

SACRAMENTAL AND LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Liturgical Signs of the Times
Convener: Bruce T. Morrill, Boston College
Presenter: David Stosur, Saint Francis Seminary
Respondent: Bruce T. Morrill

As liturgical theologians have, by and large, shifted their methodologies over the past half-century from a primary, if not at times nearly exclusive, concern with liturgical *texts* to a more holistic analysis of liturgy as ritual *action*, they have had to make judgments about the context in which a liturgical rite was or is being performed. This requires leaving behind the satisfying security of doing a "systematic" sacramental theology, operating in the realm of ideas, and taking account of the far more ambiguous historical realities, in which churches enact their sacramental rituals as prayer. This has made issues of methodology a constant work for the discipline.

In his paper, "Liturgy and (Post)Modernity: A Narrative Response to Guardini's Challenge," David Stosur invited our group to hear afresh the twofold caution the late Romano Guardini raised in a 1964 letter about the prospects for liturgical renewal as mandated by the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Stosur perceives the two issues Guardini posed at that time to now constitute, first, a "modern" concern about the elements of the rites and then, secondly, a fundamental "postmodern" problem with the possibility of people engaging liturgical rites at all. For Guardini, as well as for many other liturgical theologians to this day, the danger for reform lies in fussing with various units of liturgy in themselves, while ignoring the impediments that modernity places between these rituals and the people who would participate in them: a pervasive individualism grounded in enlightened reason, an understanding of religion as a private, interior state in a person, and a consequent view of public worship as, at best, ceremonial "surrounding" each individuals "experience" of God or, at worst, an external imposition on one's personal relationship with the divine. Guardini warned that all the efforts at reforming the liturgy's various rites would not amount to much if the subjects practicing them are characterized by what Stosur lists as key cultural characteristics of the modern west: individualism, consumerism, pragmatism, and the mentality that worship is technology and entertainment.

In light of all this, Guardini moved on in his letter to raise what Stosur finds to be an even more provocative, if less developed, concern, namely, whether people are capable of the liturgical act today at all. Guardini leveled the challenge bluntly: "Is not the liturgical act and, with it, all that goes under the name 'liturgy' so bound up with the historical background—antique or medieval or baroque—that it would be more honest to give it up altogether? . . . And instead of talking of renewal ought we not to consider how best to celebrate the

sacred mysteries so that modern man can grasp their meaning through his own approach to truth?" Stosur considers Guardini's prophetic words to amount to the postmodern challenge to liturgy, a challenge that current popular debates in Roman Catholicism over whether the reforms of Vatican II have gone too far and now need reform themselves fail adequately to grasp due to their ongoing assumption that the criteria all reside within the (trans)formative power of the liturgy itself.

For assistance with this deeper challenge Stosur turns to Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory of literary texts and human actions. What Stosur finds to be so promising here is Ricoeur's dialectical engagement of the universal understanding inherent in texts and rituals and, on the other hand, the ways in which each individual appropriates these through familial, cultural, and communal filters. The other significant feature of Ricoeur's narrative theory for Stosur is its emphasis on temporality, a dimension of human reality that bears its own dialectic between the qualitative human experience as past, present, and future and the quantitative scientific time of physical nature. What thereby characterizes postmodern human experience is the interplay of wholeness and fragmentation, for which the most satisfying literary and ritual practices are poetic and critical, rather than pragmatic and consumerist. Stosur considers the use of individual, bland communion wafers to be a stellar example of how the current normative celebration of the Mass of the Roman Rite remains mired in modernity, falling far short of both the Christian narrative symbolism of the one loaf broken for all, as well as the postmodern spiritual and social hungers of believers.

Stosur concluded by listing several other aspects of liturgical theory and practice that would benefit from Ricoeur's narrative strategy, admitting that each possibility would require much analysis and exploration. His overall concern is for finding ways to enable contemporary, postmodern Christians to implicate themselves in the narrative of biblical faith.

Substituting for an ailing Joanne Pierce (College of the Holy Cross), Bruce Morrill offered a response to Stosur's presentation mainly by noting insights from several prominent liturgical historians and theologians who have taken up Guardini's challenge over the past few decades. Whereas the lineage of Alexander Schmemmann, Aidan Kavanagh, Don Saliers, and Gordon Lathrop has argued for the formative power inherent in the liturgy's *ordo*, James White argues that these theories about "primary theology" have little to do with what a historian finds contemporary worshipers doing. For White the criterion for a liturgical rite's viability is not a traditional *ordo* but the sheer historical evidence of its endurance over time, what Morrill characterized as a sort of liturgical Darwinism. Morrill closed by questioning whether Ricoeur's still largely hermeneutical theory is capable of meeting the full extent of Guardini's challenge. A lively and extended discussion among all the group's participants ensued.

BRUCE T. MORRILL
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts