

Towards An

ARS CELEBRANDI

In Liturgy

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IN
----- LITURGY -----

The Oxford English dictionary defines art as “*the expression or application of creative skills and imagination*”, or as “*various branches of creative activity*” or even as “*a skill at doing a specific thing*”. St. Thomas Aquinas defined it as “*the right judgment about things to be produced*” [S.T. I-II, Q. 57a: 4] What is common in these definitions is that art is generally understood as something closely connected to human activity and skill.

And its use in connection with Liturgy has been a late development especially within the context of the post-conciliar period. It has been felt even more specifically within the last two decades. But, its general orientation has been more in relation to skills and dispositions of celebrating Liturgy well and in such a way that it would become in itself an art, an experience of beauty in a rather aesthetic sense. Such enthusiasm is attested to in a document issued by the Association of Professors of Liturgy in Italy entitled “*To celebrate in spirit and in truth*” of 1992. It affirmed: “*Rhythm, order and style, three terms that belong by right to the art of celebrating, because they belong to the reign of every art and to the great reign of the language of communication. They express the rule of beauty, the measure by which perfection is measured, the completeness of that which is fully realized and of that which is perfectly expressed. They express the yearning of every artistic initiation and every vision of beauty*” [Translated from - **To Celebrate in Spirit and in Truth, Rome 1992, p. 139**].

Thus, with time this expression assumed a profoundly anthropological orientation. It entered liturgical vocabulary as something that expresses the necessary human action in Liturgy. In a socio-cultural context that tends to reduce the importance given to the role of the divine in human life and which gives pride of place to that which is essentially human and “*this worldly*”, the danger in positing a so called art of celebrating, to liturgy, in a purely humanistic sense is not minimal. Indeed, if Ars Celebrandi is to be understood as something based on human skills only, then, we have missed the point altogether. Whatever serves as the foundation for creative human art

and skills, cannot be ipso facto transferred to Liturgy. But in some circles any acceptance of the term *ars celebrandi* is interpreted to mean a glorification of a sense of horizontalism.

Ars Celebrandi and Actuosa Participatio

That probably was the reason behind the clarification of Pope Benedict XVI on that subject in the Post Synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Indeed the Holy Father alludes to this danger when he affirms that *"in the course of the Synod there was frequent insistence on the need to avoid any antithesis between the Ars Celebrandi, the art of proper celebration, and the full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful"* [Sac. Carit. 38]. The Holy Father thus seemed, in the first instance, to indicate the need to adopt an *"Ars Celebrandi"* in order to celebrate well the Liturgy, while at the same time insisting on the fact that *"full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful"* cannot be realized without that. In other words he seemed to indicate that *actuosa Participatio* could not really happen unless the harmonious, beautiful and orderly celebration of the Liturgy was ensured. Without a properly understood and effected *ars celebrandi*, Liturgy would probably end up being merely a series of meaningless, chaotic and insipid actions. He affirms this emphatically, when he states that *"the primary way to foster the participation of the people of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself. The ars celebrandi is the best way to ensure their actuosa participatio"* [ibid].

Actuosa Participatio

The Pope in his book *"The Spirit of the Liturgy"* defines *Actuosa Participatio* as a call to a total assimilation in the very action of Christ the High Priest. It is in no way a call to activism, a misunderstanding that spread widely in the aftermath of *"Sacrosanctum Concilium"*. Stated Cardinal Ratzinger: *"what does it [active participation] mean? Unfortunately the word was very quickly misunderstood to mean something external, entailing a need for general activity, as if as many people as possible, as often as possible, should be visibly engaged in action"* [Spirit of the Liturgy, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2000 p. 171].

We know that in many places this led to the amalgamation of the Sanctuary with the Assembly, the clericalisation of the laity and the filling up of the Sanctuary with the

noisy and distracting presence of a large number of people; one could say that virtually Wall Street moved into the Sanctuary. But was that really what the Conciliar Fathers advocated? Cardinal Ratzinger does not think so. For him *“the real ‘action’ in the Liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate is the action of God himself. This is what is new and distinctive about Christian Liturgy: God himself acts and does what is essential”* [ibid p. 173]. This kind of participation in the very action of Christ, the high priest, requires from us nothing less than an attitude of being totally absorbed in Him. Says the Cardinal *“the point is that, ultimately, the difference between the Actio Christi and our own action is done away with. There is only one action, which is at the same time his and ours – ours because we have become ‘one body and one spirit ‘with him”* [ibid p. 174]. Active participation, thus, is not a giving way to any activism but an integral and total assimilation into the person of Christ who is truly the high Priest of that eternal and un-interrupted celebration of the heavenly Liturgy.

Sacrosanctum Concilium too, as we know, spoke of this when it defined Liturgy further as a foretaste of the *“heavenly Liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem towards which we journey as pilgrims, and in which Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the Sanctuary and of the true Tabernacle”* [cfr. Apoc. 21: 2; Col. 3: 1; Heb. 8: 2]-[SC 8]. Hence, everything we do should help us to achieve that and that alone is the true meaning of the *“participatio”*: a taking part in a bigger Actio. Participatio itself is, I would say, in this sense, an ars where we ourselves are not the artists; neither do we follow an ars taught or handed down to us by others but allow the Lord to be the artists through us, becoming part of what he does. As far as we are concerned, it is Participatio in the order of *“esse”*. All what we do in Liturgy makes us achieve that union with the eternal High priest, Christ and his sanctifying offering. The more we become part of the Oratio of Christ, His eternal self offering to God as the expiatory Sacrificial Lamb [Apoc. 14: 1-5], so much more would it be able to transform us into the Logos and make us experience the redeeming effects of such transformation. Without that as Cardinal Ratzinger wrote we would radically misunderstand the ‘theo-drama’ of the Liturgy, lapsing into mere parody [cfr. ibid p. 175].

Ars Celebrandi

Ars Celebrandi at its roots is, as we saw, not so much a matter of a series of actions put together in a harmonious unity as much as a deeply interior communion with Christ – the art of conforming to Christ, the High Priest, and his Sacrificial and Salvific Actio. It does not so much connote the freedom to do as one pleases as much as the freedom to be united to the priestly mission of Christ. To understand this concept well, we need to look at it, as being effective at three different levels: an interior level in which the priest becomes a listener of the Word of God as it has been mediated by the Holy Spirit within the Church [*Interiority*]; an attitude of total obedience and identity with that Word [*Obedience to Norms*] and finally a profoundly absorbed celebration of the sacred mysteries in the Liturgy [*Devoutness*].

Attitude of Interiority

This sequence requires, as a sine qua non, on the part both of the priest and of the faithful a profoundly reverent, totally concentrated and self abasing attitude of faith and prayerfulness as well as a sense of stupor before the great divine mysteries celebrated in the Liturgy. The question today is whether we do possess within ourselves such interior dispositions or whether everything has become a matter of mere intellectualism, routine and a carrying out of a series of ritualistic acts or habits.

There can be no true Ars Celebrandi unless every priest is first and foremost touched and profoundly motivated by his faith in the Lord and in the grandeur of his call as well as of the tasks entrusted to him by the Lord. That great desire to spend and be spent for the Lord in priestly and shepherdly service is a sine qua non. It is not so much a matter of understanding as much as of conforming to Christ with a profound sense of awe, faith and joy. Pope John Paul II called upon all to learn true Eucharistic piety at the school of the saints. Stated the Pope “*in them the theology of the Eucharist takes on all the splendour of a lived reality; it becomes ‘contagious’ and, in a manner of speaking, it ‘warms our hearts’*” [**Ecclesia de Eucharistia 62**]. It suffices us to remember Sts. Filip Neri, Francis de Sales and John Mary Vianney to understand the attitude required of us priests. The celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, especially of the Eucharist, is a tremendous trust that the Lord has entrusted to us priests. The Holy Curè of Ars once

told a friend *"I should not care to be curè in a parish, but I am very happy to be a priest because I can say Mass"* [The Curè of Ars, by Abbè Francois Trochu, English version, Tan Books and Publishers, Rockford, Illinois, 1977 p. 320]. He once stated *"when we have been to Holy Communion, the balm of love envelopes the soul as the flower envelopes the bee"* [ibid 323]. Again, as the same biographer writes, *"One Corpus Christi day as he returned to the sacristy bathed in perspiration, we asked him: you must be very tired, M. Le Curè? Oh why should I be tired? He whom I carried likewise carried me"* [ibid p. 231].

This is not a call to naïveté but to an inner disposition among priests and faithful which is characterized by a profound sense of faith in the mysteries celebrated in the Liturgy and a sense of awe and humility which should accompany it.

Obedience to Norms

As Pope John Paul II stated in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* *"liturgy is never anyone's private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated"* [E de E 52] and so *"no one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands; it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality"* [ibid]. Indeed, Liturgy is a treasure given to the Church, which is to be jealously guarded. This is so also because it is the Actio Christi realized in and through the Church, which is His own Body, in its three fold extension – the Church Victorious, the Church Purifying and the Church Militant. Thus every Liturgical act has a meta cosmic extension. Besides, it is in and with the Church that Christ realizes his Priestly office making Liturgy profoundly ecclesial, in the sense of the whole Church. It is the whole Church which celebrates Liturgy each time a priest does so with his own local community.

Liturgy is "Given"

Liturgy thus should be considered a treasure *"given"* to the Church, not created by it. The fact of the steady growth of liturgical traditions along its bi –millennial history and the surprisingly harmonious and natural way in which it has happened is proof of the work of the Holy Spirit and the surpassing nobility of its contents. It is like a tree which continues to grow, at times shedding its leaves, at other times being pruned

to become stronger and straighter but always remaining the same tree. Sacred Liturgy has undergone a similar process of growth but never a new beginning, right from the earliest times even upto now and so it will be even in the future because it is Christ himself who through his mystical Body, the Church, has continued to exercise his priestly office.

Christ, the Main Celebrant at the Altar

And so, the correct approach to *Ars Celebrandi* of priests and even of the faithful would be to ensure that they allow Christ to take over at the altar, becoming the voice, the hands and the being of Christ or the alter Christus. *Sacramentum Caritatis* affirms so, very clearly when it states *“Priests should be conscious of the fact that in their ministry they must never put themselves or their personal opinions in the first place, but Jesus Christ. Any attempt to make themselves the centre of the Liturgical action contradicts their very identity as priests. The priest is above all a seroant of others, and he must continuously work at being a sign pointing to Christ, a docile instrument in the Lord’s hands. This is seen particularly in his humility in leading the liturgical assembly, in obedience to the rite, uniting himself to it in mind and heart and avoiding anything that might give the impression of an inordinate emphasis on his own personality” [Sac. Carit. 23].*

In everything he does at the altar he should always let the Lord take control of his being. The words of John the Baptist are important in this matter: *“He must increase and I must decrease” [Jn 3: 30].* Bishop Fulton J. Sheen emphasized this when he stated: *“the priest does not belong to himself; he belongs to Christ; he is not his own. He is Christ’s” [Those Mysterious Priests, Alba House, New York 2005, p. 221].* It is only this way that the priest can truly interiorize the Holy Sacrifice of Christ and of His Church so that it becomes co-natural with him. For what we do at the altar, as *Mediator Dei*, states is not our own but *“worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its head and members” [MD 20].* To be conscious of this before, during and after the celebration of the Eucharist and the other Liturgical acts is extremely important.

Ego Pampering

Let us face it, all of us, Priests, Bishops and even Cardinals are human beings and so the temptation to place ourselves at the centre makes us feel good, what I call “*ego pampering*”. None of us, are exempt from this and now with the Missa versus Populum that danger is even greater. Facing the people increases chances of dis-attention and distraction from what we do at the altar and then the temptation for “*showmanship*”. In a beautiful article written by a German author the following comments were made on the subject – *“while in the past, the priest functioned as the anonymous go-between, the first among the faithful, facing God and not the people, representative of all and together with them offering the sacrifice today he is a distinct person, with personal characteristics, his personal life style, his face turned towards the people. For many priests this change is a temptation they cannot handle to them, the level of success in their performance is a measure of their personal power and thus the indicator of their feeling of personal security and self assurance”* [K.G. Rey, “*Pubertaetserscheinungen in der Katholischen Kirche*” – “**Signs of Puberty in the Catholic Church**” – *Kritische Texte, Benzinger, Vol 4, p. 25*]. The priest here, as we can see, becomes the main actor playing out a drama with other actors on a platform like place and the more creative and dramatic they become they feel a sense of ego satisfaction. But, where can Christ be in all of this?

Sense of Awe

The true *Ars Celebrandi* thus requires from all, first and foremost, a sense of profound faith and veneration towards the nobility and celestial dignity of all liturgical acts that are to be celebrated. A sense of awe at what is being done requires to be cultivated in the way the surroundings of the celebration are handled in its preparation, its celebration and even in the atmosphere that follows. These are never to be equated with any other ordinary activity of the day. These inner spiritual dispositions as well as the co-natural physical postures, gestures and actions should be fostered even before any such celebration begins. A silent and prayerful atmosphere should be cultivated in the Church as a preparatory posture; the celebrants should be seen by the faithful at personal prayer at the altar before such celebrations even begin; this would stimulate the faithful, to, in turn, be recollected and prayerful, the noble and prayerful way of

vesting in the sacristy too becomes important, those vesting prayers should return to the sacristy, there should be a strong sense of liturgical correctness and dignity in the way the celebrations are carried forward, the piety and intense sense of communion with the Lord and the entire Church which the priest displays in his concentration on what he does at the Altar, the moments of silent prayer and the intense spiritual atmosphere and the atmosphere of feeling grateful for the eternal gifts received, in recollected thanksgiving after the celebration, are all part of the powerful language of the presence and action of God in these celebrations. The priest celebrant should manifest in everything he does Christ's own loving embrace of the Cross and that most self-effacing way in which he showed his great love for mankind. If not it would all mean empty formalism and a big bore and no priest should feel immune from that type of temptation.

Ecclesial, Hence Not According to Our Whims

Besides, Liturgy is always the public prayer of the Church and each time such is celebrated it is the Actio Christi which the entire Church performs. Indeed the Church is Christ in his Mystical presence in time and space, and so, what we do is what He Himself does mystically. We, as Church, have received it from Him. It is this that places the rite above the authority of the celebrant. It is divine Liturgy as the Christian East calls it and not just Liturgy. Speaking of the rites Cardinal Josef Ratzinger stated: *"they elude control by any individual, local community or regional Church. Unspontaneity is of their essence. In these rites I discover that something is approaching me here that I did not produce myself, that I am entering into something greater than myself, which ultimately derives from Divine Revelation"* [The Spirit of Liturgy, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2000, p. 165]. And so, for its deeply divine and strongly ecclesial nature, Liturgy cannot be arbitrarily changed. The Second Vatican Council affirmed it so when it stated: *"Therefore no other person whatsoever, not even a priest, may add, remove or change anything in the Liturgy on their own authority"* [SC 22: 3].

Ars Celebrandi, thus, as Sacramentum Caritatis explained, involves the *"faithful adherence to the Liturgical norms in all their richness"* [Sac. Carit. 38]. *"Attentiveness and fidelity"* to such norms and also *"to the specific structure of the rite expresses both a*

recognition of the nature of Eucharist as a gift and on the part of the minister, a docile openness to receiving this ineffable gift” [Sac. Carit. 40]. Ars Celebrandi should at the same time “foster a sense of the Sacred and use of outward signs which help to cultivate this sense, such as, for example, the harmony of the rite, the liturgical vestments, the furnishing and the sacred space” [ibid]. Besides “attentiveness to the various kinds of language that liturgy employs: words and music, gestures and silence, movement, the liturgical colours of the vestments” [ibid] are also equally important.

Devoutness

In short, the celebrant should realize what a great responsibility has been thrust into his hands, in spite of his fragile nature, and feeling ever so grateful to the Lord and aware always that he is not the owner of the mysteries that he celebrates but only a humble servant, a mere guardian or instrument, strive to, in absolute fidelity to the Lord and to His Church and faithful to the norms and requirements outlined by it, devoutly and faithfully, celebrate the Sacred Liturgy. He should never assume a pedantic and haughty attitude of feeling that he can decide on the rite and add or remove anything at his own will. At the same time he should refrain from every effort at drawing the attention of the congregation to himself but ensure that Christ outshines in everything. Besides, he should realize that by submitting humbly to the beauty of the rubrics, he will be freer to elevate his mind and heart to the contemplation of the mysteries he celebrates and be able to adore the Lord and the heavenly hosts that descend on the Altar, transmitting that same faith and devotion to his congregation.

Everything depends on the faith and the courage of the priest as well as his sense of generosity. If the sacred Liturgy, as the Church teaches, is the font from which all its power flows and the summit towards which its activity is directed [cfr. SC 10] and the priest is uniquely placed in the mediatory role as a visible manifestation of the invisible yet mystically operative Supreme High Priest, Christ, an office of great dignity, then, in him should grow a profound sense of loyalty and love for the Lord and for the divine mysteries that he is invited to be part of. And Ars Celebrandi then would lead him to a true experience of inner beauty and grandeur. He would identify himself totally with Christ who thus becomes one with him, as a habitus, a way of being, a sort of a second

nature, nay his only nature, able to exemplify in himself the words of St. Paul – *“I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me”* [Gal. 2: 20]. Once that union is yearned for and achieved, which is the deepest identity of a priest, then everything else will fall into place, the Liturgy would become such an exhilarating and edifying experience and all the external aspects of the celebration that we mentioned above would be easily taken care of. There would be no need for more documents from the Holy See, which unfortunately gather dust in book shelves and book shops, nor for any Swiss guards to impose liturgical discipline world wide.

In this matter the role of the Bishops becomes extremely vital. For, as the Code of Canon law indicates *“the sanctifying office [of the Church] is exercised principally by Bishops who are the high priests, the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God and the moderators, promoters and guardians of the entire liturgical life in the Churches entrusted to their care”* [CIC 835: 1]. Hence upon them rests *“a specific responsibility”* [Sac. Carit. 39] in ensuring a correct Ars Celebrandi and, as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal states, must be *“determined that the priests, the deacons and the lay Christian faithful grasp ever more deeply, the genuine meaning of the rites and liturgical texts and thereby be led to an active and faithful celebration of the Eucharist”* [GIRM 22]. Besides, as Sacramentum Caritatis indicates, they have to be not only the guides of their community in this matter but also personally examples of the dignified celebration of the Liturgy especially in their own Cathedrals [cfr. Sac. Carit. 39]. Every Bishop should long for the day when he could see in his priests truly holy men, loving the Lord so much that they cannot wait any moment longer to celebrate their next Holy Mass for they wish to be the *“alter Christus”* to their people – offering themselves up for their salvation.

May I conclude this reflection with what the holy Cure' of Ars wrote in his little catechism on the Holy Mass: *“all good works together are not of equal value with the sacrifice of the Mass, because they are the works of men and the Holy Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison; it is the sacrifice that man makes of his life to God; the Mass is the Sacrifice that God makes to man of His Body and His blood. Oh how great is the priest! If he understood himself he would die God obeys him; he speaks two words, and our Lord comes down from Heaven at his voice, and shuts Himself up in a little Host. God looks*

upon the altar. "That is my well beloved Son", He says, "in whom I am well pleased". He can refuse nothing to the merits of the offering of this victim. If we had faith, we should see God hidden in the priest like a light behind a glass, like wine mingled with water"

[The little catechism of the Cure' of Ars, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc. Rockford, Illinois, USA, 1951, p. 37].

Thank you.

✠ **Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith**

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