

SACRED LITURGY AND POPULAR PIETY

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Introduction

It is worth noting that Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety involves worship and expression of Christian faith but not all activities which have such characteristics qualify to be Sacred Liturgy. Hence, it is always a problem among many to make a distinction between Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety or Devotions. To this end, this paper aims to show the distinction between Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety. Again, in this paper we will explain how Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety are related. In order to achieve this, we shall start by give the background of Sacred Liturgy. Further, explain what Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety are at length. Then, we will explain how these two are related.

The Background of the Sacred Liturgy

According to the New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, the word liturgy is currently used among Roman Catholics and some Episcopal and Protestant scholars to describe the public worship of the Church.¹ From its etymology the word comes from Greek word *leitourgia* which had secular meaning: denoted a work (*ergon*) undertaken on behalf of the people (*laos*).² Hence, public projects undertaken by an individual for the good of the community in sectors like education, entertainment or security would be called *leitourgia*. In addition, in Greek Old Testament (OT) the word liturgy was used to refer to divine worship and to the ministry of the levites.³ The word liturgy was also used in the New Testament (NT). For instance, Hebrews 8:2 used the word to refer to the priestly work of Christ: Christ is called a minister (*leitourgos*) of the sanctuary. Again, Romans 15:16, Paul speaks of himself as a minister (*leitourgon*) of Christ Jesus among the Gentiles (Fink 740-741).

In Introduction to Catholic Liturgy, Peter Kreeft believed that, on the 1st century among Greek speaking Christians the word liturgy indicated both the ministry of the church officials and any act of divine worship.⁴ But by 4th century in the Eastern Church the word was used to refer only to the celebration of the Eucharist. Again, it is believed that, for many

centuries in the Western Church the word liturgy fell out of use. Words like divine office, ecclesiastical office or sacred rites were used to denote worship services. In 18th century the word refers to cultic activities of the Church (35-39). This was confirmed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (Vat II) and in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

What is Sacred Liturgy

It is worth noting that, the Vatican Council II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy offers several descriptions of liturgy. Each illuminates a different aspect of this most important activity of the Church. Firstly, the word is an outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church⁵. Secondly, the word is considered an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ that is, by the head and his members.⁶ Hence, from liturgy grace is poured upon us and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God is achieved in the most efficacious possible way. So it is a summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed at the same time it is the fount from which all her power flows.⁷

Moreover, liturgy involves full and active participation in the celebrations of the Church which is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian Spirit (S.C.14). Further, liturgy comprises public, communal, ritual activities in which the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the sense and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs.⁸

Liturgy allows us to be drawn close to God's love. It is a means of seeking and finding perfect truth and love. Hence participating in liturgy is a response to Christ's presence in his Church. Liturgy is the official worship of the Church.⁹ As a result of that, liturgy consist of the Seven Sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours. However, liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church¹⁰ nor it is the only time when Christians offer worship to God. They are other Christian activities which are known as devotions or popular piety.

Popular Piety

Popular piety, most often called devotions, refers to those prayers and rituals that may well enjoy great popularity, but are not a part of the official liturgy of the Church. Popular piety would include devotions to Christ, to the mother of God and the saints, and the recitation of the Rosary. Further, they are those cultic of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the sacred liturgy but by forms derived from a particular nation or people or from their cultures.¹¹ Blessed John Paul II in the Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines, gave particular attention to the subject of popular piety. He said that popular piety is simply “faith deeply rooted in a particular culture, immersed in the very fibre of hearts and ideas. Above all, it is generally shared by people at large who are then a people of God.”¹²

According to Paul VI in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, he argued that popular religiosity, of course, certainly has its limits such as if misguided it focuses on non-essentials. Moreover, popular piety may end up being exaggerated such that it will be imposed to others. Again, it is prone or subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and superstitions. Hence, it frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance by faith which leads to the creation of sects and endanger the true ecclesial community. However, if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values.¹³ It entices people to have thirst for God. Again, the Directory stressed that, it makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence.¹⁴ It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion.¹⁵

The Relationship between Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety

In order to keep the appropriate distinction between devotions and Sacred Liturgy so that people will recognize that devotions should take their power from the liturgy, and lead people to the liturgy, in December

of 2001 the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued what is called the Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines. In the Directory, Pope John Paul II deciphered that:

“The correct relationship between these two expressions of faith must be based on certain firm principles, the first of which recognizes that the liturgy is the centre of the Church's life and cannot be substituted by, or placed on a par with, any other form of religious expression. Moreover, it is important to reaffirm that popular religiosity, even if not always evident, naturally culminates in the celebration of the liturgy towards which it should ideally be oriented. This should be made clear through suitable catechesis .”¹⁶

Again, the Directory puts it clear that the liturgy always enjoys primacy in the prayer life of the Church as it states that, the faithful should be made conscious of the pre-eminence of the liturgy over any other possible form of legitimate Christian prayer.¹⁷ Hence, the formation of priests and of the faithful give pre-eminence to liturgical prayer and to the liturgical year over any other form of devotion. However, this necessary pre-eminence is not to be interpreted in exclusive terms, nor in terms of opposition or marginalization.

It is worth noting that, devotions and liturgy constitute two different kinds of prayer, and that the two must always be kept distinct, keeping in mind that the liturgy always takes precedence in the life of any Catholic Christian community. This notion concurred with what the Directory propounded on when it says that,

“practices on the liturgy so as to differentiate their language, rhythm, course, and theological emphasis from those of the corresponding liturgical action, must be avoided, while any form of competition with or opposition to the liturgical actions, where such exists, must also be resolved. Thus, precedence must always be given to Sundays, Solemnities, and to the liturgical seasons and days ”.¹⁸

Conclusion

In a nutshell, The Sacred Liturgy, as it is described by Sacrosanctum Concilium as the summit of the Church's life, can never be reduced to a

mere aesthetic reality. Neither can it be considered simply as a means to pedagogical or ecumenical ends. Before all else, the celebration of the sacred mysteries is an act of praise to the Triune God's sovereign majesty, and is willed by God Himself. The term "popular piety" designates those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture. After having said this, Sacred Liturgy and Popular Piety are distinct activities in worshipping God. Hence, the correct relationship between these two expressions of faith must be based on certain firm principles, the first of which recognize that Liturgy is the center of Church's life and cannot be substituted by or placed on a par with any other forms of religious expression.

¹Fink, Peter E. *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990 pg 740

² Miller, John H. *The Nature and Definition of the Liturgy*. Washington D.C: Holy Cross College pg 20

³ Fink, Peter E. pg 740

⁴ Kreeft, Peter. *Introduction To Catholic Liturgy*. New York: Knight of Columbus Supreme Council, 2000.

⁵Second Vatican Council. *Vatican Council II: The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy. Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Revised Edition. Vatican: Dominican Publication, 1988. Pg.2

⁶“Pg 7

⁷ “Pg.10

⁸ Pg 7

⁹ Kreeft pg 48

¹⁰ S.C p.g 9

¹¹ Directory pg. 9

¹² Directory pg.11

¹³ Directory pg. 48, 13

¹⁴ Pg.13

¹⁵ Pg.14

¹⁶ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. *Directory on Popular Piety and The Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*. Jorge A. Card. Medina Estévez. ed. Vatican City: 2001. Pg. 56

¹⁷ “Pg.58

¹⁸ “Pg.59