

# Is Our Liturgy Relevant?

By MSGR. WILLIAM SHANNON

Every one would agree that liturgy should be relevant; but not every one agrees what a relevant liturgy is. What is relevancy and what does it mean when applied to liturgy? In approaching the question of "relevant liturgy" the dictionary definition of "relevant" is helpful. "Relevant" means "pertinent to the matter at hand." This suggests that relevant liturgy will have as its purpose to relate something to something else, so that the one is seen as pertinent to the other.

If this is so, then the question of "relevant liturgy" becomes the question: what are we trying to relate to what in the liturgy? Is a relevant liturgy one that relates liturgical rites to every day life? Or is a relevant liturgy one in which liturgical rites relate the

## INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

human condition of daily life as we experience it to the demands of the Gospel?

The purpose of this article is to suggest that liturgy will be truly relevant only if it confronts the worshipping community with the demands of the Gospel. No matter how much liturgy may incorporate the contemporary into its structure, it will not be truly relevant unless it helps people to experience the Lord's presence in their lives and respond to that presence.

In this connection the etymology of the word "relevant" is helpful. "Relevare" means "to lift up", "to raise up". Relevant liturgy is a liturgy which lifts up the worshipping community to the vision of the Gospel. It is interesting in this context to recall that the Eucharistic Prayer begins with the priest's invitation: "Lift up your hearts" — which could be taken to mean; "Have relevant hearts." The purpose of liturgy is to lift us up into the paschal mystery of Christ. Jesus said: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself."

for those who had worked only part of the day or merely an hour? The point was to teach us God's thoughts are not at all like our thoughts, His ways aren't like ours. He really doesn't expect us "to earn" our way to heaven, for the simple reason we cannot. Redemption is free, salvation is free, grace is grace — that is, a gift freely given. Oh, how long it takes us to learn this!

Then why do good? Not to earn heaven, but to express the joy and happiness that must be ours if we realize God's goodness toward and love for us. How do you think those men reacted who got a whole day's wages for one hour's work? How do you think they felt toward the master? How would you have felt had you been the recipient of so great a favor? What would you have thought of such a master? And suppose he continued to give you, for the rest of your life, a whole day's wages for one hour of work, what would you think of him? Wouldn't you love Him? Wouldn't you try to please him? Wouldn't you go out of your way just a bit to do as he asks?

That was the whole point Jesus was trying to make in His parable. God has given us life, love, time, the earth — everything! And He promises us happiness forever and ever and ever (a "fairy-tale" ending to life). The sole condition is that we go into His vineyard and labor. The time doesn't matter. It can be the last hour of the day, as for the thief on the cross; or half a lifetime, as for St. Augustine, Mother Seton; or the whole day, as for the Little Flower of Jesus. There is only one thing we must not do — namely, nothing! "Why have you been standing here idle all day?"

Liturgy is relevant, only when the liturgical celebration helps me to see the pertinence of the Gospel to the matter at hand, namely the human condition of daily life as I experience it. Liturgy is relevant only when the liturgical celebration makes me face up to the responsibility of making Christian decisions. Liturgy is relevant only when the liturgical celebration helps me to see the Gospel as being at once the good news of salvation and at the same time a judgment on my life and my world.

All this suggests that relevant liturgy is much less a matter of ingenuity than it is a matter of faith. We may exert our ingenuity to the utmost in planning exciting liturgies, but unless these liturgies express the faith dimension of the community for which they are planned, they are doomed to be irrelevant.

This is not in any sense to minimize the paramount importance of creative planning of liturgies. It is simply to clarify and underscore the goal toward which this planning should be directed, namely, the expression of the faith-experience of a community.

In recent years many people, especially young people, have been disaffected from liturgy. Is it because of the drabness and dullness of many liturgical celebrations? Without doubt this is part of the answer. We are reaping the fruit of our non-chalance about liturgy; our willingness simply to let it happen without careful and creative planning. But this is only a part of the answer. The deeper problem is the problem of faith,

the problem of conversion, the problem of acceptance of the Gospel.

We shall never have truly relevant liturgies until we have faith-communities who are living

the problems of life, suffering and death that belong to the human condition and are challenged by the Gospel to enter into the paschal mystery of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord.

### WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 20: 1-16. (R1) Is. 55:6-9. (R2) Phil. 1:20-24, 27.

St. Thomas once described sin as a turning from the Creator and a turning to the creature. Isaiah describes conversion as a reversal of this process: "Seek the Lord and let the scoundrel forsake his way." Later, our Lord was to say, "Seek and you shall find." "Seek the Lord and He will be found, for the Lord is, near to all who call on him" (Response).

One of the great obstacles to seeking the Lord is our sinfulness. Candy before a meal, no matter how appetizing, can spoil the meal. However Isaiah tells us that our sinfulness should never, never be an impediment to our turning to God. For the Lord is generous and forgiving. The Psalmist never tires of repeating this consoling truth about God: "The Lord is gracious and merciful (which Israel learned from over a thousand years of experience with God), slow to anger and of great kindness."

How different God is from us! We love only what is good. That precisely is the trouble with our love. It is always conditional: "I love you IF . . . if you get good grades, if you do as I want you to do," etc. On the contrary, God loves and makes good. Were God to wait till we became loveable before loving us, He would have to wait till eternity. Instead, He first loves us — loves us despite our failings and shortcomings. That is how loving somebody differs from just liking someone. "I like you because . . ." (because you have the same tastes as I do, etc.); "I love you although . . ." (although you don't think as I do or have the same tastes as I do, etc.). That is why the prophet could say, God's thoughts are not like our thoughts and His ways are as far above ours as heaven is above the earth.

To exemplify this prophetic statement, Jesus told the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Whenever I've heard this parable, I must honestly say that my basic sympathies were always for those who had labored all day and got the same wages, and no more, than those who had labored only an hour. It does seem a bit unjust, doesn't it?

And yet when you think of it, those who had labored all day got a full day's pay. So there was no injustice. What was the point of the master giving an all-day wage

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