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Battle lines in the liturgy wars

Tom Roberts | Mar. 1, 2010

Massgoers receive Communion at the Church of the Annuciation in Washington, D.C. (Dreamstime)

Analysis

Editor?s note: This is the first part of a series exploring the long-standing ?liturgy wars? and how they shape today?s understanding of the Second Vatican Council.

It would be difficult to find two more incongruous words to utter in the same phrase than ?liturgy? and ?war.? Yet those are the terms that have been widely used in the English-speaking world to discuss a struggle that has dominated much of the Catholic community?s life since the Second Vatican Council, that remarkable series of meetings of the world?s bishops that occurred 1962 through 1965.

With recent decisions on translations of the prayers we pray during Mass, with Vatican officials openly urging a ?reform of the reform,? and with a pope who has made significant overtures to groups within the church who are eager to restore Latin as well as some of the more elaborate manifestations of episcopal office, the question becomes: Are the liturgy wars at an end stage?

Arguably, no other single issue has occupied as much of our time and energy, nor caused deeper divisions, than the liturgy wars. And with good reason.

Liturgy, the central act of worship, embodies the genetic code of the community. It holds the key to what we think about God; about Christ?s action in human history; about our relationship to the Trinity; about our relationship to each other; about the relationship between ordained and lay, between the community and the wider world. In the big picture, a lot hinges on the way we approach liturgy.

The council?s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is so important, said Jesuit historian Fr. John O?Malley, because liturgy ?is at the heart of what we do.? He considers the recent attempts to change the sense of the liturgical renewal from the top down a serious matter. ?In 1985,? he said in a phone interview with NCR, ?the synod of bishops said of those four constitutions [of the Second Vatican Council], those are the standards against which all the other documents are to be interpreted. Once you start to play with one of those, you?re playing with everything.?

The state of the liturgy debate can also be a leading indicator of which view is prevailing in the equally long and divisive battle over how to interpret Vatican II a half century after Pope John XXIII first conceived the idea of the council and 45 years after it ended.

How the changes in liturgy were arrived at in the four decades since the council is significant, because the process speaks a great deal about whose articulation of the elusive ?spirit of the council? is in ascendancy. By most indications, the way the liturgy has been changed in recent years would suggest that those who hoped that the pervasive themes of collegiality and dialogue evident in the Vatican II documents would lead to a change in the style of church governance have been on the defensive for a long time and may now be in full retreat.

The story of the liturgy battles, while often conducted in rigorous intellectual theological terms, is also a story of ecclesiastical politics played out on an international stage. It is telling to note, also, that the lines of battle are not joined solely along liberal-conservative or pro- and anti-reform boundaries. While that may be the case generally, one of the earliest giants of the modern liturgical movement also voiced, 30 years after the reforms were enacted, some of the same criticisms leveled today by those who opposed the reforms from the beginning.

Liturgy set the tone

When the assembled bishops of the world ratified the first document of the Second Vatican Council on Nov. 22, 1963, the groundbreaking Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the tone and direction of the rest of the council?s session was irrevocably set. It is not overstatement to say that with that document, the church as the modern world knew it was changed forever.

For even with the ?reform of the reform? in motion, history has amply recorded what followed the council:

- Altars were turned so the priest faces the people;
- Communion rails disappeared;
- The Eucharist was distributed to standing, rather than kneeling, communicants;
- Latin was replaced the world over by languages spoken by the people;
- The liturgy was seen as intimately connected to what takes place outside the sanctuary walls, particularly regarding issues of social justice;
- In a deeper change, an understanding of Christ?s humanity took its place in a profound way in the Mass alongside reverence for the divinity of Christ, and there was a shift in emphasis from a vertical relationship with God to a more horizontal relationship to God in the community;
- Perhaps most important for average churchgoers, everyone became participants, and not simply passive observers, in the eucharistic celebration.

As described by the late Benedictine Fr. Godfrey Diekmann of St. John?s Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., one of 55 international liturgists who helped write the document, ?It was a Magna Carta of the laity.?

It might be reasonable to presume that with the world?s bishops and the pope signing off on liturgical reform, all would be set for the foreseeable future. But the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, a solemn pronouncement of the council, was also a political document. Its implications went far beyond what prayers people would say and when they would stand and kneel, or what motions a priest would make during the ritual.

The further-reaching implications had to do with ecclesiology, what kind of church we were becoming. It was clear in 1963 to then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger what was at stake with the newly affirmed document. In what appear approving tones, Ratzinger wrote of the ?decentralization of liturgical decision-making.?

?The first chapter of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy contains a statement that represents for the Latin church a fundamental innovation,? he wrote, and that innovation was a new independent authority for national conferences of bishops.

?Perhaps one could say that this small paragraph, which for the first time assigns to the conferences of bishops their own canonical authority, has more significance for the theology of the episcopacy and for the long-desired strengthening of episcopal power than anything in the Constitution on the Church itself,? wrote Ratzinger, who would become Pope Benedict XVI. It was a pronouncement of decentralized church authority on steroids.

Pulling back

If strengthening of episcopal power was much desired then, time has changed that opinion. During the quarter of a century of John Paul II?s papacy and continuing into Benedict?s, quite the opposite has been true. John Paul, often using the congregations on doctrine and liturgy, especially clipped the wings and authority of national conferences, and a favorite target was the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. One of the mechanisms for trimming its authority was rejection of liturgical texts previously approved by the conference.

U.S. resistance to Rome?s interference abated over time as John Paul continued to appoint bishops of unquestioning loyalty to his wishes and point of view.

It is difficult to measure the accumulated anger and disappointment among many liturgical experts who had enthusiastically embraced the changes brought by the council over what one Vatican official recently termed ?the renewal of the renewal.? The new translations being imposed on the English-speaking Catholic world have recently drawn a lot of attention because of objections to awkward phrasing and ungrammatical construction aimed at restoring reverence and awe in the liturgy.

Yet it must be noted that even Diekmann, as early as 1993, voiced concern that ?in the liturgical movement, we have lost the sense of mystery, of the sacred.? While rejecting such ?false props? as Latin, he said that the prior 30 years had seen an overemphasis on God as immanent and loving, creating at times a ?feel-good? religion. He recommended restoration of ?kneeling, genuflecting, bowing or even lying prostrate on the floor? as gestures that express ?making ourselves small before God.?

Those are concerns identical in many ways to the objections voiced by many who opposed the reforms from the start. The question remains how to find common cause and make change. It would appear that the manner in which change has occurred is cause for perhaps even a deeper divide, and in some minds, an even deeper betrayal of Vatican II, than the changes themselves.

Historian O?Malley referred to a canon law principle that essentially says, ?An abuse doesn?t mean you change what you?re doing. You try to correct those who are abusing things.?

More to the point, he said the papacy should be a mediating force among different points of view. Instead, he said, ?the professional liturgists have been elbowed out. This is your research branch. Management should listen to the research branch.?

O?Malley?s contribution to the recent book *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* makes a detailed case for how dramatically different the council was in its language, purpose, and particularly its attention to collegiality and dialogue. It was the first council that did not address a crisis; it also did not issue anathemas. And it paid unusual attention to the laity.

The Georgetown University professor termed the way the ?reform of the reform? is being conducted a ?partisan? attempt. ?They don?t listen to liturgists and they don?t listen to local communities,? he said in an interview.

Indeed, while the council set up a process for doing translations of sacred texts and prayers for worship, a widely consultative process that went on under the guidance of English-speaking bishops from around the world and liturgical and scriptural experts for more than 30 years, the reform of the reform began in earnest in a secret Vatican meeting in 1997. That year, as *NCR*?s John L. Allen Jr. reported at the time, 11 men met in secret in the Vatican ?to overhaul the American lectionary, the collection of scripture readings authorized for use in the Mass. Short-circuiting a six-year debate over ?inclusive language? by retaining many of the most controversial uses of masculine vocabulary, and revamping texts approved by the U.S. bishops, this group decided how the Bible will sound in the American church.

?Powers in Rome handpicked a small group of men who in two weeks undid work that had taken dozens of years,? Allen continued.

In ensuing years the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, known as ICEL, which was created at the Second Vatican Council as a joint project of 11 English-speaking bishops? conferences and not under control of the Vatican, has essentially been supplanted by a Vatican-controlled agency, the Vox Clara Committee, with a mandate to advise the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on English translations.

ICEL, meanwhile, under great pressure from the Vatican, has revised its statutes and overhauled personnel to be more in line with Vatican wishes and a 2001 Vatican document, *Liturgiam Authenticam*.

In late January, Vox Clara released a statement saying its work on a new English translation of the Roman Missal, the book of prayers used at Mass, is nearly complete. When it goes into use, as expected, in Advent 2011, a major battle, at least, in the liturgy wars will have been won.

Can the factions that fought, sometimes bitterly, come together in the future in the kind of unity the liturgy begs? Benedictine Sr. Mary Collins, a liturgist and professor emeritus at The Catholic University of America in Washington, said, ?I do think there needs to be a change of heart running through the whole ecclesial body.? A reality in the church today, she said, ?is that we are still in the winners-and-losers game. I think unless the church can get beyond that, we can?t tell ourselves we?re responding to the call of the Holy Spirit.?

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