

THE CORPORATE NATURE OF WORSHIP

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SOME TIME AGO I WAS PRAYING in a chapel, as I looked up I saw the hymnals neatly arranged in the book holders of each pew. On the cover of each book, the word “Gather” in gold lettering popped out against the dark background. “That’s our problem!” I said almost out loud.

For nearly a generation, we have been told and have been telling others that we have to “gather” in Church. Our songs reinforce the notion: “We gather together to sing the Lord’s praises...” The hymnals, too, speak: “Gather,” they tell us. And yet, if we stay at that level—at the level of gathering only—we have missed an essential aspect of the liturgy.

I think of a model airplane that I can buy at the local hardware store. All of the pieces are there in the box, gathered in the same place. But they do not get to be an airplane until the pieces are assembled!

The same is true of the Church at prayer. The worshipping assembly is formed into one body on a variety of levels: in speech, in song, in gesture, but also in mind and heart. And while it is true that when they gather to pray, each brings his or her own prayers, none should come with any other motive than the praise of God.

The Christian community joined in public prayer is decidedly not a group of anonymous individuals who happen to be gathered in the same place and time. They are called brothers and sisters in the Lord—related by nothing less than blood and water—the Blood of Christ and the water of baptism. They are perpetually trying to connect every aspect of their lives with the Mystery of Christ.

Assembling into one body is only possible for those willing to do so; they must come to the liturgy with openness and charity, ready to pray together, ready to share and celebrate what really matters, ready to care for one another. In some ways, the liturgical assembly never really exhausts its role because concern for others extends beyond the walls of the building.

Our participation in the liturgy happens because we are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Saint Paul explains this magnificent idea for us in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Each one of us, in his or her own and unique way has something to contribute. Since the Eucharistic Liturgy is the prayer of Christ to his Father, we can only participate in it fully if we are members of Christ. By the Sacrament of Baptism, we become members of his body and are “equipped” with the ability to join his prayer to the Father.

When the community gathers to pray, it must pray as the body of Christ: the community prays as a kind

of “corporate” Christ. In the liturgy, the word “I” rarely means one of us individuals. It usually refers to this assembly that prays as one. The “my” in the liturgy does not mean “mine alone.” It is the voice of Christ that speaks here, we fold our voices into his. The liturgical is the most exquisite presentation of the Church, since in her liturgical prayer the Church shows herself most perfectly both as the bride of Christ and as his own beloved body. This “my” in the liturgy is the Body of Christ, it is Corpus Christi.

The initial task of the liturgical assembly, then, is to form, or better yet, to *be* formed into the body of Christ, reminiscent of Saint Augustine’s command: “Become what you receive, receive what you are.” The Christian people, gathered as Christ’s body, joins with him, its head and spouse, in offering a unified prayer of praise; in union with the whole Church and with Christ we participate in his prayer to Father. This gathering, moreover, is not an amorphous mass, or a group of disconnected individuals who happen to be in the same place and the same time.

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There is order and structure both to the gathering and to its prayer.

Each member of the community has a role to play in the liturgical act. This means that the highest value of liturgical expression, in this sense, is that each person play his or her part fully. And not only that, but that each play only that part. In this way, rather than making

all the members the same, each will respect the unique quality and contribution of the other.

The Church has resisted calling this gathering an “audience” because the members of the community are assembled for a collective action, collective prayer, rather than watching or merely listening. They do not come to be entertained, to be impressed by the discourse no matter how eloquent nor by the music no matter how phenomenal. Liturgical celebrations should not be evaluated as if they were performances. We want to learn to live a Christian life that feeds into and is nourished by the celebration of the sacred mysteries. This is living liturgically. ❧

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