

LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS

"I'm going to liturgy..." "Huh?" "Oh, I'm going to Church!" *Liturgy* is one of those church words: we know generally what it means but we seldom use it in our everyday conversation. More often we use words like worship, praise, Mass, and celebration. Whatever words we use, the liturgy is at the heart and center of the Church's life, it is the most important thing we do. Some might object, "No, the care of the poor is more important." Others might consider the hospitals or schools we run to be more important and needed activities. And yet it remains true that the liturgy, the worship of the Church is the most important and needed work of the Church. Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed and the font from which her power flows. This is because it is especially in the liturgy and through the sacraments that we encounter Jesus Christ. In the end, there is no greater need and no greater treasure. In the words of an old spiritual, *You may have all this world, give me Jesus.*

Liturgy is Cosmic

We never worship alone. Whenever we worship, our prayer and praise are swept up into the worship of heaven. The Book of Revelation describes this heavenly (or cosmic) liturgy of the angels and the saints: *Day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who*

lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor



and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created..." the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints...and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!...To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing

*and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev 4-5). When we gather for Mass or other liturgies, we are swept up into this glorious heavenly celebration. Can you sense this glorious truth and experience it as a reality? Our own songs blend with those of the angels and saints. We see God enthroned in glory and lift our hands in adoration and prayer, praise and wonder. *God is a good God, He is a great God.**

Liturgy is Jesus' Work

Another vision we must have about the liturgies we celebrate is that every liturgy is an work of the entire Body of Christ. What this means is that every liturgy is fundamentally a work of Jesus. He after all is the head of the Body, the Church (Col 1:17). Whenever we gather to worship the Father in Spirit and in truth it is Jesus who gathers us and it is Jesus who leads and directs our praises,. This is a fine truth indeed for no one can praise the Father like Jesus. This is also why the priest declares at every Mass, *Through him [Jesus], with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever!* The Church responds, *Amen!* For it is indeed so.

Time Machine

Yet another truth about the liturgy is that when we celebrate our salvation in Christ, we are not celebrating distant historical events. Instead, these events are made present to us.

At every Mass we are brought to the foot of the cross and there we experience the once, for all, perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the altar of the cross. We also see him rise and ascend to glory at the Father's right hand. In the liturgy we actually experience these things as events which Jesus makes present to us. They are not events long ago and far away. They are present right here and right now.

Sacraments

This helps us also understand what the sacraments are. Too often the sacraments are seen only as rituals or ceremonies. Yet they are so much more, they too, are encounters with Christ. Many centuries ago Christ walked this earth. He healed the sick, he forgave sins, he fed the starving multitudes, taught and encouraged the faithful and opened the gates of heaven. But it is no less true today. Christ still does all these things. His hand is still stretched out to feed us, forgive and heal us and he still opens the gates of heaven for us. He works all these works through his mystical body, the Church.

The sacraments are special ways in which we celebrate and experience these saving works of Jesus. In Sacrament of Baptism he opens the gates of heaven for us. He forgives us our sins in both Baptism and Confession. He still feeds multitudes through the Eucharist brings healing and consolation in the anointing of the sick. As once he encouraged and empowered his disciples with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3-4; Jn 20:22), so does he continue to do in the sacrament of confirmation. And just as he once built up his Church with new disciples and established the Church with leadership so now he does so through the sacraments of Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders. What

he did many centuries ago is no less real today. He still walks this earth in his mystical body the Church. We hear him speak to us as the scriptures are proclaimed and we still experience his saving love as his hands are stretched forth in and through the sacraments.

What is a Sacrament?

We can use the word "sacrament" in a wide sense and a narrow sense. In the wide sense, it is any person, place, thing or event which helps us to experience the presence of God. So for example, a beautiful sunset might help us consider God's glory or a holy person might remind us of God's goodness. The narrow sense of the word sacrament is however more common: *A sacrament is an outward sign, established by Christ, to give us grace.* The Church celebrates seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. In weeks ahead we will look at each of these sacraments in more detail. For today however, we can look at the definition of a sacrament and allow Baptism to serve as an illustration.

There are three parts to the definition of sacrament. First, it is "an outward sign." What this means is that there is some action that can be seen and heard. In baptism for example, the visible action is the pouring of water or the immersion of a person in water. What is heard is these words, *I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* The words are important because they give a clear meaning to what is being done. The pouring of water over a baby's head could be ambiguous. Are we baptizing the baby or merely washing the baby's hair? Thus the words make clear what is being done. The action and the words together are the "outward sign."

The second part of the definition of a sacrament is that it is "established by Christ." What this means is that each sacrament was given to the Church by Christ himself. He gave them either by an explicit teaching or implicitly by what he himself did. For example, regarding Baptism, Jesus instructed his Apostles, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*" (Matt 28:19-20) When we look at each sacrament individually in future flyers we will examine the scriptural roots of each sacrament and see how Christ established each one.

The third part of the definition of a sacrament is that its purpose is "to give us grace." Grace is a word that is rich in meaning. Fundamentally, grace is "a free gift of God that enables us to share in His very life." In each sacrament God gives us special gifts that are necessary for us to share in His life and become a new creation in Christ. In baptism for example we receive numerous graces. We are washed clean of sin, brought from death to new life, and made a child of God. We become a temple of the Holy Spirit, we begin to share in the very life of God, and we receive a heavenly inheritance, just to mention a few of the graces!

Thus the sacraments are special ways in which God blesses us. Jesus hands are still stretched forth to bless, heal forgive and save us. Through his mystical body, the Church he literally touches us for every sacrament involves touch. Whether it is the pouring of water, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, or the very reception of Him in Holy Communion, Christ touches us.