

**CELEBRATING THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY**  
**JEREMY DRISCOLL, O.S.B.**

# THE LITURGY

WORK OF THE HOLY TRINITY

# CHRIST'S WORK

IN THE LITURGY



In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1077 to 1112 are a beautiful treatment of how the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all at work in the Church's liturgy, each in a different but profoundly related way. The section is divided into smaller parts which treat in turn the roles of each member of the Trinity, beginning with the Father. In the previous article I commented on those parts that concerned the Father. In this present column I would like to treat the paragraphs titled "Christ's Work in the Liturgy," paragraphs 1084 to 1090.

Titles and subtitles are effectively used throughout the *Catechism*. They help the reader to see the structure and logic of the exposure. The subtitles of this section on Christ's role in the liturgy have subtly employed a useful technique of putting three periods either before or after the four subtitles, indicating that the four sections can form one sentence. So, "Christ glorified..." is the first section, while the second section is titled "...from the time of the Church of the Apostles..." Then, "... is present in the earthly liturgy..." And finally, "...which participates



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in the liturgy of heaven.” Seven dense paragraphs can thus all be summarized with one sentence: Christ glorified, from the time of the Church of the Apostles, is present in the earthly liturgy, which participates in the liturgy of heaven. Let us see how the *Catechism* exposes all that is contained in this loaded sentence.

It is good to recall that we are in a part of a larger section titled “The Liturgy— Work of the Holy Trinity.” Even as the exposition naturally treats Father, Son, and Spirit in that traditional order, it regularly links one member of the Trinity to the others. This is done effectively in the first subsection titled “Christ glorified. . .” The very first statement includes mention of all three persons of the Trinity in a dynamic relationship to each other, acting for the sake of the Church. The emphasis falls on Christ, the focus of this section. It says, “Seated at the right hand of the *Father*’ and pouring out the *Holy Spirit* on his Body which is the Church, *Christ* now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.” [emphasis mine] (§1084) So, Christ is the principle one who acts in the liturgy, but he does this from the “place” of his glorification, expressed here in the biblical phrase, “seated at the right hand of the Father.” From there he pours

out the Holy Spirit on the Church. Ascension and Pentecost stand behind this formulation, an idea previously established in §1076 and upon which I commented in my first article in these pages. In the Ascension, Christ is taken from our sight but only to act in a new and deeper way through the Holy Spirit in the liturgy.

There follows a definition of sacraments, which older Catholics will recognize as a slight expansion on a traditionally pithy and efficient way of saying what sacraments are. “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.” (§ 1084) The older and simpler definition that I remember from my youth was “Sacraments are outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace.” The slightly longer definition of the *Catechism* adds several dimensions to this essential core. It specifies “words and actions” as what the signs are formed of. This rightly draws our attention to both as requiring our understanding. It further emphasizes that these signs are fitted to the perception of our human nature— a useful reminder; for after all, it is God who is acting and it is good

to take note that he acts in a manner suited to us and our way of understanding. Another addition to the older simpler core is mention of the Holy Spirit along with Christ. This addendum allows for a fuller Trinitarian understanding of sacraments and will be developed in the next major section on the Holy Spirit and the liturgy.

I remember that I was in high school religion class when I first learned the word “efficacious” in connection with how the signs of the sacraments work. I thought it wonderful that there could be such a precise and loaded word for saying what kind of signs we encounter in the sacraments. I was happy to find again that word used by the *Catechism* at this point. For after all, in this human world of our words and actions, it is entirely possible that signs could flop, that they could fail to express an intended meaning. This failure does not happen with the words and actions of the sacraments. Christ is acting in them, and the power of the Holy Spirit is present; and for this reason they unfailingly deliver what they signify. Hence, the *Catechism*’s claim: “. . .they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”



The next paragraph, §1085, says precisely what that grace is. This paragraph is one of the densest and most beautifully formulated paragraphs of the entire *Catechism*. It is packed with theology, and, once understood in its fullness, it serves as a very useful formulation of what this section sets out to teach; namely, “Christ’s Work in the Liturgy.” Picking up on the words “make present” and “signify” from the definition of sacraments just given, this paragraph begins with a short sentence that says it all, even if it will need to be unfolded in what follows: “In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present.” So, the Paschal mystery is the basic content. The words and actions of the liturgy deliver that— or better said, the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit deliver that.

Then the phrase “Paschal mystery” is developed. Even without the *Catechism* it is, of course, known that this phrase basically refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus; but several things are quite useful in the way the *Catechism* sets forth this teaching. It first notes that Jesus pointed to this climax of his mission throughout his earthly life both by his teaching and his actions. But the passage then comes quickly to the center and does so by using an expression of Jesus that we know from John’s Gospel, even if that origin is not explicitly noted here. In John’s Gospel Jesus spoke of his approaching death and resurrection as being “his hour.” At the turning point of the whole gospel we read, “Before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour

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had come to pass from this world to the Father.” (John 13: 1) Relying on this and other uses of the term from John’s Gospel, the *Catechism* says, “When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father ‘once for all.’” All this is the Paschal mystery, and it is this that Christ signifies and makes present by the words and actions of the liturgy. He can make present what happened in the past precisely because it is “his Hour,” which the *Catechism* strikingly notes “does not pass away.” It explains how this could be. Precisely because it is “his Hour,” it is unique in its relationship to time. “His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past.”

That the Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in history is a crucial point. Jesus really was crucified at one particular time and in one particular place. Indeed, in this way the Son of God shows that he really did become incarnate and enter into history, so deeply in solidarity with our condition that he enters the ultimate limits that death imposes on our particular time and place. Then from one particular place and time Jesus

rises and is filled with divine glory. Resurrection bursts the bonds of time and place. “The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is— all that he did and suffered for all men— participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all.”

This is beautifully put: “transcends all times while being made present in them all.” To destroy death means, among other things, that the bonds of a particular time and place are burst open. Time and space themselves are burst open, and the risen and glorified Christ is present in them all. In the liturgy Christ signifies this (precisely this!) and makes it present. The paragraph ends with what is nothing less than a joyful announcement: “The event of the Cross and Resurrection *abides* and draws everything toward life.”

Clearly, this is a powerful formulation and teaching of “Christ’s Work in the Liturgy.” This is the first of four points developed around this theme, and it is the foundation of the others. The subsequent paragraphs in fact are for the most part simply citations from Vatican II’s programmatic document on the

liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. This too is a common feature of the *Catechism*’s style of teaching. It cites the documents of many councils but especially those of Vatican II. As such, it can be considered a kind of hermeneutic of the Council and indeed part of the task of its ongoing application. It is probably the case that, apart from theological experts, not many people actually sit down anymore and read *Sacrosanctum Concilium* straight through. But throughout the *Catechism* we encounter this document and other major documents cited again and again.

In this article I have chosen to concentrate my attention on the several paragraphs of the *Catechism* that are newly formulated. These paragraphs form a new context for the conciliar citations, which in many other places have been usefully commented upon. The *Catechism* uses these citations to unfold the single sentence that I said at the beginning could summarize this whole section: Christ glorified, from the time of the Church of the Apostles, is present in the earthly liturgy, which participates in the liturgy of heaven. I have tried to show how enormous is the beginning of this sentence: “Christ glorified. . .”

