

CELEBRATING THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

“A NEW ERA IN THE DISPENSATION OF THE MYSTERY”

BY JEREMY DRISCOLL, O.S.B.

It is well known that the reforms of the liturgy associated with Vatican II had as their goal greater participation on the part of all. Many things changed in the external celebration of the rites designed to facilitate this, and those changes have borne abundant fruit. But the renewal of the liturgy also wished to provide a fresh understanding of the meaning of the rites, a deeper theological grasp of what the words and the signs mean. And ultimately of what God *does*, what God *accomplishes* when the sacred liturgy is celebrated. Deepening this theological grasp is of immediate pastoral relevance, for it means greater interior and conscious participation in the rites themselves. This theological renewal is a work that we can take up anew, a question that continually needs our attention.



Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B. is a monk of Mount Angel Abbey in St. Benedict, OR. He is a professor of theology at Mount Angel Seminary and at the Pontifical Athenaeum Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

This is the approach that *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes, and in this regular column I would like to show how useful some of its formulations are for a deepened understanding of the liturgy. After ten brief paragraphs that deal with preliminaries (CCC §§1066-1075), the first major section on the liturgy (CCC §1076) begins with an immensely profitable paragraph for those seeking to develop a fuller, more conscious, and active participation in liturgical prayer. I want to comment on this paragraph here.

Strikingly, the section begins with the mystery of Pentecost. “The Church was made manifest to the world on the day of Pentecost by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.” The significance of such a beginning should not be missed. Pentecost is the culmination of Jesus’ Paschal mystery, where the crucified and now risen and ascended Lord lavishes on the world the Spirit with which he himself was anointed. We could say that Pentecost is the point at which Jesus wished to arrive, as it were, so that what he did in one time and place could be extended to every time and place through his Holy Spirit. This extension is the Church, that is, the assembly of all that Jesus draws to himself when he is lifted up. (See, Jn. 12:32).

After Pentecost, Jesus is active in a new way through his Spirit: “The gift of the Spirit ushers in a new era in the ‘dispensation of the mystery’— the age of the Church...” The expression “new era” is especially helpful, for it indicates that our communion with Christ and conformity to him will not come about through some imaginative leap backwards in time. We are not trying to picture ourselves encountering a first-century Jewish rabbi. No, this new era is a realm appropriate to the new condition; namely, his glorification at the right hand of his Father. This new era is “... the age of the Church, during which Christ manifests, makes present, and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, ‘until he comes.’”

So this is where and how and why the liturgy appears. Jesus, having lived the particular circumstances of a single earthly existence that culminated in his crucifixion, is now glorified and will come again in glory. Between the one coming and other, as the many centuries pass, Christ is constantly doing three things through the liturgy. He is *manifesting* and *making present* and *communicating* to every time and place his work of salvation accomplished in one time and place.

These three actions are consequential for our active participation in the liturgy. They describe what we are to discern and grasp. They are a clue to the meaning of all the words and gestures and signs. In fact, among everything that happens in the liturgy, it is nothing less than Christ himself at work. Through the liturgy’s words, gestures, and signs, the mighty deed of Christ’s death and resurrection is displayed before us (*Christ manifests*) as the very content of liturgy. By means of words, gestures, and signs the past event becomes a present event (*Christ makes present*). Through them all, the power of the saving deed is delivered to us in such a way that we are saved by it (*Christ communicates*).

But why is it that this should happen through the liturgy? “In this age of the Church Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way appropriate to this new age.” In fact, liturgy is a consequence of Jesus’ glorification, and it is “appropriate” precisely because the realm of words, gestures, and signs pulls us into the domain of faith, without which we could not detect his presence as risen Lord. For “risen” does not mean that Jesus is simply “up and running again” and so has returned to the ordinary human

“AND I, WHEN I AM
LIFTED UP FROM THE
EARTH, WILL DRAW ALL
PEOPLE TO MYSELF.”

JOHN 12:32

existence that he shared with us before his Paschal Mystery. If that were all it meant, then one would have to—I can only speak somewhat facetiously—go to Jerusalem and stand in a long line waiting to meet Jesus. But no. “Risen” means filled with divine glory. “Risen” means a body once crucified now placed in a realm entirely beyond death. “Risen” means present in the Spirit, filling all material things with a sacramental presence in which matter is used to communicate this new life, yet never in such a way that the fullness of this life is available here and now. This is the “new way appropriate to this new age.”

“He acts through the sacraments in what the common Tradition of the East and the West calls ‘the sacramental economy’...” “Economy” here means a divine arrangement of things; in this case, God’s own arrangement that the life of the risen Lord should be delivered to the Church through the sacraments, that is, through the material elements of the liturgy. The next part of the sentence says it this way: “... this is the communication (or ‘dispensation’) of the *fruits* of Christ’s Paschal mystery in the celebration of the Church’s ‘sacramental’ liturgy.” The fruits

of Christ’s Paschal mystery— his death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit are all for our sake. All this is communicated to us, “dispensed” to us, in the celebration of the liturgy. The fruit of Christ’s Paschal mystery is the Church herself, which comes into being as the fruits are communicated through the words, signs, and gestures of the liturgy.

Rightly then, we must attend to the external forms of the liturgy and enact them well. The ultimate reason for this is not in order to pull off some event, which in virtue of the force of its performance, moves the participants, pleases them, and stirs them up. Rather, these external forms are a divine economy through which Christ manifests himself as present and acting to save us. Every time the liturgy is celebrated, Jesus, in effect, is present to the assembly saying, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you know him because he remains with you and will be in you.” (Jn. 14:16-17).

