

# The Role of Bishops in the Liturgy

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"The bishop," says Vatican II, "is to be considered as the high priest of his flock, from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and dependent." (SC art 41). The bishop is the shepherd to whom the Lord has entrusted the care of his sheep, a particular Church or diocese which depends on him for the accomplishment of its baptismal commitments and for the nourishment and growth of its Christian life. He is first of all a spiritual father, a shepherd whose main concern is the molding of the entire man and the entire community in the image of Christ. His office of teaching, sanctifying and governing has this as its aim. If he spends his energy in the work of mercy and the establishment of social justice, he does so from the perspective of Christ's command to feed his flock with the word and the sacraments. Thus, in a very particular way, the pastoral ministry of the bishop centers around the liturgical life of his diocese. Being primarily a spiritual father and animator of his people, rather than an organizer and administrator of material goods, the bishop dedicates his life to the work of redemption which is realized in the celebration of the Christian mysteries. For as Vatican II states, it is "from the liturgy and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, that grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way." (SC art 10).

In conformance to the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, Vatican II reaffirms that the responsibility of regulating the liturgical life of the diocese is incumbent first of all on the bishop. The decree "Christus Dominus" (art 15) says that the "bishops are the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God, as well as the governors, promoters and guardians of the entire liturgical life of the Church committed to them."

Without at all minimizing the responsibility of priests, it should be stated that, in the final analysis, all the ministers in a diocese act only in the name of the bishop whom they assist in the discharge of his duties. Thus, as early as the year 107, St. Ignatius of Antioch could emphatically write: "Apart from the bishop, let no one perform any of the functions that pertain to the Church. Let that Eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge. It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God." (Ad Smyrn 8). We observe in St. Justin Martyr that only the bishop performed the liturgical functions of giving the homily and offering up the eucharistic prayer. (Apol I, 67). This tradition evolved to such an extent that the delivery of the homily during the synaxis as well as the recitation of the eucharistic prayer became the "special liturgy" of the bishop. Through his charismatic gift he was considered the high priest of the prayer of the Church as well as the teacher of her faith. On no account did any priest presume to give the homily during liturgical celebrations, except in cases of emergency. We know for an historical fact that one of the most brilliant minds of the Church, Origen himself, was severely reprimanded by his own bishop when he, as a simple priest, preached at the liturgical assembly of Caesarea at the invitation of the local bishop. In Hippo the people resented the delegation of the office of preaching to Augustine, then a priest serving the community under an aged bishop.

All this, of course, is to be seen from the perspective of an historical development in the Church from the second to the fourth century, when the acephalous communities of the early Christians gradually adopted the monarchical structure with a resident bishop as head. Being the high priest of the community, the bishop became the center of Christian life and the liturgy. It is along this monarchical tradition that Vatican II urges the faithful to "hold in great esteem the liturgical life of the diocese centered around the bishop, especially in his cathedral church; they must be convinced that the preeminent manifestation of the Church consists in full active participation of all God's holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which there presides the bishop surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers." (SC art 41). This situation envisioned

by the council is, however, only an ideal one. Present-day conditions do not allow bishops to preside always and everywhere over the entire community of the diocese. Thus, parishes have been set locally under pastors who take the place of the bishop. To them the bishop delegates his office of preaching, sanctifying and governing the flock.

However, the delegation of office to the parish priests and pastors should not obscure the historical development of the bishop's role in the liturgy. The bishop remains the good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him. As governor, promoter and guardian of liturgical life, he carries a heavy burden of responsibility. His task is to regulate the worship of his Church. This he can wisely perform only if he is willing to take the trouble of celebrating the liturgy with the different parish communities, in order to make himself cognizant of the existing conditions and needs of the diocese. In other words, as the principal dispenser of the mysteries of God in the Word and the sacraments, no bishop can afford to be a mere armchair liturgical minister. He cannot restrict himself to the task of issuing liturgical norms to be followed by his priests and people, but he must actively and directly engage himself in the different liturgical celebrations all over the diocese. In practice, the cathedral church is no longer the center of the entire diocesan liturgy. But the bishop still is the center of community worship. That is why, he cannot confine himself to his cathedral church, or much less, to his private chapel. History made the bishop a resident monarch, but it does not mean that he loses contact with the people over whom he presides in the solemn act of worship. Like the itinerant bishops of old, he must continually make his rounds of the different parish communities, in order to personally preach the Word of God, celebrate the Eucharist and administer the sacraments to his flock. Too often the liturgical ministry of the bishop in the parishes is limited to confirmation. It will be ideal, if he, as the head of the family can, as often as possible, be at hand to baptize in parishes, especially during Easter time. Likewise, as minister of reconciliation, he should preside at the penitential rites in parishes during Advent and Lent, in order that he may personally exhort the communities to penance and conversion. His leadership in the eucharistic community should become a visible reality. To this end he needs to circulate among the parish churches in order to celebrate the Eucharist, especially

on Sundays and other occasions when the entire parish can be gathered around the table of the Lord. His presence as shepherd must be felt by the sheep of Christ, because as father and animator, he can no longer act and direct from a distance. As St. Ignatius of Antioch beautifully puts it: "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal Church." (Ad Smyrn 8).

Today one of the aims of liturgical renewal is to make worship truly meaningful and expressive of the life and activities of the Christian community. The success of such a renewal will depend largely on the attitude of the bishop and his community. More and more we have to realize that the liturgy must be person, not ritual oriented. For the Church herself is not mere structure, but a living community; and her liturgy is not mere ritual, but the dynamic celebration of her life. The classical principle of theology, properly understood, holds true even today: "sacramenta sunt propter homines." If our Lord gave the sacraments to his Church, it was for no other reason than to serve the needs of men. Indeed, one can be bold enough to say that the sacraments lose their meaning, if men do not profit from them. The sacraments exist because of men. That is why, we are asked to value men and their redemption more than our rituals, traditions and ecclesiastical structures. Liturgical reform, therefore, like any human reform, must begin with the reform of attitudes. As long as we are not convinced that the liturgy is not a dead ritual, as long as we do not let it reflect the daily life of men, as long as we do not make it conform to their needs, liturgical reform will be nothing more than an external and superficial change of ceremonials, or worse, a servile and legalistic implementation of liturgical instructions without due reference to the people for whom our Lord instituted the sacraments.

In the past, liturgy was as absolute as the dogmas; what was considered good in Rome had to be good in Manila and all over the world. And even when the Romans no longer understood their own liturgy, it had to be retained, because it was understood once upon a time. What was considered reform in Rome was expected to satisfy the needs of a barrio in the Philippines. As the great bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, so pointedly remarked in defense of his Church's custom of washing

the feet of neophytes: "I say this, not to rebuke others, but that I may commend my own ceremonies. In all things I desire to follow the Church in Rome, yet we, too, have human feeling; what is preserved more rightly elsewhere, we too preserve more rightly." (De Sacram III, c. 1, 5). Today we realize that the liturgy cannot be uniform, and much less immutable, but must be necessarily conditioned — like the people who celebrate it — by cultural, political and socio-economic factors. And since no two situations are identical, no two celebrations should in principle be the same. The result of this will be a certain diversity of liturgical forms depending on the circumstances of the different communities. But diversity is not something to be abhorred. While the division of tongues at Babel was a divine curse, diversity was the work of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Thus, the Council admits that "in the liturgy the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community." (SC art 40 & 37).

We have, of course, to recognize the fact that the liturgy cannot be amorphous: it is the worship of the community, and hence, needs a certain form in order not to degenerate into chaos. Order is not only aesthetic; it is vital in the life of any society. That is why, the Council insists that the "regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church." (SC art. 22) It is also to keep a sense of order and form in the worship of the Church that the Council urges that "as far as possible, notable differences between rites used in adjacent regions must be carefully avoided." (SC art. 23) However, liturgical forms should not be so fixed and inflexible, that they rule out any form of initiative, spontaneity and creativity. For the liturgy is the celebration of life, and the celebrant are not robots, but living persons who continuously experience change and novelty. Thus, there is a constant need to adapt the worship of the the Church to the conditions of the people. It is then the task of the bishop and his cooperators to search or test the kind of worship which would correspond to the needs of his community. As Vatican II reminds us: "The liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These latter not only may, but ought to be changed with the passage of time, if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it." (SC art 21) in saying this, the Council makes us understand

that we need not look forward to a final, definitive and canonical structure of the liturgy, and much less to any form of uniformity. While the divine elements are maintained, the human must reflect the condition of the Christian community as a moving and pilgrim people on earth. Her liturgy must be expressive of her vitality and dynamism. It is an on-going experience in worship and cannot be petrified and fixed in liturgical books.

It is in this context that we have to understand the sense of liturgical instructions and directives. For these are not absolute laws from Rome to be followed strictly to the letter. Rather they are guidelines which give the proper orientation and show the direction toward which adaptation is to be made. Roman rites are not meant to be stereotyped and acted out exactly as instructed. The Bishops' Conference and the individual bishop in his diocese may modify the rites, adapt, add or subtract according to the situation of the place and the provision of the general norms of adaptation.

Changes, however, should be based on existing liturgical forms which are being lived by the community. Adaptation is a factor in the process of growth, but it is homogenous, because it stems from the trunk itself. That is why, the Council warns that "care must be taken that any new form adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing." (SC art 23) Radicalism may have some advantage — radicalism here being understood as an entirely new creation whose purpose is to impress the people with something coming suddenly out of the blue — but it is certainly not the natural process of liturgical growth and should be tried only with the greatest precaution.

One of the headaches of certain bishops today is the existence of "underground liturgies." These came about partly because some official bodies of the Church failed to cope with the demand for a more meaningful celebration, and partly because there are and there will always be persons who have an insatiable thirst for novelty. Although "underground Liturgies" seem to respond to and satisfy the clamor of certain groups, there is no doubt that they are often thoroughly radical and unmindful of the total community and its traditions. But the question to be asked is not how to put a stop to abuses, for abuses there will always be in any human society, and no pas-

toral action will be effective if it is geared solely to eliminating undesirable elements. In curing the headache, do we cut off the head? Because of abuses, shall we abandon liturgical adaptation altogether? The question to be asked is whether the official leaders in the liturgy live up to the people's expectations of renewal. And more poignantly stated, whether the bishop and his commission should not share the burden of adaptation and renewal with the parish priests who are responsible for their communities and who are more cognizant of their existing conditions. If the answer is "two heads are better than one," we remove the cause that leads to the existence of underground worship which has always given the impression that bishops are after the neck of recalcitrant priests, or that there is a "persecution" going on in the Church. How the parish priests and others will relate themselves to the official body of the Church is a matter of mechanics for those who accept the idea.

The leadership of the bishop in the liturgy should also find expression in his concern for the Filipino cultural heritage. For it is a fact that in the Philippines popular liturgical celebrations, ancient churches and other liturgical art pieces are the principal features of our cultural tradition. Thus, religious practices and monuments belong, not only to the past, but also to the present: they belong to our people, they are part of their life. We have no right to abolish traditional religious celebrations, although we can purify them of undesirable accretions, and much less to demolish old churches in the name of modernity. It is tragic to see our religious heritage vandalized, churches and monuments razed to the ground, and liturgical artpieces sold to unscrupulous art collectors. Liturgy is so much part of the people's life: that is why, it must conform to their present conditions. Liturgy has a unifying force: it not only unites Christians, it also links them to the past and the future. It is to be hoped that through the intervention of the bishops, the iconoclasts will come to respect our Filipino cultural heritage and the people it represents. It is a sociological truth that a community which can pride itself of its historical monuments and traditional customs shows more solidarity. The preservation of our Filipino heritage will give us, not only a sense of cultural identity, but also a sense of unity.

To conclude, allow me to cite an uncalled-for remark we often hear these days from many quarters: that bishops do not have the monopoly of the Holy Spirit. It is, of course, true that the Holy Spirit speaks to non-bishops also. It is also true that the authority of the bishop is not despotic, inspiring fear and trembling in the hearts of the people. And it is true that he must discharge his office as leader, father and animator in the spirit of service. But it is an aberration to completely ignore or undermine the charismatic role of the bishop in the liturgy. For it is primarily through him that the Holy Spirit speaks in the hearts of Christians, and it is through him that the unity in faith and love among the faithful is created and fostered. Vatican II states that the zeal for liturgical renewal is a sign of the providential dispositions of God in our time and a movement of the Holy Spirit in his Church. (SC art 42) It can be added that the bishop plays a unique role in this movement. For he is the cooperator of the Holy Spirit in the building up of the community of people who worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

## EPISCOPAL ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES

Let us pray for our Bishops on the occasion of their ordination anniversaries.

Most Rev. Vicente Ataviado, D.D.  
August 8, 1968 .

Most Rev. Francisco F. Claver, S.J.  
August 22, 1969

Most Rev. Vicente P. Reyes, D.D.  
August 24, 1959

Most Rev. William Brasseur, C.I.C.M.  
August 24, 1948

Most Rev. Antonino Nepomoceno, O.M.I.  
August 31, 1969