

# THE STUBBORN FIDELITY OF THE LITURGY

**BY KIMBERLY HOPE BELCHER, PH.D.**





**Participants in Notre Dame Vision attend a liturgical celebration at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart.**

Photo: MayaJoy Thodé (2013).  
Courtesy of Notre Dame Vision.

“Religious ritual that lacks connection with real life—and the questions of how we should live—is like a carefully preserved house of cards in the wind,” muses Don Saliers in his “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics Revisited.”<sup>1</sup> When Christians think about the connection between liturgy and ethics, we tend to think good liturgy will simply drive us out to the soup kitchen. This is not a bad outcome, of course, but it is superficial. If all we want is more volunteers, we could just use more economic incentives—five dollars or a free soup kitchen t-shirt for every soup kitchen volunteer! The liturgy goes beyond this consumerist solution; it changes my heart so that I can be in solidarity with God and others—an interior change that radically alters the whole world in which I live. Practice of the liturgy is about changing our minds, not on the surface (“No, on second thought, I’ll take the salad”), but at a level that affects how we see ourselves, others, the world, and God. Liturgy does not just make me feel the need to serve the poor, but to become poor. Before the soup kitchen, it leads me to examine my closet, my mirror, and my Facebook profile. In this present column, I will speak about what we cannot expect liturgical change to mean; in the last two columns for this volume, I will talk about the changed vision that we can acquire, by grace, through participation in the liturgy.

Changed vision requires a changed perspective. Something we previously saw, perhaps, suddenly seems new in its new context, and speaks to us anew. In Lois McMaster Bujold’s *The Curse of Chalion*, the main character, Cazaryl, after a divine vision, is arrested by the sight of a pebble: “It was so *dense*. So *persistent*. . . . He wondered why he had never appreciated the stubborn fidelity of matter.”<sup>2</sup> The liturgy, like the created world, has a “stubborn fidelity”: its parts wait, unappreciated, soaking into our bones, until some great joy or terror draws aside the veil over our vision and we see anew. “I remember how, in a very small rural church,” Don Saliers reflects, “the Lord’s Prayer, repeated by rote, in season and out of season, could suddenly explode with meaning for particular folks. . . . ‘Thy will be done’ . . . becomes a cry for what God intends for us, for human beings to be realized in this community, and in the life of the ones who make themselves vulnerable enough to pray it.”<sup>3</sup>

The “stubborn fidelity” of the liturgy is important, because it reminds us that effective liturgy, transformative liturgy, is not always (though it may be) emotional, high, or remote. For example, take a small practice in my household. My son, who is seven, has been having nightmares. I suggested a prayer at night to help him give his anxieties over to God, and sense God’s presence with him. He has been praying Psalm 121, and a little coda taken from Psalm 4.

There are some ways that wrong expectations could trouble him unnecessarily. Suppose he thought that praying the Psalm was supposed to eliminate his nightmares altogether (“like magic”). In that case, he would be disappointed and disillusioned when the nightmares recur every so often, and, worse, he would be developing a belief that God is arbitrary and unfeeling, sometimes choosing to help, other times to refuse help. On the other hand, suppose he believed the

prayer was “just ritual,” a psychological device to forget ordinary life and its fears and desires. That belief would keep him from opening up his heart full of anxieties and the daily experiences he is trying to understand to the prayer and the voice of God speaking through it. It might be a beautiful escape from his worries, but it would still leave him alone with them. Instead, this ancient poem is meant to open his eyes, to ask him to see the God who feels, who stands nearby:

The LORD your guard, the LORD your shade  
at your right hand.

By day the sun shall not smite you,  
nor the moon in the night. (Ps 121:5–6)<sup>4</sup>

The Psalm does not grant protection, but authoritatively reveals it: it assures human beings that God’s care is as much a fact as those inescapable cosmic bodies, the sun and the moon.

If we look at the history of the sacraments, these two misunderstandings of the relationship between liturgical prayer and ordinary life are endemic. An interpretation that Baptism works like magic suggests that, as long as the celebrant gets the ritual right, I need not change; magical baptism changes God’s relationship to me, not my relationship to God. Similarly, the idea that Baptism is mere psychological ritual absolves me of any stake in the process; the thing has been done, perhaps, to appease Grandma, but it did not mean anything to me. Either way, now I am free to pursue my own agenda and seek my own interests.

Sacraments require a little humility: we begin with the assumption that we might possibly be missing something worth seeing in the mysterious darkness of things we do not know. “Receive the light of Christ,” goes the injunction to the newly baptized as their baptismal candle is lit from the flame of the Paschal candle. This is the light which is spoken of in

Psalm 36 (NRSV): “By your light we see light.” If the Paschal flame casts its light into our lives, then even the shade, the murky dimness of everyday life, can become a witness to the Lord among us. I do not seek Baptism to get something I want, but to recognize goods I knew not. Ultimately, sacramental grace confers on us the gift of recognizing “the Lord our shade”—the God who has chosen to be one with us and to make us one with one another. The Lord is both our light and our shade, our fire and our tent, our grow lamp and our sunglasses. All things we experience can be experienced in Christ.



*Kimberly Hope Belber, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor in the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame, specializing in sacramental and liturgical theology and ritual studies.*



## NOTES

1 Don Saliers, “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics Revisited” in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, eds. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 209.

2 Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Curse of Chalion* (New York: HarperTorch, 2002), 412.

3 Saliers, “Afterword,” 223–4.

4 *The Revised Grail Psalms*. Copyright ©2010, Conception Abbey/The Grail, admin. by GIA Publications, Inc., [www.giamusic.com](http://www.giamusic.com). All rights reserved. Used with permission.