

Liturgical Prayer and the Ignatian Exercises

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The contemporary world is characterized by rapid and intense activity. Yet, sometimes as an understandable reaction to the feverishness of haste, at other times for the very success of activity, there are worldwide manifestations of a drive towards greater interiority.

Asia today is an interesting example of the activity-interiority tension. Even apart from the too facile generalizations of comparative sociology, Asia remains the place where of set purpose interiority is passionately sought, even at the expense of activity. Yet Asia today is one of the most exciting fields of the action-conquest of reality. Asian action is therefore distinguished by its inherent reference to concomitant reflective interiority.

It is against this background that the Church has to work out its corporate renewal and reform. And in summary form the theme of the present article is that a continuing interaction of liturgy and a system of interiority-seeking, such as the Ignatian Exercises, provides the ideal framework for the renewal of the Church in Asia, as indeed anywhere else.

The liturgy is the most potent means of spiritual renewal for both individual Christians and for communities. This is so all over the world, but is particularly true in Asia, where the external sign and symbol have always had an important pageant value in themselves, even apart from the reality they indicate.

But in order to lead to effective and drastic renewal and reform the liturgy must proceed from the deepest inner realization and acceptance of all that it implies. It is here that the Ignatian Exercises can play a powerful role in the action-reflection dialectic by leading to a greater interior preparedness for meaningful liturgy. And fortunately the Exercises seem to be gaining ground on Asian soil.¹

There needs to be a realized unity and synthesis between liturgy and interiority-seeking. Such synthesis between varying aspects of life is for our contemporaries a matter of sincerity. So, if the contemporary Christian cannot built his liturgical life and his quest for personal interiority into a vital unity, either aspect tends to fade out of his life.

The synthesis is possible, for the extent of interpenetration between liturgy and Exercises is large, and the depth of mutual support great. For those who have not met the Ignatian Exercises as such, or have

¹In the absence of precise figures from all over the region, this is admittedly an impression, based on facts such as that while 441 persons came in 1970 to the Jesuit Retreat House in Kandy, Ceylon, for reflection and prayer, in 1971 the number rose to 808. The figures for the first four months of 1972 are higher than for the same months in 1970 or 1971.

not been moved by them, much of what we seek to say will still apply to the interaction of liturgy with any other form of personal interiority-seeking.

Liturgy

All religion is concerned with the worship of the Deity present in, while also transcending in some real but mysterious way, the universe. The Christian religion is concerned with the worship of God as Father in union with the Spirit through Christ present in the cosmos but also reaching out beyond it to the luminosity of the endless, timeless Trinity.

The liturgy may be seen as the summit of the worship of God. And this in two ways: as the path to the summit and as the summit itself.

If worship is a high mountain, of all paths that lead to the top, the liturgical reaches furthest and is the surest. The liturgy places man at the beginning of the path by the sacrament of baptism and then leads him forward by slow and steady steps.

The argument from the magisterium is conclusive:

‘. . . for the achievement of holiness the worship which the Church, united with her divine Head, offers to God is the most efficacious possible means.’¹

‘. . . liturgical prayer, being the public prayer of the august Bride of Christ, is superior to private prayers.’²

‘. . . every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can match its claim to efficacy, nor equal the degree of it.’³

All other paths—and the Ignatian Exercises are one such—lead to the summit only when they join the liturgy, and only through the liturgy can they take individuals and communities to the Mountain of the Worship of God.

But the liturgy is not only a path to worship: it is worship itself, and the summit of worship. For it is the public worship of God in union with Christ, Head of the Church.

This liturgy takes place all the time. In Heaven which is all around us—in space, in outer space, and out of space—there is the unending liturgy of the heavenly Jerusalem which it is the goal of the earthly liturgy to join.

But this praise and worship of God goes on endlessly even in the earthly creation. The seas and the skies, the birds and the beasts, the valleys and the mountains show forth the glory of God.

‘Shout for joy, you heavens, for Yahweh has been at work!
Shout aloud, you earth below!
Shout for joy, you mountains,
and you, forest and all your trees!’⁴

¹Pius XII, *Mediator* (London: CTS), n. 28.

²*Ibid.*, n. 41.

³Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, art. 7.

⁴Isaiah 44, 23.

It is necessary to re-read Colossians and Ephesians in the spirit of poet or a mystic—such a spirit as was Teilhard de Chardin's when he read these letters—to sense this continuing working of the cosmic liturgy.

'(because) God wanted all perfection
to be found in him
and all things to be reconciled through him and for him,
everything in heaven and everything on earth,
when he made peace
by his death on the cross.'¹

What does the visible and audible liturgy of the Church do in the midst of this perennial cosmic liturgy? It links the universal liturgy to the heavenly liturgy; it intensifies the cosmic worship of God; it makes creation's praise an act consciously performed by the members of the Church, welding them together into a community of living, thinking, loving worshippers of God in felt union with one another, with and in Christ.

The Exercises

The first introductory observation in the book tells what the Exercises are about. 'By the term "Spiritual Exercises" is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities.' The same observation proceeds to state the basic finality of the Exercises: '. . . we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.'² This is a dry scholastic method of procedure by means of a definition and a statement of secondary immediate and primary ultimate ends.

However, in practice, the Exercises are much more, and achieve much more, than an armchair reading of the first observation might lead one to expect. Throughout their history the Exercises have powerfully sensitized exercitants to hear and respond to both the scripturally revealed and the existential Word of God and have led them to very high degrees of communion with their fellowmen in God and with God himself.

A study of the nature, spirit and purposes of the liturgy and of the Exercises thus shows us that there is no conflict between the two.

Mediator Dei is unequivocal about this:

'. . . but this superiority (of liturgical over private prayers) does not mean that there is any conflict or incompatibility between them. The two are harmoniously blended because they are both animated by the same spirit: "There is nothing but

¹Col. I, 19-20.

²Louis J. Puhl, trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (India: St Paul Publications, 1965), n. 1. All further references to the text of the Exercises are to this edition.

Christ in any of us'. Their purpose is the same: to form Christ in us.¹

And of retreats and periodical spiritual exercises the same encyclical says:

'... such practices are very useful, indeed necessary, for the cultivation of real piety and for the attainment of a holiness that will enable the sacred liturgy to be more effective and beneficial.'²

Finally, making explicit mention of the Ignatian Exercises, the encyclical states:

'... the spiritual exercises conducted according to the principles and method of St Ignatius have been fully approved and strongly recommended... for their marvellous efficacy.'³

Compatibility

In the text of the Exercises, the relationship with the liturgy does not go beyond one of good neighbourliness. In order to cross the line between such good neighbourliness and full acceptance, some of the literature on the connection between the liturgy and the Exercises lays great store by the evidence in the text of the Exercises which shows that St Ignatius really honoured the liturgy. Much is made of an oblique reference to the importance of daily Mass and Vespers in Introductory Observation 20 and of various liturgical and near-liturgical practices in the Rules for Thinking with the Church. To these may be added the recommendations of Confession and Communion given in the text of the First Week of the Exercises, even though these recommendations are made in the context of self-purification and not in the scheme of a liturgical spirituality.

Outside these three places no other direct reference to liturgical prayer, practices or spirituality appears in the text of the Exercises. The three references themselves do not seem to be intended to lead either the director or the exercitant to see the Exercises as inherently functional towards a liturgical life and spirituality.

In St Ignatius' own life, during and after his conversion, there is ample evidence that he was profoundly and mystically moved by the Eucharist and the Divine Office—with the other sacraments, the chief pillars of a liturgical spirituality—but the internal dialectic of the Exercises is in the text itself nowhere explicitly and directly related to the upward and onward thrusts of the liturgy.

This point must not be misunderstood. It is by no means alleged that anyone could make the Exercises, in St Ignatius' day or in any other, without being drawn to a love of corporate divine worship and the sacramental life. Indeed, one of the fruits of a well-made Ignatian retreat is invariably a greater real acceptance of the Eucharist.

¹*Edit. cit.*, n. 41.

²*Edit. cit.*, n. 190.

³*Edit. cit.*, n. 192.

But when all this is freely acknowledged, it still seems to remain true that St Ignatius did not so much intend to make the dynamism of the Exercises subserve the dynamism of the liturgy as to make the Exercises move forward on their own momentum, alongside but not within the liturgy. The fact that in the text of the Exercises the liturgy is only a good neighbour does not detract from St Ignatius' undoubted genius; it merely points to the human limitations of that genius. The limitation has a historico-cultural explanation. For the Exercises were written during a period when real liturgical spirituality was weak and liturgical life at a low ebb.

The Christian liturgy of the West had come a very long way by the time St Ignatius began first to make and then to compose the Exercises in the first half of the sixteenth century. The liturgy had passed through the early period of its life, when strong bonds were established between the public worship of the Church and the private piety of the individual. It then passed through a period of splendour, when the exuberance of the external liturgy was achieved somewhat at the expense of the true sense of inner worship and of real piety. There follows the third and long period of liturgical decadence. Public worship became formalistic, and private piety was forced to seek new life from sources other than the liturgy. The Ignatian Exercises were composed during this third period. To complete the skeleton story, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the Benedictines gave the first clear signs of a new liturgical dawn.¹ The twentieth century desire to relate all private piety intimately and consciously to the liturgy was not one which St Ignatius, in common with many other spiritual leaders of his time, experienced.

It is difficult to know how far St Ignatius' reaction to the empty liturgical formalism of his time was a considered and deliberate one. But react he did, in a way somewhat comparable to the reaction of Amos and the other prophets to the spiritless external forms of the Hebrew worship of their times or, more closely, to the reaction of Gautama the Buddha to the hollowness of the brahminical ritualism of his country and time. The reaction of St Ignatius, like that of the Buddha, was in the direction of greater personalism as against groupism, of greater interiority as against external wordy show. When the liturgy had so largely ceased to speak meaningfully, spiritual leaders like St Ignatius were forced by circumstances to seek inspiration elsewhere.

Two external sources of this inspiration should be indicated. One was the *Devotio Moderna*, the New Devotion, whose influence was brought to bear on St Ignatius through various channels. One important channel was García de Cisneros, Benedictine Abbot of Montserrat, where St Ignatius spent a few days and where he

¹For the delineation and description of these four periods see Gabriel M. Braso, trans. Leonard J. Doyle, *Liturgy and Spirituality* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1960), ch. 3.

probably came to know Cisneros' work, the *Ejercitatorio de la vida espiritual*.

The second source was the humanistic current of the period in which St Ignatius lived. Though he does not seem to have been at all enthusiastic about secular humanism, adopting towards it at best a utilitarian attitude for its formative value for Jesuits in training, he may have been influenced by Christian humanism. And this in his day bore a strong individualist accent. This source, like the *Devotio Moderna*, drew St Ignatius in the direction of private and personalist piety. In his original and transforming mind, this piety also became outgoing and other-oriented—to use modern language, it acquired a horizontal dimension, as the exercises on the Kingdom of Christ and the Two Standards amply demonstrate—but this was fundamentally the work of his own spiritual genius building on his own military and basque background and was not the fruit of deep insight into the essential sociality of the liturgy.

The times did not permit such insights. Neither did such insights occur to successive post-Ignatian generations of directors of the Exercises. 'Did they not . . . take away from souls the taste and the feeling for true liturgical ceremonies and for their rich and beautiful simplicity? . . . the true answer to this reproach seems to me . . . that in their spiritual writings . . . in the matter of exercises of prayer in common and of public ceremonies, the Jesuits . . . largely adapted themselves to the habits and tastes of their contemporaries.'¹ These tastes were not liturgical. Consequently, the Exercises have so far not been in the mainstream of liturgical spirituality.

Consequences

What then must be done? The Exercises in their original structure do not seem to be directly functional for the liturgy; on the other hand we have a great revival of the liturgy and of liturgical spirituality. The Exercises are seen by the Church (pastors and people) to be as useful, and even necessary, today, as they ever were; on the other hand there is the official *prise de position* of the Church that the liturgy should have definite pre-eminence as a means of individual and communal experience of God.

Our task would appear to be a twofold one. First, to re-reflect on the Exercises and make explicit to directors and exercitants their implicit liturgicity: in their attitude to the liturgy both must progress from good neighbourliness to full acceptance. Second, to meditate on the liturgy in depth and make explicit the powerful support it can derive from the Exercises in order to be truly effective and never again to lapse into the uninspiring formalism and rubricism from which after many decades it has in our own day begun to recover.

¹Joseph de Guibert, trans. William J. Young, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964), pp. 557-8.

Before attempting this task, however, it will be useful to show up as chimerical the suspected opposition between private prayer, Ignatian or other, and public liturgical prayer. In private prayer, the personal aspect is manifest, but the social, though latent, is equally important. It is the individual and private person who prays, but he prays as the recipient of grace, and grace is always given socially, that is, *in Christo et per Ecclesiam*. The grace won by prayer similarly returns not to the individual in isolation, but in community: the community of believers in Christ and the community of all those of good faith and good will, even though, as in Asia, they are not explicit believers in Christ. The prayer of the Exercises is therefore necessarily social. Linking the Exercises with the liturgy ensures the conscious realization of the social dimension of personal prayer.

On the other hand, in liturgical prayer the social aspect is manifest, but the personal, though latent, is as important. In the liturgy, the community prays in the realized union of its members with one another and with Christ. But the community is made up of persons, each of whose minds and hearts must be personally united with God. The liturgy, says von Balthasar in his classical book on prayer, 'points beyond itself to personal contemplation of the word. . . . A liturgical movement unaccompanied by a contemplative movement is a kind of romanticism.'¹ Linking the liturgy with the Exercises guarantees the personal dimension of all liturgical prayer.

It is sometimes said—and Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* shows that he was aware of the terminology²—that the piety of the liturgy is objective, while that of private prayer, as in the Exercises, is subjective. Discussion along the lines of the individual-social, subjective-objective dialectic was acute and sometimes heated in Europe in the second decade of this century, consequent upon Dom M. Festugière's seminal essay of 1913, *La liturgie catholique*.

In the West today, and at any time in Asia, such distinctions are looked upon as rather unenlightening academic rationalizations, useful perhaps for times more leisured than ours. For all prayer must have both objective (that is, other-regarding, the greatest other being God) and subjective (that is, self-regarding) elements. An interpenetration of the spirit of the liturgy with the spirit of personal reflection, as taught by the Exercises, will achieve that unity in depth of prayer turned towards to the Divine, Transcendent and Immanent, and proceeding at the same time from the depths of the praying self.

We may now attempt a reflection on the Ignatian Exercises in order to make manifest their latent liturgicity. Instead, however, of examining the Exercises as a whole, it will be methodologically more manageable to show by means of one crucial example how the whole of the Exercises may be impregnated with the spirit of the

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (London: Chapman, 1961), pp. 94 and 98.

²*Edit. cit.*, n. 31.

liturgy. This is far more important than introducing into the Ignatian Exercises, alongside other devotions, certain liturgical rites too.

The example is the central exercise of the Ignatian retreat: the choice of a new way of life or of drastic reform in a way already irrevocably chosen. It is difficult not to note the strong individualist flavour of all the paragraphs that deal with the decision-making process. The use of the singular is significant. It is a question of a choice 'I wish to make'. I must keep in mind 'the end for which I am created'. Finally, 'I must come to a decision in the matter under deliberation because of weightier motives presented to my reason'.

This is strange language to liturgical ears. However, there are at least two important and crucial pointers to a communitarian approach. The first is the statement that my process of choice and the choice itself must be 'more for the glory and praise of God our Lord'. The transition from the personalist 'I' to the liturgical 'our' is noteworthy. The second is the macro-stage second prelude of the decision-making meditation on the Three Classes of Men. 'Here it will be to behold myself standing in the presence of God our Lord and of all His saints.' To vivify this incisive meditation and the whole choice-process with the spirit of the liturgy, this second prelude should be referred to the great vision contained in Chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation. The exercitant then realizes that he is the object of interest to all that grand assembly of those who live by the Spirit of Christ in worship of the Father. Upon his decision everyone waits. His future depends upon his decision, but also in a very real way the future of the community. Will his decision lead him to take or to refuse his part in that glorious liturgy of the service of God? Will it lead him to take his place in the great human community, merge with his people, feel their influence, think of his own position, if at all, only in terms of a mission of service among and for and with the people?

An orientation of this nature at all the high points of the Exercises will bring to them the spirit of the liturgy. Only then will the daily celebration of the eucharist not be merely an exercise of self-transformation but the true liturgical centre and vivifying spirit of the Exercises. When the liturgy has been thus accepted into the heart of the Exercises, it will be most natural to have meaningful celebrations of lauds and vespers, and self-purification exercises by means of reflective reading of the effective Word of God. Without this interior and willing acceptance of the liturgy, lauds and vespers, scripture sessions and even the eucharist run the risk of being merely other devotional practices, like the Rosary or the Stations, filling the gaps between private meditations and conferences in the daily timetable of the retreat.

The second part of our task is to show how the liturgy could itself become authentic and vital if the Exercises are used to support it.

The *ex opere operato* nature of the eucharist and the other sacraments and the inherent effectiveness of the Word of God are neither magical nor compulsive. The liturgy calls for a purified and sincere heart in all its participants. The fatuity and even the moral danger of liturgical rites, no matter how fully they comply with the lawbooks, without metanoia or change of mind and heart is a recurring theme of the Old Testament and is central to the prophetic message.¹ To the Samaritan woman Jesus himself urges sincerity and true interior spirit, if public worship is to be salvific.²

The Exercises, properly made, make sure that liturgical worship takes place in spirit and truth. To this end a double concomitant movement must take place in the Exercises: one of asceticism or soul-purification, whereby sincerity in worship is assured; the other of union, even mystical, with God, whereby liturgical worship may proceed from the living flame of love. In a word, the mystical asceticism of the Exercises finds its term in the liturgical worship of God, at the highest summit of this worship, where Christ is all in all his people, through the Spirit in God.

Asia

This article might have ended here if it were not being written by an Asian in Asia. To such a person, however, the union of the liturgy with the Exercises is pregnant with potential for the hitherto so tragically unsuccessful task of bringing the Christ of Asia to millions of Asian minds and hearts in terms which Asia can finally understand.

For, on the one hand, the Exercises will help Asia to see the essence of the liturgy by moving forward from the pageant value of its splendid signs and symbols to the mysteries signified and symbolized. They will help us to develop the liturgical sense and spirit. They will help us to transcend (which means, not to disregard, but to go beyond) rubricism and particular liturgies, even the roman liturgy, if this is judged to provide fewer elements for a vital Asian liturgy than, say, the syriac liturgy. Nevertheless, without the true spirit of the liturgy—which the Exercises are qualified to give—the Asianization of the liturgy, compelling as it is, will be fraught with serious chauvinistic and fissiparous dangers.

On the other hand, the liturgy will help us to seize the essence of the Exercises, which are not so much a science as an art of hearing and responding to the Word of God. This liturgical permeation of the Exercises will make sure that they are imparted in Asia without their western cultural veneer and that they harmonize with Asia's own ancient longing to hear and worship God.

¹Cf. Isaias 1, 11-16; Hosea 8, 11-13; Amos 5, 21-25; Micah 6, 6-8; Malachi 2, 13-14.

²John 4, 21-24.