

Christian Worship and Social Reform

By Thomas Merton

*The following essay was circulated by Thomas Merton in mimeographed form but was never published.¹ It was evidently written some time between late October 1962 and early December 1963, since it includes an extensive quotation from the “Message to Humanity” of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, issued on October 20, 1962, shortly after the opening of the first session of the Council, but makes no reference to Sacrosanctum Concilium, the Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated at the end of the second session on December 4, 1963. As a reflection on liturgical renewal, it is closely related to the essays collected in Merton’s 1965 volume *Seasons of Celebration*,² particularly the opening chapter, “Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism,”³ which includes a number of references to Sacrosanctum Concilium, and the final chapter, “Liturgical Renewal: The Open Approach,”⁴ a reflection on the first wave of changes made in “the new Mass.” “Christian Worship and Social Reform” was perhaps omitted from that collection because Merton considered that it was already outdated, since it had been written before the Council’s document on the liturgy had been completed. But its focus on the relationship between liturgy and “the struggle for peace and brotherhood in the great crises of the twentieth century,” its consideration of the issues of racism, materialism and technology in the context of Eucharistic celebration, provide important insights on Merton’s conviction of the integral relationship between ecclesial worship and work for justice. It is therefore being made available in this issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, lightly edited, with minor alterations in punctuation, from the mimeographed version.⁵ Thanks are due to the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish “Christian Worship and Social Reform,” and to Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson for providing a copy of the material and for assistance and encouragement in bringing it into print.*

1. This was not an unusual procedure for Merton: see for example his November 1, 1964 letter to Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, in which he sends his essay “Identity Crisis and Monastic Vocation,” which he says is “being circulated in mimeo but not for publication” (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 250-51). “Christian Worship and Social Reform” is marked “(not for publication)” on its title page.
2. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965); this volume has recently been reissued by Ave Maria Press with a Foreword by William H. Shannon.
3. *Seasons of Celebration* 1-27; this essay was originally published as “Liturgy and the Spiritual Life” in *Worship* (October 1960) and was revised and expanded to include reference to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* for its appearance in *Seasons of Celebration*.
4. *Seasons of Celebration* 231-48; this essay originally appeared in *The Critic* (December 1964).
5. For example, ellipses are added to the passage from the Vatican II “Message to Humanity” to indicate omitted material.

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The liturgy is something more than collective worship. It is a sacred mystery. It therefore far transcends the scope of sociological measurement and analysis, for it is a more than human act. Christ, the Son of God, unites men to His worship of the Father in the liturgy of the Church. It is true that the liturgy can be regarded, from outside, as a sociological phenomenon. Yet such a view can never penetrate to the inner significance of the “phenomenon” so studied, because the real essence of the liturgy, though it makes itself somehow visible, yet remains forever inaccessible to scientific scrutiny. One cannot understand the liturgy merely by looking at it “objectively.” One must be personally and religiously involved in it, to grasp its real meaning.

Now this is true not only of the liturgy as a whole, but also of all its various aspects. It is possible, for instance, to have a deep, personally “committed” awareness of the sacredness of the liturgical mystery, as well as a profound connatural realization of the aptness of certain rites to express this sacredness. One may have a very acute sense of the fitness of certain works of sacred art, or of sacred music. Certainly it is not possible to understand Gregorian chant merely by listening to it: full appreciation of this sacred song of the Church is not granted to those who never actually participate in singing a Mass or an office in plainsong. Of course this does not mean that those with properly developed taste and awareness cannot understand a great deal merely by hearing the chant sung and by uniting their hearts and minds with the prayer that is thus offered to God. But the more completely and personally one is involved in liturgical worship, the more he will understand its inner meaning.

Personal involvement in the liturgy depends on two things: first, self-commitment to the aims and purposes of the sacred mystery, which are no other than the redemptive purposes of Christ for the world; and secondly, an understanding of how these aims are both expressed and fulfilled in the liturgy. As to the expression of Christ’s redemptive love in the liturgy, we must not be too vague or academic in our approach to this. For centuries we have passively accepted liturgical rite and symbol as something given to us, which we were supposed to receive without question, even at the cost of complete ignorance and misunderstanding. We have assumed that the full meaning of the liturgy was something accessible only to carefully trained experts, and that these esoteric secrets were the material of specialized courses. True, the liturgy needs to be studied. But let us not forget that we, the members of Christ, also make the liturgy. It is, or should be, the expression of the redemptive power of Christ in our own lives. We should be able to give to the liturgy a shape which enables us to sing and proclaim the Word of God as fully our own, unequivocally accepted by us as a rightful heritage, and ready to be used by us as a spiritual weapon against the evils of injustice, poverty, hatred, war, and every form of sin.

What about the social dimensions of the liturgy? What is meant by this term? Is it merely a question of the power of the liturgy to produce a feeling of solidarity and fellowship in those who participate? Or that it induces them to “be better men” both individually and collectively? Or that it expresses in a meaningful and dynamic way the current social needs and aspirations of a Christian group? Much more than this. In the liturgical mystery we have not only a participation in a sacred action which unites Christ the Head and High Priest with the members of His Mystical Body, the Church: we also have a ritual and symbolic expression of the redemptive and life-giving union of Christ with His members in all the aspects of their existence in the world. The Eucharistic mystery is then both an expression and a consecration of the Christian’s life in his family, his creative or

productive work, his struggles to make a living and to feed his dependents, his life of friendship, his life as citizen, all his associations in work and recreation with the other members of his group. Indeed Eucharistic liturgy has dimensions that are not only social but even cosmic and eschatological. They reach out to the limits of man's actual world. They embrace everyone living in that world (Jn. 1:9), with all the work, the needs, the ideals, and strivings that are constantly activating the whole social body of mankind. They reach out to the furthest limits of the cosmos. For man is in nature not merely as part of nature. By his spirituality, his intelligence and his capacity for wisdom in the divine Spirit (*pneuma*), man can contain within himself all the truth, the goodness, the light, and the meaning of the cosmos. Man is therefore in the cosmos, so to speak, as the eye is in the body. Man is the "light of the world" not only because he is capable of understanding the world, but because he is able, by the right use of his spiritual freedom, to give the whole world its ultimate spiritual and religious significance.

Man united to Christ in work and worship acts in the world as a redemptive instrument of the Incarnate Son of God, a personal and free instrument whose spontaneous and creative love is a force that gives spiritual life and renewal to the evanescent material universe. Man in Christ is the demiurge of the "new creation."

St. Thomas has declared that the value of one degree of grace in the soul of man outweighs all the value of the entire material creation. This statement is not a platonic fantasy, implying a depreciation of matter and a contemptuous rejection of nature. It is rather an assertion of the truth that, as St. Thomas also says, the soul of man is the end for which all other beings exist. Man is in the universe as the key to its purpose. But the universe does not automatically attain its finality in man. This fulfillment depends on man's own free acts. He must freely decide to make that creative and spiritual use of material things which will spiritualize and, so to speak, divinize them by elevating them to a living role in his own life of grace. Liturgy is the ritual expression of this mysterious activity of love.

The materials of bread, wine, oil, water, wax, and all the other works of man's hands that are used in the liturgical mysteries, enable the cosmos to participate symbolically in man's worship of God. And by this participation, the cosmos acquires a religious meaning which it would not otherwise have. It is true of course that natural forces and beings have in themselves a "numinous" power which strikes the primitive mind with sacred awe: but is this power after all in the things themselves, or in the mind of the primitive? In any case, even primitive religion strives to grasp and to express the powerful spiritual and religious implications of man's communion with the rest of nature. But Christian liturgy goes far beyond this. Note however that the mere fact that some material things are used in liturgical worship is not yet their fulfillment. They are present as signs and tokens, reminding man of his obligation to the world, to his fellow man and to Christ: his divine vocation to live and work in such a way that his ordinary use of material things contributes his share of the building of the Kingdom of God – the new creation.

Primitive and so-called "pagan" worship is not able to liberate and spiritualize the numinous forces generated by man's confrontation with nature. The worship of primitive man fully accepts the fact of this confrontation, and celebrates this fact in powerful, sometimes obsessive rituals. But cosmic rites, dances, and sacrifices are not able to transcend the quasi-hypnotic fascination with which man succumbs to the power of nature. Primitive worship is therefore full of generative force

which pours itself orgiastically back into the flood of natural life and by that very fact imprisons the person once again in nature.

Christian worship on the other hand spiritually transcends nature, and sublimates the generative, physical ecstasy of the pagan religious impulse to a higher, clear-sighted, and creative fulfillment.

Christian worship is first of all reasonable (*rationabile obsequium*) but it goes beyond reason to the sublime peace of spiritual vision. It is to this vision of nature and man in God's economy (*theoria physica*) that liturgy should elevate the participant. Liturgy should show us how we can fulfill our vocation as a community of men united in the Holy Spirit, to carry out the work of the Spirit in the world and around us!

Liturgical worship is not only a communal celebration but a celebration of community, of communion "in the Spirit." Now however real and intimate the communion of man and nature may be, it is never so real, so profound, or so meaningful as that of man with his other self, his fellow man. And this communion of men among themselves is celebrated in liturgy. How is it celebrated? We have discussed the purely religious, the mystical, and biblical, and other aspects of the celebration. But now let us look more closely at a more fundamental aspect still.

Man's communion with nature and with his fellow man is not, and can never be, a "purely spiritual" affair. It is not merely a question of thought, ideas, aspirations, prayers. It is first and foremost a living, concrete, existential, and earthly thing. Man communes with nature not alone by dreamily contemplating sunsets, but first of all by working for his living and wresting his livelihood from the earth. Man communes with his fellow man not only in cordial expressions of civility and of friendship, but by intelligently sharing common efforts to solve common problems, to satisfy common needs, and to fulfill common aspirations for peace and plenty in their social life.

The liturgy, which consecrates and expresses this intelligent communion, is therefore built on simple, obvious, ordinary social patterns in which work, sharing the fruits of work, and community of concern are all expressed. The "shape" of the Eucharistic liturgy is then patterned on the sacred meal, the Last Supper. But the Last Supper, insofar as it was a supper, was like any other supper: a meal in which men sit down together to eat food, produced by the labor of their hands, to share the fruits of their common labor, and thus to sustain their life.

Liturgy is therefore first of all rooted in life. Our sharing in the living and spiritual bread is meaningful and spiritually fruitful in proportion as it maintains its vital connection with the most basic activities of man: his work, his sharing the fruits of work, his communion with his fellow man in the responsibilities, trials, and joys of their common social life.

But for the participant to experience this essential dimension of the liturgy he must naturally be able to relate it to the basic realities and concerns of his own existence. He must recognize first of all that in his Eucharistic worship of God he is offering up the work of his own hands, his own mind, and his own heart. He is consecrating his daily tasks not merely in a formal and abstract fashion, by a purely "mental" act, but he is offering in the symbolic shape of worship what he will each day contribute in concrete and actual fact to society by his work.

Liturgy is itself a "common work," a sharing in worship. Liturgy therefore expresses a communal responsibility and reciprocity which, after taking a religious form in the sacred cult, afterwards incarnates itself in work characterized by a similar responsibility and reciprocity. To be worthy of being offered to God in worship, our work must be a valid and responsible contribution to the

common good of the society in which we live and, indeed, of the whole world. Needless to say, even the humblest and most obscure functions can make such a contribution.

The common worship of the liturgy is also an expression of brotherhood. It bears solemn witness to the fact that all we who eat of one bread are one in Christ (1 Cor. 10:17) and therefore that each one of us loves his brother as himself. Not only that, but the liturgy expresses the mystery of peace and unity in Christ. Hence to participate in the liturgy should mean a living testimony of the fact that we are men dedicated to peace, to reason, and to order and that we are therefore always ready to obey Christ's command to love our enemies.

In signifying these moral and religious aspects of our social life, the liturgy can exercise a powerful transforming action upon that life. We need not wait until we have become fully conscious of this dimension of the liturgy before it begins to act in our souls. Yet the sacred pedagogy of liturgical prayer will be to a great extent ineffective in us if we never direct our attention to it, and never have any real desire to learn the social lessons that the Church teaches us in her school of common worship.

Here however we are confronted with a complex and rather serious problem. The liturgy is made up of ritual signs and symbols which are understandable only when one grasps the world-view which underlies them. And of course it stands to reason that our experience of the liturgy will be weak and deficient in proportion as the cosmology and anthropology behind it are unfamiliar to us.

Now we have been talking of the liturgy in general. To do this is to run the risk of conveying an unfortunate impression that the concrete, actual shape of the Roman liturgy, as we now know it, fulfills all these ideal requirements and is therefore something perfect, untouchable, and eternal in its own right. On the contrary, we must certainly recognize, with the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, that the time for "renewal" of the liturgical forms is long overdue. The rites, the language, the symbols that were eloquent and appropriate in Christian antiquity had already lost much of their meaning by the time of Charlemagne. But they were fixed in a solemn, hieratic shape which was handed down with profound reverence from generation to generation, without any significant changes for over a thousand years. The texts of medieval commentators like Amalarius of Metz and Honorius of Autun show to what extent the real inner meaning of liturgical symbolism was lost even at an early date. Hence it can even be said that the Roman liturgy of the early twentieth century expresses the world-view of the eleventh century, the Gregorian Reform, the age of Cluniac monasticism. In a word, it is the world-view of an agricultural, primitive, static, and feudal Christendom.

Of course, the world-view expressed in the symbols of the Roman liturgy is basically that of Catholic theology. But it is also, in its gestures and attitudes, that of a Christian civilization which has by and large ceased to exist. The hieratic stance of the minister in the sanctuary is that of courtiers in the presence of their Emperor.

It would admittedly be exaggerated to say that the world-view of the liturgy is purely and simply that of eleventh-century papacy and empire, and that it therefore cannot be adjusted to a world-view that has witnessed the revolutions of Copernicus, Galileo, Robespierre, Marx, Darwin, Lenin and Freud. Nevertheless we have to become aware that the mentality behind the liturgy in its present form is essentially the mentality of the Medieval Church. What does this imply? A static and hierarchical concept of society, rooted in agricultural and feudal life. A concept of a world that has passed through most of its allotted span of six or seven thousand years and has reached a final state of development preceding an eschatological climax and end. A world in which the Gospel has been

in effect preached to everyone; in which the Church praises and glorifies the Lord of History through the splendor of a cult carried out by monks and clerics deputed for this purpose; a cult which itself contains, in typological symbols, a solemn prophetic manifestation of the consummation prepared for her in the return of the glorious Savior as judge of the living and the dead.

No Christian can seriously deny that this hieratic conception of the world and of history retains much relevance today. In its eschatological element, it is perhaps relevant now more than ever before. But the very serious defect of this outlook is its presupposition that eleventh-century Christendom was the final, unchangeable form to be taken on earth by the Kingdom of God. The hieratic immobility of the rites (and the thought accompanying them) proclaims with intransigent solemnity: “There can be no change!” This implies that the changes which have taken place (and which liturgical tradition has so long ignored) might well be the work of antichrist.

The result of this mentality tends therefore to be a rejection of any world-view more recent than St. Gregory VII or St. Peter Damian. It tends to be a rejection, or indeed only a grudging acceptance, of the new society, the new world of technology and progress.

Without becoming naively enthusiastic over technology, which, they explicitly warn, is not always used in concert with “the supreme law of morality,” the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council clearly stated the relation of spiritual renewal with man’s social development. This indeed has been the main theme of the Council.

We therefore the followers of Christ are not estranged from earthly concerns and toils. Indeed, the faith, hope, and charity of Christ urge us to serve our brothers. . . .

We expect a spiritual renewal which may provide a happy impetus for human welfare; that is, the findings of science, the progress of the arts and of technology and a greater diffusion of culture. . . .

We are constantly attentive to those who, deprived of the necessary assistance, have not yet reached a standard of living worthy of man. For this reason in performing our earthly mission we take into most serious account all that pertains to the dignity of man and all that contributes toward the real brotherhood of nations. “For the love of Christ impels us” (2 Cor. 5:14); in fact, “He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17). . . .

Is not this conciliar assembly – admirable for its diversity of races, nations, and tongues – a testimony of a community bound by fraternal love which it bears as a visible sign?

We proclaim that all men are brothers, irrespective of the race or nation to which they belong. . . .

The doctrine outlined in the encyclical letter, *Mater et Magistra*, clearly shows how the Church is needed by the world today to denounce injustices and shameful inequalities and to restore the true order of goods and things so that according to the principles of the Gospel, the life of man may become more human. . . .

It is our ardent desire that the light of the great hope in Jesus Christ our only Savior may shine, in this world which is still so far from the desired peace because

of the threats engendered by scientific progress itself – marvelous progress – but not always intent upon the supreme law of morality.

This surely is a kerygmatic statement of the Church's faith in the Incarnation, a faith which embraces all that is best in the idea of Christian humanism which it elevates to the plane of evangelical fulfillment. This too should be the view of the liturgy.

Unfortunately one of the most serious problems that confronts the liturgist today arises out of the fact that instead of adapting the liturgy to the world-view of a new society already in the thirteenth century, the clergy preserved the forms that had been familiar since Charlemagne, and the religious needs of the common people had to be satisfied by non-liturgical devotions and spiritual exercises. It is true that as time went on there were a few very minor adaptations. But these were made very slowly and never went very far. In consequence we find ourselves, in the age of communist revolution and nuclear war, with a liturgy that is still to a great extent modeled on court ceremonial, including certain baroque accretions from the time of the counter-reformation.

Every effort is being made to renew liturgical forms in such a way that they can express the most important realities of our modern human and social situation, without betraying our living tradition. Active participation by the laity in the sacred mysteries is vitally important to manifest the struggle for peace and brotherhood in the great crises of the twentieth century. But perhaps it is not always sufficiently well realized that this is the real purpose of active participation. Some seem to think that the chief reason for active participation is merely to keep the congregation awake and to stir up emotions appropriate to a communal ceremony.

Liturgy is, or should be, intimately concerned with the most critical problems of our society. One of these is the problem of race relations. The Eucharistic mystery is by its very nature incompatible with any form of racial segregation. The whole meaning of Eucharistic communion is that all believers, irrespective of their race, class, or social background, are truly one in Christ. In Him, as St. Paul said, there is no longer Jew or Greek.

There is therefore nothing strange in a bishop excommunicating Catholics who refuse to accept this basic principle of unity in Christ and to apply it in the sphere of so-called "integration," for instance a Catholic school. A white Catholic who formally declares himself separate from a Negro Catholic, on the grounds of his race, and who therefore refuses to recognize the Negro as his brother, has by that very fact excommunicated himself in spirit. He has spiritually cut himself off from the true unity of the Body of Christ, in which such distinctions can no longer justify any separation between brothers.

There is only one example. There are many others. We must candidly face the fact that our liturgical worship can hardly have any deep or genuine religious meaning if we contradict it by our greed in business, our injustice, our rapacity, our spirit of prejudice, our fanaticism, our aggressive fury in politics, and our failure to cooperate in measures that are intended to right wrongs that cry out to heaven for vengeance.

However, it is not just a matter of bringing our personal conduct into line with the principles which we express, whether we know it or not, when we participate in the liturgical worship of the Church. We must go deeper than that. We must recognize that the liturgy is an outward expression of mysterious spiritual principles, given to us by God Himself and implanted in the world in the living spiritual organism which is the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ, the Church, is not in the world as a merely static object planted in the midst of society as a kind of monument to remind men that the world is contemptible and that heaven alone is to be desired.

On the contrary, the Body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, is in the world like leaven. It has a dynamic, transforming power, and it means to exercise that power (spiritually, not politically) to bring about the total renewal and re-creation of human society on a divinely revealed and eschatological pattern.

But this renewal of society cannot be effective if Christians themselves do not realize their part in the work to be done, and do not set about the task allotted to them.

That spiritual task is not easily or immediately discerned. Nor is it just a fragment or accident in the atomized existence of the twentieth-century Christian. It is part of an undivided and indivisible whole: the life of Christ, the life of the Holy Spirit in the whole Church and in each Christian. The social task of the Christian will not reveal itself to him and to the Church except in proportion as each one immerses himself spiritually in the grace of Christ which flows from the living springs of the Church's life of worship, doctrine and charity. Our social role in the world consists not only in being good citizens but in being "other Christs." This indeed is what the non-Christian world still continues, in large measure, in spite of many disillusionments, to expect of us. We have not yet measured up to these expectations, still less to our own claims.

The social dimension of the liturgy is then manifest in the awareness, in the responsibility that is awakened in each participant who comes to recognize his sacred duty to carry out a redemptive and sanctifying function in the world, and to do this by his daily work and his relations with his fellow man. This does not in any sense mean that each Christian has to go about heckling and proselytizing, or minding his neighbor's business. But it means that each should learn, from the Church's worship and teaching, to realize the power of Christ and of the Spirit in the daily work which is his own contribution to the world of men.

This has stern implications: not only in the order of justice, honesty, probity, and purity of life, but also in a realization of the moral implications of the technological instruments of power which we all cooperate in creating and manipulating. These tremendous instruments, whether weapons of nuclear war or tools of peace, all by their own nature and functions speak out their role of creativity or of destruction. The man who participates in the liturgy of life and who lives by complicity in the fabrication of cosmic death can hardly claim that his work is the spiritual expression of the Church's worship. He has a serious obligation to learn from the Church's worship and teaching the real dimension of his responsibility to the world of his time.

In one word, the liturgy is an expression of a spiritual law of life implanted in the Church by the redemptive act of Christ. This vital force of grace is intended by God's merciful will to overflow into every department of man's life so that there is no longer anything left in His creation that is unclean, hateful, or profane. Such is our ideal and our vocation. Unfortunately we are still very far from realizing it.¹

1. Since it is not possible in the space of a short article to make all the qualifications and reservations necessary for the proper understanding of this problem in all its aspects, I may perhaps be permitted to conclude with a footnote in the first person singular that will make my own position

more definite. I am certainly not one of those who holds that a sweeping and universal reform of the liturgy must be pushed so far as to completely abolish the ancient and traditional liturgies that have come down to us from the past. Far from it. It is my feeling that these liturgies should also be preserved, in their authentic and traditional form. But since they are perhaps out of reach of the understanding of the average Christian, the proper place for them would seem to be in certain monastic settings, where their symbols can be properly understood and where their language can be effectively translated to cover the needs of our time. This requires, evidently, a special training and sophistication. For my own part I have no special fault to find with the liturgy of my own monastery which, to me, has been meaningful and deeply effective. I do not think that all the accidental changes that have recently been made in it are necessarily improvements, though some certainly are. But it seems to me that it is better to create entirely new liturgical forms, for pastoral purposes, in our own time, rather than to tinker with ancient systems which are much more effective in the original forms that were appropriate to their age. It may be added that when I speak of “new liturgical forms” I am obviously not referring to anything that would touch the essence of liturgical worship, which must remain unchanged. It seems to me that it is also important to maintain a spirit of liberty in diversity, in liturgical worship, and that it should be possible for monastic as well as ethnic groups to make use of a wide choice of approved liturgical forms, in order to find what best suits their own needs.