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Roles of bishop, cathedral intertwine

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 31, 2010

St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Worship & Liturgy

When bishops are to be installed, the question arises: Where should the ceremony take place? It has become common for these liturgies to be held in arenas or convention centers to better accommodate a crowd, but the temptation should be resisted. The theology of the episcopacy and our human yearning for a sense of the holy to be located in a particular place both issue in a presumption in favor of having such large and important liturgies in the diocesan cathedral.

Vatican II?s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states: ?The bishop is to be considered as the high priest of his flock from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and upon whom it in some way depends. Therefore all should hold in the greatest esteem the liturgical life of the dioceses centered around the bishop, especially in his cathedral church. They must be convinced that the principal manifestation of the church consists in the full, active participation of all God?s holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop resides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.?

Derived and *depends* are strong words to describe a relationship, and it is fair to admit that such descriptions are rarely used to characterize the relationship between a bishop and his flock today.

Too often, we do not view our bishops as ?high priests.? We view them as remote men vested with authority over our parish school and the choice of our pastor and the dispersal of the diocesan budget. This view of the episcopacy may have some functional truth to it, but its emphasis on managerial qualities diminishes the theological significance of the bishop: He is the high priest, who leads his people in worship. Liturgy is not just something we do, like running to the store. It makes us who we are, who we most profoundly are, the people of God, gathered in worship, here and now but always in continuity with the apostles gathered with Jesus in the Upper Room. That continuity is made manifest most clearly when a successor the apostles presides at the liturgy. A bishop may be a horrendous administrator, a dismal fundraiser, but he is still the high priest and his authority is rooted in that role, not in his control over diocesan funds.

Focusing on the unique role of a cathedral can both enhance and qualify this understanding of the bishop?s role in the church. On the one hand, it clearly sets him apart from the people. A cathedral is ?his church.? He alone sits in the cathedra by right, and when a priest presides, the cathedra is left empty, and the priest avails himself of a different chair. This all tends to glorify the role of a bishop, but the cathedra remains when the current incumbent is gone. The Italians have a saying: ?If this pope dies we shall make another.? The focus on the cathedral does not guarantee you will have a great bishop, but it does serve as a focus for the guarantee of apostolic succession, without which the Catholic church would be just another big human organization.

Catholics also have long understood the importance of a theology of place. We want a holy place to go to for prayer. We want a place that is set apart, and we cloak our ministers in special garb to distinguish their liturgical roles and actions from those of everyday life. Liturgy is never quotidian.

I understood the importance of place most clearly at my mother?s funeral, which was held at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Hampton, Conn. We carried my mother?s body through the same doors through which she passed when, as in an infant, she was brought to the font to be baptized, the same doors through which she walked, all dressed in white, as a little girl to receive her first Communion, the same doors through which she came as a young woman, again dressed in white, to be married to my father, the same doors through which she had come to bury her parents and her brother. The church was not just a holy place. It was holy to her because of the mystic chords of memory, intertwined with the bonds of grace in which her sacramental life had been lived, the only bonds that free the soul instead of tying it down. At Mass, where the bonds of death are broken anew and all Christians living and dead are present mystically, my mother was as present as if she had been sitting in the next pew, and that theological truth would have remained true no matter where we held the funeral. But memory is a powerful thing, and the theological truth was heightened and enriched because, like the mystery of the Incarnation, it was enfleshed in human memory.

Aesthetics, as well as memory, counsels in favor of using cathedrals, rather than arenas, for large liturgies. For Catholics, of course, aesthetics is a theological reality. Indeed, the theological significance of aesthetics remains, perhaps, the greatest point of separation between a Catholic imagination and a Protestant one. Martin Luther famously said that the crucifixion was a rejection of all that was beautiful. Hans Urs von Balthasar counters that the crucifixion is the form of the beautiful, because we see in it the depth of suffering love and that it is precisely such suffering love that is not only beautiful for the Christian but decisive. All functional, managerial considerations give way before this insistence on the primacy of suffering love in Balthasar?s view of the faith, and just so, Balthasar is credited with revivifying the idea of a Christian aesthetic more than any other modern theologian. It goes without saying that the decision to use a modern arena, with its industrial carpet, fluorescent light, and plastic seating, represents precisely the triumph of the modern, utilitarian, functionalist mindset that Balthasar so despised.

Simple folk have long understood what Balthasar was aiming at. The great cathedrals of the world were often built with the pennies of the poor who gave willingly for the erection of a beautiful temple of their faith. Nineteenth-century Irish immigrants to the United States knew they were excluded and undesired in many areas of American life. ?Irish Need Not Apply? read the signs at shops hiring workers. But, the church was theirs, and whether you were poor or rich, famous or a nobody, you could contribute your mite and watch the mighty buttresses and spires of St. Patrick?s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue reach for the stars. They relished in the fact that the great neo-Gothic cathedral rising in the heart of Manhattan was more magnificent than anything being built by their Protestant neighbors.

There is, of course, a counter-argument and one that cannot be lightly dismissed. More people can attend a service in a large arena and many dioceses have relatively small cathedrals. ?In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else,?

the council fathers wrote in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. But no liturgy scheduled midafternoon on a weekday, as episcopal investitures inevitably are, will get ?full? participation, and in our day, such services are mostly going to be watched by webcam.

Besides, over time, if a bishop were to really devote himself to making his cathedral a center for the liturgical life of his diocese, people could recall that liturgy every time they visit the cathedral. Bishops should consider ending the practice of using sets for televised Masses and, instead, televising their pontifical Mass from the cathedral every Sunday. (I will bet that most priests would videotape it to catch the homily afterwards.) Bishops should have parishes come to the cathedral on a regular schedule, to join him in worship. Confirmations on Pentecost at the cathedral would highlight that too often overlooked liturgical solemnity and the bishop?s role in it as a successor of the apostles.

In short, there are many ways the spiritual and liturgical life of a people can be enhanced if bishops were to actively and creatively highlight the role of the cathedral in the life of the local church. They can start by being installed not in an arena devoid of aesthetic and religious significance but in their own cathedral. A church that once again sees its bishop as the high priest of the diocese might better recognize that the life of the spirit demands a holy place for its worship and, then, we might also better become a holy people.

[Michael Sean Winters writes the Distinctly Catholic blog on NCRonline.org.]

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