

A Contemporary Sharing on the Power of Christian Liturgy

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Author's Note: Some of the reflections, observations and examples cited below are written at a time of heightened and even stricter lockdowns due to the pandemic especially in the Philippines. A predominantly Christian country in Asia, the examples here given refer mainly to the nation's situation of church and worship. We are aware that at any given time, conditions may change and thereby the liturgical structures along with our social life may return to normalcy.

LITURGY: a Spiritual Lifeline in Today's Situation

Our current ongoing world crisis brought about by the long-winding pandemic has thrown communities all over into a chaotic situation. The reality of fear, anxiety, worry, despair economic woes, the struggle for survival and the threat of death stalking us at every corner awaken raw human emotions, which daily resound in the liturgy. Open the Book of Christian prayer of the Church and you can randomly pick out almost in every page the psalmist's desperate plea in the liturgy. In the Liturgy of the Hours (LOH), for example: *"Do not abandon me or forsake me, O God of my help!"* (Ps 27) Or from a Responsory, *"I cry to you, o Lord, for you are my refuge"*; or from an Antiphon to the classic Cantic of Zechariah *"Lord, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death."* (Sat Lauds, Week I).

Through the fascinating power of media, the liturgy, another dynamo -- the power of the LITURGY as a spiritual lifeline has been unleashed and has increasingly crept into places hitherto perhaps we little imagined. The reality of quarantines and lockdowns have somehow brought the liturgy closer to us. At a click, the highest form of worship and prayer of the Christian Church which is the liturgy stands at our doorsteps and becomes accessible to homes and work places; the latter, in many cases, having also shifted gears to -- "Work from Home" (WFH).

The phenomenon of livestreamed liturgies, -- Eucharistic celebrations, virtual Divine Office or LOH, and other forms of liturgies flickering on TV screens and Smart phones – is an awesome reality and a new opportunity for the Church and us who are her members, to reach out even to remote places during this prolonged time of uncertainty and distress. And all this resonates well with what P. Francis says (in this time of lockdowns) “*Make your house a place of worship. Pray, pray, meditate, ask, thank, praise, plead...*” Is this not tantamount to an invitation challenging us to make our homes a sacred space to give glory to God? All of a sudden, liturgical prayer at this special time now resounds everywhere beyond the walls of traditional places of worship, such as church buildings and other structures.

The psalms and canticles which constitute the body of the LITURGY OF THE HOURS (LOH) is deeply Scripture-based in its recurring cycle of Morning Prayer (Lauds) at sunrise, Evening Prayer (Vespers) at sundown and other minor hours of the Day within the Divine Office. In its Readings, as well as those of the Mass – the sets of Bible readings highlighting the gospels, as well as the Orations, Intercessions and so on make liturgy the best of biblical spirituality centered on the Word of God. In every liturgy God speaks and we listen and respond to his word. The Eucharist which is the apex and zenith of the entire LITURGY of the Church, captures the mystery of life-and-death. And in the liturgy we encounter Christ in a privileged way as we celebrate the reality of his passion, death and resurrection. The liturgy gives us this potent source of life day after day, making it our spiritual lifeline in all our human experiences, and all the more so in today’s situation of crisis. In the liturgy, we encounter the God of Scriptures who saves and gives life, the God whom the psalms portray as our *sanctuary, a refuge, a shelter, our hope and salvation*.

Nature of Liturgical Prayer: A Missionary Benedictine Experience

The second edition (2002) of our Constitutions of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters (MBS) of Tutzing states:

“The liturgy is the highest form of our prayer in which we join in the praise of the Church, glorifying Christ and through him the Father. In the power of the Holy Spirit we stand with Christ before the Father on behalf of the whole world. The liturgy is the fountain from which our strength flows” (III, 2).

While participation in the liturgical/public prayer of the Church is primarily for the glory of God, we also have the privilege of praying with Christ and, together with him, we intercede to the Father for the needs of the whole world. And it is from the liturgy that we draw strength to accomplish our mission and ministries; it is the liturgy that inspires us to realize and continue Christ’s work of teaching, healing and saving. This share in Christ’s work and mission points to the missionary dimension of liturgy.

Subsequent texts of our MBS Constitutions identify the threefold component of our Benedictine prayer: the *“Eucharist as the center of our life”* (III, 2) and its highest point, as well as our *source of renewal and unity*; the *Opus Dei* (literally translated as *“the Work of God”*) or Liturgy of the Hours or) as our *“basic community prayer”*, *“common divine praise”*, and therefore *“essential to our community life”* (N309; 401). Further, we note that our common prayer is, *first and foremost, a “witness to the priority of rendering glory to God” ... and “a proclamation of faith,”* (III 2, par.2,3). The third component, which feeds, strengthens and prepares us for a meaningful celebration of the liturgy, deals with the Word of God: -- *Lectio Divina* -- the classic composite and unified of process of *reading-meditating-praying* of Scriptures which culminates in contemplation.

Liturgy as public worship does not lose sight of the importance of individual or personal prayer (think of pauses within the liturgy that enable this and our need for private prayer outside the hours of common prayer). But liturgy brings to focus the importance of the community of believers gathering together in worship. Liturgical prayer goes beyond personal concerns as we carry the intentions of the larger community – of the society and the world around us. Every liturgy, if it is to be whole, must be linked to God’s invitation

to respond to the needs of our neighbor (interconnectivity of liturgy and mission). I cannot celebrate the liturgy without getting involved in the mission of the Church, to proclaim the Good News to all especially to the poor and needy. Does the priest not say at the end of the Mass “*The Mass is ended, let us go forth and serve the Lord and one another*” or the call “*to proclaim*”..; “*to bring Christ to the world*”,.. and so on. The cries and groaning and pleading of the Responsorial psalms at Mass or, in fact, many of the psalms we pray mirror to us the very real cries of people today for help. And the same call to action holds – action in the form of further intercession (prayer) and action in the form of active charity.

To sum up by way of a question: what invitations do I hear at this time in the context of my experience of liturgical prayer?

Spiritual Liturgical Frontliners Today

At a time of still restricted entry to our Christian places of worship (at times allowing only 10-30 % of the space capacity of a church, when this is not closed due to health protocols), our liturgical life as Christians has expanded from parish-based liturgies to online services. This adjustment has brought worship to the wider scope of neighborhoods: to families “on location” and to other groups and communities in various places.

The creative and courageous liturgical initiatives taken at this time by some of our priests in or outside their parishes, as well as lay leaders are inspiring and deserve recognition. These are our spiritual heroes, just like the frontliners in healthcare, or those who share bread in community pantries who remind us of Jesus multiplying bread and fish to feed the hungry multitudes. These too, are extensions of the liturgy in real life and action. Yet, many for now, still have still limited access to the sacraments which are part and parcel of the liturgy, e.g., limited access to the sacrament of reconciliation (confession); matrimony (how many weddings- to-be await the sacrament of matrimony today); Baptisms at a time of travel ban, or being restricted in going out and, at times, even crossing the borders of a town; the Rite of Anointing the sick and administering the last sacraments to the dying;

and Christian burial as well, and so on. On a more positive note, we see certain parishes opening up to outdoor liturgies where people in vehicles can attend Mass and receive Communion inside their cars to “circumvent” the mandated limit to the number of people allowed inside a church. The number of priests who risk contamination in their pastoral contact with and blessing of the sick and dying in hospitals and institutions for the elderly and people with disabilities (PWDs). Like health caregivers, the ranks of the clergy in some dioceses have their own share of loss of lives among their ranks at the service of liturgy and prayer ministry. All this gives us hope and pride in a Church that will continue to serve no matter the cost.

A Cherished Benedictine Heritage

The practice of praying the psalms dates back to the early tradition of prayer. But Benedict in his 5th century.

Rule (RB) put a lot of emphasis and importance on the *Opus Dei* (the Divine Office) making this, the “praise of God”, a priority in the lives of his followers. He dealt with the Liturgy of the Hours (*Opus Dei*) in 19 chapters of his document (RB 8-19), not to mention the related chapters 20; 42; 43; 45. This, indeed, is a common priced liturgical heritage which Benedictines all over the world share in common. The RB chapters dealing with the Liturgy are commonly referred to as the *Liturgical Code* of the RB, but they do not make easy reading as they contain many detailed prescriptions of when, where and what to pray, and so on – actually, the master strokes of a gifted liturgist which Benedict was, and a great contribution towards establishing the structure of the LOH from which we benefit till today. Describing its succession of the different hours of prayer (at more or less an interval of three hours each) Benedict wisely inserted the hours of common prayer between hours of work (*ora et*

labora) providing his cloistered monks with a balanced rhythm of life through a fruitful consecration of the entire day, round-the-clock interchange of prayer and work.

Benedict's organization of common prayer is indeed a sacred heritage which Benedictines all over the world share and treasure. So, down the centuries, generations of monks, nuns, Sisters and many of their lay affiliates called "Oblates of St. Benedict" pray the Divine Office in an unbroken tradition and practice. Whereby not all communities need to meet seven times a day for choir prayer. We Missionary Benedictine Sisters who serve in schools and institutions, meet several times a day to pray especially the main hours of Lauds and Vespers, as well as one of the Day hours and Night Prayer (Compline); on special occasions we also pray the Office of Readings. Thus, Benedictine common prayer is to be understood as inseparably linked to work and activities. Both prayer and work invite us to be conscious of the Divine presence everywhere but Benedict points out that this Divine presence is especially there when praying Divine Office (RB 19:1-2). Moreover, in order to emphasize the primacy of our common prayer in our Benedictine life, he uses the phrase, to "*prefer nothing to the work of God*" (RB 43:3). It is the same word "*prefer*" that Benedict uses when he speaks of "*preferring nothing to the love of Christ*" (RB 4:21) or "*the love of Christ must come before all else* (72:11). Cf. Commentary to RB 1980, Collegeville MN)

By Way of a Light Musical Note: "Love at First Sound"

To end on a light "musical note", here is a true story of first exposure, discovery and enchantment with the beauty of the Liturgy. When our German pioneer Benedictine missionaries arrived in the Philippines (Tondo) in 1906, no doubt, they carried along with them the traditional practice of praying the Divine Office (in Latin books of their time). When they moved and settled in Singalong and gradually built up St. Scholastica's College of Manila, the "*internas*" (Boarders) and other students love to recall how some of them

would quietly sneak to the big Chapel to listen to the beautiful singing wafting through closed thick yellow curtains covering the grills which blocked off the view. They did not see the nuns but only heard the voices raised in song. They did not understand the Latin Gregorian Chant being sung. But they *listened* and fell in *love at first sound* with the beauty of the liturgy. Beauty attracts. Is it a surprise that a good number of their students embraced the same life as MBS and joined them in singing God's praises down to some successive generations that followed?

Here's to vibrant and life-giving liturgy in good times and in bad; online or in-person; with or without lockdowns, that in all things God may be glorified!

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