It is 1935.

A young Benedictine monk in Minnesota, reading the signs of the times, notes that economic life in the U.S. was “hard, merciless, and sinister” (Franklin, iii-iv). The Great Depression and accompanying unemployment are crushing the country, and—in a disproportionate way—the largely immigrant Catholic community.

Father Virgil Michel, OSB, had studied in Europe and was at the forefront of the Liturgical Movement, an attempt within the Church to help the faithful rediscover and better understand the liturgy so as to see life and liturgy as intimately intertwined (Wilbright, 37).

According to Michel, the “social question”—what we today call industrialization—was not primarily an issue of wages or the money system. The underlying problems that led to the depression ran deeper than that, to the soul: an overemphasis on the individual and on the acquisition of material wealth at the expense of the community and the common good. Unfortunately, not much has changed.

He wondered: “could society be transformed unless hearts, souls, and persons were changed first” (Franklin, iv)? His answer? No. And at the heart of this needed transformation of hearts, souls, and persons stood the liturgy.

He wrote: “Pius X tells us that the liturgy is the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit; Pius XI says that the true Christian spirit is indispensable for social regeneration. Hence the conclusion: The liturgy is the indispensable basis of Christian social regeneration” (Michel, 8).

For Virgil Michel, social justice and the liturgy were intimately connected, as they were for Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.

Sadly, the social justice and liturgy camps came to a parting of the ways after the Council. Such a parting would have been anathema to the pioneers of the Liturgical Movement, but we still see the fruits of this division in our parishes.

There are “liturgy” people and “social action” people, and rarely do they interact, let alone overlap.

There are some liturgy people who reduce all the Church’s activity to worship within the Church’s four walls; there are social action people who see the liturgy as an irrelevant distraction from what is really important.

Yet, at the Second Vatican Council, the Bishops were clear: While “[t]he sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church” (CSL #9), “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows” (CSL #10).

In terms of social action, Pope Benedict XVI drew the connection between liturgy and life even more explicitly in Sacramentum caritatis.

For this pope, the division between worship and service, liturgy and life, is a distortion of the Gospel. Here it is important to consider what the Synod Fathers described as eucharistic consistency, a quality which our lives are objectively called to embody. Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith. (SC #83)
Our communities, when they celebrate the Eucharist, must become ever more conscious that the sacrifice of Christ is for all, and that the Eucharist thus compels all who believe in him to become "bread that is broken" for others, and to work for the building of a more just and fraternal world. (SC #88)

In other words, liturgy is not an “escape from the world’s anxieties and miseries” but the primary way that we experience—and are formed in—God’s ways of peace and justice (Wilbright, 36).

Neither does liturgy teach about justice in a didactic fashion, like a classroom session. Being formed for life in what the late Mark Searle called God’s Just Kingdom is not about singing more songs with justice themes or preaching more homilies that touch on hot-button issues or even holding special “social justice Masses” more often. No; the connection is less mechanical, and more intimate, than that. It is about encountering, in a privileged way, the justice of God in the liturgy (Wilbright, 50-56).

Encounter

In the liturgy we encounter Christ in the word proclaimed and the sacrament shared, in the person of the presider and the assembly gathered. All of these are “modes” of one very real presence—the presence of Christ in our midst. This encounter, week after week, year after year, changes us. In a sense, the liturgy “soaks into our bones.” The traditional language for this loving presence given to us as transformative gift is “grace.”

The eucharistic mystery thus gives rise to a service of charity towards neighbor, which "consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, affecting even my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ." (240) In all those I meet, I recognize brothers or sisters for whom the Lord gave his life, loving them "to the end" (Jn 13:1). (SC #88)

Of course, we need to be open if we are to be transformed. But too many of us are comfortable in our shells, our embrace of the prevailing culture rather than of the radical demands that the Gospel makes. I am not surprised by the resistance of many Catholics to Pope Francis’ message, especially when it runs counter to the prevailing views in our capitalist society.

Rehearsal

Mark Searle spoke of liturgy being “God’s self-revelation to the world” (Wilbright, 21) through ritual. We misunderstand ritual if we think it is about “us” — about expressing our feelings or trying to create a particular affective experience. Such a subjective emphasis destroys ritual. Rather, ritual is about identity: about inculcating a particular way of being in the world. Or, as Searle put it, about rehearsing those attitudes which mark the Christian life.

Searle argues that in order to experience this revelation, this encounter, we need to develop certain attitudes—a way of being. Such attitudes do not come naturally or easily, especially in our contemporary culture—which, like Michel’s, is still marked by an exaggerated emphasis on the individual and on materiality.
These attitudes need to be “rehearsed”—practiced—in the liturgy itself. And, as the late Mark Searle noted, the very attitudes that we need to enter into the liturgy full, consciously, and actively (CSL #7) are the attitudes that mark life in God’s Just Kingdom. “We learn who we are by doing what we do” (Wilbright, 29; see n.49).

Searle claimed that engaging in liturgy requires—and helps us develop—certain attitudes; a certain way of being. These attitudes and way of being are the marks of the Reign of God, a Reign characterized by justice properly understood: right relationships.

Stephen Wilbrecht writes of Searle’s insight:

Searle was convinced that the liturgy reveals God’s “attitudes” toward the world; that prior to our response, the liturgy expresses God’s love for creation. However, if the liturgy is revelatory of God’s “attitudes” towards us, then our faith response must involve “rehearsing” those same attitudes, learning to see the world as God sees it. Thus, liturgy is the “rehearsal of Christian attitudes.” The liturgy is the locus for the celebration and appropriation of “right” attitudes, the place where the Christian community practices over and over again the worldview of God’s reign. It is the event in which individual Christians rehearse surrendering their individuality in order to be fashioned into the Body of Christ. It is where the pattern of redemption is lived out, experienced bodily, and appropriated for the transformation of all life. (Wilbright, 35)

Rehearsing Justice

Mark Searle noted that Christianity “is more caught than taught, and the model for learning is closer to that of an apprenticeship than that of a classroom” (Wilbright, 63; see n. 94). If liturgy is an apprenticeship in justice, we need to be clear about what we mean by that term. When we are speaking of justice, we mean biblical justice—not justice defined in narrow legal terms. Justice in the Scriptures is characterized by right relationships: between humanity and God, between human persons, and between humanity and all of creation. This definition comes across loud and clear in Pope Francis’ encyclical, Laudato Si’.

A detailed look at every aspect of the Mass is more than we can undertake in this short article. Instead, allow me to comment briefly on one attitude in which each part of the liturgy forms us.

Opening Rites: An Attitude of Emptying (Wilbright, 64-91)

The purpose of the opening rites is to gather us, disparate individuals, into a worshipping assembly ready to hear the word of God and offer God our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. An assembly is called together; we respond to God’s summons. The series of rites—from singing together and assuming a common posture (standing) to the dialogue between priest and people, from confessing our need for reconciliation and healing to shared silence and prayer—forms us in an attitude of self-emptying in order to become something bigger than ourselves: the Body of Christ. Liturgy is the worship that Christ and his Body—give to the Father. Liturgy is not about my needs and wants, but about surrender: we come to serve and not be served. It is this same attitude which marks a life dedicated to the works of charity and justice in the world.
Liturgy of the Word: An Attitude of Listening (Wilbrecht, 92-118)

The opening rites begin to form the liturgical assembly into the gathered Body of Christ; this journey continues in the Liturgy of the Word. Here, we listen together to the word proclaimed and preached. Such listening requires a trusting imagination to discover “its life in the midst of the story of God's word” (Wilbrecht, 117). It is a listening that calls forth a response in faith: the root meaning of “obedience” is to listen intently. The Liturgy of the Word is a dialogue: God speaks to us and we respond by professing our faith, by offering our prayer for those in need, by entering into the Eucharistic sacrifice and all it requires of us. We respond in obedience, in “submission to God’s will (Wilbrecht, 118). Our self-emptying continues. To serve others in justice and charity we must listen intently to them, enter into their stories, and then respond.

The Eucharistic Prayer: An Attitude of Sacrifice (Wilbrecht, 119-149)

The worldview that the Eucharistic Prayer calls for is counter to our culture’s emphasis on accumulation of both personal achievement and material possessions. In the Eucharistic Prayer, we begin by collecting the fruits of creation and human labor—signs of all we are and do—and, in gratitude, offering them back to the Father through, with, and in Christ. In “remembering” Jesus we don’t just recall his life, we enter into it—and into his self-offering to God. Mark Searle put it this way:

Faith itself is the sacrifice of the Church. To come to faith is to be converted, to undergo a radical change of values, to adopt a new lifestyle. The term “sacrifice” is used of Christians, then, in relation to such matters as dedication to the apostolate, prayers, fasting, collections for the relief of the poor, the care of orphans and widows, and conversion itself. (Wilbrecht, 147; see n.81)

It is this “gradual abandonment of self-oriented ways of seeing the world in order to behold the Kingdom in Christ” that occurs if we enter into the Eucharistic Prayer with hearts truly open and lifted up to the Lord that makes our work for justice possible.

Communion and the Concluding Rites: An Attitude of “Life Together” (Wilbrecht, 150-177)

In preparation for Communion, we pray the Lord’s Prayer, share the sign of peace, and break the bread while singing the Lamb of God. All these move us deeper into a sense that Christian life is “life together.” We recognize that we are one; community is not constructed but revealed. By walking together to Communion we are formed into this reality; eating and drinking together reveals “our desire not to live for the self but to live for others” (Wilbrecht, 176); returning to our places we now see with new eyes—the eyes of (the Body of) Christ. As Pope Benedict put it in Sacramentum caritatis (#88):

In the Eucharist Jesus also makes us witnesses of God’s compassion towards all our brothers and sisters. The eucharistic mystery thus gives rise to a service of charity towards neighbor, which “consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, affecting even my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ.” In all those I meet, I recognize brothers or sisters for whom the Lord gave his life, loving them "to the end" (Jn 13:1).
It is with new eyes that we are sent back onto the world to live God’s Just Kingdom, to proclaim the gospel, to glorify the Lord by our lives.

There is so much more that can be said about each part of the liturgy, and of the attitudes which they engender. Hopefully this provides some beginning reflections on how you experience the connection between worship and justice, liturgy and life.

Promises, Pitfalls, Problems

Those in the Liturgical Movement, following the lead of Pope Pius X, emphasized the notion of the Church as the “Mystical Body of Christ.” To overcome the self-centeredness of contemporary culture, to become a Body rather than a collection of individuals, requires certain attitudes: emptying, listening, sacrifice, communion, and more. These pioneers saw in the liturgy an antidote to what was infecting modern society—a spirit contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.

Sadly, this same spirit of individualism has come to infect the liturgy as well. We shop around to find a parish that meets our needs, where we are comfortable, where everyone else is just like us, rather than see in the challenge of parish life (as in family life) the opportunity to rehearse those attitudes and virtues that mark the Christian walk. Presiders and other ministers turn the liturgy into their own project, thinking that by being ‘creative’ they can make the liturgy more “meaningful’ and ‘relevant.’

In the end, liturgy requires that we die to ourselves. It is not about us. We don’t go to Mass to “get” – we assemble as a Body to “give” – to give back to God what God has given to us in an offering of praise and thanksgiving and, yes, an offering of petition and lamentation.

That is how liturgy forms us for justice: not by teaching facts but touching our imaginations; not by telling but by showing; not through our minds alone but through our bodies as well.

But that means we must celebrate the liturgy well. Grace works “on the inside” – it is real, but it is not magic. We encounter the divine through the human, the material. Through what earth has given and human hands have made. Therefore, what we do and how we do it is crucial if liturgy is have its transformative effect.

And that means that we must trust the liturgy, trust the ritual to move us out of ourselves and into something more. If we are able to die to ourselves in the liturgy and become one, that is how we learn to die to ourselves and become one beyond the walls of the church. Liturgy leads to right relationships—not just with God, but with one another and with all of creation. Liturgy leads to justice—to life in God’s Just Kingdom.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


