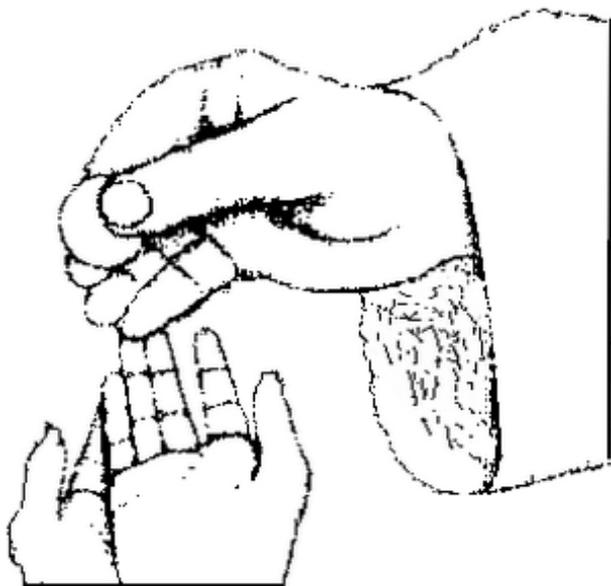


The Word Is Very Near You: Liturgy and Life



David G. R. Keller © 2000, 2012

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Life As Prayer

In 1988 I asked a friend why she was participating in a program I was leading called "Contemplation In A World Of Action". Jan was the supervisor of a cardiac nursing unit, an artist, the chair of her parish council, a catechist and wife. She said, "I am not here to learn how to pray. I want my life to become a prayer."

Jan affirmed that prayer is a limitless experience of God's presence and grace in everyday life as well as the myriad of ways we respond to that presence. She wanted her prayer to be the heart of her relationships with staff and patients, her artistic expression, church ministries and marriage. She wanted her daily life to be a manifestation of her life with God, formed within her faith community and her personal contemplative prayer.

But that is no easy task. Jan's daily life could easily have scattered her energies, distorted her priorities and fragmented her life. She could have become a creation of her own activity, losing clarity about life and drifting further and further away from God. What she desired in contemplative prayer was a disposition of self to receive God's grace and love. Instead of being fragmented, Jan wanted to be bound to God's love and vision for her life.

Jan wanted her life transformed into prayer. She could not foresee such transformation by herself. She was open to listen to God's voice and

share God's life. This is what transformed her work, activities, decisions and relationships. Jan discovered that in our experience of God we learn the nature of authentic human life and are given grace to live in the likeness of God. By participation in her faith community, especially in the Eucharist, she was constantly reminded of her authentic human life in God's image and fed by the very life of God.

The Transcendent in the Ordinary

What was it about Jan's participation in the Eucharist that was critical for her integration of prayer and daily life? In 1926 Dom Lambert Beauduin envisioned the "Liturgical Apostolate" as a movement which could "renew the close relation which existed between the liturgy of the Church and the daily life of the Christian people during earlier ages of Christianity..." (Translated by Virgil Michel, OSB in *Liturgy The Life of the Church* [Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1929], iii)

This raises important questions. How can *our* liturgies embody this vision? How can our Eucharists reflect a contemplative dimension without becoming disconnected from everyday life? These questions lead to a deeper question: "why *bother* connecting the Eucharist with the world?" The answer will never be found, satisfactorily, in words. It will appear in our *experience* of the liturgical actions and imagery of the Eucharist, itself, as we participate over and over

again. We will also hear it in the variety of patterns of our personal contemplative prayer. And we will encounter its meaning in the difficult challenges, responsibilities and joys of living. All three aspects of our spiritual lives help us recognize the mystery we encounter both in the Eucharist and in our daily lives.

This three-fold pattern of (1) Eucharistic life within the faith community, (2) personal contemplative prayer and (3) engagement in the activities of the world form us as Christians and integrate within us the triune dimensions of God's being with our ordinary human lives. This pattern bonds us to what is most fundamental in life. The Word is very near us in all three aspects of our lives, indeed, because eternity and time/space and contemplation and action are threads of the same tapestry!

In this context, it is important to remember that contemplative experience (the integration of life and prayer) happens in all venues of life, not just in solitude. Also, silence is not simply the absence of sound. Both contemplation and silence are a letting go of control which opens us to the mystery of a *mutual seeing* in which we are not only looking and listening, but being seen and heard. The integration of action and contemplation in the Eucharist is congruent with the active and contemplative dimensions which form each human being. The presence of ordinary people, sacred space, music, scripture, smells, bread and wine and

liturgical movement evokes awareness of a transcendent presence that has no boundaries. The result is that the "normal" boundary between the natural and the supernatural is dissolved. In Pauline language, the natural world is given fullness by the presence of the Spirit.

This may seem contradictory because we have created unnecessary mental boundaries between what we call the world of nature and the realm of God. We resist and blind ourselves to the presence of God in the ordinary. Yet life hints at what lies behind and within itself. There is an ineffable quality, a presence in life that we sense with an obscure sympathy, but cannot define. Life is a manifestation of Something, of Someone. Some things and moments evoke our attention and move us at the core of our being. These are contemplative moments that lead us to the presence of mystery. A sense of wonder is all that is required.

Our Biblical tradition points to this contemplative dimension of life. It declares that life itself is the venue for experience of God. Poetic images in the Hebrew scriptures bear witness to God's awesome, untouchable nature and at the same time point to the live-giving intimacy of God's presence in all contexts of human life. The ancestors of Jesus recognized this creative tension in their own lives as well. They discovered the image and likeness of God embedded in their humanity.

The Incarnation of God in Jesus, the Christ, is good news precisely because it proclaims that the divine energy and vision present in the humanity of Jesus is the same energy and vision offered to us in the Eucharist and in our experience of God in contemplative prayer. Authentic human life is found in union with the divine life present in the Anointed and Risen One.

The Eucharist as Mystagogue: a Mentor in Mystery

Mystery, therefore, is not something hidden. It is all around us in plain view. Mystery is that aspect of divine presence in all of life that is beyond our control and definition. Mystery leads us beyond ourselves into the heart of God. It is the threshold between time/space and eternity. The gateway to mystery is a sense of wonder.

In a society that emphasizes productivity, entertainment and technology, we must recover a sense of wonder and mystery about life. This is a primary need in the Church as well, especially in our liturgies and sacraments. There should always be a contemplative dimension in the manner we celebrate the Eucharist, because the Eucharist, itself, is a contemplative experience. Obviously, this may include quiet reflection expressed within the Liturgy through environment, music and silence. Yet the Eucharist should reflect the active dimension of human life, as well, because the active and contemplative aspects of liturgy are not in

competition. They mirror the same integration that takes place in our daily lives. Every Eucharist becomes an opportunity to experience the mysterious presence of God in a context that is congruent with our daily lives. The Christ we meet in the Eucharist is the same Christ we encounter in personal contemplative prayer and in the world. Therefore, the pattern of listening to and experiencing the Christ in the Eucharist enables us to recognize and respond to that same mystical Presence in all the other contexts of life.

For example, I realized recently at a Eucharist that we do not *receive* the bread and wine; we are *gathered into* these mystical elements and are bonded to Christ and each other. This reminded me that the Eucharist has always been our primary mystagogue. By our regular participation we are mentored in mystery. It is a deeply personal and transcendent process which draws us ever deeper into the Mystical Body, the Church. I have learned this from experience, rather than pedagogy. Dom Virgil Michel, a major figure in the 20th century American liturgical movement, stressed the natural catechetical and formative dimensions of the Eucharist. Because the Eucharist is the "ordinary channel of God's grace", it brings about participation in the Christ life. In the Liturgy, the Christ is the teacher and sanctifier. "Finally, the Liturgy is marked by a sense of progressive development and growth in Christ and in union with God". Michel believed that in the Liturgy the

truths of Christ are formed in prayer in such a way that our hearts and minds are formed after the mind of Christ. This experience of the Christ calls and enables those who form the assembly to become the Christ in a complex world. (see Virgil Michel, "Teaching the Life in Christ", *Orate Fratres* 15 [December 1940-41], 14-15. See also David M. Beaudoin, "A Personalist Approach to Catechetics", *WORSHIP* [Vol. 62 No. 3, May 1988] 337-348)

Before I knew about Dom Virgil, I experienced his wisdom. The Eucharist, the Mystical Body of Christ, has formed me throughout my life, has taught me without words, has nurtured my life and helped me share that grace with others. Dom Virgil was right. The faith community and its symbols, actions, words, bread, wine, water, song and smells form the tapestry of God's mystical and real presence. At the same time I became aware that I was not alone in all of this, for the Eucharist drew me deeper into the faith community and into the world. Liturgy is the formative aspect of ecclesial life. It is the template of divine life, offered as gift, in time and space.

The Eucharist as Mentor in Personal Contemplative Prayer

Why, then, is personal contemplative prayer important and how does it relate to the faith community and the Eucharist? In today's society we are conditioned to expect progress and results.

We have a fear of what we cannot define or control. To be human, says conventional wisdom, we must be doing something. Our lives are too busy, often with good things. Words and endless expectations have kidnapped us at work and at home. It is difficult to relax. In the midst of a noisy society we are forgetting how to listen. We are so active we are losing sight of where we are going. The Church is not exempt. Neither are our liturgies.

How can our personal lives and the life and worship of the Church incarnate the Gospel we believe? What are we *becoming* as we carry out our personal and corporate apostolates? Like Jan, we could become scattered and lose sight of what is fundamental in our lives. Personal contemplative prayer, in its variety of forms, and our continued experience of the Eucharist will keep us gathered in God's presence and vitality. Jesus exhorts, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Contemplative prayer, in both these contexts, is not leaving or avoiding the world. It places us within the heart of divine love where we can experience a fullness of life that enables us to see and love the world through God's eyes.

Something within us knows this is true. Augustine of Hippo was right. We are restless until we are found in God. The image in us yearns to be born. It recognizes itself in other people and in the world around us. It longs to be gathered into community. Initially, our awareness of God's presence lures us into a faith community. God

creates the Church. We do not. Therefore, it is the vitality of God's presence in individual persons that gathers and forms the Church.

So personal prayer, the life of God in each person, brings the faith community into being. This forms an ecclesial environment of grace, fed by the divine nature in each member's gifts and charisms, as Peter reminds us in his Second Letter. This means that personal prayer is not only necessary for our own wellbeing. Linked with the assembly, especially at the Eucharist, it also builds the Body and makes its presence in the world a reality.

In like manner, the wisdom of the Church is formed by the wisdom of each member's life in God and in the world. Each person's life experience contributes to the practical implementation of the Church's service to the world. In a grace-filled integration, personal prayer informs the Church through every member's experience of God as the parish's catechetical and worship life mentors and challenges each person's life in the world to become a life of prayer. The Eucharist is the primary mentor for the prayer that each person is called to manifest in daily life. This points to the critical need for both liturgical catechesis and spiritual formation in the life of every parish.

The Eucharist and Life

At its heart, then, the purpose of liturgical renewal and catechesis is to help us see the connection between Liturgy and life. How will the

liturgical life of each faith community empower and guide its members in the actual situations, challenges and relationships they face every day? This is a primary vocation of the Church. It can be accomplished by enabling Liturgy to reflect the life that surrounds it and enrich that life with the presence of God manifest in the Eucharist and the lives of those who form the assembly. As the Body of Christ becomes manifest in the Eucharist, those who have been gathered are united in that mystical and real presence. As they are nurtured by the Mystical Body, again and again, they are consecrated to become Christ's life and wisdom in the world. The contemplative experience of the Christ in the Eucharist is the womb of our active and compassionate service in the world.

Because each of us bears the image of God, we are called to sing the glory of God through our individual lives in our specific cultural context. Jesus has given us a vision of true humanity, a humanity permeated with divine presence. The oneness we experience with Christ in the Eucharist is a sign of the liturgy we are called to live in our daily lives. This is the common priesthood Peter celebrates in his First Letter. It requires the sacrifice of our selves as we are transformed and participate in the divine nature. We can, in the here and now, - as scientists, artists, parents, students, lawyers, physicians, economists, laborers, educators, managers, computer technicians, regardless of our

task - celebrate our own liturgy through Christ's presence in the way we live and work.

Like the great iconographers, who take wood, egg tempera, minerals, traditional images of Biblical figures and saints, and pray them into the colorful images which lead us into God's presence, we can, with the ordinary elements of daily life create a new reality through which the mysterious face of the kingdom of God shines through the pain, injustice, hunger and warped values of today's world. Every task can be a sacrament transforming the world, each in its own way, however seemingly mundane or insignificant. In this way, culture and society, through people, join the liturgy and becomes its doxology.

Some Practical Implications for the Assembly

How does the Assembly experience the integration of the Eucharist, personal contemplative prayer and daily life? How does it challenge its members to say, like Jan, "I want my *life* to be a prayer". Here are some suggestions:

+ Clergy and lay members of worship committees must be committed to planning the Liturgy so that it reflects both the mystery of Christ's presence *and* the contexts of the people and society which surround it.

+ Parish Councils and worship committees should collaborate in composing intercessions, designating offerings and planning other aspects of

liturgy which reflect the needs of the world and opportunities for service.

+ Liturgy should be seen as an *art form*. All the human senses and a variety of liturgical actions, imagery and artistic expression should be involved. These should manifest both the mystery of God's presence as well as the culture, art and lives of local people.

+ Worship committees should include periods of silence within the Liturgy, encourage slower paces for responses and recitation of the psalms and avoid additions to the Liturgy which create unnecessary busyness and distractions (such as announcements and conducting parish business).

+ More emphasis should be placed on liturgical catechesis as a basic part of Christian formation in the parish.

+ Parishes should offer opportunities for members to learn a variety of methods for listening to Sacred Scripture, such as *lectio divina*.

+ Parishes should provide space for an oratory where opportunities to learn and practice a variety of forms of contemplative prayer can be offered as a regular part of spiritual formation. Members of the parish should be encouraged to practice contemplative prayer at home.

+ Parishes should offer opportunities for discernment of apostolates in the community and personal spiritual formation through spiritual direction and soul friend relationships.

+ Parish councils and worship committees should offer occasional opportunities for members to discuss and discern opportunities for ministry and service within the parish and beyond the parish as a way of sharing the wisdom of the Spirit present in the Eucharist and in the personal prayer of the people.

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