

THE LITURGY AS COMMUNICATION



It is enough to examine the roots of the word “liturgy” to see immediately that communication is intrinsic to it. In fact, the Greek word combines *leitōs* (public) + *ergon* (work) = *leitourgia* (“public worship service”). But who is the communicator? In the Christian Liturgy, there are two levels of communication: the first and foremost is the divine level, but it is the second level—the human one—that helps us perceive the first and it is also the one that can be analyzed. At times it happens that the Liturgy does not communicate very effectively on the human level. To remedy this, Vatican Council II “cleaned up” liturgical rituals so as to make them more meaningful.

A “Multicoded” Communication

Communication through the Liturgy is complex and multicoded. From the aspect of communication, it has similarities to a theater performance. In fact, like a stage show, the Liturgy too has a “director” who works within a “furnished” space in which lighting, objects and the “costumes” worn all play meaningful roles. The persons who carry out various ministries in the liturgical service are the “actors.” The liturgical rituals themselves include elaborate attitudes, gestures, “spoken parts” and music.

Liturgical rites are not improvised. On the contrary, they are regulated by the rubrics (the *Instructions* or *Principles/Rules*) that precede every sacramental rite.

When the science of communications (semiotics) enters into play in a liturgical event, even though it stops at the phenomenal aspect (the features that strike our senses), it is clear that the divine aspect cannot be omitted because otherwise the liturgical celebration would not be fully understood.

The Entrance Procession

Here is an example: with regard to the Introductory Rites of the Mass, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says: “After the people have gathered, the Entrance Chant begins as the priest enters with the deacon and ministers. The purpose of this chant is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers” (n. 47).

If we carefully analyze the above-cited words, many aspects related to communication can be noticed. We are presented with an assembly context laden with meaning from the very start, with the entrance of several persons appointed to carry out specific roles. These individuals are clothed in sacred vestments and file into the church in a particular order: “The procession is led by the thurifer carrying a thurible with burning incense. He is followed by ministers bearing lighted candles, and between them an acolyte or other ministers with the cross. These are followed by the lector or a deacon carrying the book of the Gospels, which should be slightly elevated. Last comes the priest who is to celebrate the Mass” (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nn. 120, 172). The words and music of the entrance chant set the tone of the procession, which gives the assembly a “direction” and “goal.”

The numerous codes activated by the procession hark back to the individual semiotics used: the spatial (proxemics), gestural (kinesics), olfactive, iconic-visual, dress and sound codes, etc. The entrance procession reminds the worshipers that they are “on the way” to their heavenly homeland. The cross tells them that they are living a time of redemption and resurrection in Christ, whose cross is elevated as a guide and standard, but also as a model and reference point for each believer and for the Church as a whole.



Alongside the cross, the Gospel represents the Living Word, Christ, who accompanies the Church and never abandons her. When heeded, this Word can transform the assembly into a missionary Church whose members proclaim the Word through their lives, lovingly united to Christ in the sacrament in which he gives his body and pours out his blood.

Thus the Eucharistic Celebration begins with a collection of codes that reinforce one another. And it is only right that this be so because the purpose of the Introductory Rite is to draw and “launch” the assembly and therefore it should involve the worshipers in a powerful way. Let us try to imagine a Liturgical Celebration in which the entrance hymn is sung by just the choir (or, even worse, one in which a taped song is used) and in which the procession has been shortened: it is made from the sacristy to the altar by the priest alone, who performs all the other ministerial roles. In this case, it is clear that the power of the rite to communicate its message is drastically reduced, if not rendered ineffective.

The communicational power of the Liturgy can be further weakened by readings that are proclaimed too quickly and/or with unclear diction, by a sermon that lacks form and substance, by repetitive and distracting gestures, by a poorly-conducted ceremony that flattens everything through a hurried mumbling of prayers, making it hard for the worshipers to follow the Liturgy and participate in it.... The result of all this is the death of liturgical communication.

From Codes to Persons: the Christian as a “Sign”

The setting of the Eucharistic Celebration is charged with symbolic meanings, some of which are immediately understood and others which are less obvious. Some things like the altar, the lectern and the “throne” of the celebrant are clearly identifiable and their significance is immediately understood. However, it is more difficult to grasp the significance of other sacred objects or areas in the church such as the baptistery or the apse. At times “devotion” has played cruel tricks and has created a conflict of communication, such as when the tabernacle is placed on the same level as the altar or on top of it.

Because the Liturgy is a complex communication, it is necessary to be initiated into it. To take an active, personal part in liturgical communication, one must understand what one is doing.

Often the points of reference are the Bible and Christian Tradition (let us call to mind iconological codification). But one aspect that must never be forgotten is that liturgical communication always takes place through the first Christian “sign,” which is the Christian him/herself. If it is true that it is not the church that makes the Christian, it is equally true that liturgical communication implies that the Christian is the first subject of communication, capable of responding to the salvific communication of God in Christ.

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