

Liturgical Renewal and Eschatology

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O Sacrum Convivium, the hymn attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, extols the Sacred Banquet "in which Christ is received as food, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the soul is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us." How splendidly this hymn encapsulates the depth and breadth of Catholic Eucharistic theology. Past and future become present in the Eucharist, for the Lord who simultaneously feeds us and assumes us into himself is the Alpha and Omega who transcends time. While most Catholics have at least a hazy notion of the Eucharist as memorial and Presence, few perceive the Eucharist as anticipation and foretaste. At a time when voices are being raised in support of a liturgical "reform of the reform," we cannot afford to neglect the eschatological or "future oriented" dimension of the sacred liturgy (especially the Eucharistic sacrifice).

Responding to the Protestant Reformers, the Council of Trent (1545-63) articulated the Church's beliefs regarding (among other things) the ordained priesthood, the Mass, and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Against the heretics who taught that the Eucharistic bread and wine merely symbolize the Lord's Body and Blood, Trent affirmed that Jesus Christ is "truly, really, and substantially" present in the Sacrament.¹ Opposing those who maintained that the Eucharistic service merely commemorates the events of the Upper Room and Calvary, Trent declared that in the Mass the very Sacrifice of the Cross is represented and renewed upon the Church's altars, together with its saving grace, through the mediation of sacred signs.² During the four centuries between Trent and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the standard Catholic manuals of sacramental theology paid great attention to the Eucharist both as a sacrament and as a sacrifice. Theologians endeavored to explain how the risen and glorified Christ becomes present in the Eucharistic elements, and how the Sacrifice of the Mass relates to the Sacrifice of the Cross. Unfortunately, the Church's defense of the Eucharistic doctrines of presence and sacrifice caused the eschatological aspect of the liturgy to be obscured or misunderstood in the popular imagination. Sacramental theology from Trent to Vatican II focused primarily on what is remembered and represented in the sacred liturgy, but not adequately on what is yet to come.³

¹ Council of Trent, Session 13 (Oct. 11, 1551), decr. *De Ss. Eucharist.*, cap. 1 and the relative canon: DS 1636, 1651.

² Council of Trent, Session 22 (Sept. 17, 1562), doct. *De Ss. Missae sacrif.*, cap. 1-2: DS 1739-1743.

³ Cf. M. Francis Mannion, "Liturgy and Eschatology," *Antiphon* 4/3 (1999), pp. 2-4; and Aidan Nichols, O.P., "A Tale of Two Documents," *Antiphon* 5/1 (2000), pp. 23-31.

Stirred by the renewal of biblical and patristic scholarship, the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement helped bring about a revival of eschatological perception.⁴ The Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy teaches:

In the liturgy on earth, we are sharing by anticipation in the heavenly one, celebrated in the holy city, Jerusalem, the goal towards which we strive as pilgrims, where Christ is, seated at God's right hand, he who is the minister of the saints and of the true tabernacle [Rev. 21:2; Col. 3:1; Heb. 8:2]. We are singing the hymn of God's glory with all the troops of the heavenly army. In lovingly remembering the saints in our liturgy, we are hoping in some way to share in what they now enjoy, and to become their companions. We are waiting for our saviour, our lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, appears, and until we appear with him in glory.⁵

This paragraph is a veritable treasury of liturgical eschatology. Even as we struggle with sin and await the return of the Lord in glory, we enjoy a foretaste of heaven. Jesus Christ, sacrificed and living eternally in the resurrection, transcends time in such a way that his Paschal Mystery and his very Presence reach all times. Therefore, the *eschatological* or heavenly liturgy can break through to the earthly. Past and future collapse into present sacramental action, and historically bound congregations find communion with the risen Lord and with the whole company of heaven.⁶

The Book of Revelation with its vision of the cosmic liturgy, at the center of which stands the sacrificial Lamb, features the contents of Eucharistic worship: an altar, a sacrifice, the smoke of incense, the continual *Sanctus*, the prayers of the angels and saints. Scripture professor Scott Hahn argues persuasively for interpreting the Johannine Apocalypse in light of the earthly liturgy of the Mass.⁷ The Cherubic Hymn of the Byzantine liturgy reminds us that the action in the Apocalypse and the action at (and around) earthly altars are the same action, occurring on two planes: "Let us who mystically represent the cherubim, and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now set aside all earthly cares."

By our participation in the Eucharist, we glimpse what the Kingdom will be like and how we will be changed: enemies are reconciled, sanctity is normal (not bizarre), and the community of redeemed and sanctified humanity (the Church) is perfectly united in love. But the earthly liturgy is only a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. In the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus forgoes sharing in the cup until he can

⁴ See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). However, it should not be supposed that eschatological themes were wholly lacking in the pre-Vatican II Roman liturgy. The liturgies of Christian burial, in the time immediately before Advent and in Advent itself were (and are) markedly eschatological. The Council brought the eschatology into fresh focus both theologically and liturgically. Theologically, it restored the understanding of the Church on earth as a "pilgrim people" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 14). Liturgically, the reformed rite offers explicit images of anticipation (e.g., in the embolism of the Lord's Prayer and in the new Eucharistic Prayers).

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], no. 8. The SC translations used in this article are from Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II* (London: Sheed & Ward and Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], nos. 1137-39.

⁷ Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1999).

drink it with his disciples in the Kingdom.⁸ He calls this wine “new,” implying the newness of the restored creation.⁹ This nicely illustrates the tension of a Kingdom that is already inaugurated in Christ (realized eschatology), but not yet arrived in its fullness (future eschatology). The union of Christians with the Lord and with one another is only partially realized in human history. Thus, the liturgy challenges us to work toward an ever-greater realization of God’s promise spoken in Christ, even as we await his return.

While the liturgy expresses Catholic doctrine and values, it is also true that the Church’s beliefs are influenced and sustained by the liturgy. (The timeless epigram, “*Lex orandi, lex credendi*” denotes the mutualism of prayer and faith.) However, if the liturgical renewal of the last century reintroduced an eschatological note to the liturgy, few practicing Catholics seem to have noticed. Too many think of the Mass as simply a commemoration of a past event (the Last Supper), or as an elaborate ceremony for producing and administering the Blessed Sacrament. The more theologically astute are familiar with the Tridentine definition of the Mass as the unbloody representation of the Sacrifice of Calvary. Few, however, realize that the Mass is an entering into the cosmic liturgy. How can we tune in our “faith senses” to the eschatological theology already embedded in the Church’s worship? What can we do to make some of heaven’s own glory reflect back onto the earthly liturgy?

One possible starting point is the church building itself. The art of the great medieval cathedrals made the faithful aware of the beauty and splendor, the order and hierarchy, of the Kingdom of God. Accordingly, the renewal of the eschatological means that Catholic churches must once again become “images of the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, toward which we are making our way on pilgrimage.”¹⁰ Eastern Christianity can teach us something about this. In Orthodox (and Eastern-rite Catholic) churches,

The icons that fill the church serve as a point of meeting between heaven and earth. As each local congregation prays Sunday by Sunday, surrounded by the figures of Christ, the angels, and the saints, these visible images remind the faithful unceasingly of the invisible presence of the whole company of heaven at the Liturgy. The faithful can feel that the walls of the church open out upon eternity, and they are helped to realize that their Liturgy on earth is one and the same with the great Liturgy of heaven. The multitudinous icons express visibly the sense of “heaven on earth.”¹¹

This is not to imply that all churches must have Byzantine form, with domed ceilings and ubiquitous icons. The Latin West has its own artistic and architectural heritage: Roman, Gothic, Romanesque, Baroque, Renaissance, and so on. Because of her catholicity, the Church is open to any style, including the modern, asking only that it be “of service to the buildings of worship and the rites of worship, exhibiting due reverence and honor.”¹² While there is no single “Catholic style” of architecture, Steven Schloeder rightly maintains that

⁸ Mt. 26:29; cf. Lk. 22:18; Mk. 14:25.

⁹ Mk. 14:25.

¹⁰ CCC, no. 1198.

¹¹ Timothy [Bishop Kallistos] Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 277-78.

¹² SC, no. 123.

a church should strive to be "otherworldly," to allow the person to leave behind the anxieties and cares of the world and enter into the heavenly Jerusalem. At Mass the people are called to "lift up [their] hearts." The architecture should allow this to happen, so that the congregation may lift up their hearts to God in divine worship. The people are called to go beyond themselves, to transcend the world and enter into the eternal worship, which is centered on the Eucharist.¹³

For instance, the sanctuary, which is the place of sacrifice, should be marked off from the nave by a higher floor level or altar rail. Images of the Savior, the Mother of God, the saints and angels in mosaic or stone or stained glass should be used to support the liturgy without causing distraction. In fact, the transition from the secular to the sacred naturally begins at the church's main door, which should call to mind the very gates of heaven.¹⁴

Architecture, liturgical furnishings and the visual arts are not the only means of raising minds and hearts to what lies above and beyond. Music, too, plays an important role in fostering adequate liturgical eschatology. In this sphere, as in others, much improvement is needed because:

The newer songs are typically about practical and pragmatic human needs (good in themselves), but they do not very often invoke the larger and wider vision of heaven. Today the music of worship regularly seems feeble, focused on the small spaces of the psyche, self-absorbed, and narrow-minded. To rectify this situation Catholic music would again assume styles which embrace the great space of the universe, becoming music of the cosmos.¹⁵

The direction in which the priest and congregation face during the liturgy is as important symbolically as architecture and the arts.¹⁶ From earliest times, Christians adopted the Jewish practice of praying toward Eden, in the East;¹⁷ the direction from which Ezekiel saw God's glory come;¹⁸ the direction in which Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives and whence he will return;¹⁹ and the direction wherefrom the Angel of the Lord will come at the end of time.²⁰ In the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* ("Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and Holy Disciples of Our Savior"), we find the command to pray eastward, praising God "who rides on the heaven of heavens towards

¹³ Steven J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), p. 46. Another architect whose fine work (both scholarly and professional) is contributing to a renewal of authentic Catholic architecture is Duncan Stroik of Notre Dame University; see Jeffrey Rubin, "Traditional Church Architecture for the 21st Century," *The Latin Mass*, May-June 1994, pp. 12-19. More recently, see Michael S. Rose, *Ugly As Sin* (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 2001).

¹⁴ For example, the western façade of Saint-Denis in Paris expresses the idea of transition from this world to the glory of heaven (Schloeder, p. 138).

¹⁵ M. Francis Mannion, "A New Phase of Liturgical Reform," *Antiphon* 5/1 (2000), pp. 2-4.

¹⁶ See my article, "[Re]Turn to the East?" *Adoremus Bulletin*, November 1999, pp. 5, 8.

¹⁷ Gen. 2:8.

¹⁸ Ezek. 43:2, 4.

¹⁹ Acts 1:11.

²⁰ Rev. 7:2.

the East.²¹ Tertullian of Carthage (died ca. 225) informs us that the churches of orthodox believers are “always” oriented “toward the light.”²² Origen (died 253) asserts that the direction of the rising sun obviously indicates that we ought to pray inclining in that direction, an act that symbolizes the soul looking toward the dawn of the true light, the sun of justice, Jesus Christ.²³ Saint John Damascene says that, while waiting the coming of the Lord, “we worship towards the East,” for that is the unwritten tradition passed down to us from the Apostles.²⁴ Other Church Fathers who confirm this practice are Clement of Alexandria,²⁵ St. Basil,²⁶ and St. Augustine.²⁷ To this day, the ancient Coptic Rite of Egypt retains in its Eucharistic liturgy (just before the *Sursum corda*) the exhortation of the deacon: “Turn towards the East!”

Before the mid-1960s, Latin-rite Catholic priests ordinarily offered the Sacrifice of the Mass standing on the same side of the altar as the congregation, all facing the same direction, toward the East. (Such remains the practice in the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches.) Although the priest and people did not always face East literally (depending on how the church was positioned), they did fact symbolic or liturgical “East” (toward the ascended and returning Lord). The “turning around” of the altars after Vatican II – something never mandated or even suggested by that Council, incidentally – was intended to facilitate the people’s participation in the liturgical action, as well as to render more obvious the “meal” aspect of the Mass. But this came at too great a cost, namely, the loss of an interpretation of the Eucharist in sacrificial and eschatological terms. As Cardinal Ratzinger points out, the orientation of the liturgy toward the East (if not literally *ad orientem* then at least *ad apsidem*, toward the apse) symbolizes a worshipping community open to the world beyond the here-and-now, a people on pilgrimage to the Promised Land.²⁸

Simply put, the contemporary Roman liturgy, as it is commonly celebrated, must literally be reoriented. (Whenever I hear the Advent hymn *People, Look East*, I am tempted to interject, “including the priest!”) The eastward orientation emphasizes an eschatological note that is both biblical and patristic. It avoids focusing attention on the personality and mannerisms of the celebrant and reminds the faithful that he is not there to entertain or amuse them, but to offer the Sacrifice of Christ and to lead them in pilgrimage to the heavenly Kingdom.²⁹

The twentieth-century Liturgical Movement renewed liturgical eschatology in theory if not in practice. Now it remains to apply this broader, richer vision to the Church’s actual worship. Architecture, the visual arts and liturgical music must once

²¹ *Did. Apost.* 7.57, citing Psalm 68.

²² *Adv. Valent.* 3; cf. *Ad Nat.* 1.13.

²³ *De Orat.* 32.

²⁴ *De fide orth.* 4.12.

²⁵ *Strom.* 7.7.

²⁶ *De Spir. Sanct.* 27.67.

²⁷ *De serm. Dom. in monte* 2.15.18.

²⁸ J. Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 139-45; idem, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), pp. 74-84.

²⁹ A return to the traditional *ad orientem* celebration must be done responsibly, with adequate catechesis. For a helpful essay on preparing a parish for this legitimate option, see Timothy V. Vavarek, “Celebration of Mass *ad Orientem* in a Parish Setting,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, October 1999, p. 26-32.

again sustain a devotional atmosphere that allows the people to glimpse the Life beyond life. Moreover, a common orientation (priest and people alike) during the Offertory, Canon and orations remains essential to an adequate ritual expression of the Church propelled toward her returning Bridegroom,³⁰ the One who is the "father of the world to come."³¹

Saint Paul connects the celebration of the Lord's Supper with the proclamation of Christ's death "until he comes,"³² meaning his Second Coming, when the Kingdom arrives in its fullness. On that day, signs and symbols – the sacraments – shall cease, because they will have served their purpose of mediating the presence of Christ in the Spirit. Until then, the work of our redemption is carried on through the liturgy.³³

"O Sacred Banquet, in which Christ is received as food, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the soul is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us." A pledge of *future glory*. In the meantime, as the Church awaits her blessed hope,³⁴ she gathers strength from the revelation she has received, enters through the liturgy into the mystery of Christ, and so prepares for the eternity of God.

³⁰ Cf. Mt. 25:6.

³¹ From the Litany of the Most Holy Name of Jesus; cf. Isa. 9:6.

³² 1 Cor. 11:26.

³³ SC, no. 2.

³⁴ "Expectantes beatam spem": *Missale Romanum*, embolism after the Lord's Prayer. Cf. CCC, no. 2854.

Christian eschatology is the study of Christian beliefs concerning the final events and ultimate purposes of the world. In Christian theology, eschatology is the study of the destiny of created things, especially of humankind and of the Church, according to the purposes of God. The "last things" are important issues to Christian faith, although eschatology is a relatively recent development as a formal division of Christian theology. Epistle to the Romans 8 (KJV)