

On Liturgy and the Polis

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“R ender unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.”¹⁶⁴ This familiar passage from Saint Matthew’s Gospel may well be considered the scriptural basis of Roman Catholic political philosophy. It is one of the most political teachings in the New Testament, a document that does not purport to address itself to politics. Yet this command of Christ is not merely political. It is also richly liturgical in its admonition to render to God that which is His: worship. The fact that political and liturgical teachings are both implied in this most crucial of passages raises the question of the relationship between the political and the liturgical. Does liturgy fit into the enterprise of political philosophy, and if so, where? The very etymology of the word ‘liturgy’ indicates that there is indeed a relationship between liturgy and the polity. As Graham Ward has noted, the Greek *leitourgia* was a technical-political term for a service rendered to the city or state, a work or labor with respect to a people or community. Current usage of the word refers to an ecclesiastical rather than political service, but this does not preclude a relation between liturgy and the polity.

Divine worship originates in piety, a kind of justice that seeks to repay that which cannot be repaid. It is impossible for man to engage in a proportionally just exchange with God. Yet man nevertheless feels driven to make a return to God and he does this principally in the liturgy. We see this clearly in Psalm 116, prayed at communion in the Tridentine Mass, which explicitly raises the question of how what we shall return to the Lord for his many gifts. We see here that the ‘justice’ of piety upon which the liturgy rests transcends the justice upon which the polis is

based. Piety implies that repayment cannot be fully rendered on some debts, which hints that there are things beyond strict justice.¹⁶⁵ As Aristotle knew, friendship is that which is beyond justice. The liturgy, in recognizing that the justice of the polis is not enough, offers man the truest and highest friendship, that with God.

Liturgy, then, may be found at the edges of what can be considered proper to the polity. At the limits of political philosophy, man realizes that the aim of political life is not attained in the political realm as such, but rather in a life devoted to contemplation of the highest things. Philosophy is therefore, as Strauss said, “necessarily accompanied, sustained and elevated by *eros*. It is graced by nature’s grace.”¹⁶⁶ Strauss seems to be indicating that, at the limits of philosophy, there is an opening to the transcendent, an opening to grace, an opening that perhaps gives way to worship and liturgy. In the preface to his book *Feast of Faith*, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger asserts that, in the midst of the “political and social crises of the present time and the moral challenge they offer to Christians... concern for the proper form of worship... is not peripheral but central to our concern for man himself.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, liturgy stands at the threshold where politics and even political philosophy can go no further. Liturgy stands as the natural and necessary limit to the political, bringing man to the end for which he was ordained from all eternity, an end which politics can recognize and promote but ultimately cannot accomplish.

To see how liturgy does this, it is necessary to consider man’s nature and end. As David Berger has insightfully noted, “man is by his God-given nature a liturgical being, which means that the liturgy as sensual expression of reli-

gion is connatural to man.”¹⁶⁸ This is probably a statement with which Aristotle, for whom the end of man was the contemplation of the highest things, would agree, for man as a liturgical being is the summation of man as a contemplative and political being. As a liturgical being, man heeds the Socratic admonition to live the examined life, or stated another way, the awakened life: “The man formed by the Liturgy is the man who is awake in the highest sense of the word. He is not only inwardly open to hearing the voice of God; he is not only aware of ultimate Truth, but he also looks on all earthly goods in their true light.”¹⁶⁹ The man who is awakened by the liturgy and lives an examined life, is able to discern with prudence even earthly goods of a political nature. Herein one is confronted with what von Hildebrand termed “the classical spirit in the liturgy,” namely, that “He who penetrates the Liturgy with open eyes and heart would like to exclaim, ‘O Truth, Truth, Truth!’ Everything is pervaded here with the breath of the Holy Ghost, everything is irradiated with the *lumen Christi*, everything testifies to the eternal Logos. All semblance, wavering, illusion, all that is false, extravagant, or cramped is dispelled.”¹⁷⁰ The polis exists to facilitate man’s journey toward his contemplative flourishing, but it in itself cannot accomplish this end – only liturgy can. Of course, if we are to have authentic contemplation and worship then we must have leisure. Leisure, the ability to open oneself to the whole of reality, is what allows man to be open to God. It is the precondition of true liturgy. Only when we are open to the whole of *what is* can we be so awed and inspired by it that we are moved to celebrate it, to ritually recognize its beauty and goodness. Moreover, it is only when we are exposed to something that is not ourselves, something that is not a product of human artifice, that we can recognize it as a gift freely given and deserving of thanksgiving.

Liturgy picks up where the polis, properly considered, leaves off in guiding man to his end. It is that through which man transcends both himself and the political realm: The realization

of man’s contemplative end is only achieved in a brand of festive leisure that is understood as an act of divine worship. In this act, however, we begin to approach the polis, for our act is ‘cultural’ in the sense that it constitutes a public *cultus*. That is to say, in worshiping God, man builds culture and culture in turn is used as a mode of expression in the liturgy. This relationship between liturgy and society was perhaps most evident in the Middle Ages. As Catherine Pickstock has remarked, “mediaeval social practice was definitively ritual or liturgical in character. There simply was no duality of the liturgical and the mundane...Such specifically ecclesial occasions as the celebration of the Mass, processions, festivals, and pilgrimages, extended beyond themselves. For all forms of social interaction were themselves embedded in a structure of worship, ritual, and charity.”¹⁷¹ Thus, liturgy conditioned all social interactions, constantly reminding man that he is not the highest being.

In, modernity, however, we find a rejection of this view. The modern project was designed to ‘liberate’ man from grace and the obedience that it entails. As this modern project developed in the late Middle Ages, ‘the political’ began to emerge as a rival to ‘the liturgical’ in that the state sought to remove social interactions, culture, from their liturgical grounding. The Enlightenment, as well as the Romantic reaction to it, went even further, attempting to divinize the community itself. This is a radical negation of true liturgy, premised as it is on the openness of man to something outside himself.

Modernity culminates in a Nietzschean vision of the world as a canvas onto which man projects the creations of his will, a worldview that pridefully rejects the need for liturgy and the grace it confers. Salvation comes instead by man’s own hand, by his indomitable will to power. The impulse underlying this rejection is, as Voegelin has noted, fundamentally Gnostic. It seeks to realize the kingdom of God in this world, to achieve immanent salvation and deliverance. Gnosticism seeks a world without liturgy because liturgy is, by its nature, antithetical

to the Gnostic enterprise. Liturgy implies something otherworldly, something entirely outside the capacity of man's will to effectuate, to which he owes his very existence. The Gnostic cannot acknowledge this reality because it implies that salvation cannot be achieved in this world.

In this attempt to deny the relationship between the liturgical and the political, its importance is in fact brought into sharper relief. The more human efforts are directed towards the end of world-immanent salvation, the more distant they grow from the contemplative life of the spirit. The more they are thrown into the great enterprise of salvation through world-immanent action, the farther the human beings who engage in this enterprise move away from the life of the spirit. Since this life is the source of order in man and society, the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline. Liturgy, as the highest expression and realization of 'life in the spirit,' is the great ordering principle for men

and their own souls, for the realization of their end, for how men relate to each other and the polis, and ultimately for the polis itself.

To understand this liturgical ordering, one must see the liturgy as reflective of cosmological order. The liturgy, in reflecting the order of the cosmos, orders the souls of the polis' citizens, who in turn seek to order the polis according to the cosmos. The liturgical life of the spirit, in directing man towards his end in contemplation of and communion with God, simultaneously directs the proper ordering of the polis according to the cosmic order, so that the liturgy becomes integral to the true flourishing of the common good. The liturgy continues to proclaim exactly that which Christ proclaimed in Matthew's Gospel: "Over and above Caesar, regardless of who he is or what is his, stands God."¹⁷²

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