The present call for a liturgical reform in Norway and in other countries alike arises out of new insight into liturgical history, combined with the conviction that our time is radically different from the time between the wars, and out of demands for new thoughts and new words even in the liturgy, if there is to be any hope of the liturgy retaining its credibility. One must admit that the climate for reform has changed again considerably since the late sixties, but not sufficiently to bar any liturgical revision. Furthermore, when the Norwegian Church got its new official translation of the Bible, based on modern exegetical insight and in contemporary Norwegian language, in 1977, this also made a revision of the liturgy unavoidable.

1.4 The work of the Norwegian Liturgy Commission of 1965.

In 1965 a liturgy commission was appointed by the State Department for Church and Education to undertake a complete revision of the orders for all the services of the Church of Norway and of all the books needed for those services, that is, to prepare a new service book, lectionary and hymnal. That the task of bringing out

a new liturgy for the Church should prove to be a laborious one, will hardly come as a surprise to anybody acquainted with the work of liturgical reform.

The work has been hampered by trivial factors, such as the Commission members being already engaged in other full time work as bishops, university teachers, church musicians etc. It has also been unfortunate that there has been a repeated change of persons in the post as secretary for the Commission. An important factor which has contributed to making the process of liturgical revision such a slow one, has been the procedure for revision itself: the work has to go through so many stages of official hearing and public discussion.

As opinions on liturgy tend to be very strong, and to differ so greatly in the various quarters of power, official and unofficial, there has been much to-ing and fro-ing. The question whether this has been for better or for worse, has probably no simple answer. Suffice it to say that the experience of serving under Bureaucracy, Hierarchy and Democracy all at the same time does anything but give a Liturgy Commission the feeling of being free to implement its own ideas.

The actual work of the Liturgy Commission (hereafter referred to as LC) started first in 1967. In 1969 an Experimental Liturgy (EL) for the Mass was issued and approved by the Government for use in about ninety congregations throughout the country for a period of two years. During that period Parish Councils, ministers, organists and 3,800 ordinary church members answered questionnaires about the liturgy.

Having taken into account the experiences with the EL, the LC in 1973 delivered a Preliminary Proposal for the Mass in the Church of Norway. This proposal was then considered by the Department's official consultants (bishops, theological faculties, Ministers' Association). In 1976 the LC delivered its Final Proposal, which was published by the Government for consideration by a larger number of consultants (among them the High School of Music and the Organists' Association).

The LC was allowed to make some adjustments in its proposal in a special Recommendation, before the Church Department let the Bishops' Conference decide on the final shape of the order in their proposal. Finally the Bishops' Proposal was approved by the Government in September 1977 and prescribed for use in the churches from Advent in that same year. The bishops producing an Order of Service was a novelty in our liturgical history. And it is only fair to say that the bishops undertook a change of the proposals of the LC on a lot more points than most members of the LC had imagined possible.

We have described the long and painstaking procedure just to show how seriously one has tried to take account of a wide range of opinions before the final decision was made. In the course of this process the demand for a radical reform of the liturgy had turned into a demand for a cautious revision. All the same, the LC, the bishops and the Government were accused of wanting to enforce upon the congregations a new liturgy overnight.

However, one should perhaps first note that after all the new order was received with satisfaction by a great number of church members. In surprisingly short time they became familiar with the new liturgy and felt that it brought a new element of joy to our worship. At the same time they were satisfied that the new order preserved the essentials of the old liturgy. The critics of the revision, however, gathered forces and made themselves very much heard in the public discussion, above all in the press.

We shall comment upon the various points of criticism later. At this point we shall only reflect briefly upon the theology and psychology of reactions to liturgical reform in our church context.

A large amount of unwillingness towards any kind of change in liturgy is always to be reckoned with. It is understandable that the fear of anything that could threaten the safe points of life should affect questions of worship more than anything else. The problem is how to distinguish between the psychological and the theological side of the matter, so that the discussion can take place on the appropriate level. We have seen that any question can be made a theological question of life and death if one is willing to use sufficiently far-fetched arguments. On the other hand it is perhaps a bit too easy to dismiss all criticism on psychological grounds. It is only right that our proposals for reform should undergo the closest doctrinal scrutiny, in order that both intended and unintended deviations be avoided. It is also right that the practical question should be asked, whether the congregations are unnecessarily alienated from their liturgy.

The most ardent criticism has come from some, but not all, members of the association called "Church Renewal", which is a group, mainly of young ministers and church musicians, interested in pastoral work, doctrine, and liturgy. In the rather moderate Norwegian sense of the word it may be labelled "High Church". On various points the criticism from this group has been supported by other church members on a variety of grounds.

There is still a possibility that some minor changes may be made in the liturgy in connection with the issue of the complete service book in a few years time. Some of the critics at least hope that all is not yet decided.

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