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An Essay on Symbolism and Liturgical Celebration

ANSCAR J. CHUPUNGO, O.S.B.

This essay is an attempt to examine the symbolic character of the liturgical celebration. The exposition centers on the celebration itself, the persons celebrating and the way they celebrate. To appreciate the full impact of liturgical symbolism, it is helpful to keep before us the ideal picture of a liturgical celebration. This we find neatly described in the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 41, of Vatican II: "The Church reveals herself most clearly when a full complement of God's holy people, united in prayer and in a common liturgical service, especially the Eucharist, exercise a thorough and active participation at the very altar where the bishop presides in the company of his priests and other assistants." In this plenary gathering the different symbolic elements acquire vividness and transparency: the assembly, the ministers, the outward form of the celebration, the festive activity.

By liturgical symbol I mean a cultic cultural sign which has undergone spiritualization or stylization, and which possesses an analogical similarity to the reality it symbolizes. (1) To interpret the message of each symbol is not easy. One has to take into account both the cultural milieu of the symbol and the subsequent interpretations given by Christian writers and the liturgy itself. In the final analysis, of course, every liturgical symbol and the totality of liturgical symbols embody and express the Church's participation in the paschal mystery of Christ. And since the Church is Christ's sacrament to the world, her liturgical

1. A. Verheul: *Introduction to the Liturgy* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1968) pp. 102-16.

celebration also conveys something to human society in its political, social and cultural aspects.

This essay — I do not presume to call it a study — is necessarily schematic. In these few pages I do not pretend to exhaust the subject, although I try to present a general view of it. And needless to say, the conclusions I draw are provisional, because in a pluralistic and constantly changing world symbols will always be provisional.

THE LITURGICAL ASSEMBLY

Some laymen were once asked what impressed them most during the Sunday parish liturgy. The question was quickly answered: the burning candles, the crucifix, the imposing altar. Someone charmingly added: the priest! It took some time before they realized that what should have impressed them most was the assembly of people coming from all walks of life, old and young, rich and poor, all united in prayer.

In what sense is the liturgical assembly a symbol? A significant statement of Vatican II on the subject is found in SC art. 41 cited above. This article says in effect that the liturgical assembly is the sign, the manifestation, the “epiphany” per excellence of the Church. Surely, the Church becomes visible also through her apostolic endeavors and humanitarian concern, but the Council underlines the importance of the liturgical assembly in manifesting the one Church of Jesus Christ. The Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, art. 26, insists that in communities presided over by the bishop, Christ is present, and “by virtue of him the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church gathers together.” Although the fulness of the sign consists in the gathering of the entire community over which the bishop presides in the company of his priests and other ministers, the Council takes note that also in parish communities the visible Church constituted throughout the world is in some way represented. (2)

Thus, the liturgical assembly is more than an ordinary symbol; it assumes a certain dynamism, a transforming force, which enables it to bring about the reality it signifies. In it the Church

realizes herself as the community of Jesus Christ and manifests herself as such to the world. (3) We can rightly say that the liturgical assembly is in the category of sacramental signs, not only because it is the original form of the Church as Christ's sacrament, but also because it brings this sacrament to its visible reality: it effects what it signifies.

To grasp the symbolic character of the liturgical assembly, it is necessary to refer to the term *ekklesia* which the early Christians borrowed from the Septuagint's translation of the *qahal Yahweh* to signify their own cultic gathering. Until the third century the term invariably meant the solemn assembly of Christians gathered for common worship. (4) Christian tradition later extended the use of the term to both the place of gathering and the society of the faithful at large (parish, local, universal or national Church), but the truth remained unspoilt: the *ekklesia* is primarily the liturgical assembly.

On the basis of this assertion the liturgical assembly stands as the symbol of God's call to salvation. The Church is a convocation on the initiative of God himself. It is he who calls and gathers his people and builds them up, says 1 P 2:5, "into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Verse nine of this early baptismal catechesis alludes to the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, the land of darkness, and makes it clear to Christians that they are the new Israel, convoked by God out of darkness into his marvellous light, in order that they too — like the sons of Israel — may declare his wonderful deeds. Everytime the people of God gathers for worship, the call of God becomes the visible reality of the *ekklesia tou Kyriou*.

But since the call to salvation is basically a call to faith and conversion, the liturgical assembly is the symbol of the community God has called to faith and conversion. That is why, the

3. A. G. Martimort: "Théologie de la célébration liturgique" in: *L'Eglise en Priere* (Tournai: Desclée, 1965) pp. 9—293.

4. G. Dix: *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1960) pp. 19—20; A. Verheul, *op. cit.*, pp. 96—101.

liturgy required the faith of the assembly ("sacraments are sacraments of faith"). There is no true *ekklesia* where there is no faith. And only those who have sealed their faith and conversion by baptism can celebrate the sacraments of faith. This explains why liturgical tradition kept off the catechumens from the liturgy of the Eucharist. (5)

In another sense the liturgical assembly is the symbol of the Church which has received the commission to proclaim the faith and give witness to it before the world. 1 Cor 11:26 says: "Until the Lord comes, everytime you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death." The eucharistic celebration, like other liturgical celebrations, is the proclamation of the mystery of faith centering on the death and resurrection of Jesus. By proclaiming it the liturgical assembly realizes the nature of the Church as a witnessing community. Indeed, the liturgical assembly is itself the proclamation made daily by the Church whereby she reaches out to the world and becomes "a sign lifted up among the nations under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together." (6) For the call of God is addressed to all men. The *ekklesia* is a universal convocation.

From a sociological standpoint, the liturgical assembly is the symbol, not only of the *koinonia* of Christians, but also of the universal unity and fellowship of men. In it we see the convergence of men and women, each with his personal interest and pursuit in life, mostly strangers to one another, and yet for the duration of the celebration allow themselves to be called brothers and sisters, and to experience together a sense of belonging to a community which is transitory and yet recurring, personal in one sense and anonymous in another. Unity is experienced at its deepest level, because it goes beyond races, social status and ideologies. It is the unity of faith. In the liturgical assembly there is no discrimination of persons: the poor sit with the rich, the oppressed with the powerful, the ignorant with the learned, the stranger with the celebrities, the social outcast with the

5. Cf. G. Dix, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

6. SC art. 2.

respectable class. (7) Already by the middle of the second century St. Justin the Martyr attested that on Sundays the Eucharist was celebrated by "a common assembly of all those who live in cities or in outlying districts." (8) Without any distinction, everyone who professed faith in Christ came for the celebration. As in the Church of the Apostles, concern for the poor and the underprivileged characterized the celebration. (9)

The liturgical assembly is thus an eloquent symbol of the unity of all men in the diversity of race, culture and social status. It invites human society to make a collective effort to realize the divine call to faith and conversion which expresses itself in an unequivocal affirmation of human equality, in the elimination of social injustice, and in the establishment of the brotherhood of men and nations. As no person can be excluded from the love and concern of society, so no race can be an outcast of the human family. In this sense the liturgical assembly, like a prophetic symbol, will always contain an element of "protest" against the rugged individualism of men and nations and against narrow ideologies. This it does, however, not by caricaturing what is evil, but by portraying what is ideal.

THE HIERARCHICAL ORDER OF THE CELEBRATION

A salient trait of every liturgical celebration is its hierarchical order: a president in the company of his assistants and an assembly with its corresponding role. This feature distinguishes the liturgical community from a crowd, and gives it an organic and harmonious character. It is so essential, that to usurp the function of another or to abdicate one's own is to disturb the order of the celebration and to ignore its social dimension. Order is vital to

7. Cf. *SC* art. 32; J. Gelineau: "Il mistero dell'assemblea" in: *Nelle Vostre Assemnee* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1970), pp. 78-79; A. G. Martimort, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

8. *I Apol.* c. 67.

9. Justin writes that after the celebration a collection was made for the widows and orphans. Cf. *PO* art. 6 which states that if the Eucharist "is to be sincere and thorough, it must lead to various works of charity and mutual help, as well as to missionary activity and to different forms of Christian witness."

the life of any human society. It is not merely aesthetic; it prevents confusion, anarchy and chaos. In the *ekklesia* each one has his role to play for the building up of Christ's earthly body, the Church. (10) In the rather stern words of SC art. 28: "In the liturgical celebrations, whether as a minister or as one of the faithful, each person should perform his role by doing solely and totally what the nature of things and liturgical norms require of him." To some this may sound purely juridical. In reality, however, there is more theological depth in it than one may suspect.

Hierarchical celebration was most probably the practice of the Church in Jerusalem which was governed by a resident apostle, James, with his council of elders, the sanhedrin. (11) Rv 4:2-4 seems to imply this form of celebration presided over by a bishop who was surrounded by twenty-four elders. But it was St. Ignatius of Antioch who advanced the cause of hierarchical liturgy and who made it the norm: "There is one altar, as there is one bishop with the presbyters and deacons." More apodictic is what he wrote in another letter: "All should respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, just as they respect the bishop as representing the Father and the priests as the council of God and the college of the apostles. Apart from these there is nothing that can be called an *ekklesia*." (12) Too often these words have been taken in a juridical sense. Certainly, St. Ignatius could not be clearer in his concept of the hierarchical organization of the Church, but in what context did he see it? Almost always he associated bishops, presbyters and deacons with the liturgical ministry in the *ekklesia*, a technical term he used to describe the Christian community at worship. For it was in the liturgy that the ministers of the Church fulfilled in the fullest sense of the word the "service of service." Inspired by the setup of Jerusalem, St. Ignatius regarded the bishop as representing the heavenly Father, the presbyters as councilors and college

10. Cf. 1 Cor 12:30.

11. J. Mohler: *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood* (New York Alba House, 1970) pp. 33-107.

12. *Tral.* c. 3; cf. *Philad.* c. 4.

of the apostles, and the deacons as those who perform the *diakonia* of Jesus Christ, for he came to this world as a servant. (13) This unusual, though perfectly logical, description of roles should not subtract anything from the liturgical *diakonia* of bishops and presbyters. It is, however, a service whose nature is quite different from that of the deacons: the bishop presides, as the Father presides over his household, while the presbyters (the elders) sit around him in council. To preside is to exercise authority and leadership, and both mean service to the community. By offering or causing the Eucharist to be offered in the name of the people, by performing his office of teaching, admonishing, supervising, guiding and sanctifying the gathered *ekklesia*, the bishop renders the service of service to the servants of God in a most sublime manner. (14)

Thus, the hierarchical order in the liturgy does more than point to the necessity of order in the worshipping community. It reveals the Christian concept of authority as one of humble service to the community. At the same time, it speaks to the Church about her duty to foster, direct and unify the diverse charisms of the Holy Spirit in her midst. It reminds her of the primacy of the liturgical ministry, of her collegial nature, and of the need to share the burden of responsibility and leadership among her members.

But the Church is a sign to the world. Hence, her hierarchical liturgy has also something to convey to the political community. A symbol of a well-ordered human society at worship, it stands as a symbol of an organized political society. The analogy can be developed further. As in the liturgical assembly, so also in the body polity each person — official or ordinary citizen — has his function to perform. Usurpation or abdication of responsibility destroys the community. Order and harmony means

13. Cf. *Didascalia II*, 28, 4: "The priests are honored as apostles and advisers of the bishop and the crown of the Church." The imagery of "crown" could have come from the fact that the presbyters sat around the bishop.

14. L. Swain: *Service and Ministry in the New Testament* in: *The Clergy Review* (May 1970) pp. 342–50. The same can be said of those who represent the bishop in the liturgical assembly. Cf. *PO* art. 5.

that the authority of the State does not overstep its competence, and that the community does not ignore its duty to cooperate and obey.

The picture of a bishop performing his function in the company of his council of presbyters is a model of the right exercise of human authority. It means that power cannot be totalitarian and despotic, nor based on caprice and personal interest. Authority must learn to listen, to seek advice, to accept criticism: it has to be collegial, or better still, democratic. Most important of all, the hierarchical order in the liturgy signifies that true leadership consists in fostering, directing and unifying individual and collective efforts for the common good. And finally, to complete the analogy, the respect and dignity with which the liturgy clothes the hierarchical ministry shows to the community that human authority is sacred, because ultimately it comes from God.

The symbolism is clear, but probably that prophetic "protest" so characteristic of worship is weak, because it is based almost exclusively on history and patristic thought rather than on actual facts.

THE LITURGICAL STRUCTURE: WORD AND SACRAMENT

Less conspicuous, although at the center of Christian life and theology, is the symbolism the structure of the liturgy has to offer. In every liturgical celebration today we can easily distinguish two aspects: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the sacrament. In sacramental liturgies the distinction does not mean separation, for they are so intimately linked together that they form one act of worship. (15) In the eucharistic celebration, for example, the one table of the Word of God and the body of Christ is set for the instruction and nourishment of the faithful. (16) Just as the dichotomy "Word-Sacrament" is a false one, so is any separation between the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Sacrament. (17) For the saving Word of God is communi-

15. *SC* art. 56.

16. *Instructio Generalis Missalis Romani* II, 8; *SC* 33.

17. L. Swain: *Apostolate and Priesthood in the New Testament* in: *The Clergy Review* (Sept. 1970) pp. 679—91.

cated to men by word of mouth and by symbolic action or sacramental rite. And both fall under the category of Word of God, or conversely in patristic thought, both fall under the category of sacrament. Likewise, just as the kerygmatic function of a minister would be frustrated if it did not culminate in sacramental ministry, so would the celebration of the Word without the celebration of the sacrament, for this renders the Word of God intensely alive and present. That is why, the Synod of Bishops in 1971 declared that "a separation between the two would divide the heart of the Church to the point of imperilling the faith," (18)

On the basis of this reflection we can say that the liturgical structure "Word-Sacrament" expresses the fundamental truth that he who has heard the Word of God and received it in his heart must hasten to the celebration of the sacrament. On the day of Pentecost those who heard the Word of God "were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ. . ." (19) As SC art. 10 very aptly says: "The goal of apostolic works is that all men who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in her sacrifice and to eat the Lord's supper." What takes place in liturgical celebrations when the Word is first proclaimed and the sacrament is afterwards celebrated is a symbolic schematization of the process of God's encounter with men. For before men can come to him, they must first be called to faith and conversion. And since faith comes through hearing, the Word of God must first be preached. (20) In the liturgy of the Word "God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his gospel." (21) God takes the initiative of revealing and communicating himself. Through the power of his Word men are led to the experience of his love. Yet such an experience is neces-

18. *Ministerial Priesthood II* (Pasay City: St. Paul's Press, 1971).

19. Ac 2:37-38.

20. Rm 10:17; cf. SC art. 9.

21. SC art. 33.

sarily incomplete: it calls for a fuller realization in the celebration of the sacraments "whereby the Word is brought to fuller effect, namely communion in the mystery of Christ." (22).

The liturgical structure "Word-Sacrament" is symbolic of the sacramental character of man's communion with God. For the Church this means that her experience of God, including the mystical kind, must find its fulness in the liturgical celebration. The prayer of St. Ambrose with its poetic radiance can be said only by one who has understood and lived this truth: *Facie ad faciem te mihi, Christe, demonstrasti; in tuis te invenio sacramentis.* (23)

THE EXTERNAL SIGNS OF THE CELEBRATION

The liturgical celebration is accomplished outwardly through visible signs which are either material things (water, bread, wine, oil) or bodily actions (immersion, laying on of hands, breaking of bread, eating, drinking, anointing). We shall limit our discussion to the latter forms, for being in the category of action, they constitute the liturgical celebration as a festive activity. It is understood that some actions belong to the essence of sacramental celebration (pouring of water in baptism, eating the eucharistic bread), while others do not (standing, blessing). (24)

But whether these external actions are sacramental or not, they are not mere rubrics or empty rituals. Each has a symbolic value. The precise meaning of each of them is not always obvious to the man of today, and probably even to the man of yesterday. For the provenance of most of them can be traced only to the Jewish and the Greco-roman civilizations. Historical research has yielded the meaning of several ritual actions which were originally either purely pragmatic or cultural, but subsequently interpreted in a spiritual or allegorical manner by the Church

22. *Ministerial Priesthood*, op. cit.

23. *Apol. David XII*, 58.

24. One can also speak of a rite that does not belong to the essence of the sacrament, although it is an *integral* part of it, e.g., imposition of hands preceding the anointing in Confirmation and in the anointing of the sick. Cf. *Apost. Const. Divinae consortium naturae*, and *Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick* of Vat. II, II 5.

Fathers and the liturgy itself. Thus, the Jewish practice of mixing a little water with wine (for purification?), a custom which found its way into the Christian Eucharistic, was explained by St. Cyprian as the union of the people (signified by water) with Christ (signified by wine). (25) The symbolism is retained by the liturgical text. Thus, also the *lavabo* in the roman rite was originally of practical necessity for the bishop and his assistants who received the offerings of the faithful. Under the influence of both the oriental and gallican tradition, it was imbued with the sense of spiritual purification. (26) The solemn procession of neophytes as they walk towards the altar after baptism was, for St. Ambrose and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a symbol of their entry and participation in the heavenly liturgy. (27) Even the bodily posture of standing up during the prayer of the faithful and the eucharistic prayer has a deeper significance than mere "gymnastics." St. Justin Martyr mentions that after the homily "we all stand up together and offer up our prayers," that is, the prayer of the faithful. (28) We read in the eucharistic prayer of Hippolytus of Rome: "We give you thanks, because you found us worthy to stand (*adstare*) before you and fulfill our priestly service." (29) In its cultural and cultic milieu the gesture symbolized prayer offered by a priestly people and the priestly minister. Examples can easily be multiplied. (30)

25. *Epist.* 63, 13. Actually, St. Cyprian who was combatting the Aquarians did not defend the use of water but of wine in the Eucharist.

26. N. M. Denis-Boulet: "Analyse des rites et des prieres de la Messe" in: *L'Eglise en Priere*, op. cit., pp. 382-84.

27. *De Myst.* 8, 43; *De Sacr.* IV, 2.5., St. Gregory writes: "The procession which you will make immediately after baptism before the great throne is the prefiguration of the glory on high. The chant of the psalms, with which you will be received, is the prelude to the hymns of heaven. The candles you hold in your hands are the sacraments of the escort of lights from on high, with which we shall go to meet the bridegroom, our souls luminous and virgins, carrying the lighted candles of faith." *On Holy Passover*, PG XXXVI 425A.

28. *I Apol.* c. 67.

29. *Trad. Apost.* 4; Cf. Roman Canon: *et omnium circumstantium*; *Sacr. Mozarab.*: *sacrosancto tuo semper adstabat altario*.

30. Cf. J. Daniélou: *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961); J. B. Molin: "La Preghiera dell' assemblea, Atteggiamenti e gesti" in: *Nelle Vostre Assemblee*, op. cit., pp. 315-32; H.

There are other outward signs which are of a more universal nature, like eating and drinking together in cultic celebration to signify man's sharing in divine life or power, and his fellowship with the living and the dead; or bowing, genuflecting, prostrating to express one's inner attitude of reverence and worship. Even in these signs, however, there exists a certain relativity depending on different cultures. Our "cup of salvation," because it contains wine, is a "cup of malice" for the people of Thailand who regard drinking wine as something vicious. On the other hand, the Chinese act of obeisance, called the *kotow*, in which one kneels and bows profoundly until the forehead touches the floor, was a source of scandal for the Dominican missionaries in China when they saw the Jesuits and the Chinese converts perform it before the coffins of the recently deceased and before the ancestral tablets.

Looking at the totality of these signs, we realize how dependent they are on time and culture. In the concrete this means that their symbolism is necessarily relative, save for some universal constants, and hence, provisional. If we do not accept this conclusion, we run the risk of failing in the effort to indigenize the liturgy particularly in the non-western world.

Another risk that we shall have to face is that of fighting a lost cause against the tide of secularization. This is a vast and complex topic, perhaps the correct word is colossal, that the only honest option open to an essay like this is to indicate a few thoughts for ulterior reflection.

I take "secularization" here in its more positive aspect, and consequently, as a form which is in no way prejudicial to Christian faith. In this sense, one can speak of secularized and secularizing Christians for whom such a dichotomy as "secularization (God is dead)- religion (God is alive)" is utterly false. Positive secularization can be described as a movement to liberate the scientific, cultural and technological activity of man from the control of the hierarchical Church authority. In the realm of the liturgy, it seeks to acquire the independence or the

option to use the cultural signs and symbols proper to the different civilizations of today in the public worship of the Church. (31)

For secularized Christians some or most of liturgical signs probably mean nothing more than an anecdote from a bygone age, irrelevant to the secular city, though interesting for the study of culture and history. However, it seems to me that the criticism often hurled at the "otherness" of liturgical symbols, that is to say, at their traditional sacral form, ultimately stems from the loss of a sense *for* historical continuity, of a sensitivity *for* traditional values and the playful revelry of the past generations. When men lose their ability for fantasy, they pick up the banal and the trite to express their inner self, and despise the traditional as irrelevant.

But one may not altogether ignore the criticism of secularized Christians, as if they came from some "angry young men" or adolescents seeking to be recognized by their elders. For in reality, we have to concede in all fairness that until now many of our liturgical symbols are either too monolithic or totally enveloped in the mist of an exaggerated sacrality.

This in no way calls to question the validity of our liturgical symbols, particularly those of a more universal nature (the constants), for the contemporary man. But it shows that what we need to do in order to establish a dialogue is to despoil the symbol of its sacral form, to demythologize it, so to speak, in order to discover its basic nature as a constant. Through this process it can become obvious to the secularized Christian that certain traditional symbols of worship are indeed essentially contemporary and universal. Thus, for example, if the baptismal act is reduced to its original meaning, it can be clearly identified as an "immersion-bath." If one analyzes more closely some of these "sacred" signs of ancient days, one will realize that underneath their sacral appearance are "secular" activities of today, endowed, it is true, with spiritual significance, but still basically

31. *The Challenge of Secularization* in: *The Uppsala Report 1968* (Zürich: CVB-Druck, 1968) pp. 79–80.

secular and contemporary. For what is more secular than bathing, than feasting, eating and drinking?

In the liturgy we meet not so much with the fact that the secular is assumed into the realm of another world, as with the stunning truth that God shines and becomes transparent in human activity. The religious expresses itself through the secular, the sacred through the profane. The form whereby this "epiphany" is realized is a cultural and sociological, more than a theological and liturgical question. Every age and every culture can embody the presence of grace. If this principle of positive secularization is admitted, the choice of one or other secular and contemporary activity to symbolize God's encounter with modern man is of secondary concern.

THE LITURGICAL CELEBRATION AS FEAST

Before entering into an analysis of this topic, it is important to preface it with some observations. The Christian liturgical celebration consists in the *anamnesis* of Christ's paschal mystery. This memorial is accomplished principally through the proclamation of the Word of God and the sacramental action which the Word vivifies and renders salvific. This is the content of the liturgical celebration. The external form whereby the content is expressed is contingent on the circumstances of culture, history and the theological climate in the Church. One generation may carry out the *anamnesis* in the simplicity and intimacy of a household celebration, without the external manifestations of a public kind. Another, imbibing the political condition of the people, may celebrate the mystery in the splendor of a Constantinian basilica. Or in the playful fantasy of another age, the same mystery may be adorned with the gaiety of the baroque period. History has taught us that over-emphasis on either the content or the form alone has had its disadvantages. Balance remains the norm.

If there is anything in the liturgical celebration which expresses, and therefore symbolizes, what is peculiarly human, it is the aspect of celebration. Unfortunately, this aspect is not

always visible, because the external form of the celebration itself often creates the impression of anything but a feast. Austerity, lack of human warmth, absence of hospitality, repression of spontaneity, formalism: all this conjures to eliminate the mood for celebrating. Today not a few are seized by a nostalgia for something like those solemn eucharistic celebrations in small Philippine towns some twenty five years ago, when a music band went around the town to invite the people to church, an amateur chamber orchestra accompanied the *missa brevis* of Mozart (!), and the elevation of the host was hailed by fireworks, churchbells and the jubilant playing of the national anthem. There was exuberance and abandon, because the people took the idea of celebration to heart. We can criticize the flamboyance of the baroque liturgy, because it disregarded active and intelligent participation, it magnified the external and dwarfed the essential. But it has the merit of displaying the meaning of the liturgy as a festivity. Its architecture transformed the church into God's festive salon. Its music, ornamentations and social ostentations celebrated the grandeur of the King on his court.

The lack of festive mood in the liturgy cannot be blamed on the nature of the liturgy itself, but on external circumstances, like the early Christians' sheer reaction to the pompous pagan festivals. Comparing the simplicity of the baptismal rite with the *suggestus*, *apparatus* and *sumptus* of pagan rituals, Tertullian exclaims: "With so great simplicity, without pomp, without any considerable novelty or preparation, finally without expense, a man is dipped in water and washed amid the utterance of a few words." (32) Certain forms of Christian spirituality with emphasis on mystical or monastic contemplation also contributed to the decline of external festivity. In the liturgical reform of Dom Guéranger of Solesmes (1805-75), the patristic *theoria* lost its *pathos*, jubilation was restrained and finally restricted to the realm of the spirit serenely gazing at a still-life.

Vatican II, however, insists that the liturgy is a celebration, that the sacraments are not merely administered but celebrated,

that the Eucharist is a festive banquet, that the fifty days of Easter are like one day of continual rejoicing. In what sense is the liturgy a celebration, or to use a simpler word, a feast? It will be extremely helpful to refer here to such authors as Josef Pieper (33), Frederic Debuyst (34), and particularly Harvey Cox (35). A feast is a special time set aside for celebrating some events or observing the memory of a God or a hero and his deeds. Through festive activity man is able to "incorporate into his own life the joys of other people and the experience of previous generations." (36) Although festivity is linked more closely to anamnesis, it also looks forward to the future by celebrating coming events. There are three ingredients of a festivity, according to Harvey Cox. The first is "conscious excess" which means revelry, overdoing things on purpose, a short vacation from convention, an ability to delight in the here and now. The second is "celebrative affirmation" which entails "saying yes to life," even in moments of tragedy. Through this man affirms both the goodness and wretchedness of things, and experiences peace and joy at their deepest level. The third is "juxtaposition" which means that the festivity is noticeably different from everyday life. (37)

It does not take any laborious effort to convince anyone that, at least theoretically, the phenomenology of festivity is verified in the liturgical celebration. We know almost by heart that the liturgy is a special time set aside for celebrating the memorial of Jesus Christ and his saving deed, the paschal mystery. By taking part in the feast, the Christian is enabled to appropriate the Christ-event into his own experience, and thus to obtain salvation. Although the celebration is primarily a remembrance, it does not focus exclusively on the past, but in hope and expectation looks forward to the endless festivity in heaven.

33. *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1965).

34. *Modern Architecture and Christian Celebration* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968).

35. *The Feast of Fools* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

36. H. Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

37. *Id.*, pp. 22-24.

The heavenly feast becomes transparent in the earthly, the future overlaps with the present. The ingredients of festivity are also present: conscious excess (even if there is a trend to lay aside vestments and symbolic gestures as unnecessary), celebrative affirmation (Good Friday is a day of celebration particularly in the charming Byzantine rite, as is the funeral of a Christian) (38), and juxtaposition (although the question is being raised whether a daily Eucharist or the patristic "everyday is a feast" is the normal rhythm of festivity). There is another element which needs to be mentioned here even if but briefly: the festive speech or language. The Fathers and the latin liturgical texts, for example, display a wealth of vocabulary and expression to extol the meaning of the feast, and to attract the people to its beauty and sublimity. Think of those magnificent leonine *orationes* or those impressive Easter vigil homilies of St. Augustine.

The liturgy is a feast. What does it mean to Christians? For a people ever conscious of its redemption, what else can it be but the joyful affirmation of the power and mercy of God in Jesus Christ? It means gratitude, remembrance, anticipation. It tells him who has put his trust in Christ that human life has taken on a new dimension — that of perpetual rejoicing. The gloom of pain and oppression persists, but the Christian does not evade it. Instead, as he celebrates the feast, he affirms it as his participation in the death of Jesus. That is why, filled with faith's inner peace and joy, the Christian can truly celebrate with abandon, and say yes to Christ and to life. Thus his celebration is the image of the endless paschal festivity of Christian life. Or as St. Gregory of Nyssa exquisitely says, referring to the Easter week festivity: "It is meant to be a symbol for those who celebrate spiritually throughout the whole week of their lives, so that all the days of their lives they may celebrate one bright and shadowless Passover." (39) The liturgical celebration is the summing up in symbols of all that Christ means to his people, of all that the people means to Christ, and of all that the people mean to each

38. Cf. J. Potel: *Les funérailles une fête? Rites et symboles* (Paris: Cerf, 1973).

39. *On Holy Passover I*, PG XLVI 621AB.

other. It is as SC art. 10 brilliantly calls the "summit" and the "foundation" of the entire Christian activity and life.

The man of today, immersed in the vicissitudes of production, professional competition and computerized efficiency, can rediscover in the liturgical feast the lost image of himself as *homo festivus*, as a person created for celebration. It tempts the *homo ludens* to take up once again the games he used to play, the fantasy and revelry on which he used to feast. For what is human life but a festivity? And what is festivity but a playful fantasy? To a world that has forgotten how to celebrate, that finds boredom in its entertainments, the liturgical celebration with its qualities of excess, affirmation and juxtaposition — to use Harvey Cox's terminology — is a symbol of man's ability to transcend time and space and to view his life from the perspective of a delightful feast. It invites man to celebrate again the "feast of fools," to stop being a machine and start living the life of a human being.

LITURGICAL SYMBOLS: REALISM AND AUTHENTICITY

Liturgical symbols, like any other symbol, are most eloquent when they possess a certain "realism." This means that they correspond more fully to their proper nature as signs and are not reduced to mere tokens. The importance of this is obvious, especially in a world that seeks to be authentic, genuine, realistic. The use of symbols which have been despoiled of their original form makes the celebration less comprehensible and eventually alienates it from its true meaning. We know for a fact that emasculated symbols have impoverished our understanding of worship in general, and of sacraments in particular. How effectively, for example, can a trickle of water on the forehead symbolize burial with Christ into death? How expressively do little pieces of wafer symbolize both the spiritual food that nourishes and the unity of many in the one bread that is Christ?

The early Christians knew the importance of maintaining the realism of liturgical symbols. A few sporadic examples will show this. The *Didache*, c.7, speaking of baptism, prefers running and cold water to still and warm water, apparently because the

former is natural and hence more symbolic of the "living water." The rites of baptismal immersion is a vivid enactment of man's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. (40) In Tertullian we come across an allusion to a generous application of oil after baptism: *in nobis carnaliter currit unctio*. (41) In the Sahidic, Arabic and Ethiopian versions of the *Apostolic Constitution* of Hippolytus of Rome a picturesque detail is appended to the rite of baptismal renunciation, obviously for vivid effect. The person to be baptized faces the West as he renounces Satan (the West symbolized the region of darkness, the domain of the evil one). Afterwards he faces the East, the region of light where Christ rules, and says: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I believe and I bow before you and commit myself to your service." (42) A study of the time elements of the Easter date reveals also the importance the Fathers attached to realism. St. Augustine who, like Origen, holds that everyday is a paschal celebration (43), nevertheless displays a deep awareness of the time element involved in the paschal vigil. For him this vigil is the living out of the hours when Christ's body lay in the tomb awaiting the moment of the resurrection. "Christ's burial," he says, "was prolonged even to this night." (44) So vivid was his consciousness of this, that we can almost read the question that lurks in his mind: Is Christ still in the tomb at this hour, or is he risen from the dead? In one of his Easter vigil homilies he answers this question in words that reveal his deep sense for realism: "If possibly his body was still in the tomb and had not risen at this particular hour when we are keeping this vigil, still there is nothing incongruous in what we are doing, because he slept that we might watch, who died that we might live." (45)

By maintaining the realism of symbols, the Fathers preserved

40. St. Ambrose goes so far as to compare the baptismal font to a sepulture, the water symbolizing the earth in which man is buried with Christ. *De Sacr.* II, 6. 19.

41. *De Bapt.* VII, 1.

42. Ed. Botte, *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris, 1946.

43. Wilmart IX, PL Suppl. 724-25.

44. *Guelf. IV*, PL Suppl. II 549.

45. *Guelf. V*, Pl Suppl. II, 549.

the role symbols play in conveying the truth of faith. For it was not only through the credal formula (the *symbolum*), but also through the other symbols (the *sacramenta*, the *mysteria*) that the rule of faith was faithfully transmitted. And they guarded the quality of the celebration as a living experience of the mystery of Christ.

Today we need to re-examine our liturgical symbols, to find out if they are able to signify to the contemporary world and to peoples of another culture the reality hidden in them. Man still speaks in symbols and lives in a world saturated with symbols. But he wants symbols which are genuine and authentic, symbols which truly speak and communicate. Do our liturgical symbols correspond to his needs? We are bound to ask ourselves whether such a basic symbol as the liturgical assembly truly denotes the reality of the *ekklesia*, the fellowship of Christians, the household of God, the body of Christ. In a world that experiences so much mobility and anonymity, how truthful is the symbolism of the liturgical assembly? Can we speak of the reality of Christian *koinonia* and the intimacy of the household of God in a big gathering strangers? Surely we can find theological justifications to call it an *ekklesia* (Tridentine theology was able to come up with valid theological reasons for receiving holy communion with bread alone), but does this not subtract from the fulness of the sign? Because cities are impersonal and anonymous, must our liturgical assembly be also impersonal and anonymous? Today should we not rather confront the basic sociological and ecclesiological problem regarding the constitution of a Christian community? What is a Christian community? In an effort to relieve the experience of the first Christian community, some local Churches have radically restructured big parishes, even in cities, by dividing them into small zone-communities, more familiar and human in size. In these communities, led by lay leaders, a sense of belonging and responsibility is developed, and community life is lived on a more personal level. On certain days of the week the community gathers in one of the houses to listen to the Word of God, to reflect on it in prayer, and if the pastor is available, to celebrate the Lord's supper. Historical

romanticism, or a convincing symbol of fellowship of Christians?

Questions must also be raised regarding the other symbols. What is the significance of hierarchical liturgy to a world that scoffs at any sign of paternalism, to Christians who are more independent in their religious and moral judgment? How does the structure of the liturgy lend itself to the exigency of freer self-expression, spontaneity in prayer, pluralism, charismatic outpourings? How can historically and culturally conditioned symbols reach the people of today, or more poignantly, the peoples of other civilizations? Is liturgical catechesis sufficient to solve these difficulties? Or should we not review the validity of our present ecclesial and liturgical structures? In a word, how authentic and realistic are our symbols? These, it seems to me, are not mere pastoral problems; they touch the very heart of historical research and theological reflection.

After more than a decade of liturgical reform we have also to ask whether the road it has taken in matters involving the rite is the only alternative. Simplification of rites, return to a simpler, more austere form of celebration, avoidance of any excess, prodigality and abandon, fear of being dramatic and colorful, reduction of liturgical paraphernalia to the minimum, and the unveiling of the naked Christian mystery for the intellect alone to contemplate — does not all this subtract something from the charm and festive mood of the liturgical celebration? Modern man is banal, so must our liturgy conform and rub it in? There is now a certain atmosphere of ordinariness in our worship, not in the sense of being at home in it, but of not finding any exceptional quality in it. Since the ordinary is so akin to routine, might we not discover some day that we have made a grand expedition in search of a new form of routine celebration? Our liturgy seems to be on the verge of turning flat, anemic, color-blinded and utterly cold. Thus, even in our catechesis we still suggest to people that we have a certain obsession for ambivalence. We call the liturgy a celebration, but we labor to remove the “false” impression that it is a feast. Have we not perhaps overstressed the spirituality of our celebration at the expense of

the totality of human experience? Certainly, we recognize the importance of external jubilation, of exuberance, of dancing, jumping and clapping for pure joy, of flowers, incense and perfume, but to use them in our liturgical feast strikes us as something bizarre, or at least as something that belonged to the Old Testament worship and to some oriental rites of little significance to the West and the modern world. Have we not perhaps forgotten how to celebrate?

But I do not wish to end this essay in a note of gloom. After all, one has to be aware of the fact that the idea of festivity can be abused and, in the end, be prejudicial to the interiority of the liturgical celebration itself. And while one may raise doubts on the alternative chosen by Vatican II regarding the rite, it must be affirmed that the liturgical reform has made giant steps in other and more important fields of worship. There is little room for pessimism.