



Episode 30: The Liturgical Movement

SUMMARY

In essence, the liturgical movement is the effort on the part of the Church to help the faithful participate better at Mass. This meant, initially, that the people would participate in the singing and in giving the responses. Over the course of time, the Church realized that it is important that the people be able to enter deeply into the mystery by understanding what's going on during Mass. This means especially that they consciously participate in the offering. The liturgical movement helped to foster this kind of participation.

In the 1920s, a Benedictine monk, Virgil Michel, returned to America from his studies in Europe with some magnificent insights about the richness of the liturgy and the ability of the faithful to participate. One of the fundamental ideas he shared with the American Church was that prayer in the church must be connected with action in the world. With Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Virgil Michel showed Catholics how prayer and concern for the poor should be woven together. Pope Pius XII echoes this notion in *Mediator Dei* when he insists, “it is

fitting that the mind believes what the lips sing, and that what the mind believes should be practiced in public and private life.” (n°. 153)

The liturgical movement is indeed a movement—but it is not fundamentally about changing the liturgy, rather the liturgy is intended to change us: to make us more aware, more receptive to the treasures of the Church’s public prayer. “The Liturgical Movement, therefore, as the words indicate, is *a movement*—a movement towards the *liturgy*.” It is the effort to being the people themselves closer to the liturgy, to understand it more fully, to enter into it more deeply, and to participate and benefit from it more completely. The Liturgical Movement is the effort to help the people participate better in the Mass: fully, consciously, and actively.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Zeal for the promotion and restoration of the liturgy is rightly held to be a sign of the providential dispositions of God in our time, as a movement of the Holy Spirit in His Church... (n°. 43)

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. (n°. 11)

IN THE TRADITION

“Song befits the lover.”

Saint Augustine
Sermon 336, 1.

“See how we were bought: Christ hangs upon the cross, see at what a price He makes His purchase . . . He sheds His blood, He buys with His blood, He buys with the blood of the Spotless Lamb, He buys with the blood of God’s only Son. He who buys is Christ; the price is His blood; the possession bought is the world.”

Saint Augustine
Commentary on Psalm 147

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ “We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish [...] the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.”

Pope Saint Pius X
Tra le sollecitudini

✠ “A remarkably widespread revival of scholarly interest in the sacred liturgy took place towards the end of the last century and has continued through the early years of this one. The movement owed its rise to commendable private initiative and more particularly to the

zealous and persistent labor of several monasteries within the distinguished Order of Saint Benedict.”

Pope Pius XII
Mediator Dei, 4

✠ “It should be clear to all, then, that God cannot be honored worthily unless the mind and heart turn to Him in quest of the perfect life, and that the worship rendered to God by the Church in union with her divine Head is the most efficacious means of achieving sanctity.”

Pope Pius XII
Mediator Dei, 26

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Grant us, O Lord, we pray,
that we may participate worthily
in these mysteries,
for whenever the memorial
of this sacrifice is celebrated
the work of our redemption is accomplished.

Prayer over the Offerings, Holy Thursday

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does a better understanding of the Mass help you to participate more fully?
2. How can careful attention to prayer at Mass help us to engage mind and heart?

FOR FURTHER READING

Virgil Michel, osb, *The Liturgy of the Church*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1937).

Lambert Beaudin, osb, *Liturgy: the Life of the Church*, (Farnborough: Saint Michaels Abbey Press, 2002).