

Laurence Paul Hemming's *Worship as a Revelation*

Laurence has written a powerful and subtle study, even if at times, despite the lavish use of italicisation and the insertion of explanatory clauses, readers may have difficulty in grasping some points. Its key, to my mind, is furnished towards its close where he states two desiderata for the future. And these are, first, greater respect in matters liturgical for antiquity of use, and secondly, an approach to the theological understanding of the Liturgy which stresses what he calls soteriological and anagogical rather than pastoral aspects. I am with him completely on both points, for reasons akin to those he gives elsewhere in the book.

On the first, respect for antiquity of use: there is an obvious danger of eliding significant and worthwhile features of liturgical life by superimposing on venerable traditions of worship the mind-set of one particular period, even one which has the inestimable privilege of including me. Hence what Lauren Pristas, whom he cites, calls the need for a 'hermeneutics of prudence'. Modern liturgical reform may have clarified form but it has been at the price of impoverishment of meaning. Where I would differ here from Laurence is that I am not so unwilling to raise the issue of further liturgical change. I think the time will soon be right to begin thinking about what form a unification of the two present Roman liturgies might take, bearing in mind how, from the debate prompted by dissatisfaction with Paul VI's reform, we also need to advert to the earlier, pre-twentieth century and indeed pre-Tridentine background of the historic rite. Of course, this thinking must be

like the third of the year's seasons in John Keats's ode *To Autumn*, slow but sure, a 'close bosom-friend of the maturing sun', if it is to enjoy 'mellow fruitfulness'. Perhaps the pontificate of Benedict XVIII? So here I depart from Laurence who states in his Preface that he has no programme.

On the second point, the priority of soteriological and anagogical over pastoral considerations might be better expressed in slightly different terms. Precisely pastoral considerations indicate the desirability of emphasizing the redemptive and deifying roles of the Liturgy. Without according such roles the primacy, the Liturgy cannot serve the people as it should in bringing home to the fresh pastures of the Kingdom the flock for which the great Shepherd of the sheep, the Pastor-Logos, became incarnate and enacted his Paschal mystery. The way in which Laurence draws on Dr Margaret Barker's highly original exegetical work exemplifies that soteriological and anagogical approach to ancient Christian texts. But one does not have to share the details of her reconstructions of Christian and indeed Jewish origins to accept the general thrust of this second request. If the Liturgy is, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, the *fons et culmen* of the Christian life, it must indeed be primarily soteriological, and thus *fons*, as well as anagogical, and thus *culmen*, issuing from the source of redeeming grace, 'fount', and lifting us up toward the goal of deification at which the grace of God for humans aims: 'culmination'.

My principal difficulty with Laurence's book does not stem, then, from any disagreement with his overall recipe. The heart of my difficulty is this. It seems to me that, not content with the already exalted terms in which the

Second Vatican Council praises the place of the Liturgy in Christian living, Laurence further inflates that role, and the role of liturgical theology, to the point at which both roles become implausible. He does, so moreover, in a fashion which, granted his criticisms of the modern liturgical books (including those that issue from the reforms of Pius X and Pius XII), has an overall tendency to induce in the Catholic reader a degree of despondency – if not despair!

What I have in mind is those passages where Laurence tends to identify the Liturgy with the present availability of revelation *tout court*, and, accordingly, to treat the theology of the Liturgy as the primordial theological discipline which unifies and provides the possibility for all the rest. For him the Liturgy is, as he writes, theology's true and only home. Laurence is not the first person to put forward this proposal or something very like it. What he asserts has a precedent in the American Benedictine Aidan Kavanagh's concept of the Liturgy as *prima theologia*, though Kavanagh is, I think, more circumspect in treating this primordial theology as our principal access to revelation rather than, in effect, suppressing the distinction between the actuality of revelation now and the Liturgy. In an age when the liturgical life of the Church has become somewhat problematic, through imperfectly conceived and even more imperfectly executed revisionism as well as the bringing to bear on the Liturgy of a by no means always helpful modern mind-set and sensibility, this identification of the Liturgy with revelation, and of theological liturgiology as the all-enabling theological discipline has, I feel,

obvious disadvantages. If getting the Liturgy and liturgical theology exactly right is so all-important, we are presently in a parlous state.

I would suggest an alternative picture which seems to me a juster reflection of the standpoint of the Church's theological doctors and other approved divines. Revelation, considered as God's disclosure here and now of the saving truth communicated climactically to the apostles, is found in the wisdom which inheres in the mind of the Church when she is regarded as the bride of Christ and temple of the Spirit. Such wisdom has as its principal expression the interplay between Scripture and the forms of tradition, of which forms the Liturgies of East and West are prime examples. Dogmatic theology, as the chief pedagogical expression of the divine wisdom among the various theological disciplines, requires, consequently, thorough informing by the Liturgy, taken globally. It still remains possible for a modern Catholic theologian in the West to appeal to earlier conditions of the Roman rite and indeed to the Oriental liturgies, albeit textually, rather than in the existentially engaged mode of someone regularly participating therein. It is, surely, worrying enough that liturgical expression may have been impaired through a hermeneutic of imprudence, without extending that impairment to affect the Church's fundamental appropriation of revelation as such, and the basic health of Catholic theology as a whole.

*Pace* Laurence's view that the Liturgy must always trump dogmatic considerations, and not the other way round, I am not so sure that history, long before the twentieth century, bears him out. For instance, in the Pneumatomachian controversy of the fourth century, fathers like St Basil

appealed to liturgical texts to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit, but the eventual dogmatization of the divinity of the Spirit at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 is generally supposed to have had its impact on the fuller development of prayers beseeching the descent of the Spirit on the people and the Gifts. On my view of things, that is perfectly acceptable. Hierarchs, once they have learned from the Liturgy in depth, may well allow the adjustment of liturgical forms so as to maximize their expression of the divine wisdom found in Scripture and Tradition. But just as doctrine develops by augmentation not diminution (compare Newman), I would expect that adjustment to take the form of additional enhancement, and not reductive simplification.

In conclusion, I might just mention one further point which could soften the blow of this remarkable book for more alerted or alarmed readers. The ingenuity with which Laurence draws theological lessons from juxtaposing the texts provided for feasts and seasons at earlier periods of the Roman liturgy could be replicated, if not in so full a fashion, by someone bringing to bear the same habits of mind as his on later versions, including the present 'ordinary form'. One example from the calendar of 1970: that the 'green' Sundays and ferias of the year - so-called 'ordinary time' - are now identified by reference to the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which acts as the first Sunday per annum, enables one to treat the entire presentation of the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the Lectionary and other texts of the Mass and Office for such 'green' time as in essential relation to the Theophany, the Trinitarian epiphany where the Redeemer takes on his messianic mission,

with its priestly, royal and prophetic aspects, in a descent into the waters which prefigures his Paschal journey through the waters of death.

Consequently, in the books of Paul VI's reform it is especially clear that the Saviour is never to be approached liturgically and in preaching in the manner of liberal Protestant life-of-Jesus research, or by a search for contemporary relevance which avoids the mysteric dimensions of the genuine Christ rather than embracing them so as to look at issues in a way that is not just pertinent to modern conditions but gets transfigured in the process. Illuminating juxtapositions are thus still available but Laurence's question remains well-posed: in what degree of fullness?