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## WHAT IS THE SUBJECT MATTER OF LITURGICAL THEOLOGY?

A good number of scholars in the academy do not have any questions about the subject matter of “liturgical theology” because they define it in a manner customary to the academy. The scholar is accustomed to coupling an adjective to a noun in order to mark off an area for exploration. Under this hermeneutic, the second word names a method and the first word names the subject upon which the method is worked. Thus “biblical theology” talks about the Bible, “liberation theology” talks about emancipation from oppressive structures, “moral theology” talks about ethical questions and theories of religious morality, and “systematic theology” covers everything else that doesn’t already have another home. “Liturgical theology” is thus thought to be an academic’s investigation of matters classified as liturgical, from sacramentaries to processions to vestments. (But usually not sacraments, which get classified in systematics, because sacramentology is thought to be too serious a subject for liturgical studies to handle.)

In an effort to gain liturgy a little more respect, some have proposed an alternative approach. Under this hermeneutic, the second word names the topic and the first word names a certain approach. Thus “historical theology” is an historical approach to the repertoire of questions, and “process theology” brought Alfred North Whitehead to bear, and “narrative theology” starts with stories instead of propositions. These interpreters see the adjective “liturgical” either as a description of the motivation a scholar (a synonym for “doxological, spiritual, prayerful”) or as the addition of ecclesiastical ingredients to the discussion. The scholar will decorate his theological tree with some liturgical ornaments.

These two hermeneutics by which to define liturgical theology were both challenged by the men who influenced my work, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and Fr. Aidan Kavanagh. They each had their emphasis, which were sympathetic. Kavanagh emphasized that liturgical theology does not reside in the mind of an individual scholar, it resides in the corporate, ritual activity of the Church. Schmemmann emphasized that an organic definition is required, one in which the two terms name one reality. I once tried to put it colorfully. Liturgical theology is not yellow liturgy marbles mixed with blue theology marbles to make a jar full of yellow and blue marbles: liturgical theology is green marbles. What is new about Schmemmann's definition was more than adding some additional marbles to the jar by outlining a new subject area to consider. Both men point to the conclusion that theology is liturgical, and liturgy is theological.

I think this is what has given Schmemmann's work such "a long shelf life," as Fr. Robert Taft put it on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. One must be cautious about some of the historical details he outlines in his examples, but what gives his voice continued relevance, not only in Orthodoxy but also to Catholic and Protestant readers, is the vision he had of this organic definition. It does not try to simply mix some liturgy into academic theology, like mixing some oil into water, but rather the goal is to be led to the deep reality named by the conjoined phrase. The public, liturgical cult that we see is only like the part of the iceberg that we can see: it is the visible part of something much greater. The term "liturgy" can mean the complex of official services, all the rites, ceremonies, prayers, and sacraments of the Church, as opposed to private devotions, and while this is an accurate definition, it is too small a definition. "Liturgical theology" is the discipline that wants to know what this cult is connected to. What is the deeper reality that lies below the ceremonial surface? Such an attempt discovers connection between cult and cosmos, sacred and profane, church and world, ritual liturgy and lived liturgy.

Taking my starting point from these two mentors, my work has attempted to approach liturgical theology by their unique hermeneutic, and explain and defend this approach. I have tried to unpack Kavanagh's assumption that liturgical theology is the corporate act of the Church by further defending the symbolism of his "Mrs. Murphy." Whereas some colleagues have misunderstood this to mean the collective opinion average worshipers, I have argued that Kavanagh intends her to be understood as the personification of a person formed by the liturgical rite over a lifetime. Mrs. Murphy is tradi-

tion embodied. And I have tried to persuade my colleagues to let Schmemmann's organic definition dilate our understanding of both liturgy and theology. In this effort, it has sometimes been convenient to distinguish "liturgy" from λειτουργία (*leitourgia*) and "theology" from θεολογία (*theologia*).

To accomplish this apologetic, I discovered it necessary to introduce a third ingredient to the recipe, namely, asceticism. In so doing, I found that both Schmemmann and Kavanagh had already woven it into their rug, and I was only picking out the thread for our attention.

Schmemmann says his goal is to connect three dimensions: theology, liturgy, and piety. I interpret his last term as spirituality or asceticism. Liturgical theology is the molecule that results when these three atomic parts bond, like water is the molecule that results when its three atoms bond. Let them separate, and a wrong is done to each part.

The goal of liturgical theology, as its very name indicates, is to overcome the fateful divorce between theology, liturgy and piety – a divorce which, as we have already tried to show elsewhere, has had disastrous consequences for theology as well as for liturgy and piety. It deprived *liturgy* of its proper understanding by the people, who began to see in it beautiful and mysterious ceremonies in which, while attending them, they take no real part. It deprived *theology* of its living source and made it into an intellectual exercise for intellectuals. It deprived *piety* of its living content and term of reference. ... To understand liturgy from inside, to discover and experience that "epiphany" of God, world and life which the liturgy contains and communicates, to relate this vision and this power to our own existence, to all our problems: such is the purpose of liturgical theology. [emphasis added]<sup>1</sup>

What definition of liturgy could I offer that is capacious enough to cover this? To illustrate my answer, I point to a structural component of the second part of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The second pillar is supposed to be about the sacraments, but before the text reaches this topic it pauses to discuss the celebration of liturgy, and before discussing liturgy it reflects upon the paschal mystery, and before approaching the historical paschal mystery, it begins by discussing the Holy Trinity. It strikes me, then, that the Catechism suggests liturgy's origination is in a place where we don't normally look. Scholarship looks for the origin of liturgy in ancient history, in religious

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<sup>1</sup> A. Schmemmann. *Of Water and the Spirit*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1974 p. 12.

ritual, in human need, in communal fellowship, but the *Catechism* seems to suggest that we do not begin the liturgy, the Trinity does. We join a liturgy already in progress. The origin of the liturgy is a divine decision, begun when the Father acted in his good pleasure through his Son and Holy Spirit. This was a point important to the liturgical pioneer, Fr. Virgil Michel, O.S.B.:

The liturgy, through Christ, comes from the Father, the eternal source of the divine life in the Trinity. It in turn addresses itself in a special way to the Father, rendering him the homage and the glory of which it is capable through the power of Christ. The flow of divine life between the eternal Father and the Church is achieved and completed through the operation of the Holy Ghost.

The liturgy, reaching from God to man, and connecting man to the fullness of the Godhead, is the action of the Trinity in the Church. The Church in her liturgy partakes of the life of the divine society of the three persons in God.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Pius XII makes the same point in a summary definition of liturgy in *Mediator Dei* (paragraph 20).

The sacred liturgy is, consequently, the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members.

To adequately enlarge our understanding of liturgy, I have recently been proposing this definition: LITURGY IS THE PERICHORESIS OF THE TRINITY KENOTICALLY EXTENDED TO INVITE OUR SYNERGISTIC ASCENT INTO DEIFICATION. In other words, the Trinity's circulation of love turns itself inside out, and in humility the Son and Spirit work in obedience to the Father's desire for all creation, which is to invite our ascent to participate in eternal life (life in God); this cannot be forced, it must be done with our cooperation as we are capacitated for such a life.

The etymological root of *leitourgia* speaks of a "work done by a few on behalf of the many." The one whose work is being celebrated and perpetuated is Christ. It is his work for the family of mankind. Christ is the premiere liturgist and every baptized person becomes his liturgical appren-

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<sup>2</sup> V. Michel. *The Liturgy of the Church, according to the Roman Rite*. New York: Macmillan 1937 p. 40.

tice. The salvific economy of God under the waterline is witnessed to in the Church's liturgical activity above the waterline. The liturgy is eternal life, ritualized and sacramentalized, as visible sign to invite the world to holiness. Such liturgy is constitutive of our identity. Our identity comes from being grafted by the Holy Spirit into the life shared by the divine nature with the human nature of Christ. "The same hypostatic union causes to flow into our human nature the life that it imparts to the humanity of Christ."<sup>3</sup> We become by grace what Christ is by nature. To indicate the formative power of ritual, Kavangh used to say in class that we don't go to mass because we're Catholic, we're Catholic because we go to mass. Celebrating the liturgy isn't something we do after we become Christians, we become Christians by celebrating the liturgy. To swim is a verb, swimmer is the noun; liturgy is a verb, Christian is the noun.

In light of this understanding of liturgy, both "theology" and "asceticism" are seen in a new light. The former word, shopworn from long use, recovers its luster by returning to a patristic understanding of *theologia* as "participatory vision." In Paul Evdokimov's summary, "The patristic definition of theology: the experimental way of union with God."<sup>4</sup> (Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience.) This theology is a kind of knowing that requires a deep change in the mind (*νοῦς* [*nous*]) of the knower, and such a change is ascetical. It capacitates for liturgy, so I call it liturgical asceticism. Fr. Tomáš Špidlík, S.I. writes, "The ancient Christian East understood the practice of theology only as a personal communion with *Theos*, the Father, through the *Logos*, Christ, in the Holy Spirit – an experience lived in a state of prayer."<sup>5</sup> A theologian is someone who attains a knowledge of God, but this knowledge is personal communion. This is a point made by Schmemmann in his *Journals*.

Pascha. Holy Week. Essentially, bright days such as are needed. And truly that is all that is needed. I am convinced that if people would really hear Holy Week, Pascha, the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Dormition, there would be no need for theology. All of theology is there. All that is needed for one's spirit, heart, mind and soul. How could people spend centuries discussing justification and

<sup>3</sup> E. Mersch. *The Whole Christ*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing 1938 p. 356.

<sup>4</sup> P. Evdokimov. *The Struggle with God*, New Jersey: Paulist Press 1966 p. 108. Reprinted by St Vladimir's Seminary Press under the title *Ages of the Spiritual Life*.

<sup>5</sup> T. Špidlík. *The Spirituality of the Christian East*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 1986 p. 1.

redemption? It's all in these services. Not only is it revealed, it simply flows in one's heart and mind.<sup>6</sup>

He is identifying theology's home, its native habitat. Theology is seeing all things by the light of Mt. Tabor, and this light still shines from the altar of the Lord so it can fill the theologian's eye. That's why Schmemmann says liturgy is the ontological condition for theology; and that's what Kavanagh thinks *lex orandi statuat lex credendi* means. Theology is first a vision, then a cogitation. When Kavanagh cites Evagrius' famous saying that "the true theologian is he who prays," he is not merely encouraging a doxological quality in the academic, as most have interpreted it, rather he is recognizing the theological quality of the one at prayer.

The dictum, so far from endowing a doxological quality upon the second-order activity of theology, in fact confers a theological quality upon the first-order activity of people at worship. More specifically, the *theologos* in this Eastern dictum is not the scholar in his study but the ascetic in his cell, and the *theologia* implied is not secondary theological reasoning but contemplation on the highest level, the roots of which are sunk deep in the ascetic's own fasting and prayer, particularly in the recitation of the psalter. The "theologian" in this Eastern view is a contemplative whose life is suffused with the *leitourgia* of a cosmos restored to communion in its trinitarian Source. "Theology" is the contemplation of God in and for his own sake. Prayer is the condition of this, and prayer, as Evagrius of Pontus said, is the rejection of concepts.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Murphy can make such contemplation, because in the liturgy she sees the transfiguring light of Mount Tabor. Liturgical theology is a light by which one sees the cosmos in its Trinitarian source. Kavanagh does not seek to endow a doxological quality on the work of an academic theologian, but rather to confer a theological quality upon Mrs. Murphy. She can be called a theologian because she know God by communion, and God is available for communion in the liturgy, and such a communion requires a preparation of the subject, which is called asceticism. Mrs. Murphy is a liturgical theologian because she is a liturgical ascetic.

For Evagrius of Pontus, *theologia* is the climax of an ascetical process that unfolds over three stages. It begins with a first stage he called *πρακτική*

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<sup>6</sup> A. Schmemmann. *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973-1983*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2002 p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> A. Kavanagh. *On Liturgical Theology*. New York: Pueblo Press 1984 p. 124.

[*praktike*], that led to contemplation (θεωρία [*theoria*]). Clarity of mind is connected to purity of heart. This contemplation is of two types, according to by its object. Evagrius calls the second stage φυσική [*physike*] because it involves seeing traces of the Logos in the logoi of creation, and seeing providence at work behind it all. But this is preliminary to contemplation of God. Kavanagh summarizes.

The third stage Evagrius called *theoria tes hagas triados* or “contemplation of the Holy Trinity.” For him this is synonymous with *theologia* – not “theology” as an academic discipline but as the supreme calm, steady regarding of the Godhead as it is in itself. The knowledge of this sort of prayer and contemplation is effortless because it is simple: it circles peacefully, quietly, closer to God than God’s own external attributes. Its quality is the “apathy” of possession: its source is in God himself, its end is total union (*henosis*) in God, what in the West would come to be termed the “beatific vision.”<sup>8</sup>

This kind of calm, steady regarding of the Godhead comes from a lifetime of being formed by the Christian Church through liturgical prayer, the liturgy of hours, liturgical seasons in the year, liturgical sacraments and sacramentals, and by participation in the Divine Liturgy.

I would be happy to call this a sort of spirituality, except for the annoying fact that the modern idea of spirituality so often means a formless, hyper-emotive state that comes and goes, while the Christian tradition knows a spirituality that is disciplined and practicable, i.e., ascetical. The term ἀσκήειν [*askhein*], from which asceticism comes, means “to work,” and especially meant the kind of training that an athlete undergoes. (This is why the monks in the desert were called spiritual athletes.) This spirituality begins in fear of God and keeping the commandments, then leads to a struggle with the passions. It is hard work, a co-operative accomplishment of God’s energy and human synergy. What Evagrius called dispassion (ἀπάθεια [*apathia*]) was translated by his pupil John Cassian as *puritas cordis* – and blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Like knows like. Liturgy is participation in the perichoresis of the Trinity, and liturgical theology is the experiential knowledge which derives from this, and liturgical asceticism is the preparatory discipline to more fully conform the Christian to Jesus. If asceticism has the reputation of morti-

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<sup>8</sup> A. Kavanagh, *Eastern Influences on the Rule of Saint Benedict*. In: *Monasticism and the Arts*. Ed. T. Verdon. Syracuse (NY): Syracuse University Press 1984 pp. 57-58.

fication, it may be because the one to whom we are conformed is the crucified Christ. It certainly is because we are sinners struggling to break free from the passions that have distorted us as an *imago Dei*. We are each a block of marble within which lies an image of the image of God (the Son), and each strike of the chisel by the Holy Spirit frees that image a bit more from stone-cold vices in order to create out of women and men a liturgical son who shares the Son's filial relationship with God the Father. There are many other motives for practicing an asceticism, but if the motive is to become by grace what Christ is by nature, then it is fittingly called liturgical asceticism.

Liturgy is the participation of the body of Christ in the perichoresis of the Trinity; asceticism is the capacitation for that participation; theology is union with God (called deification). The Church's liturgy is a theological act, and after it has been done it can be talked about. That is why Schmemmann called liturgy the ontological condition for theology; I would suggest there is also an asceticism that has liturgy as its ontological condition. The whole aim of such asceticism is to capacitate a person for prayer, and the highest experience of prayer is *theologia*. Theology is knowing the Trinity, but in the Biblical sense of 'knowing.' Such participatory knowledge theology requires the mind (*nous*) to undergo a deep change (*meta-nous*), and such a change is ascetical, and it capacitates for liturgy. "If liturgy means sharing the life of Christ (being washed in his resurrection, eating his body), and if ἄσκησις [*askesis*] means discipline (in the sense of forming), then liturgical asceticism is the discipline required to become an icon of Christ and make his image visible in our faces."<sup>9</sup>

I am aware that this hermeneutic places liturgy and theology in a different language game (Wittgenstein) than they normally play in when the academy discusses them. I do not object to the latter discussion, since it has its own job to do, however, I am joining Schmemmann and Kavanaugh in re-enfranchising Mrs. Murphy as a theologian (though not of the academic variety) and as an ascetic (though not of the monastic variety). My definition of liturgical theology can be summarized in two defining attributes: first, it is *theologia prima*. The scholar can take a second look at liturgical theology (*theologia secunda*) but what he is looking at is the *theologia prima* that Christ has communicated to his bride. Second, it is *lex orandi*. Liturgical theology is contained in the law the Church obeys when she prays. This does not pit

<sup>9</sup> D. Fagerberg, *A Century on Liturgical Asceticism*. "Diakonia" 31:1998 fasc. 1 pp. 31-60.



Mrs. Murphy as lay theologian against the academic as specialized theologian, any more than it pits Mrs. Murphy's common priesthood against the priest's ministerial priesthood. It does, however, ask the academic to remember that liturgical theology does not spring from his own head, as Athena sprang from the head of Zeus. The baptized Christians being formed by a life of liturgy do qualify to be called theologians, so long as we don't restrict that title to the person with an academic degree. Before there were universities with theology faculty, there were theologians. Primary theology is revealed upon the Church's encounter with the risen Christ every eighth day, and this revelation is more fully clothed than bare propositions.

Kavanagh used to say that liturgy is "doing the world the way the world was meant to be done." My reason for reflecting upon a hermeneutic by which to appreciate liturgical theology has the practical consequence of wanting to realize the connection between Church and world, Christ and life, supernature and nature. Sacraments exist "for the life of the world," as Schmemmann titles his book on the subject. The cultic activity of the Church is only the tip of a liturgical iceberg that breaks surface in cult and sacrament; the reality it celebrates is beyond our rational comprehension and requires an experiential knowledge. The massive reality that undergirds our ceremonies and services turns out to be the same reality that supports our existence and beckons us to deification. My approach to liturgical theology attempts to dilate both terms to permit grasping this. Then the liturgical light bursts out the doors of the temple to flood the world in transfiguring light; then the cosmos is seen theologically, as gift from God and raw material for eucharist; then man and woman are finally, fully understood in their role as cosmic priests; then time no longer drains into nothingness because the Eternal One has irrupted into it, and history becomes a training school for eternal happiness; then we discover why nothing finite will satisfy our appetite, because we are made in the image of God to grow into the likeness of God.

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## CO JEST PRZEDMIOTEM TEOLOGII LITURGICZNEJ?

## Streszczenie

Teologia liturgiczna usiłuje łączyć teologię liturgii i teologię z liturgii. Nie wolno jej jednak zredukować do tych dwóch wymiarów. Nie można oddzielać teologii liturgicznej od jej życia rytualnego i podtrzymywać ją przy życiu za pomocy sztucznych akademickich respiratorów. Struktura, kod, gramatyka liturgii są tu odkrywane, nie na nowo wynajdywane. *Leitourgia* Kościoła, jak mówił Aleksander Schmemmann, jest pełną i dostateczną epifanią tego, w co wierzy Kościół. Każda teologia winna być liturgiczna, nie w sensie czynienia liturgii wyłącznym przedmiotem studiów (jak to czyniły teologia liturgii i teologia z liturgii), ale w sensie teologii mającej swój ostateczny kres odniesienia w tym, co Kościół objawia liturgicznie. Liturgia ma strukturę teologiczną i jest ucieleśnieniem chrześcijańskiego schematu interpretacyjnego. Nie jest ona po prostu zwykłym doświadczeniem Boga, które następnie wydziela rytę i teologię. Teologia reflektuje nad tym, co się stało – co stało się, kiedy Bóg przeszedł przez Ur Chaldejczyków, krzew gorejący na Synaju lub stajnię za betlejemską gospodą. Teologia liturgiczna zastanawia się nad tym, co zdarzyło się po tym, gdy wierzący poznał, że Bóg przechodzi sakramentalnie przez jego lub jej życie. Teologia biblijna reflektuje nad tym, co się stało na kalwarii lub w Betlejem. Teologia dogmatyczna pokazuje znaczenie tego faktu dla nauki Kościoła. Teologia liturgiczna, łącząc to wszystko, ukazuje te prawdy w ich konkretnej, sakramentalnej aktualizacji.

**Key words:** theology, liturgy, worship, *leitourgia*, liturgical theology, theology of liturgy, theology from liturgy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teologia, liturgia, kult, *leitourgia*, teologia liturgiczna, teologia liturgii, teologia z liturgii.