

LISTENING AND LITURGY

Some twenty years ago a friend of mine observed that there was more liturgy in a ballpark than in a church to-day. It is reminiscent of the imperial amphitheatres of antiquity. Spectacles were calculated for the populace—(S.P.Q.R. = *Senatus Populusque Romanus*)—to acclaim their gods, selves and leaders with an unrestrained catharsis and spontaneity as death and sacrifices displaced collective guilt through the *participatio activa* of established worship. Participation of this kind is vigorous exertion or action rather than reflection. Called active, it is commonly understood as doing or saying something, a.v. acting.

That Christians suffered for a transcendental faith was to be expected because they were at variance with the *sensus communis*. With a *cultus* alien to the prevailing mentality, they were rejected and even substituted as vicarious victims of the game. Refusing to worship the established gods, they became the reproach of men. Their God was a victim of Roman justice—incomprehensible and mysterious.

The key to this contrast of liturgies may be explained by the fact that “the image we form of God is a determining factor in the worship we offer Him.”¹ Frank Sheed expressed it as: “your treatment of the thing depends on your definition of it.”² What we express by word or action reveals our basic thinking. How we think determines our behavior. Moreover, we project ourselves through them even to the extent of exposing our attitudes towards others. What we do or say is, therefore, obvious to God.

Awareness of the dynamic movement of the liturgy facilitates taking part in it. Throughout both actions—the Word and the Eucharist—the priest, *in persona Christi*, is the facilitator of communion. At one time he speaks to God for and with the people, at another he addresses the people of God. Thus the action oscillates between the vertical and horizontal directions of communication. Silence at intervals is in order. In this dynamism one can discern the symbolism of the cross.

The purpose of the liturgy, then, is to manifest our perception of God and our response to Him. It is theocentric rather than homocentric, revealing the focus of one’s love. God characteristically gives and man takes. Love, though, is reciprocal. The Church under divine guidance has realized this in the structure of the Mass. In the liturgy of the Word we speak to God Who responds through scriptures and His priest. As we expect God to listen to us, so we listen to Him. If we assume the courtesy of being heard, we must tender the courtesy of listening attentively. This very dynamic reveals our love. Both scriptures and homily should be received as revelation from God activating deep reflective silence.

Impelled by contemplation, enriched by music, we are prompted to action through the offertory of ourselves and gifts. Love of the Word of God thus proclaimed by the Church suggests pertinent music to embellish the seeds cast in the vineyard. Obviously the quality of the music reflects that of the musician’s gift.

In the liturgy of the Eucharist, then, we give to God in keeping with His giving to us. “Surrender” expresses more accurately our sacrifices in union with the Victim Christ, the Gift of the Father. So disposed, we are open to the awe of the angels singing *Sanctus* at the sight of such munificence to men. Words fail us because the silence of heaven is too loud for us to hear. The contrast between word and song insinuates a silent pause, however momentary.

The role of all—the communion of saints—in the sacrificial liturgy called the “Mass” has been defined by the Church and reiterated as *participatio actuosa*. It is to be *actual*—in spirit and in truth—by contrast with merely *active*. The discriminating factor lies in its facticity of realism whereby there is harmony between word or action and truth: taking part actually.

Thus it precludes mere verbalizing, shallowness or the superficiality of mere spectators. *Participatio actuosa* is involvement with the investment of one's self in the action: song, prayer, listening. It is rational and volitional rather than emotional, affective rather than sentimental or exhibitionistic.

The emphasis to-day is on the person through bodily activity even to the extent of hyperactivity by way of escape from silence because it is alien and threatening to him. It isolates one from one's security in escape, evokes confrontation and it requires discipline to be meaningful and authentic.

How does listening come into liturgy? After his experience of a "new Mass" André Frossard commented to Pope John Paul II: "Holy Father, I'm not asking for a return to the old Mass. I just feel that the new one isn't as contemplative. It has much talk and a lot less mystery." To this the Holy Father rejoined, "The Word is also a mystery."

Both men appear to illustrate different perspectives and approaches; Frossard passive, the Holy Father active in the sense of *actuosa*. The former seems to focus on conditions conducive to contemplation: silence, tranquility and composure, while the Pope focuses on the object of contemplation: the *Logos*, the ultimate Word and expression of the Father. The conditions are within our own power while the object is given through grace.

The dispositions necessary for such prayer are: composure, tranquility and silence.

Composure. Summarily, composure is self-possession, the victory over distractions and unrest. It is the vital dynamic unity of an individual who could be distracted by the surroundings, tossed to and fro by the myriad events of his life or debris floating in the space of memory.

It is not uncommon for one's attention to be broken into a multitude of fragments by the variety of things, persons and events around him. His mind is restless, his feelings seek objects that are constantly changing; his desires reach out for one thing after another; his will is captured by a thousand intentions, often conflicting. He is harried, torn, self-contradictory. Composure works in the opposite direction, rescuing his attention from the sundry objects holding it captive and restoring unity to his mind. It frees him from its tempting claims and focuses it on one, the all-important.

Composure is more than freedom from scattered impressions and occupations. It is something positive; it is life in its full depth and power. It may be compared to respiration. It has two directions: inward and outward. Both are vital; each is a part of this elementary function of life; neither is all of it. The living organism that only inhaled, or exhaled, would soon asphyxiate. Composure is man's mental "inhalation" by which, from deep within, he collects his scattered self and returns to his center. Only through such composure is he genuinely affected by what life brings him, for he alone is awake, aware with the inner realization of the essential. Only then is he free, open and accepting of the other in his words; only then is he in communication. He is as absorbed as the audience listening to Handel's *Halleluia Chorus* or a Merton when he wrote: "the rain ceases, and a bird's clear song suddenly announces the difference between heaven and hell."

Tranquility. Man is related; he must relate or get lost in the isolation of his nothingness. Existence itself relates him to God, his origin and the reality of his image. Only in that Ocean of Tranquility can one realize one's own tranquility: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." "Love knows no fear" (1Jo).

Tranquility is freedom from disturbance, agitation. Despair, unbelief, guilt, narcissism are so contrary to the good of human nature as to be destructive and alienating one from "the other," God in particular. They constitute barriers, obstacles to existential harmony. Reconciliation is a pre-requisite (cf. Matt 5:24: "Leave your gift

at the altar. . ."). The serenity of a genuine penitent frees him to "approach the throne of grace" without fear of rejection. The storms of evil are subject to the divine command: "Be calm."

Those who acknowledge the Real Presence in the tabernacle can experience tranquility through the awareness of the divine presence. Words are not even necessary. The very fact of just being present can constitute prayer, adoration and love.

Silence and Listening. Noise is so prevalent in our society that some people panic at its absence. For many silence is the absence of sound. Negative as that may seem, there is also silence of a positive, rich nature, prompting the question: did you ever listen to the silence?

The Third International Dictionary (unabridged) states that to *hear* is to "be made aware of by ear," whereas to *listen* is "to pay attention to sound," "to hear with thoughtful attention." Thus it would seem that hearing is a passive activity; the inevitable result of having the faculty of hearing, a physiological phenomenon requiring little conscious effort on the part of the hearer. One perceives the sound, though not necessarily the depths, meanings and variables accompanying it. In other words, "hearing" can be applied to the reception of sound ranging from the periphery of consciousness to the total engagement of the person. Thus, it might be conceived as a continuum with something like parataxic distortion on one extreme and listening on the other.

Listening, then, is by contrast more active, implying attention, alertness and consciousness, in fact the whole person. It would appear that there is more to listening than might be evident so that examination of the spoken word and the dispositions of the listener is in order for the believers whose faith revolves so much around the art of listening. "Faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17).

Both silence and listening require the discipline of attentiveness if one is to relate *ad extra*, to receive, to discover and to increase. It is prompted and intensified by interest. Interest is the expression of one's reaction to the environment and consequently the ability to receive and to give of one's self. It is the prelude to love.

Sound: Word and Song. It is said that "sound is heard only in silence." The greater the silence, the richer the word received. A word or sound is a thing of mystery. It is so volatile that it vanishes almost on the lip, yet so powerful that it decides fates and determines the meaning of existence. Words come from within, rising as sounds fashioned by the organs of a man's body, as expressions of his heart and spirit. He utters them, yet he does not create them, for they already existed independently of him. One is related to another; together they form the great unity of language.

The word or note written on paper is clearly a lifeless, inert, symbol with no meaning or efficacy. It must be perceived by a mind which absorbs it, and its significance, internalizes and personalizes it so that it becomes part of him and thereby becomes dynamic. It is the person who gives it life so that it becomes vibrant, deep, meaningful and expressive. Thus it becomes the means, the medium whereby a person communicates himself because those very words emanate from him and in a way are himself. Only words and sounds formed by the human voice have the delicacy and power necessary to stir the depths of emotion, the seat of the spirit, the full sensitiveness of the mind.

The living word arranges itself onion-like in various layers. The outermost is that of the simple communication, such as might be conveyed artificially, symbolically or by some apparatus which reproduces human speech. The syllables thus produced draw their significance from genuine language but are superficial, often mechanical. Such a level of words is not true speech: that is to be found in deeper layers. Rather, true speech exists only in proportion to the amount of inner conviction carried over from the speaker to that which is spoken. The more clearly his meaning is embodied

in intelligible sounds, and the more fully his heart is able to express itself, the more truly does his speech become a living word.

Listening. Since the word or sound is multidimensional and is an expression of the person who embellishes it, it follows that hearing, too, exists on many levels. The hearer, therefore, is in tune to the extent that he chooses or has the dispositions for full reception of the communication of the person speaking. One can be selective in listening, hearing only those words that appeal to him, mean anything to him, or are consonant with his own outlook and expectations. One can listen to those songs and statements desired, yet “tune out” advertisements and all other sounds irrelevant. But selectivity in listening does not guarantee full reception of the message or, for that matter, of the person who speaks.

Clearly, listening requires more. The reality of speech or music depends upon the speaker’s ability to speak and to be silent in turn. Silence and speech belong together: they are interdependent. Silence is not the mere absence of noise but something positive and full of life. It implies a stillness, the tranquility of the inner life, the quiet at the depths of its hidden stream. It is a collected, total presence, a being “all there,” receptive, alert, ready. There is nothing inert or oppressive about it. It is not a superficial matter as it is when there is neither speaking nor actions, but it is the repose of thoughts, feelings and heart as well as the limbs. Genuine stillness permeates, spreading ever deeper through the seemingly plumbless world within. It is something to be desired, learned, striven for and achieved. Behind it lie meditativeness, reflectiveness and attentiveness. It is no more compatible with disturbance than the distraction of Claudius as he exclaimed:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

So much, then depends on the dispositions of the listener, his receptiveness, and his openness. Egotism and preoccupation with himself and his affairs close him within himself so that he is unable to receive and accept the other person’s communicating himself through song or words. Something more is required of the listener, something which he must desire and of which he is capable: a being inwardly “present,” listening from the vital core of his being, unfolding himself to that which comes from beyond. And all this is possible when he is inwardly still. In stillness alone can he really hear, but stillness presupposes composure.

How then is listening liturgy? One’s encounter in the liturgy is essentially a harmonious blend of the living word and listening. The word or thought as incarnated, personalized, by the speaker or singer is released as living speech as he seeks that unity of persons called rapport.

In the liturgy listening and response constitute the very essence of worship. Silence makes for “silent worship,” and makes room for the “Word of the Lord,” so that prayer is listening rather than talking. We must listen to ourselves as we pray, always conscious of the One Whom we address. God permits self-centered prayer until we listen to ourselves and realize the need to concede: “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.”

Liturgy is communication, a two-way process. It involves direct and indirect elements through audio and visual means. Words and gestures alone do not necessarily relate because they can be meaningless ritual. The Lord revealed this truth as He observed: “This people pay me lip service but their heart is far from Me. They do Me empty service” (Matt 15:8).

God has difficulty getting through to us because we create a distance between Him and us through self-preoccupation and sin—denied or admitted—making us deaf to His Word. Distortion of His meaning by the Jerusalem politicians led to rejection of Him.

Those who “read” for excitement, curiosity or novelty coursing over the words and songs, seeking what fascinates, really portray *participatio activa*. They have ears to hear but not to listen, unaware of the fact that the scriptures were written to be heard, absorbed rather than read. We must read the gospels with our ears, listening as have anawim in their poverty and simplicity, open to the Word of God Himself beneath appearances. Their purposeful genuflection, sign of the cross and demeanor reveal *participatio actuosa*. Pharisees and publicans, disciples and saints exhibit levels and degrees of involvement in the re-enactment of the passion, death and resurrection of the sacrificed Christ, too mysterious for words.

While communication implies both transmitter and receiver, the focus of their efforts must be Christ, the eternal Word. The depth of what is conveyed devolves from their knowledge and love of Christ. He becomes real, or present, to them according to their investment of self in Him. On the other hand, the combination of sight, sound and action portrays the sacraments but, devoid of reverence and advertance to reality, they are mere ritual. Sincerity distinguishes a compliment from flattery.

The crisis of faith that distinguishes this age has tragically affected the liturgy, the Church’s gem and treasured gift. While there is a revival of interest in scripture and spirituality one is led to inquire about their origins. The passion for novelty, individualism and activism has produced superficiality with disconcerting results. Why are tradition and antiquity rejected when they have withstood the ravages of time, change, and culture? Culture derives from *cultus*, worship of the numinous. It reveals the perspective of a society as being transcendent or immanent.

God has given man the ability to rise above himself and his world, the vertical aspect of liturgy. The Church has always taught and fostered it, for from it derives the awe, mystery and reverence which characterize true religion. Sixty years ago Dietrich von Hildebrand explained the contrast evident in “celebrations” to-day. Gone is the “spirit of *discretio* in the liturgy” which he defines as the “sense for the structure and the dramatic rhythm of being” for “the stages of the inner development of a given theme,” organic in contrast to the mechanical and artificial.

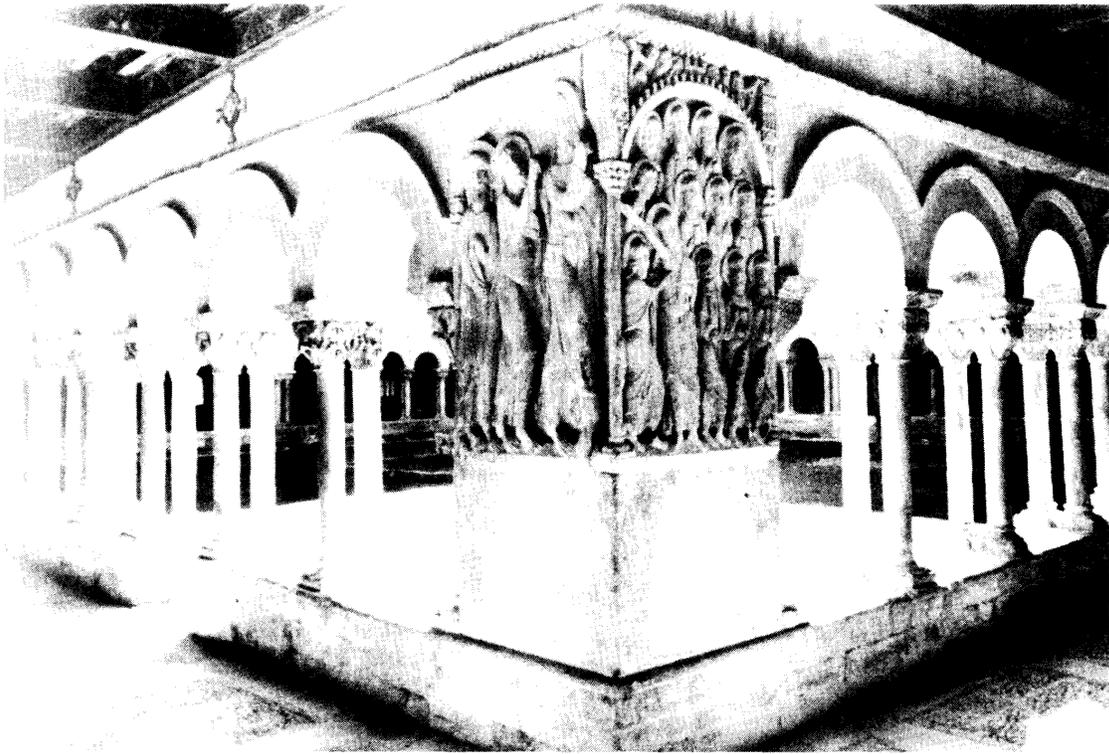
Pre-reformation Christians found themselves by contemplating God while subsequent generations seek God in man, the image. The reality is lost in a collage of images and the cacophony of the age of communication.

Finally, we must ask the *questions*: to whom do we listen? Whom do we believe? The *answer* still is: “This”—the Church—“is my beloved Son, listen to Him.”

REVEREND PETER T. MAC CARTHY

NOTES

1. Grossouw, W. K. *Spirituality of the New Testament*.
2. Sheed, Frank. *Theology and Sanity*.
3. Frossard, André. *Portrait of John Paul II*.
4. von Hilderand, Dietrich. *Liturgy and Personality*, p. 51.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 115.



SACRED MUSIC

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