



Episode 1: The meaning of “liturgy”

SUMMARY

The word “liturgy” comes to the Church through ancient Greek culture. It carries with it a triple nuance, a three-fold meaning. Often translated as “the work of the people,” it is not simply the people’s work. Catholic liturgy includes the celebration of Holy Mass, of the Divine Office, and the celebration of the Sacraments.

Lit-urgy: laos=people + ergon=work
 English cognates: laity, energy.

Nuance One

Liturgy is the work of the people. The people must be engaged in it.

Nuance Two

Liturgy is the work of Christ done on behalf of the people. It is “work” that the people cannot do on their own. Christ prays to his Father. We join in his perfect prayer.

Nuance Three

Liturgy is the work of God in which the people participate.

The best way to worship God is to act as God acts.

We worship the God of mercy and forgiveness.
 We worship the God who sings the eternal love song.

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✙ “...the Father accomplishes the ‘mystery of his will’ by giving his beloved Son and his Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world and for the glory of his name.” (Cf. Ephesians 1:9)

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 1066

✙ “It is this mystery of Christ that the Church proclaims and celebrates in her liturgy...”

CCC, n°. 1068

✙ “The word ‘liturgy’ originally meant a ‘public work’ or a ‘service in the name of/on behalf of the people.’ In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in ‘the work of God.’”

CCC, n°. 1069

✠ “In the liturgy it is the *whole Christ* (*Christus Totus*) who acts, Head and Body. As our High Priest he celebrates with his body, which is the Church in heaven and on earth.”

*Compendium of the
Catechism of the Catholic Church, n°. 233*

IN THE TRADITION

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

“The liturgy then is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n°. 7)

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Almighty and merciful God,
by whose gift your faithful offer you
right and praiseworthy service,
grant, we pray,
that we may hasten without stumbling
to receive the things you have promised.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Collect for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the triple nuance of “liturgy” add to our understanding of participation in the Mass?
2. “Sing the Mass!” was a favorite phrase of Saint Pius X. What do singing the Mass and participation in the work of God have in common?
3. If the liturgy is the work that Christ accomplishes on our behalf, what are some instances in the Mass where this is made explicit?
4. Why is it important to know that Christ is the principal liturgist and the foundational minister of every sacrament?

FOR FURTHER READING

- Pamela Jackson, *Abundance of Graces: Reflections on Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004). This volume includes the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, The Encyclical Letter *Mediator Dei* (Pius XII), and the Motu Proprio of Saint Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*.
- A.G. Martimort, ed., *The Church at Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992). See especially Volume I: Principles of the Liturgy, “Introductory Chapter: Definitions and Method,” pp. 7-18.