

Retrieving the Tradition

The playfulness of the liturgy

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To be at play, or to fashion a work of art
in God's sight—not to create, but to
exist—such is the essence of the liturgy.

Grave and earnest people, who make the knowledge of truth their whole aim, see moral problems in everything and seek for a definite purpose everywhere, tend to experience a peculiar difficulty where the liturgy is concerned.¹ They incline to regard it as being to a certain extent aimless, as superfluous pageantry of a needlessly complicated and artificial character. They are affronted by the scrupulously exact instructions which the liturgy gives on correct procedure, on the right direction in which to turn, on the pitch of the voice, and so on. What is the use of it all? The essential part of the Holy Mass—the action of sacrifice and the divine banquet—could be so easily consummated. Why, then, the need for the solemn institution of the priestly office? The necessary consecration could be so simply accomplished in so few words, and the sacraments so straightforwardly administered—what is the reason of all the prayers and ceremonies?

¹In what follows the writer must beg the reader not to weigh isolated words and phrases. The matter under consideration is vague and intangible, and not easy to put into words. The writer can be sure of not being misunderstood only if the reader considers the article and the general train of thought as a whole.

The liturgy tends to strike people of this turn of mind as—to use the words which are really most appropriate—trifling and theatrical.

The question is a serious one. It does not occur to everyone, but in the people whom it does affect it is a sign of the mental attitude which concentrates on and pursues that which is essential. It appears to be principally connected with the question of purpose.

That which we call purpose is, in the true sense of the word, the distributive, organizing principle which subordinates actions or objects to other actions or objects, so that the one is directed towards the other, and one exists for the sake of the other. That which is subordinate, the means, is significant only insofar as it is capable of serving that which is superior, the end. The purpose does not infuse a spiritual value into its medium; it uses it as a passage to something else, a thoroughfare merely; aim and fulcrum alike reside in the former. From this point of view, every instrument has to prove in the first place whether, and in the second to what extent, it is fitted to accomplish the purpose for which it is employed. This proof will primarily be headed by the endeavor to eliminate from the instrument all the non-essential, unimportant, and superfluous elements. It is a scientific principle that an end should be attained with the minimum expenditure of energy, time, and material. A certain restless energy, an indifference to the cost involved, and an accuracy in going to the point characterize the corresponding turn of mind.

A disposition like this is, on the whole, both appropriate and necessary to life, giving it earnestness and fixity of purpose. It also takes reality into consideration, to the extent of viewing everything from the standpoint of purpose. Many pursuits and professions can be shown to have their origin almost entirely in the idea of purpose. Yet no phenomenon can be entirely, and many can be only to a minor degree, comprehended in this category. Or, to put it more plainly, that which gives objects and events their right to existence and justifies their individuality is in many cases not the sole, and in others not even the primary, reason for their usefulness. Are flowers and leaves useful? Of course; they are the vital organs of plants. Yet because of this, they are not tied down to any particular form, color, or smell. Then what, upon the whole, is the use of the extravagance of shapes, colors, and scents in nature? To what purpose the multiplicity of species? Things could be so much more simple. Nature could be entirely filled with animate beings, and they

could thrive and progress in a far quicker and more suitable manner. The indiscriminate application to nature of the idea of purpose is, however, open to objection. To go to the root of the matter, what is the object of this or that plant, and of this or that animal, existing at all? Is it in order to afford nourishment to some other plant or animal? Of course not. Measured merely by the standard of apparent and external utility, there is a great deal in nature which is only partially, and nothing which is wholly and entirely, intended for a purpose—or, better still, *purposeful*. Indeed, considered in this light, a great deal is purposeless. In a mechanical structure—a machine, say, or a bridge—everything has a purpose; and the same thing applies to business enterprises or to the government of a State; yet even where these phenomena are concerned, the idea of purpose is not far-reaching enough to give an adequate reply to the query, whence springs their right to existence?

If we want to do justice to the whole question, we must shift our angle of vision. The conception of purpose regards an object's center of gravity as existing outside that object, seeing it lie instead in the transition to further movement, i.e., that towards the goal which the object provides. But every object is to a certain extent, and many are entirely, self-sufficient and an end in itself—if, that is, the conception can be applied at all in this extensive sense. The conception of meaning is more adaptable. Objects which have no purpose in the strict sense of the term have a meaning. This meaning is not realized by their extraneous effect or by the contribution which they make to the stability or the modification of another object, but their significance consists in being what they are. Measured by the strict sense of the word, they are purposeless, but still full of meaning.

Purpose and meaning are the two aspects of the fact that an existent principle possesses the motive for, and the right to, its own essence and existence. An object regarded from the point of view of purpose is seen to dovetail into an order of things which comprehends both it and more beyond it; from the standpoint of meaning, it is seen to be based upon itself.

Now what is the meaning of that which exists? That it would exist and should be the image of God the everlasting. And what is the meaning of that which is alive? That it should live, bring forth its essence, and bloom as a natural manifestation of the living God.

This is true of nature. It is also true of the life of the soul. Has science an aim or an object in the real sense of the word?

No. Pragmatism is trying to foist one upon it. It insists that the aim of science is to better humanity and to improve it from the moral point of view. Yet this constitutes a failure to appreciate the independent value of knowledge. Knowledge has no aim, but it has a meaning, and one that is rooted in itself—truth. The legislative activity of a Parliament, for instance, has an end in view; it is intended to bring about a certain agreed result in the life of a State. Jurisprudence, on the contrary, has no object; it merely indicates where truth lies in questions of law. The same thing applies to all real science. According to its nature, it is either the knowledge of truth or the service of truth, but nothing else. Has art any aim or purpose? No, it has not. If it had, we should be obliged to conclude that art exists in order to provide a living for artists, or else, as the eighteenth century German thinkers of the *Aufklärung*—the ‘age of Enlightenment’—considered, it is intended to offer concrete examples of intelligent views and to inculcate virtue. This is absolutely untrue. The work of art has no purpose, but it has a meaning—‘*ut sit*’—that it should exist, and that it should clothe in clear and genuine form the essence of things and the inner life of the human artist. It is merely to be ‘*splendor veritatis*,’ the glory of truth.

When life lacks the austere guidance of the sense of purpose, it degenerates into pseudo-aestheticism. But when it is forced into the rigid framework that is the purely purposeful conception of the world, it droops and perishes. The two conceptions are interdependent. Purpose and meaning, effort and growth, activity and production, organization and creation—these are the two poles of existence.

The life of the universal Church is also organized on these lines. In the first place, there is the whole tremendous system of purposes incorporated in the Canon Law, and in the constitution and government of the Church. Here we find every means directed to the one end, that of keeping in motion the great machinery of ecclesiastical government. The first-mentioned point of view will decide whether adjustment or modification best serves the collective purpose, and whether the latter is attained with the least possible expenditure of time and energy.² The scheme of labor must be arranged and controlled by a strictly practical spirit.

²Even when the Church is considered from its other aspect, that of a divine work of art. Yet the former conception is bound to recur in this connection.

The Church, however, has another side. It embraces a sphere which is in a special sense free from purpose. And that is the liturgy. The latter certainly comprehends a whole system of aims and purposes, as well as the instruments to accomplish them. It is the business of the sacraments to act as the channels of certain graces. This mediation, however, is easily and quickly accomplished when the necessary conditions are present. The administration of the sacraments is an example of a liturgical action which is strictly confined to the one object. Of course, it can be said of the liturgy, as of every action and every prayer which it contains, that it is directed towards the providing of spiritual instruction. In order to sense the difference, it is sufficient to compare a week of the ecclesiastical year with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. In the latter every element is determined by deliberate choice, everything is directed towards the production of a certain spiritual and didactic result; each exercise, each prayer, even the way in which the hours of repose are passed, all aim at the one thing, the conversion of the will. It is not so with the liturgy. The fact that the latter has no place in the *Spiritual Exercises* is a proof of this.³ The liturgy wishes to teach, but not by means of an artificial system of aim-conscious educational influences; it simply creates an entire spiritual world in which the soul can live according to the requirements of its nature. The difference resembles that which exists between a gymnasium, in which every detail of the apparatus and every exercise aims at a calculated effect, and the open woods and fields. In the first, everything is consciously directed towards discipline and development; in the second, life is lived with nature, and internal growth takes place in her. The liturgy creates a universe brimming with fruitful spiritual life and allows the soul to wander about in it at will and to develop itself there. The abundance of prayers, ideas and actions, and the whole arrangement of the calendar, are incomprehensible when they are measured by the objective standard of strict suitability for a purpose. The liturgy has no purpose, or, at least, it cannot be considered from the standpoint of purpose. It is not a means which is adapted to attain a certain end—it is an end in itself. This fact is important because, if we overlook it, we labor to find all kinds

³The Benedictines give it one, but do so in an obviously different system of spiritual exercises to that conceived by St. Ignatius.

of didactic purposes in the liturgy which may certainly be stowed away somewhere, but are not actually evident.

When the liturgy is rightly regarded, it cannot be said to have a purpose because it does not exist for the sake of humanity, but for the sake of God. In the liturgy, man is no longer concerned with himself; his gaze is directed towards God. In it man is not so much intended to edify himself as to contemplate God's majesty. The liturgy means that the soul exists in God's presence, originates in him, lives in a world of divine realities, truths, mysteries and symbols, and really lives its true, characteristic and fruitful life.⁴

There are two very profound passages in the Holy Scriptures which are quite decisive on the point. One is found in the description of Ezekiel's vision.⁵ Let us consider the flaming Cherubim, who: "every one of them went straight forward, whither the impulse of the Spirit was to go . . . , and they turned not when they went . . . , ran and returned like flashes of lightning . . . , went . . . and stood . . . and were lifted up from the earth . . . , the noise of their wings was like the noise of many waters . . . , and when they stood, their wings were let down." How 'aimless' they are! How discouraging for the zealous partisans of reasonable suitability for a purpose! They are only pure motion, powerful and splendid, acting according to the direction of the Spirit, desiring nothing save to express its inner drift and its interior glow and force. They are the living image of the liturgy.

In the second passage, it is eternal Wisdom which speaks: "I was with him, forming all things, and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times, playing in the world. . . ." (Prov 8:30-31). This is conclusive. It is the delight of the eternal Father that Wisdom (the Son, the perfect Fullness of Truth) should pour out its eternal essence before him in all its ineffable splendor, without any 'purpose'—for what purpose would it have?—but full of decisive meaning, in pure and vocal happiness; the Son 'plays' before the Father.

Such is the life of the highest beings, the angels, who, without a purpose and as the Spirit stirs them, move before

⁴The fact that the liturgy moralizes so little is consistent with this conception. In the liturgy the soul forms itself, not by means of deliberate teaching and the exercise of virtue, but by the fact that it exists in the light of eternal truth, and is naturally and supernaturally robust.

⁵Ezek 1:4ff., esp. 12, 17, 20, 24; and 10:9ff.

God and are a mystic diversion and a living song before him. In the earthly sphere, there are two phenomena which tend in the same direction: the play of the child and the creation of the artist.

The child, when it plays, does not aim at anything. It has no purpose. It does not want to do anything but to exercise its youthful powers, pour forth its life in an aimless series of movements, words and actions, and by this to develop and to realize itself more fully; all of which is purposeless, but full of meaning nevertheless, the significance lying in the unchecked revelation of this youthful life in thoughts and words and movements and actions, in the capture and expression of its nature, and in the fact of its existence. And because it does not aim at anything in particular, because it streams unbroken and spontaneously forth, its utterance will be harmonious, its form clear and fine; its expression will of itself become picture and dance, rhyme, melody, and song. That is what play means; it is life, pouring itself forth without an aim, seizing upon riches from its own abundant store, significant through the fact of its existence. It will be beautiful, too, if it is left to itself, and if futile advice and pedagogic attempts at enlightenment do not foist upon it a host of aims and purposes, thus denaturizing it.

Yet, as life progresses, conflicts ensue, and it appears to grow ugly and discordant. Man sets before himself what he wants to do and what he should do and tries to realize this in his life. But in the course of these endeavors he learns that many obstacles stand in his way, and he perceives that it is very seldom that he can attain his ideal.

It is in a different order, in the imaginary sphere of representation, that man tries to reconcile the contradiction between that which he wishes to be and that which he is. In art, he tries to harmonize the ideal and actuality, that which he ought to be and that which he is, the soul within and nature without, the body and the soul. Such are the visions of art. It has no didactic aims, then; it is not intended to inculcate certain truths and virtues. A true artist has never had such an end in view. In art, he desires to do nothing but to overcome the discord to which we have referred, and to express in the sphere of representation the higher life of which he stands in need and to which, in actuality, he has only approximately attained. The artist merely wants to give life to his being and its longings, to give external form to the inner truth. And people who contemplate a work of art should not expect anything of it but that they should be able

to linger before it, moving freely, becoming conscious of their own better nature, and sensing the fulfillment of their most intimate longings. But they should not reason and chop logic, nor look for instruction and good advice from it.

The liturgy offers something higher. In it man, with the aid of grace, is given the opportunity of realizing his fundamental essence, of really becoming that which according to his divine destiny he should be and longs to be, a child of God. In the liturgy he is to go "unto God, who giveth joy to his youth."⁶ All this is, of course, on the supernatural plane, but at the same time it corresponds in the same degree to the inner needs of man's nature. Because the life of the liturgy is higher than that to which customary reality gives both the opportunity and the form of expression, it adopts suitable forms and methods from that sphere in which alone they are to be found, that is to say, from art. It speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life; it is carried out in places and at hours which have been coordinated and systematized according to sublimer laws than ours. It is in the highest sense the life of a child, in which everything is picture, melody, and song.

Such is the wonderful fact which the liturgy demonstrates; it unites art and reality in a supernatural childhood before God. That which formerly existed in the world of unreality only, and was rendered in art as the expression of mature human life, has here become reality. These forms are the vital expression of real and frankly supernatural life. But this has one thing in common with the play of the child and the life of art—it has no purpose, but it is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play. To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God's sight—not to create, but to exist—such is the essence of the liturgy. From this is derived its sublime mingling of profound earnestness and divine joyfulness. The fact that the liturgy gives a thousand strict and careful directions on the quality of the language—gestures, colors, garments and instruments which it employs—can be understood only by those who are able to take art and play seriously. Have you ever noticed how gravely children draw up the rules of their games, on the form of the melody, the position of the hands, the meaning of this stick and that

⁶Entrance prayer of the Mass.

tree? It is for the sake of the silly people who may not grasp their meaning and who will persist seeing the justification of an action or object only in its obvious purpose. Have you ever read of or even experienced the deadly earnestness with which the artist-vassal labors for art, his lord? Of his sufferings on the score of language? Or of what an overweening mistress form is? And all this for something that has no aim or purpose! No, art does not bother about aims. Does anyone honestly believe that the artist would take upon himself the thousand anxieties and feverish perplexities incident to creation if he intended to do nothing with his work but to teach the spectator a lesson, which he could just as well express in a couple of facile phrases, or one or two historical examples, or a few well-taken photographs? The only answer to this can be an emphatic negative. Being an artist means wrestling with the expression of the hidden life of man, avowedly in order that it may be given existence; nothing more. It is the image of the divine creation, of which it is said that it has made things 'ut sint.'

The liturgy does the same thing. It too, with endless care, with all the seriousness of the child and the strict conscientiousness of the great artist, has toiled to express in a thousand forms the sacred, God-given life of the soul to no other purpose than that the soul may therein have its existence and live its life. The liturgy has laid down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God. And, if we are desirous of touching bottom in this mystery, it is the Spirit of fire and of holy discipline "who has knowledge of the world"⁷—the Holy Ghost—who has ordained the game which the eternal Wisdom plays before the heavenly Father in the Church, its kingdom on earth. And 'its delight' is in this way 'to be with the children of men.'

Only those who are not scandalized by this understand what the liturgy means. From the very first, every type of rationalism has turned against it. The practice of the liturgy means that by the help of grace, under the guidance of the Church, we grow into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in his sight; it means fulfilling God's word and 'becoming as little children'; it means foregoing maturity with all its purposefulness, and

⁷Responsory at *Terce*, Pentecost.

confining oneself to play, as David did when he danced before the Ark. It may, of course, happen that those extremely clever people, who merely from being grown-up have lost all spiritual youth and spontaneity, will misunderstand this and jibe at it. David probably had to face the derision of Michal.

It is in this very aspect of the liturgy that its didactic aim is to be found, that of teaching the soul not to see purposes everywhere, not to be too conscious of the end it wishes to attain, not to be desirous of being over-clever and grown-up, but to understand simplicity in life. The soul must learn to abandon, at least in prayer, the restlessness of purposeful activity; it must learn to waste time for the sake of God and to be prepared for the sacred game with sayings and thoughts and gestures, without always immediately asking 'why?' and 'wherefore?' It must learn not to be continually yearning to *do* something, to attack something, to accomplish something useful, but to play the divinely ordained game of the liturgy in liberty and beauty and holy joy before God.

In the end, eternal life will be its fulfillment. Will the people who do not understand the liturgy be pleased to find that the heavenly consummation is an eternal song of praise? Will they not rather associate themselves with those other industrious people who consider that such an eternity will be both boring and unprofitable?*

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