

## Christian Liturgy and Social Change

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**Abstract:** In the past decades, theologians have drawn an interesting link between liturgy and social issues. From being seen as a stress-free way of escaping from the challenges of life while maintaining the status quo, liturgy is now regarded as a place where the dichotomy between faith and life finds a unifying factor. There is a growing awareness on the social implications a true liturgical celebration conveys. The author concludes that without active commitments, worship is comfortable entertainment, empty ritual, a pretence of worship - in short, negligent *diakonia*". This paper was prepared thirteen years ago and presented to a congress in Nairobi. It was never published. It is published today with permission from the author who did not revise it.

**Key words:** liturgy, Eucharist, jubilee, symbols, social commitment.

### Introduction

Over the last 30 years there has been an interesting reflection concerning the link between liturgy and social issues. A number of books and articles have appeared, stressing various dimensions of the theme and opening the way for a future reflection. It must be said from the outset that there is an uncomfortable tension between liturgy and social issues, since liturgy is often understood and experienced as a stress-free way of escaping from the challenges of life while maintaining the status quo. A certain way of understanding the 'spirituality' and 'clericalism' of the liturgy have brought about a dichotomy between faith and life. As a consequence, liturgy and everything that has to do with spirituality came to be seen as having little or even no connection at all with social issues. This tension is still with us. Many sects present a religion and a spirituality that have nothing to do with real life and which do not challenge the status quo. To a certain extent the Catholic Church is becoming more aware of the deep social implications that a true liturgical celebration conveys. Much needs to be done not only to uncover the richness of this dimension but also to sensitize the Christian community about it.

In this paper I will show how the link between liturgy and ethics is kept in balance in Jewish worship. Then I will turn to the Christian liturgy, highlighting how the liturgy handles this tension. As a conclusion I will offer some reflections on the Sunday celebration of the Mass and its inherent power to bring about major changes not only at personal and ecclesial levels, but also at the social level.

### **The Jewish Worship**

At the centre of the Jewish faith, there is the profound belief that God intervenes in history and reveals his identity through concrete historical events. History came to be the locus where God revealed his identity and called the people of Israel to faith. The Hebrew Scriptures are the witness of this intervention of God experienced and lived in faith. Worship, in its various dimensions and forms, came to have a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it was the memorial of the wonderful deeds of God, and on the other, it challenged Israel to take charge of history and to bring about any necessary changes. Let us give a couple of examples.

**1. Jubilee Vision** - The celebration of 'Jubilee', in its three main forms is indicative of the powerful link between worship and social commitment. The Sabbath day and the Sabbath year play a very important role in the shaping of worship and ethical commitments and point in the direction of the celebration of the Jubilee<sup>1</sup>.

"The Sabbath Day was intended to break the cycle of daily work - always in danger of degeneration into exploitation or drudgery - to offer rest and restoration for humans and animals alike, and to recall the divine purpose of liberation from slavery for building an alternative social possibility in which all would have enough and none would have more than enough"<sup>2</sup>. In various texts (Ex 16, 20 & Deut 5) the meaning of the Sabbath day is rooted in the liberating action of God and is seen as a logical and necessary fulfilment of God's powerful action.

In the same way, the Sabbatical year<sup>3</sup> - celebrated every seven years - was a concrete way of linking the memorial of Exodus and the coming into the Promised Land with concrete actions geared towards helping the poor and rectifying serious injustices and imbalances at social and economic levels. The liberation from Egypt is at the root of a new way of living and building social relationships that are both liberating and just. Debts and slavery are addressed in a special way, thus "halting the 'normal' process of socioeconomic marginalization and impoverishment"<sup>4</sup>.

These two important celebrations, as we have said, point in the direction of the Jubilee, celebrated every 50 years<sup>5</sup>. The social commitment that is embodied in the Jubilee finds its meaning "in the context of spiritual renewal and faithfulness to the God who liberated the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and gave them the Promised Land"<sup>6</sup>. The biblical Jubilee provides a solid foundation for commitment and action at social and economic levels through the redistribution of the land. This divine mandate is "the solution to the problem of exploitation, poverty and marginalization."<sup>7</sup>

**2. The Rite of the Offering of the First Fruits (Deut 26:1-11).** This celebration is a concrete way of making the people of Israel understand that the land is a gift from God. The awareness that the land is a gift finds its expression in the action of 'dispossession'. Some fruits of the land are 'returned' to God. These fruits represent the whole land and are returned to God in an attitude of thanksgiving. But the ritual gesture by itself is not enough! Important though this gesture may be, it must be accompanied by another important gesture, namely the dispossession in favour of those in need. In other words, the whole celebration is a genuine and a true expression of gratefulness to God when the people of Israel reach out to those in need. According to the Scriptures, true worship is never separated from some 'works'. These works are the best response to the faithfulness and commitment of God towards Israel. When Israel had nothing and was a stranger, God provided for it. The Promised Land was a gift offered to Israel.

The best way of giving thanks for the gift of the land is to act exactly as God did. Israel is invited to make the ritual celebration of the gift of the first fruits genuine by engaging in concrete works towards those who have nothing.

“The rite is the *symbolic expression* of an ethical duty. Grace is always given as a task to be performed. For Israel, ritual liturgy has no meaning unless it is fulfilled as a ‘liturgy of the neighbour’”<sup>8</sup>.

The tension between an empty ritualism, which ignores the neighbour, is always at the centre of the criticism of the prophets. Many a time the prophets had to call Israel to conversion because of the gap between the “worship of the lips” (cf Amos 5:21-27; Hos 6:6; Jer 7:1-28; Mic 6:6-12) and ethical commitment. Cultic formalism was a betrayal of the true historical faith of the people of Israel and the prophets had to intervene in a harsh way to castigate this kind of cult and to re-direct the heart of the people towards the true cult that entailed a concrete reaching out to the poor (cf also Sir 35:1-4).

**3. The Prayer of the Psalms** - Another important area that can throw light on the vital link between worship and social involvement is the prayer of the Psalms. The Psalms praise God for his active and loving involvement in history and they express also Israel’s answer to God’s action. The theology that is expressed in the Psalms is that “praise is not only a religious vocation, but it is also a social gesture that affects the shape and character of human life and human community.”<sup>7</sup>. The singing of the Psalms is not a neutral activity, but rather a constructive activity.

Yahweh, who works wonders, is at the centre of the praise of Israel. This praise, which springs forth from a strong belief in the faithfulness of God, makes Israel hope in the new transformations that God will bring about, and gives them the assurance that God will make all things new in the future. At the same time the praise of Israel effects major changes at social level, since it challenges the power of idols and those who rely on them. It calls for the construction of a new world order. In this new world the one who reigns is God himself. Yahweh is the one who rules and who establishes compassion, justice, mercy, equity and truth. This is clearly at odds with the ‘imperial’ power and the slavery of idols. The singing of the Psalms leads to embody the way in which Yahweh rules the world, by taking concrete action in the shaping of this new world order. It challenges everyone who prays the Psalms to live a new lifestyle in harmony with the rule of God. This praise “legitimizes the urgent practice of justice” and calls for the emergence of “a missional community.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Christian Liturgy and Social Change**

Jesus was very much in line with the position of the prophets and at various times he endorsed their criticism of cultic formalism and a religiosity that did not come from the heart. In Jesus’ teaching, the vertical dimension of prayer and religion goes hand in hand with its horizontal dimension. It is the horizontal dimension that gives meaning to every act of cult and it is precisely this dimension that expresses true religion. This profound and challenging teaching, embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus, was taken up in the liturgy by the Church. Many of the ancient Eucharistic Prayers contain very concrete requests to God, asking that the members of the assembly be granted “open-handed generosity towards the needy”<sup>11</sup>. Many times the focus has been just on the **personal** transformation that our encounter with the Lord effects in our life. At times, the **ecclesial** transformation has been stressed and highlighted. A deep reflection on the

nature of Christian liturgy cannot overlook the **social** transformation that any genuine liturgical celebration calls forth. These three transformations go hand in hand and enable us to live the liturgy as true and genuine 'diakonia'.<sup>12</sup>. A couple of examples will help us understand the depth of all this.

### 1. **The Threefold Body of Christ**

Theological tradition has always distinguished a threefold body of Christ: the body that is revealed to us through the living Word of God, the sacramental body and, finally, the ecclesial body. The proclamation of the Word of God in the liturgical assembly is meant to enable us to understand the sacramental presence and to transform us into the ecclesial body. The sacramental presence of the Risen Christ also aims at transforming us into the ecclesial body of Christ. The formation of the ecclesial body is paramount in the liturgical celebration. As an example we can look at the epiclesis which is found in the Eucharistic Prayers.

***The first epiclesis*** - During the Eucharistic Prayer, the presider, in communion with the whole assembly, calls on God's power and asks that the gifts offered by human hands be consecrated, that is, that they may become the body and blood of Christ. This special invocation of the Holy Spirit is called 'epiclesis' and usually it is highlighted by the ringing of bells. In Eucharistic Prayer II this invocation is as follows:

"[Father], let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

This prayer is accompanied by some special gestures of the presider. The presider holds his hands outstretched over the offerings. This gesture is called "laying on of hands" and it is a specific gesture that signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. A sign of the cross is also made once over both the bread and chalice at the words "the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ." It is the belief of the Church that the bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

***The second epiclesis*** - During the Eucharistic Prayer, the presider, in communion with the whole assembly, calls on God's power and asks that those who receive the body and blood of Christ may become one body in the Lord. This special invocation of the Holy Spirit is called second 'epiclesis' or epiclesis of communion. In Eucharistic Prayer II this invocation is as follows:

"[Father] May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit."

This second epiclesis focuses on the effect of the Eucharist. The Lord gave us his body and blood as our spiritual food ("Take and eat"; "Take and drink") and we, who eat and drink the body and blood of the Lord, become one body in Christ. In the second epiclesis, the gesture is the actual receiving of the body and blood of Christ in order to be united into "one body, one spirit in Christ." The Eucharist is a Church-making sacrament, and our receiving of the Eucharist makes us more and more living members of the Church. St Augustine used to say that when we receive communion, "we become what we eat." By this he indicated the transformation that the Holy Spirit brings about in us who approach the altar. The Holy Spirit, present in the Eucharistic species, transforms us into the ecclesial body of Christ.

The two epiclesis reveal in a special manner the transforming action of the Holy Spirit in the gifts and in ourselves who receive the body and blood of the Lord. This transformation into

the ecclesial body of Christ is in view of the transformation that God wants to bring about in the world! The mission of the Church springs exactly from this transformation and the ecclesial body now shares the Word and Sacraments with everyone. The transforming action of the Holy Spirit enables the Church to fulfil its mission in the world. This can be expressed also in the traditional liturgical language *lex orandi* and *lex vivendi*. The celebration of the Liturgy (*lex agendi*) expresses not only our belief (*lex credendi*) but also our Christian living (*lex vivendi*).

## 2. The Sunday Mass and Social Change <sup>13</sup>

At the end of the celebration of the Mass we are sent forth in peace “to love and to serve the Lord” in deeper communion, we hope, with one another and with the whole Church. The Sunday celebration is meant to transform us in such a way that we become the sacrament of the presence of the Trinity in the world. There is an intimate and inseparable link between the Eucharist and mission. Our participation in the Eucharist is meant to shape our daily life in such a way that it becomes ‘Eucharistic’. Pope John Paul II highlights this as follows:

“Proclaiming the death of the Lord ‘until he comes’ (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely ‘Eucharistic’. It is this fruit of a transfigured existence and a commitment to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel which splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life as a whole: ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Rev 22:20)” <sup>14</sup>.

This important commitment is emphasized in the celebration itself in various ways. We highlight only some important points in order to see how the whole celebration of the Eucharist places us in the struggle to have Christ’s kingdom grow in the world.

### Gathering Together: a Prophetic Act

On Sundays we gather together for the celebration of the Eucharist. The very fact of gathering as an assembly is a prophetic gesture, pointing in the direction of the catholicity (universality) of God’s family. People of various walks of life, of different nationalities, languages and cultures, gather together in the same place in order to form a praying community and to celebrate the Eucharist. This is the ‘miracle’ that takes place every Sunday in every church. The Risen Lord calls all the members of his family together in order to speak to them through his living Word and to feed them with his Body and Blood. Our gathering together on Sunday is a very important dimension of our faith and it reveals our sense of belonging to the Trinity and to the Church, as well as our commitment to break down the many barriers that are built around us because of social, ethnic or financial status. The assembly overcomes all divisions and barriers and offers a challenging image of how the Trinity calls us to live together. What happens in church must not end there, but should lead us to break down barriers and build bridges in our daily life, aware that all of us are children of the same Father. The challenge that is that of developing a healthy continuity between what happens in church and what takes place in our daily life. The dignity of everyone taking part in the celebration must be respected even outside the church. This can be done by creating those structures that uphold the dignity of every person and that extend to daily life the prophetic dimension of the assembly.

### **The Word of God**

The Word of God we have listened to is always linked to a concrete intervention of the Trinity in history and it invites us to take responsibility for the spreading of God's kingdom in our society today. Jesus continually tells his disciples to be not just 'listeners' of the Word, but to put it into practice, to be 'doers' of the Word of life. This can be done thanks to the powerful action of the Holy Spirit who acts in the assembly and enables all its members to receive the Word and to live it in their life. According to St Gregory the Great, the putting into practice of the Word listened to is not just a follow-up to understanding the Word, but rather it forms an integral part of it: listening, understanding and action are linked together, thus overcoming any dichotomy between faith and experience, liturgy and life. Prayerful listening to the Word of God leads the assembly to living the message that is proclaimed as a concrete way of being disciples of the Lord. The Word of God, as we have already seen in the first part, calls for a dynamic and creative involvement in ordinary life. The kingdom that is proclaimed is also brought about through our active cooperation and commitment. Another important dimension is the listening attitude of the assembly. Listening to God's Word must attune our ears to listening to the cry of the poor when the celebration is over. The listening that takes place around the Table of the Word is geared to preparing us to a continuous listening and response to those who suffer. The Prayers of the Faithful play an important role in linking liturgy to life. Our prayer intentions are to be made in such a way that they instil in us a desire to action and commitment.

### **The Eucharistic Prayer**

In the Eucharistic Prayer, we repeat the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper "Do this in memory of me". These words acquire a profound and rich meaning when they are seen within the context of Jesus' self-gift which found its climax in the Paschal Mystery. As we repeat those words, we are challenged to live in the way he did. Through the whole celebration of the Mass we become more profoundly the Ecclesial body of Christ and we are sent forth as the Church to continue the mission of the Lord. The communion with the Trinity and with one another that we have experienced around the Table of the Word and the Table of the Eucharist must affect the way in which we enter into relationships outside the church, the way in which we commit ourselves to building a more human world.

As the Risen Lord gave his apostles the great gift of the Holy Spirit and "breathed" on them, we too, at each Eucharist, are filled with the new life of the Spirit, especially when we receive Holy Communion. We too are empowered by the Risen Lord to be witnesses of his forgiveness, to spread his Word, to continue his mission of healing and peace wherever we are, at home, at work, with friends, etc. Any true communion with the Lord will lead us to recognize him in those most in need in the way he did.

### **Communion**

In the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46) Jesus himself reminds us that whatever we do for those in need, we do it for him. In the early Church, many bishops used to challenge their Christians to recognize Christ not only in "the breaking of bread" but also in the broken lives of those around them. In this way a powerful link was established between the Sunday celebration of the Mass and ordinary life. Our communion with the Lord commits us to the poor and should flow into prophetic action on behalf of the oppressed. This commitment leads us back to the Eucharist where we shall once again find the strength and energy we need in order to live as true

disciples of the Lord. Through communion we experience God's unconditional love, forgiveness and compassion. Now we are challenged to share the same gift with our brothers and sisters<sup>15</sup>.

### A Eucharistic life

Pope John Paul II continues to remind the Christian communities that sharing, charity, solidarity and the work of justice are part and parcel of a Eucharistic life. The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist does not absolve us from our commitment to sharing and solidarity. On the contrary, it commits us even more to carry out various works of charity, mercy stressing, in a special way, the dignity of every person. "The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth", says the Pope<sup>16</sup>. This glimpse of the kingdom must shape our relationships and our daily life in such a way that the dismissal at the end of the Mass will not mark the completion of a duty but will launch us into living a Eucharistic life. This means, concretely, tackling the problems that darken the horizon of our time. The Pope indicates the way to follow in these timely words:

"We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from its conception to its natural end. And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a 'globalized' world where the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest appear to have so little hope! It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love"<sup>17</sup>.

This becomes a reality when we see the Eucharist as the sacrament that challenges us to build "a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God's plan"<sup>18</sup>.

### A Eucharistic Service (*Diakonia*)

In the celebration of the Mass we encounter in a special way the Risen Lord who has lived his life in an attitude of service to all. He himself said that he "did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life" (Mk I 0:45) and, at the Last Supper, he revealed his identity to his disciples when he said: "I am among you as the one who serves" (Lk 22:27). As a concrete expression of all this, he washed the feet of his disciples and commanded them to do the same (cf Jn 13:1-20). The highest expression of this service was his readiness to give his life on the cross. His service found expression in the sacrificial love that shaped the whole of his life and that is summarized in the Paschal Mystery.

In the Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions, we pray using these words:

Open our eyes to the needs of all;

Inspire us with words and deeds

to comfort those who labour and are overburdened;

keep our service of others

faithful to the example and command of Christ.

Let your Church be a living witness to truth and freedom,

to justice and peace,

that all people may be lifted up by the hope of a world made new.

A true liturgy leads us to a lasting ethical commitment. The **vertical** communion with the Triune God that is celebrated in the Eucharist is verified and lived in the **horizontal** dimension,

which is our loving attention to those around us according to “the example and command of Christ”<sup>19</sup>.

### The Sunday Eucharist

- a) empowers us to become instruments of communion, justice, peace and reconciliation;
- b) renews us in our call to be more loving, compassionate and caring;
- c) brings healing in our broken life;
- d) makes us servants of one another.

Our Eucharistic celebration becomes a counter-sign to the values of the world. It empowers the Christian community to overcome and alleviate poverty, to reject oppression, to break down barriers among people, to make common cause with those who suffer, to share ourselves with others through concrete gestures of service and charity. When we gather together in church on Sunday, we bear with us not only our joys and sufferings, but also the concerns and anxieties of the whole world. Then, when we leave the church, we move back into the daily rhythm of life animated by a deep desire to live in solidarity and communion with others, especially with those who are in need of our love, service and attention.

### Conclusion

“Without active commitments, worship is comfortable entertainment, empty ritual, a pretence of worship - in short, negligent *diakonia*”<sup>20</sup>. If we, both as individuals and communities, do not live in an attitude of *diakonia* (service) from Monday to Saturday, then our Sunday Eucharist is just an empty ritual and a contradiction. Our real work begins when the celebration comes to an end in church and we are sent forth to the world.

The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is meant

- a) to change our outlook and actions (personal transformation)
- b) to get more involved in the Christian Community (ecclesial transformation) and
- c) to lead us to place the Kingdom of God at the centre of our life (social transformation).

This takes a concrete shape when we feel called to contribute “with the light of the Gospel to the building of a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God’s plan”<sup>21</sup>. In this way the Eucharist will lead us to a deeper understanding of the presence of the kingdom of God in our midst. Thanks to the Sunday Mass, we are given both the desire and the strength to engage ourselves in a constant process of transformation of our “earthly city” until it reflects the “heavenly city”. Filled with the joy of the presence of the Risen Lord, we can now reach out to others in love and solidarity, sharing with them what we have celebrated.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf Kinsler, Ross and Kinsler, *Gloria, The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life. An Invitation to Personal, Ecclesial and Social Transformation*, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Exodus 23, Deut 15: 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Kinsler, Ross and Kinsler, *Gloria, The Biblical Jubilee ...*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 25: 8-17, 23-55.

<sup>6</sup> Kinsler, Ross and Kinsler, *Gloria, The Biblical Jubilee ...*, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Chauvet, Louis-Marie, *The Sacraments. The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, 2001, 58.



<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Israel's Praise. Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*, 1988, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Brueggemann, Walter, *Israel's Praise...*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Giraud, Cesare, The Eucharist as Diakonia: From Service of Cult to the Service of Charity. In: Pecklers, Keith F., ed, *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, 2003, 131.

<sup>12</sup> At the same time these 'transformations' challenge the liturgy to be what it is called to be. This vital "tension" calls for a "twofold rereading: a liturgical rereading of ethics", and an "ethical rereading of the liturgy". Cf Chauvet, Louis-Marie, *The Sacraments*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> This section is based on my forthcoming book: *Understanding the Eucharist. Pastoral reflections on the Sunday Mass*, to be published by Paulines Publications Africa.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Cf John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Cf Giraud, Cesare, The Eucharist as Diakonia . . , 131-132.

<sup>20</sup> Giraud, Cesare, The Eucharist as Diakonia . . , 132.

<sup>21</sup> *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, 20.

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