

## SACRED LITURGY: A 'PLACE' OF ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

*Oscar Madzonganyika, C.Ss.R*

Sacred liturgy is the pillar of the Christian faith because it unites the church from the past, present and future. Liturgy is embraced with three main forms that are essential in the catholic faith namely Eucharistic celebrations, celebration of other sacraments, and divine worship. In all these forms, liturgy becomes an important aspect to the church especially as an encounter with God and the people who are involved. This essay shall discuss the sacred liturgy and further give an analysis of how is it important as an encounter with God.

According to *Mediator Dei*, the Papal encyclical on sacred liturgy, by its very nature liturgy is “public worship which our redeemer as the head of the church renders to the father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its founder, and through him to the heavenly father”.<sup>1</sup> The word liturgy derives from a Greek word *Leitourgia* which means public service or the work of the people. In this case it is a combination of two words namely ‘*litos*’ which means people and ‘*ergon*’ which means work.

Sacred liturgy is the fundamental aspect in the Christian faith. It keeps us in touch with the past, present, and the future proclamation of our faith. It is a unique mark that distinguishes the believers and non-believers. It is traditional and historical in nature. It is dated back to the early church that gives taste of the beginning of the Christian faith, beliefs, ways and nature of worship. The tradition in liturgy itself helps the church to uphold the Christian teachings that are Christocentric and Theocentric through participating in the work of Christ who was sent by God to redeem humanity from sin.

The Vatican II insists that the word liturgy be used in the first understanding whereby it calls for a duty to fully participate in the public worship. The active and conscious participation<sup>2</sup> of the whole assembly is crucial as dynamic liturgical celebration. The teaching of the church concerning sacred liturgy from the Vatican II shade more light that the focus on liturgy

should not only rest on the ‘assembly’ of people but should see the ‘work of God’ being effective in the assembly itself. This balance in sacred liturgy helps the church to be lively and fruitful in all aspects of public worship.

At the centre of liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist. This is regarded as the paschal mystery which signifies the continual redemptive power of Christ whenever the assembly celebrates the Eucharist. The liturgy also encompasses other special liturgical celebrations like Easter, sacraments of the church, and respectively other prayers that are crucial in the church like ‘the liturgy of the hours’.<sup>3</sup> Bringing all these aspects of liturgy together, this will then sum up the special gift of the church from God – the “Mystery of our Faith” which is the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ which is at work here and now in the church.<sup>4</sup>

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) takes us back to the Old Testament and inform us that the love of God to the Israelites was, was “but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God”.<sup>5</sup> This coming of Christ in the New Testament fulfilled the love of God which was revealed in the Old Testament to the Israelites who represents God chosen people. The coming of Christ as human through the incarnation was clearly a divine revelation from God which invites us to participate in the divine worship which was given to us by God.<sup>6</sup>

The liturgical catechesis highlighted that liturgy in the New Testament was traced from the early church where the Christians were participating in the “work of God” (Jn. 17:4). It further states that liturgy was done by the small Christian communities whereby they could gather together during the “breaking of the bread” (Acts 2:42) and in that sense they were bringing the past into the present (the paschal mystery of Christ).

The sacred liturgy is the celebration of the presence of Christ. The constitution on the sacred liturgy puts it clear that liturgy is an “exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ”.<sup>7</sup> The story of redemption in which Christ accepted the will of the father to become the sacrificial victim on the cross clearly indicated that he performed the duty of a priest – to offer sacrifice. As a result of this, whenever the priests celebrate the Eucharist, they participate in God’s mission of outpouring of his love though the

person of Jesus Christ. In this case, liturgy can be seen as the Church's participation in the work of Christ, hence, this becomes our fundamental duty to work for the church.<sup>8</sup>

According to Schmidt and Power, "liturgy is an act in which there is a true communication between God and men and his fellow men".<sup>9</sup> This encounter is an expression of faith through the act of performing in public worship. Christian behaviour is then regarded as minimal in expressing our faith. The main issue then are the words and symbols of the liturgy which unites God and the people involved. In this case, expressing our faith signifies that we believe Christ who became human and dwelt among us. Through faith we become true believers in the outpouring of God's grace through Christ's death on the cross. Hence, faith enables us to participate in the sacred liturgy, and in this we encounter God by continuing the work of Jesus in the church.

Pope Francis, addressing the assembly of the Vatican congregation, said that liturgy is the encounter of people of God with the Lord that changes the heart. He insisted that liturgy is not something which is an idea, rather it is a reality. Pope Francis went on saying that, "liturgy is a living treasure that cannot be reduced to tastes, recipes and currents but must be welcomed with docility and promoted with love, as an irreplaceable nourishment for the organic growth of the People of God".<sup>10</sup> Liturgy is not something that is personal or idealistic but an "epiphany of ecclesial communion" which is real, therefore the prayers that are offered together will gather people as one real community rather than an ideal subject.<sup>11</sup> As Pope Francis highlighted that liturgy is not an idea but the reality, it is practical to say that people encounter God himself through participating in liturgy.

The Holy Father, Francis sees liturgy as a process of conversion. People then encounter God through conversion because in all the liturgical practices that they undertake, their main focus is to be more like Christ. It is difficult for someone to be converted without encountering the cause of conversion. Therefore, by following the life of Christ who is the cause for conversion, we become the partakers of his ongoing redemptive work in the church. This will then enable us to encounter God in everyday lives

when we take an active role in sacred liturgy.

Lukken strongly believed that faith is expressed in a more original and complex way in liturgy.<sup>12</sup> He further said that, “God gives himself completely to man and man abandon himself to God in Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the liturgical complex of words and symbols”.<sup>13</sup> Sacred liturgy then becomes a radical and unique encounter with God because it surpasses all the theological argument or intellectual expressions about our faith. It is in sacred liturgy that we experience God’s presence within us through the work handed over to us by Christ himself when he ascended into heaven. Hence, the Holy Spirit is at work in the people of God during liturgical expression. This brings the unity of the Triune God who is always present in the church whom we celebrate during public worship.

Cardinal Robert Sarah said that we encounter God ecclesially. He believed that our relationship with Christ comes through the Church which he founded for that same reason. To stress the human encounter of Christ in liturgy, he quoted Pope Benedict XVI, “It is in the Church that we discover Christ, that we know him as a living Person. She is ‘his Body.’” (General Audience, “The Ecclesial Nature of Liturgical Prayer”). This explains why liturgy is important as an encounter with God. Christ himself founded the church as his spouse so that the assembly may remain in constant communion with God through sacred liturgy. As parts of the body of Christ, it is important that the people encounter God through participating and fulfilling their roles in order to complete functions the whole body – the church.

Liturgy is important as an encounter with God because it is the word itself. The words that are uttered, the music that is sung, and the art that is in the liturgical expression clearly signifies the real presence of God. Through singing for example, the assembly summarises the scriptures and many people are attracted closer to God through liturgical music. Sacrosanctum Concilium pointed out that music and art should draw the minds of the people to see God prayerfully.<sup>14</sup> Liturgical music should lift up the heart of the faithful so that they can be closer to God. The structure of the churches (art) should also be constructed with the idea of liturgy in mind. The constitution on sacred liturgy stressed that the art in the church

should promote active participation, prayer and contemplation.<sup>15</sup> This draws the people closer to Christ which is a direct encounter with God through art and music.

In summary, sacred liturgy as public worship is something that unites the church together and draw people closer to God through Christ. The Eucharist as form of liturgy enables us to celebrate the Paschal mystery of Christ who is not an idea but really present whenever mass is celebrated. The liturgical year enables us to commemorate the whole mystery of Christ and so it is fundamental in carrying out the tradition which started in the early church. Other sacraments, divine office, music and arts also sums up our duty to participate in liturgy in order to be in constant communion with God. All these put together, they allow us to encounter God because our active participation will help us to see Christ's work and to complete it. This helps people to experience God's presence who became human through the person of Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mahlahla, Joseph. Class lecture. Introduction to Liturgy. Holy Trinity College. Harare. 27 August 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium. December 4, 1963. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) Accessed: 26 September 2019. (2 § 14)

<sup>3</sup> *Know the Words, Know the Meaning, Know the Mystery. Liturgical Catechesis* No. 1, December 2010. <http://archphila.org/Roman%20Missal/pdfs/What%20is%20the%20Sacred%20Liturgy.pdf> Accessed: 01 October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Know the Words, Know the Meaning, Know the Mystery. Liturgical Catechesis*. N\* 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sacrosanctum Concilium, 5 § 2

<sup>6</sup> Sacrosanctum Concilium. SC 5 § 1.

<sup>7</sup> Sacrosanctum Concilium. SC 7 § 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Liturgical Catechesis. N\* 2.

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt, Herman and Power, David. *Liturgical Experience of Faith*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1973. P. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Gomes, R. *Vatican News: Liturgy is Encounter of People of God with the Lord That Brings Change of Heart*, 14 February 2019. P. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gomes, R. *Vatican News: Liturgy is Encounter of People of God with the Lord That Brings Change of Heart*, 14 February 2019. P. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, Herman and Power, David. P. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt, Herman and Power, David. P. 20.

<sup>14</sup> SC 112 § 1-4

<sup>15</sup> SC 124 § 3