

Go in Peace . . .

The Relationship of Liturgy to Justice

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The liturgy does not end with the final blessing of the congregation. This is understood by most of the assembly, if only in theory rather than in practice, and despite the custom of some to dart out of the church right after receiving Communion. In one sense, our worship prepares us to encounter the risen Lord in daily life, throughout the week. It is in this encounter where liturgy and justice meet. We read in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "Day by day the liturgy builds up those within the church into the Lord's holy temple, into a spiritual dwelling for God At the same time the liturgy marvelously fortifies the faithful in their capacity to preach Christ. To outsiders the liturgy thereby reveals the church as a sign raised above the nations" (CSL, 2).

For Christians, justice is the work performed by the followers of Jesus in response to the Gospel message. More precisely, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1807, justice is the moral virtue by which we render what is due to God and to our neighbor. Justice toward other people disposes each person to respect the rights of others and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good.

I hope to show here that the liturgy provides a means to "rehearse" the practice of justice toward others, building the common good of all people. We will first look at the meaning of the dismissal heard at the conclusion of the liturgy. This brief rite points the way to the proper disposition toward all people. Then we will show why the practice of justice is intrinsic to the liturgy. This relationship is witnessed on two levels: by the way in which the community members interact during worship and through their responsibility to care for the greater society outside the Church community.

WHY IS THE CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST CALLED THE MASS?

The liturgy concludes with a blessing and a dismissal. For the dismissal, usually we hear a simple benediction, such as "May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Mass is ended, go in peace." And the people respond,



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"Thanks be to God." According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), 90, the purpose of the dismissal is "so that each may go out to do good works, praising and blessing God." It is interesting to note that, while the literal meaning of the dismissal is simply a granting of permission to leave the assembly, throughout the Church's liturgical tradition this meaning has unfolded creatively, suggesting more of a mission than a simple sending away.

For the dismissal, the early Church used the phrase *Ite, missa est* (“Go, you are dismissed”). From the Latin word *missa* comes the English word “Mass.” Here, *missa* is derived from the Latin word *dimissio*, meaning “dismissal.” *Ite, missa est* sounds somewhat similar to what we might hear today at the conclusion of a business meeting or a session of court, for example, “This meeting [or court] is adjourned.” For the early Church, it announced the end of the worship. However, sources from this era indicate that the phrase may have been more than a mere announcement. For example, according to Hippolytus, writing in the third century, the catechumens were sent away from the liturgy with a laying on of hands. Here, the dismissal itself became a religious act, a sign of the Church drawing her children near with motherly affection before sending them away. Joseph Jungmann, in his classic work, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, explains that it is in the very nature of the Church for its members to experience a refuge of grace and blessing. Such a refuge would have been especially significant for members of the Church during this time. Christians faced persecution regularly so the way home was fraught with danger and temptation. This sign of sending forth—the laying on of hands—served to strengthen them for their journey. Eventually, by the fifth century, the word *missa* came to stand for the final blessing within the liturgy and from this developed the custom of calling every service of worship a *missa* because it included a blessing. Furthermore, it was through this dismissal that the assembly was directed toward good works in the care of others.

It is a matter of finding God in all things. The sending forth commissions the Christians to transform the way they live so that Christ’s presence may be revealed. In responding to the living word of Jesus Christ, Christians conform their lives to the practice that promotes harmony for all people. Hence, Christians are committed to a practice of justice, which is the lived expression of finding God in all things.

Recently, the meaning of the dismissal has been given a stronger connection with the Church’s mission, as found in the papal exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, following the Bishop’s Synod on the Eucharist:

Ite, missa est. . . . The word “dismissal” has come to imply a “mission.” These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The people of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church’s life, taking the dismissal as a starting point. In this context, it might also be helpful to provide new texts, duly approved, for the prayer over the people and the final blessing, in order to make this connection clear. To make more explicit the relationship between Eucharist and mission.

The suggestions that the bishops made, and that Pope Benedict XVI included in his exhortation, appear to follow the lead of Pope John Paul II who, in his Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*, recommended that “the final blessing and dismissal need to be better valued and appreciated, so that all who have shared in the Eucharist may come to a deeper sense of the responsibility



The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states that liturgy is to inspire works of charity and piety so that believers will shine the Light of the World and give glory to God.

entrusted to them.” With the forthcoming revised English translation of the Roman Missal, the Church will hear new charges for the dismissal, such as “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord”; “Go forth the Mass is ended”; “Go in peace”; and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” The rite of dismissal, then, provides an outward thrust to the liturgy, clearly indicating that the Christian worship of God continues after the close of the service.

The Constitution explains that the Church’s activity extends beyond the liturgy. Indeed, before people come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and conversion. In the words of Saint Paul, “How are they to believe in him whom they have not heard?” (Romans 10:14–15). For this reason, the Church proclaims the good news of salvation to believers and nonbelievers alike. To believers, to inspire them to works of charity and piety so that they will shine like the light of the world and give glory to God for all to witness. In this way the nonbelievers will come to recognize Jesus Christ as the Son of God (CSL, 9).

THE THREEFOLD PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

The relationship of liturgy and justice becomes clear when we consider the threefold purpose of the Church. In his encyclical, *Deus Caritas est*, Pope Benedict lists these purposes with their Greek titles: *kerygma*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*, translated as proclamation, worship, and service. It is the Church’s responsibility to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ, to worship God in gratitude for creation and redemption, and to continue the salvific work of Jesus Christ in daily life. In the liturgy, the three are brought together as scripture, sacrament, and service.

We find a paradigm for this threefold scheme in the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, at the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke (24:13–35). Recalling the story, we find the two disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed companion, walking along a road toward Jerusalem. It was later in the day—the day Jesus rose from the tomb. As they walked, they



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Our worship prepares us to encounter the risen Lord in daily life.

discussed the news of the day: the rumors of Jesus' Resurrection and his appearance to several women. They are confused, not knowing how to understand this fantastic report. Then a stranger appears; it is Jesus, but they do not recognize him. In a sorrowful tone, they recount these stories to him. When they finish speaking, Jesus interprets the scripture for them, explaining how Christ is the fulfillment of the prophets. The two disciples then invite Jesus to join them for a meal and to spend the evening with them. At the table, Jesus is invited to pray the blessing over the meal. Following the Jewish custom, he takes a piece of bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the two men. Suddenly, the men have a flash of recognition: in the breaking of the bread, they recognize Jesus as the Christ. They express to each other their amazement and run outside to tell the other disciples of their experience: "The Lord has truly been raised!"

The apparition on the way to Emmaus offers a paradigm for the threefold structure of the liturgy: the word of God, the Communion meal, and the dismissal. First, the disciples come to the Lord carrying their concerns of the day. Their expectations of Jesus as the Messiah are confused. They stand in need of hearing God's word in a new way. Jesus opens the scripture for them, as a preacher would, applying the lesson of the text to the current context. Then, at the table, Jesus breaks the bread, following the fourfold action of take, bless, break, and give, the same action we find in the feeding of the multitude and at the Last Supper. The word of God disposes the disciples to a deeper awareness of the presence of God in their midst. As they move to the table, Christ's presence is rendered clear to them through the meal which he commanded his followers to celebrate. At this point, they express an awareness that their "hearts were burning as he opened the scriptures" for them. The encounter at Emmaus is more than a pedagogical moment; it is drama. As their eyes and hearts were opened, the disciples were drawn into the scripture; they became part of the story. They were able to see in a new way. They had been transformed. Finally, this good news cried out to be shared. The two disciples ran from their home to tell other disciples. In their telling of the story, and interpreting its meaning for themselves, the Christian community was born.

Those who worship the risen Christ today should leave the liturgy intent upon telling the story through the spoken word and good works. The dramatic dialogue of proclamation and response continues to reveal the presence of Christ as the hearers participate in this story.

Through this activity of word and works—the *diakonia*—the Christian community continues to thrive. As Susan Wood explains in her book, *Sacramental Orders*, before this term became associated with a specific office within the Church—the "deacon"—it referred to service in a broad sense, that is, the ministry of the whole Church. Traditionally, this service took the form of social ministry with an emphasis for the care of the poor and of those in need. This service was seen as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ. As Christ cared for the poor, and showed compassion toward those in need of healing and forgiveness, the Church as the body of Christ would manifest the presence of the Savior through its service. In this way Christians strive toward building a community of justice.

THE LINK BETWEEN LITURGY AND JUSTICE

Throughout the scriptures we find a connection between the activity of worship and the practice of justice. The Hebrew prophets as well as the apostles rail against those who practice an elaborate worship, adhering to the rules of purity while ignoring the needs of their neighbors. We hear from the prophet Amos: "I hate, I despise your festivals, / and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . / But let justice roll down like waters, / and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:21–24). For other examples from the prophets, read Hosea 6:6 and Isaiah 1:16–17.

Saint Paul echoes the prophet when he criticizes the Corinthians for their manner of worship. He focuses his criticism on the divisiveness so clearly evident within their celebration of the Lord's Supper. So rampant is their division that they make a mockery of the Eucharist. In Paul's words, "When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. . . . When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. . . . Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:18–27).

Jesus appears to sum up both the criticisms of Amos and Paul in his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. According to Jesus, they have taken the seat of authority and made a show of their religious practices. Meanwhile, they create burdens for the Jewish people. They do not practice what they preach. He chastises them: "So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but on the inside you are filled with righteousness and hypocrisy" (Matthew 23:1–36; Mark 12:138–40; Luke 11:37–52). Genuine worship consists of the praise of God and the practice of justice for the people of God.

Genuine worship is fruitful. Christian worship will be judged effective by the fruit it bears amid the greater community, and this fruit is borne through the work of justice. As it is

written, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:16). This ancient notion of producing fruit was revived by the Second Vatican Council, as mentioned earlier (CSL, 9). It is amplified by John Paul II in his letter, *Dominicae Cena* (1980), in which he explains that there is a clear connection between the community’s worship and the fruit to be borne from it, namely that what the congregation has received by faith and sacrament in the celebration of the Eucharist should affect their way of life. Strengthened by the “heavenly food,” they should live joyfully and gratefully, eager to perform good works.

Diakonia is a creative act, a work-in-progress, constructing the community. The service of God becomes a form of expression through which the modern-day disciples realize the presence of Christ in their midst and understand the meaning of Christian discipleship. This act is no mere form of self-expression, but an expression of the body of Christ, a realization of the faith of the community rooted in the teaching and work of Jesus Christ. This discipleship in service of others is heard concretely in the liturgy’s Prayer of the Faithful, in which the needs of the community are gathered and offered to God, a demonstration of the priesthood of the laity. As this prayer is included in the Liturgy of the Word, it provides a response to the word of God. The faithful take the word to heart by bringing it to life within the community.

Genuine worship relies upon the intermingling of the three duties of the Church: proclamation, worship, and service. Taken individually, these duties may be reduced to self-serving activities. For example, reading or hearing the scripture alone, without the proper response in praise of God or in works of justice, may reduce a living faith to fundamentalism. When the worship celebration is separated from its scriptural roots, it risks being tied to a medieval format or drifting into the avant garde. And when justice loses its moorings from the Church, it becomes social action rather than an act of discipleship.

CONCLUSION

From this discussion we see that the Rite of Dismissal is more of a charge than a conclusion. It is the necessary response to the proclamation of the scripture that enlivens the word of God. It is the response, as well, to the recognition of Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. The Judeo-Christian tradition proclaims the necessity of living justly, for this is how the faithful will know the presence of God. We come to worship in order to deepen our awareness of Christ in our midst. When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, he displayed the effects of this kingdom in the ordinary events of life, especially through his teaching, healing, and forgiving. He demonstrated the power of God acting in the world. He confronted the powers of the world by living for the poor and the oppressed. The Son of God is present in the least of humanity (Matthew 25). To fulfill the law of Christ, then, Christians are called to live in justice, that is, to live faithfully to the demands of their relationship with all the people of God. The liturgy cultivates our ability to recognize the living Lord, not only in the Church’s ritual and in the confines



From the days of the early Church, the final blessing directed the assembly to care for others.

of the sacred space, but to recognize him in the world, and to help others come to recognize him as well.

The Constitution explains that the goal of the Church’s work is that all who become children of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God within the community of the Church and to eat the Lord’s Supper. “The liturgy in turn inspires the faithful to become ‘of one heart in love,’ and prays that ‘they may grasp by deed what they hold by creed’ ” (CSL, 10). Through living out their lives in the practice of justice, following the example of the Lord, Christians continue to respond to Christ and recognize him in their daily existence. Given the tools of the trade by the Church, Christians set out to fashion a world in which Christ is recognized: “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the meaning of the statement “The Rite of Dismissal is more of a charge than a conclusion.”
2. How is the dismissal rite treated in your parish worship?
3. How may the liturgy bear fruit within the local community?
4. Discuss the inter-relationship of the three duties of the Church.
5. Some claim that the liturgy has nothing to do with justice. Give examples from scripture which connect the people’s worship with the practice of justice. ♦

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