

Chapter Three: A Performance Model for Liturgy

If we are to have a true recovery of the power of the language of worship, we must look for ways to enrich and make vital the background of shared experience out of which worship takes place.⁶⁸

A theatre company which produces a play in such a manner as to have it received by an audience with large yawns and occasional snores is a theatre company which will certainly bring down the curtain permanently. For all practical considerations, a boring play is no play at all. The test for its ‘boringness’ is, of course, the audience itself. The audience which is bored is the audience which does not return to the theatre.

The impulse to assemble for liturgy is quite definitely stronger than the impulse to assemble for theatre. This impulse for liturgy is a saving grace in a way. Without it, many churches would be lacking an ‘audience’ in a manner of speaking, should their performances be judged in the same breath as theatre.

Without wishing to appear flippant, serious thinking must be done about whether or not ‘boring’ should be entered as a new theological category.⁶⁹ The plain fact of the matter is that ‘boring’ does not belong to the group of adjectives which usually describes theatrical and liturgical activity. This activity is the result of very special impulses.⁷⁰ It is responsible activity. If one thinks, for a moment, of all the media of communication, the performing arts stand out insofar as the entire body is thought to be needed in the actual act of communication. Furthermore, this activity is a whole need. This activity communicates in a very special way when it is properly done. It is an ‘explosive’ activity

68. Don Saliers, “On the ‘Crisis’ of Liturgical Language,” in *Worship*. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1970), 405.

69. Patrick Regan uses “tedious.” Patrick Regan, “Liturgy and the Experience of Celebration,” in *Worship*. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1973), 598.

70. C.f., Eugene and Laughlin d’Aquila, Charles, “The Bio-Psychological Determinants of Religious Ritual Behaviour,” in *Zygon*. (Chicago: Joint Publication Board of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science and Meadville Theological Seminary of Lombard College, 1975), 49, also, Raymond Hoch-Mond, “Artistic Dimensions of Liturgy,” in *Studia Liturgica*. (Nieuwendam: Studia Liturgica Press, 1976), 118–30.

whereby the entire person is moved to sharing, where body and spirit grapple with gesture and speech.⁷¹ This gesture and speech is a unified whole, never in contradiction with each other, although capable of revealing contradiction within the person.

Confused behaviour, for instance, is organically unconfused: it reveals what is really moving within. It is unimaginable that this activity, when properly done, could ever be labeled 'boring' or 'irritating' or 'frustrating,' especially when the assembly is attending in expectance.

When such labels are uttered, it can only mean that the words and gestures are empty of the impulses which cause them to occur in the first place. This sort of behaviour is mechanical, rote, best described by the phrase 'saying mass' or 'reading Mass.' The activity is, after all, especially designed for communication. When communication ceases, something has broken down, something is missing.

Specifically in liturgy, this breakdown is deadly,⁷² for liturgy is Common Prayer.⁷³ Common prayer is not simply something spoken in public, it is prayer that is necessarily communal. It is an activity that must have a community performing within it, performing wholly in body and spirit.⁷⁴ This sort of performing is what Stanislavski calls 'putting the human spirit into a part.'

Yet, in many instances of the liturgical event, the activity proper to liturgy doesn't 'measure up.' As Rahner says,

...it is possible to have in certain circumstances a 'valid sacrament' which in point of fact does not cause any grace in the recipient of the sacrament.⁷⁵

71. Regan, "Liturgy and the Experience of Celebration," 596.

72. Regan, "Liturgy and the Experience of Celebration," 598.

73. G. Cumming, *New Testament Foundations for Common Prayer* 10 (1974): 88 *Studia Liturgica*. Nieuwendam: Studia Liturgica Press, 1974.

74. Regan, "Liturgy and the Experience of Celebration," 596.

75. Karl Rahner and Cornelius Ernst, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Crossroad, 1961), 259.