

Relevant or Revelation: The Liturgy and Evangelization

Fr John Muir, S.T.L.

November 10th 10:30 to 11:45am (Room 159AB)

It is a real blessing to be with you today. I am here today to speak with you about “liturgy and evangelization,” which is a great joy for me. I am a priest of the Diocese of Phoenix, and currently working at the Newman Center at ASU, the Office of Worship, and Xavier College Preparatory.

Since I was a 16-year old, the central passion of my life is Jesus Christ, knowing Him, and making Him known. As a high school student right here in Phoenix, I met Jesus in a personal way in the heart of the Catholic Church and the Eucharist, and he completely wrecked my life. I had been living essentially for myself; I began to live for Him. When I was 19, He asked me to be one of His Priests, and I said yes. I was already head-over-heels in love with Christ in His gift of Himself in the Eucharist, so, by age 22, this was (all things considered) a pretty easy “yes.” Now, as ever, speaking about Jesus Christ and the Holy Eucharist is a joy and an amazing privilege.

You might say there are two kinds of people in the world: those who read the last chapter of the novel first, and those who don't. If prefer suspense and hate spoiled endings, please close your ears for the next minute. But for the rest of us, allow me to give away the heart of my talk today. My goal today lay out before you the vast importance of the Church's liturgy and its essential link to evangelization, and to have you walk out the door as catechists a renewed enthusiasm for proclaiming the beauty of Jesus Christ, revealed and made concretely accessible in the Church's sacred liturgy.

The title of the talk: “Relevant or Revelation: The Liturgy and Evangelization.”

First, a story. Russia, in 988. Prince Vladimir was looking for a national religion. He sent men to investigate the various religions. They sauntered into Hagia Sophia in

Constantinople during a Eucharistic liturgy. They stumbled out transformed. They reported to the prince: “We do not know whether we have been in heaven or on earth...we only know that God dwells there among men.” Vladimir was baptized, and Russia became Christian.

Another story, perhaps even more provocative for our discussion today. The scene is Ems, Germany, 1847. Hermann Cohen, born into a wealthy Jewish family, was now a young man, a famous pianist across Europe. With his childhood faith overwhelmed by his fame, he became spoiled, arrogant, and self-centered. He went to a Church concert solely for the music, and as a favor for a friend. During Benediction, he felt agitated, something stirring in his soul. Returning a week later, the sense grew stronger. A few days later he attended a Mass, remaining utterly motionless throughout. Soon a burning desire to be present overtook him. Finally, the definitive moment arrived (read excerpt *Honey from the Rock*, 41). “When I left the Church, I was already a Christian....” Several months later, on the feast of St Augustine 1848, he was baptized; in 1851, he was ordained a priest, and spent the rest of his life inviting people to the happiness and joy he found in Jesus Christ, especially through the Eucharist and the Mass.

A third story. Once, for a project, I asked a few friends to attend a Mass at a somewhat randomly selected time and place, parishes they had never attended before, and then record their impressions. Their reports came back almost identical. They said, “The atmosphere before Mass was chaotic and noisy while the musicians warmed up; we didn’t see any of the parishioners genuflecting and bowing upon entrance; there was a general lack of reverence both before and during Mass, with a lot of moving and talking amongst the congregation. Frequently the congregation clapped their approval at the end of songs. The whole thing felt like a ‘revival.’ It was very relaxed, with reverence. It was just so loud.”

Finally, a fourth story. A good friend of mine in college went to 12 years of Catholic education. We attended the same Catholic college where the liturgy was fueled by a constant barrage of novelty, theatrical music, laughter, and feel-good stories. Students

generally had a good time at Mass. Five years after college, my friend and I saw each other after a while apart, and I shared with her that I was studying theology and liturgy as a seminarian. She said, “It’s so good the Mass is relevant to us nowadays, I think—we understand what’s being said, the music is contemporary; it’s welcoming. It’s so much better now that it’s welcoming.” On a whim, I asked, “When’s the last time you’ve been to Mass?” My Catholic friend answered, “Five years ago.”

Today we are talking about Liturgy and Evangelization. In these stories—very unrandomly selected, I admit—are embodied two basic approaches to liturgy, both which claim strong but very different notions of how the liturgy is connected to evangelization, and these two approaches will undergird our discussion. The first two stories (Prince Vladimir and Hermann Cohen) embody what we will call “Liturgy as (a) revelation”. The second two stories (my various friends) embody what I would like to call “Liturgy as relevant.”

My claim today is that the Church’s sacred liturgy has a vital and even central link to evangelization, but that this link is only authentic and fruitful in the measure that it embodies what I am calling “liturgy as revelation.” An exploration of the nature and purpose of the liturgy as expressed by the Second Vatican Council in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* uncovers the essence of this model, and does not support other popular but gravely mistaken understandings. If as Catechists we teach, explicitly or implicitly, an approach to liturgy which is antithetical to the true Catholic and conciliar approach, we seriously undermine our efforts to fruitfully evangelize.

First, it will behoove us to define terms like “liturgy” and “evangelization.” By the liturgy we mean the work of redemption carried out by Jesus Christ, head and members, under the guise of signs (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2, 7). Evangelization is, fundamentally, the proclamation of Jesus Christ to the nations, that through Him “salvation is offered to all people, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 27). We can see, right off the bat, that both the liturgy and evangelization have a significant overlap: making Christ known, loved, and served. One does this through sacramental

signs (the liturgy) and one in a whole variety of ways (evangelization). Here is where we are going: Evangelization is the Church's work—like John the Baptist—of preparing the way for the Lord, proclaiming salvation in Christ her Lord. In the liturgy, Christ proclaims Himself. This is unique form of and the highest expression of evangelization.

Liturgy as (a) revelation: the outstanding expression of Christ. What does the Church understand the liturgy to be? The liturgy—especially the Eucharistic liturgy—is the highest and most significant expression of Jesus Christ, of his person and his mission. The Council says that the liturgy “is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (*SC*, 2). The liturgy, then, is the outstanding *expression* in people's lives of the reality of Jesus Christ, and of his bride and body, the Church.

The liturgy expresses Christ because it is, properly speaking, “His great work;” “an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ” (*SC*, 7). By saying this, the Council emphasizes that Christ is the primary agent of the liturgy.¹ He is active in four specific and ordered ways: the priest, the Eucharistic species, the word proclaimed, and lastly in the praying and singing Church:

To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, "the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross" but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20)

¹ By “his” the council means “agency.” He is the subject of the liturgy, not merely the object, as in “I drew a picture of my friend. It’s his picture, i.e., a picture of him.”

The reason for this emphasis on the primacy of Christ's action in the liturgy is rooted in the nature of the liturgy itself as the "work of our redemption." The liturgy is Christ's work because He alone is the Redeemer. We don't save ourselves. There is no such thing as a redemption committee (not counting the Three Divine Persons, of course!). At the foot of the cross, John and the Blessed Virgin Mary ostensibly did nothing as Christ gave his life for their ransom.

And yet, and yet: the Council goes to great pains to proclaim that the liturgy *is* the work of the Church, too, because it is Christ's body and bride: "Christ indeed always associates the Church with Himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is His beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father" (*SC*, 7). The Church (signified by the visible worshipping community) offers worship to God the Father *through Him* (signified by the priest).

Moreover, the Council makes bold to say: "In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle" (*SC*, 8). Simply put, the Church's liturgy not only a re-presenting of the sacrifice of the cross, it is a foretaste of heaven in the present moment. For these reasons, the Council says famously that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (*SC*, 10). Recently Archbishop Chaput of Denver expressed this by saying, "The reason we evangelize is in order to bring people into communion with the living God in the Eucharistic liturgy. And this experience of communion with God, in turn, impels us to evangelize." Do all of our strategies as evangelists have this common starting and end point: Life-changing Eucharistic communion? Recently a protestant woman I helped to catechize entered full communion with the Catholic Church. What a sense of joy—and a kind of completion—to see her receive her first Holy Communion. At the moment the Blessed Sacrament touched her tongue, and she adored Almighty God dwelling really, truly, and substantially present in her body, the end of my work began.

Yet in the midst of this breath-taking exaltation of the liturgy as Christ's work of redemption and the heavenly liturgy, the Council offers an important but (I'm afraid) often-overlooked caution: "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church" (SC, 9). What other activity or activities does the Council have in mind here? While the whole of Christian life is implied here, the Council specifically mentions, in the very next line, evangelization. She says, "Before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion: "How then are they to call upon him in whom they have not yet believed? But how are they to believe him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear if no one preaches? And how are men to preach unless they be sent?" (Rom. 10:14-15)." The liturgy is the summit of evangelization, but it is not the whole mountain. The liturgy is the source of evangelization, but it is not the whole river. This has been the Church's liturgical aim for at least a century: to remove from the liturgy any secondary and therefore non-liturgical demands. How often we operate under the debilitating illusion and unfair expectation that the Eucharistic liturgy, for example, somehow must touch or even satisfy every religious, emotional, catechetical, social, and aesthetic need we have. The Council actually *encourages* devotional life and sacramental life but demands that these bear an organic relationship to and from the liturgy, never replacing or added on to the liturgy (cf. SC, 13, 14). As catechists, our most goal must be simultaneously more ambitious and more simple: to proclaim the liturgy as source and summit, the beginning and the end—but not *everything*.

This holds true for evangelization. Though the liturgy is the impetus and power for our work of evangelization, the liturgy itself must be *preceded* by a great deal of evangelization which the liturgy simply is not equipped to do. If you've ever tried to "convert" someone by dragging them to Mass or a confession and expecting them to walk out like St Theresa of Avila in ecstasy, you know what I am talking about.

If we look closely, however, at the conversion story of Hermann Cohen, we see that the liturgy *was* essential in his "breakthrough" moment, when he interiorly "saw" Christ and "tasted" the heavenly Jerusalem (to use the Council's language). But prior to that moment there was a whole array of evangelical preparation: he was initially attracted by the beauty of the Church's non-liturgical music and the warm invitation of his religious

friends, and then by his own quiet prayer and quasi-liturgical prayer, and finally by his deeply contemplative attentiveness to the actions and signs of the Mass.

Hermann Cohen's experience exemplifies the heart of what the Church proclaims about her liturgy, especially the Eucharistic liturgy: here, in a way that exceeds all other ways, Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. Pope Benedict wrote in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that "the liturgy is a radiant expression of the paschal mystery, in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion." He continues by saying that this liturgy "is the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves, and drawing us toward our true vocation, which is love (*Sac. Car. 35; GS 22*).

Again, Hermann Cohen is an excellent model how liturgy and evangelization work together. He had heard about Jesus Christ countless times, growing up in the high-brow and bourgeoisie environment of 19th century Europe in which he was fully immersed. After a time of preparation, he *encountered* Jesus Christ Himself in the liturgy, and did so in a way by which he was attracted and delighted, and enabled to "emerge from" himself. St. Augustine often spoke about the importance of beauty, the beauty of the Crucified and Risen Christ, as a beauty that wounds and heals us at the same time. This is what the liturgy is meant to do.

I've attempted to lay out the Church's understanding of the sacred liturgy as a "revelation" of Christ, the Paschal Mystery, and His body the Church, citing especially the Second Vatican Council's teaching. Once G.K. Chesterton recalled attending a high Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in the early 1900's in which an English woman guffawed at the strange and remote display of lace, biretta-kissing, mumbling, and incense by moaning: "Isn't this dreadful?" Nothing of Christ's splendor reached her. The Council fathers wanted to move beyond the various impoverished and popular notions that made this experience common, such as the view that the liturgy is not merely the application of the salvific fruits of the cross to the living or dead, a canonical obligation for the faithful,

a private devotion of the priest, or worse, merely an archaic and unintelligible web of ceremonial gestures and pomp.

Against these notions, the Council sought to reclaim that the liturgy is Christ's *self-communication*, the sacramental expression of the Crucified and Risen One. Here is a helpful phrase which summarizes the context of this divine self-communication: God reveals himself in history, mystery, and majesty. He communicates Himself in *history*: creation, the Old Testament, and ultimately the Cross; in *majesty*: when he comes in glory; but also in *mystery*, that is, in the sacraments. The basic pattern remains the same in all these divine actions of self-communication. God offers Himself; we either receive him in joyful poverty and spiritually live, or reject him in prideful self-sufficiency and spiritually die. In creation, redemption, and his coming in glory, the initiative is always God's; therefore the measure of our poverty and humility is always the measure of our capacity to receive God's gift, whether in history, mystery, or majesty.

This pattern of poverty-receptivity abides in the sacred liturgy because it is Christ's saving self-communication. Therefore the liturgy can never be fabricated or produced, but only received. In this regard, Christ's words on salvation apply by extension to the liturgy: "Those who humble themselves will be exalted"; "Unless you acquire the heart of a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God." What marks spiritual child-likeness if not wonder, fascination, and the joyful poverty of radical receptivity? Are these the attitudes we desire in our approach to the liturgy?

This theological demand for receptivity to God's work of redemption in Christ through the liturgy is expressed in various concrete ways, most especially in careful fidelity to the rites themselves, to the gestures, words, and practical demands prescribed therein. This requirement (expressed in Code of Canon Law, 841, 846; SC 22: "Therefore no other person [besides the Pope], even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority"). This is not rooted in empty ceremonialism, but flows from the interior logic of our creaturely status. Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption: these all presuppose our poverty and receptivity, which is sacramentally expressed by our

receptivity of liturgical actions. It is helpful to note that there are changeable and unchangeable elements in the liturgical rites; the liturgy is never meant to be static or blandly uniform. But the liturgy, at its heart, can only be received, as St. Paul proclaims: **“For I received from the Lord what I pass on to you, that on the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me.’”** (I Cor 11:23-24).

Issue #1: Liturgy as Relevant. We face a number of issues in integrating this approach to the Divine Liturgy as revelation, which is God’s own self-communication. I’d like to address two in particular. The first is what I’d like to call the “liturgy as relevant” model. In what were (we ought to assume) well-intentioned but misguided efforts to make the liturgy easily understandable and accessible to the faithful, liturgy became subject to the category of relevance. The argument goes something like this: the pre-conciliar liturgy was a relic of earlier generations, and therefore crusted over by cultures long disappeared (like the imperial courts of Rome, or the royal courts of late medieval France, and so-on); for the liturgy to “speak” to people of Christ, it ought to use culturally timely forms, namely those of the present moment and place. This approach on the surface seems to offer an attractive solution to the problem of a liturgy which has lost its power to evangelize a given culture. If the important thing is Christ’s invisible and interior self-communication, why not simply accommodate the exterior dimension of the liturgy (music, architecture, words, gestures, etc.) to the sensibilities and tastes of this or that community? Is not the Incarnation all about God becoming flesh and speaking in a way that we can understand? Shouldn’t liturgy accommodate itself to whatever cultural situation in which it finds itself?

To answer to this question, we turn to one of the great fathers of the liturgical renewal of the 20th century, and a *peritus* of the Council, Fr. Romano Guardini, and what I would like to call his deep *liturgical epistemology*, that is, *how* we come to know Christ’s saving self-communication in the liturgy. One of Guardini’s most powerful influences was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, especially his approach to science. Goethe was highly

critical of the aggressively analytical form of rationality that he saw growing in popularity in the late 1700's and early 1800's. The most striking exemplar of this method of knowing was Newton. The Newtonian scientist would "rip a plant from the ground, place it under bright lights, dissect it, and compel it to answer his questions." (Barron, 54). While this method can provide some information, it fails to give real knowledge of the object in question. Goethe proposed instead a contemplative form of science, in which the object was allowed to follow its own rhythms, in its own habitat, to ask and answer its own questions.²

Applying this method to liturgy, Guardini wrote, later in his life, "I have come to realize so clearly these days that there are two ways of knowing. The one sinks into a thing and its context. The aim is to penetrate, to move within, to live with. The other, however, unpacks, tears apart, arranges in compartments, takes over, rules" (*Letters from Lake Como*, 43; quoted in Barron, 55). For Guardini, the self-communication of Christ in all the various symbols of the liturgy demands a suspending of this Newtonian way of knowing in favor of a kind of Goethean contemplative gaze: the altar, the candles, the holy water, the church door, liturgical prayers, the Eucharist itself—the meaning of these things will only emerge to the "one who gazes at them with endless patience and reverent attention" (Barron, 55). Again, Hermann Cohen's conversion is a striking example.

Now we are in a position to see through the false promises of the "liturgy as relevant" model. To submit the liturgy to the criteria which we deem "relevant" is to rip it from its native environment, tie it to a chair, and force it to answer *our* questions—and thereby to pervert or even destroy its essence. Moreover, because the liturgy is the means by which Christ communicates redemption to us, this Newtonian wrenching actually blurs or inverts the essential difference between Creator and creature, and, like serpent in the garden, confuses the difference between "self-realization through truth and usurpation" (Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 137). If this happens, the liturgy is opaque as best; at worst, it becomes a sign not of heaven but of man's idolatrous usurping of God's

² How often does Jesus in the gospels question those around him, and tell them what to ask? (Who do you say that I am?) How often people ask the wrong questions—even to test or trap him.

authority. When this happens, the liturgy is gutted of its proper evangelical power because it communicates not Christ but our own spiritual dysfunction. When it comes to offering the gift of salvation, nothing is less relevant than that.

The solution, then, cannot be to shape the liturgy according to the criteria and suppositions of the age in which we live, but to allow the liturgy—as God’s redemptive self-communication—to transform us, and in that way, to shape the world according to its own inner beauty.

Issue #2: Liturgy as self-expression. Consequent on the “liturgy as relevant” model is a second issue we face, which I will call “liturgy as self-expression.” I recall sitting in a Church building meeting once looking at a very confusing and frankly ridiculous drawing of a proposed church building, and I asked the pastor what was going on with it. The pastor assured me, “Father, you just have to come and meet our parish community, then you’ll understand—the church represents us!” The same type of thinking has been applied to the liturgy with disastrous effects. I recently asked a college student why she goes to Mass. She said, “I feel so good when I go there.” Another said, “So I can express my love for God.” No doubt there is a grain of truth in these statements, but I would wager that most Catholics—and certainly most Americans—assume that religious services (and therefore the liturgy) is for the purpose of some kind of self- or communal-expression.

If our first challenge (liturgy as relevant) was rooted in a kind of Newtonian empiricism (we know things based on empirical evidence alone), then this problem is rooted in the view that knowledge is grounded in one’s own inner intuition or conviction. This view was made popular by Rene Descartes’ *cogito* and finally by Fredreich Schleiermacher’s notion that religion is reducible to a “feeling of absolute dependency.” This is a view of liturgy which is dominated by subjectivism—the “self” becomes the measure of reality, not vice versa. The liturgy, then, is guided and judged by feeling, creativity, self-expression, aesthetic preferences, and emotions—which are all rooted deep in my own interior.

This view is wildly popular today. It is embraced in many liturgical journals. The attraction is obvious: it gives the appearance of being intensely personal and meaningful, which is what the liturgy is meant to be. We cannot be distant spectators at the liturgy, and this model seems to resolve the threat of the liturgy's apparent rigidity and lack of spontaneity. The problem with this model, like the liturgy as relevant model, is that the dominant criteria for and agent of the liturgy is no longer God but the "self." It is no longer revelation of the priestly work of Jesus Christ and his mystical body, but a vehicle to "meet the needs" of this or that isolated group of people. True, there is nothing necessarily wrong or sinful about my or your self-expression. There's just nothing salvific about it. There's nothing wrong with expressing my religious feelings. But evangelization is the proclamation of and encounter with Jesus Christ, not the sharing of my or our own feelings—even my feelings about Jesus.

The solution to this view—so rooted in a misguided (self-enclosed) view of the self—lies, I suggest, in Jesus' words about the "self": "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24). Redemption consists in Christ's self-emptying on the cross, not in some Oprah-like "self-expression." But in this emptying of self is, paradoxically, his radical self-communication. This pattern remains in the liturgy, where authentic "self-discovery," if you will, is gained in the measure that I lose myself, that we lose ourselves "for" Christ. Practically, this happens in common, predictable gestures and words.

Four Conclusions. We have seen that the Church's liturgy is fundamental for evangelization because it is the outstanding means by which the beauty of the crucified and risen Jesus is expressed in this age between the Incarnation and the Coming of the Lord. This expression through sacramental signs continues the work of redemption because it is Christ Himself who acts, in union with his mystical body the Church, and therefore Christ who reveals and communicates himself. Liturgy, then, is fundamentally a revelation of Christ, and is strictly opposed to a model based on relevance or self-expression. I'd like to make four practical conclusions.

First, we need to recover what Archbishop Chaput has called the “intrinsic and inseparable connection between liturgy and evangelization,” yet do so without collapsing them into one another in such a way that our people expect the wrong things from their experience of the liturgy. Is the liturgy the “font” of our life and work? Is the liturgy our culminating desire for those whom we serve and love, and for ourselves? Is it a means to some other end, however noble?

Second, we need to facilitate a spirit of poverty (and therefore childlike receptivity) with respect to the Divine Liturgy as a defense against self-serving models (which seek to “produce” liturgy) which are perhaps fashionable but always spiritually sterile. This concretely involves the development of liturgical asceticism in which we learn to conform ourselves interiorly to the liturgy itself, which is conformity to Christ Himself.

Third, we need to learn and teach an attitude of mind that is capable of approaching the liturgy with a true contemplative gaze, which protects us from a rationalistically determined desire to subdue and control. This must be fostered before, during, and after the liturgy.

Fourth, we need to promote the liturgy is a school of sacrificial love. Because it is an encounter with the crucified God, the divine Lamb, the liturgy sanctifies those who “lose themselves” for Christ in the liturgical prayer of the Church. Sacrifice is self-offering in love, not self-expression in ego. The sanctification that flows from this prayer gives the power (and ecstatic enthusiasm!) to love with Christ’s sacrificial and life-giving love once the Mass is ended.

Ten Practical Ways for Liturgical Evangelization.

- 1. Learn the Mass, pray the Mass, live the Mass. Best thing to do.**
- 2. Study the prayers of the Mass in Latin and English.**
- 3. Use appropriate devotions before and after the Mass**
- 4. Get a Missal or go online to explore “proper” Mass parts**
- 5. Use daily Mass, adoration, and the Lord’s Day to enhance Sunday Mass**
- 6. Invite prepared non-Catholic friends to Easter Vigil, Holy Thursday, etc.**
- 7. Prepare to answer simple liturgical “why” questions**
- 8. Avoid using the liturgy for evangelism without proper preparation**
- 9. Share your love for the liturgy often with others**
- 10. Develop a clear strategy to get a fallen-away Catholic back to the liturgy**