

**Book Presentation**

**L.P. HEMMING, *Worship as a Revelation. The Past, Present and Future of Catholic Liturgy* (London & New York: Burns & Oates, 2008).**

**London, Brompton Oratory, July 1<sup>st</sup> 2008, 4pm**

**Response by Joris Geldhof, Faculty of Theology, Leuven**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Laurence,

In the field of the liturgy, a kind of “ideological pneumatologism” or even a “pneumatocentric ideology” has prevailed in the hearts and minds of many scholars throughout the past century. Before and after the Second Vatican Council, a fascination and sometimes blind enthusiasm for the power of the Holy Spirit was prominently featured in liturgical and theological studies. The Holy Spirit was said to render the liturgy accessible and transparent again; it was the driving force behind the creativity of those engaged in liturgical groups and formation; it was the guarantee of the liturgy’s dynamism, flexibility, and digestibility; in sum, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity seems to have functioned as a forgotten hero, who, alas, as it turned out, did not fulfil all the expectations laid upon him – how could he? At a more fundamental level, liturgists often explicitly argued for a real ‘*Geistvergessenheit*’ in the Western (Latin) tradition, very much like some philosophers, who meticulously laid bear the onto-theological structure of Western metaphysics and uncovered (or discovered?) an inherent ‘*Seinsvergessenheit*’. Because too little attention had been paid to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, so the liturgists suggested, the outlook of the liturgy had become one-sided, its organisation too dry and the active participation in it too weak.

Personally, I don’t think that this analysis is accurate. On the one hand, the basic presumptions of these ideas are ideologically biased, in particular by a kind of subjectivist activism. On the other hand, I cannot

imagine that the majority of theologians concerned with the liturgy, let's say, from medieval times onwards, systematically operated with handicapped notions of the trinity. That would be much too harsh a judgment and one presumably not well informed by the source texts.

Despite the ubiquity of such ideological traps into which much liturgical scholarship still falls, Laurence's book successfully avoids them. It neither seeks to address the necessary questions in terms of a tendentious pneumatology, nor does it idealise the fourth and fifth centuries as the "golden age" of the liturgy, when creativity and authenticity went hand in hand with (multi-)cultural adaptations. Laurence's book is a profound reflection on the essence of the liturgy, and therefore thoroughly Christological. Moreover, I fully subscribe to Laurence's opinion that it is precisely that which we need today: a sound Christological sacramentology – and not only in the Catholic Church.

For a number of reasons, however, the nature of the reflections undertaken in this book has a strained relation with contemporary thought and culture. I would now like to look briefly at these reasons, since they elucidate the peculiar profile of this book. (Dwelling on these reasons also gives me the opportunity to express my overall appreciation for the content of this book.)

First of all, Laurence makes a clear case for the centrality of the liturgy. The liturgy is not the field of applications or exercises. It is the basis, it concerns the very fundamentals of Christian faith. In this sense, it is more essential and absolute than relative or accidental. The liturgy stands at the centre of faith and theology. It is, however, fairly "unzeitgemäss" to maintain this idea in a time when the study of the liturgy is often subsumed in practically oriented research departments. I myself am part of the research unit of pastoral theology at my faculty, though fortunately I come from the department of fundamental and systematic theology...

Second, at more than one occasion, but often more in the deeper fibres of the text than at the surface, this book challenges modernity and postmodernity. (For the sake of the argument, I will not make a philosophical distinction here between these phenomena.) Take for

example Laurence's critical position towards Cartesianism. It is evident that the subject involved in the liturgy stands at odds with the Cartesian cogito, who is actively – but restlessly – looking for knowledge and certainty. The activism of the modern subject has caused and indeed continues to cause much damage to the beauty and the nature of the liturgy. Much more caution is needed in the near future.

Third, this book clearly illustrates the indissoluble tension between Christianity (with its revelation claim) and modernity (with its ideal of autonomy). I find this tension so crucial it is one of the central topics of my own research. Philosophically speaking, the future of Christianity needs an uncompromising realism. But the nature of this realism has to be well understood and carefully defined. It is not in the first instance an epistemological realism. I think we have become a little satisfied with discussions about the adequacy of Christian representations of reality versus the demanding standards of modern (and postmodern) rationalisms. We need to focus on a soteriological realism. Of course, the latter remains ultimately indistinguishable from the former. But above all, we need to emphasise the crucial role of Christ in the mystery of (our) redemption. Redemption, and therefore also grace mediated through the sacraments, is real. Just like our participation in the Son's eternal worship of the Father through the Holy Spirit is also something real – real in the sense that it really matters for the beings that we are. In an exemplary way, Laurence makes an intelligent case for such a soteriological realism, although he does not call it that. We cannot understand the nature of the liturgy and the sacraments unless we are convinced of the truth and the reality of salvation. But again, that is quite an "unzeitgemäss" vision to uphold.

As may have become evident, I share many of the philosophical presuppositions of Laurence's book. I had a different itinerary in philosophy and theology – studying mainly German idealism and romanticism (especially Schelling and Baader) – but we have come to similar positions regarding subjectivity, realism, truth, and revelation. But I have of course a few questions, which are rather theological in nature.

My first question deals with the unity of the theological discipline. I defend a holistic and synthetic view on the nature of theology and resist any compartmentalisation of theology, be it in the form of ongoing academic specialisation, or of various strategic interests directed against the dialogue and exchange among theologians of different academic and confessional traditions. At times, when reading Laurence's book, I had the impression that pastoral concerns are not taken seriously enough. Let me be clear, he expresses no hostility towards the pastoral in this book (I even think the reverse is true!). For historical reasons, I can understand his implicit reluctance towards the intrusion of the pastoral into the liturgical. In the end, however, I don't think the two can or should be separated. My question is, then: Is there not an intrinsic validity and legitimacy to pastoral concerns being taken seriously into the core of the liturgy?

My second question concerns revelation. I certainly do agree that the liturgy in essence continues the Christ event as both revelatory and salvific. And I do agree that revelation is absolutely anterior to any human initiative. But I realise that there are different nuances to the insistency with which theologians defend and proclaim this idea. I am thinking of the difference between K. Barth and K. Rahner, for instance. And I asked myself when reading: is Laurence not too much of a Barthian? Would he also decisively answer "Nein" to the Brunnerians of our time? And is there not a complicated threat in barthianising the liturgy? Despite its noble intentions, the focus on the divine might paradoxically turn into a complete secularisation or, even worse, indifference – so much that history, namely the coming into being of modernity, repeats itself.