

The inestimable benefits of the liturgy

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Young people who come to the abbey for retreats often ask us why we give such importance to liturgy in our monastic life. Let us hear from one of our novices, now a monk and priest, who experienced great trials during his novitiate. He once confided in us: "I would not have persevered in my vocation if, every day throughout the year, through the grace of the holy liturgy, God had not extended a helping hand to me." This is what everyone in our monasteries experiences, more or less confusedly: the liturgy works a kind of seductive charm deep within our souls. Day after day, a voice is heard with a gentleness and accuracy of tone that cannot be mistaken, illuminating souls from within with a succession of light touches.

Next, we will see that the liturgy is essential to the monastic vocation as a natural unfolding of baptismal grace. If there is a first joy in knowing that one is forever part of the family of God's children, there is another joy in becoming a singer of divine glory and receiving, as if in advance, some ray of that light from above. Thus, through symbols, signs, sacraments and sacramentals, the monk enters into the jubilation of the Church through the sacred drama of an immemorial, Latin and Gregorian liturgy. If we were to summarise all the benefits that daily attendance at the Church's public prayer brings us, we would have to boil them down to four essential points:

- the constant reminder of divine transcendence,
- the attractive power of liturgical beauty,
- the meaning of the Church,
- the education of the inner man.

1. First, divine transcendence

Man is truly himself only when he worships. Worship is the sign by which creatures identify and define themselves. For thousands of years, blind humanity groped its way towards God, and despite unimaginable errors, remained invariably faithful to the austere duty of worship. That there was much servile fear mixed in with this approach to the divine, so be it. But there was still the humble admission of a bond of dependence where not everything sounded false: the religion of Antiquity had the value of expectation. We remember the famous episode of the stele dedicated to the unknown God, which Saint Paul used to enter into dialogue with the Athenians (Acts 17:23). It would seem that God prefers to be worshipped without being known, rather than to be known

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without being worshipped, **because** that would be a false knowledge, a belittled and misleading notion of divinity. Here we recognise the whole drama of the modern world.

How can worship be defined? In the broadest sense, it is a free and loving submission of one's entire being to divine transcendence, through which the believer recognises God's sovereign rights over His creatures. But what Revelation was to bring **that** was original would mark a turning point. First, the notion of the supernatural: divinity would cease to appear as a superior force at the top of the ascending series of forces of nature, but would be situated on a plane infinitely superior to the natural order.

We must avoid any risk of trivialising this word; supernatural is not synonymous with unusual or marvellous. It refers to a reality infinitely above the natural conceptions that man can have of holiness. The word *sanctus* means separate. There is a very powerful statement in the Gospel: "You are from below; I am from above. You are from this world; I am not from this world." (John 8:23). Then, as a second effect of Revelation, this thrice-holy God reveals himself as Father: far from crushing or terrifying, he elevates his creature to the dignity of a son. Adoration does not exclude tenderness. Such will be the prerogative of the liturgical order.

The forgetting of divine transcendence has plunged the world into a dramatic situation. It is the beginning of the great apostasy announced by Scripture, and the present state of the world is inferior to that of Antiquity because its rejection of God means **that** it is no longer even a world of expectation but a world of refusal. The present world is dying from the disappearance of the supernatural. The cult of man, the hypertrophy of the social, the affirmation of the self: who can claim that this naturalism has not penetrated the way modern man prays? This appears in many different forms: a craving for novelty and adaptation; the invasion of modern music and vulgar languages (oh how much, said Marie Noël); inculturation, which drowns the immutable prayer of the Bride in the ever-changing tide of contemporary sensibilities; and finally, creativity, which is one of the most subtle forms of human pride. To sum it up in a word: modern man gives in to the temptation to adapt religion to man instead of adapting man to religion, as the Church has been trying to do for centuries.

Turning resolutely away from these naturalistic trends, it will be easy for us to see that liturgical expression, **because** it transcends fashions and particularities, is, by its very nature and vocation, perfectly suited to what is most essential and profound in human beings: the instinct for the sacred, the thirst for worship. What has never ascended to God will never descend to men. "He who is of the earth is earthly, and his speech is earthly" (John 3:34). Liturgical language must descend from God if we want it to lift us up to Him.

As a remedy for these deviations, the Church offers us the theocentrism of its prayer. The altar, the priest and the faithful must turn in spirit of adoration towards the infinite majesty of God. Our liturgy is essentially adulatory. The "Mass facing the people" is nonsense. "There is danger," says Cardinal Ratzinger, "when the communal character tends to transform **the** assembly into a

closed circle. We must react with all our strength against the idea of an autonomous and self-sufficient community: the community must not dialogue with itself; it is a collective force turned towards the Lord who is coming." (*Conversations on Faith*). What could be more normal than for the readers of the epistle and the Gospel to stand facing the faithful who are listening to them? But then, as soon as the sacrificial part begins, the celebrant goes up to the altar and, turning towards the thrice-holy God, offers the propitiatory victim. At *the Te igitur*, the priest raises his eyes to the cross and bows deeply in an attitude of adoration and reverence. He then turns towards the east, facing the crucified Lord who is also the Lord of glory, because it is from the east that the Son of Man will return, surrounded by his angels with great power and majesty.

The second aspect of this orientation is that each morning, the celebrant turns towards the rising sun as the most beautiful cosmic image of the risen Christ, eternally born of the Father and constantly reborn victorious in the hearts of the baptised. Silence itself, when it follows choral singing, is a silence of adoration in which all created words fade away before the Creator. The first benefit of the liturgy is its theocentricity. See what Father Bouyer says about it: "How desirable it would be for Christianity to rediscover this primary meaning of the Mass: this theocentric meaning, this reorientation of all humanity, of the entire universe, towards its one authentic centre; this universal return brought about in Christ crucified and ascended into heaven; this gathering of all things into the immense flow of divine love, finally flowing back in filial love to the paternal source!" (*The Meaning of Monastic Life*)

2. The attractive power of liturgical beauty

But worship does not imply annihilation. The beauty of sacred rites ennobles souls, elevating them by exerting a gentle attraction from Heaven. True tradition is not sad. Our Sunday abbey masses say it well. They last two hours, yet no one, neither children nor teenagers, shows any sign of impatience. Why? Mac Nabb, a historian of religions, provides the answer. He notes that we enter the Church through two doors: the door of intelligence and the door of beauty. The narrow door, he says, is that of intelligence; it opens to intellectuals and scholars. The wider one is that of beauty. Henri Charlier said in the same vein: "We must lose the illusion that truth can be communicated fruitfully without the splendour that is inherent in it and that we call beauty." (*L'Art et la Pensée*)

The Church, in her impenetrable mystery as the bride of Christ, *Kyrios* of Glory, needed an earthly epiphany accessible to all: this would be the majesty of her temples, the splendour of her liturgy and the sweetness of her hymns. Last year, I observed a group of young Japanese naval officers visiting Paris Cathedral. Their eyes lingered on the height of the vaults, the splendour of the stained-glass windows, the harmony of the proportions. Imagine that at that moment, officiants dressed in velvet chasubles and ornaments entered in procession for solemn Vespers. The visitors watched in silence; they were captivated: beauty had opened its doors to them. Now, the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas and Notre-Dame de Paris are two contemporary architectures. They say the

same thing. But how many of the visitors have read the *Summa* of St. Thomas? The same phenomenon can be found at all levels. Tourists visiting the Acropolis in Athens are struck by a civilisation of beauty. But how many of them understand Aristotle?

The **same** is true of liturgical beauty. More than any other, it deserves to be called the splendour of truth. It opens up the treasures of its magnificence to young and old alike: the beauty of psalmody, sacred song and literature, lights, harmony of movement, dignity of bearing. With sovereign artistry, the liturgy exerts a true seduction on souls, touching them directly, even before moving the energies of the mind. But it is a delicate art, the antithesis of a certain post-conciliar liturgy, "which has become opaque and boring, with its taste for the banal and mediocre, to the point of giving one the shivers." (Cardinal Ratzinger, *Conversations on Faith*) Let us also beware of the breed of leaders who meddle in introducing new elements into the celebration to make it more attractive. Cardinal Ratzinger warns us again: "The liturgy is not a show, a spectacle that needs brilliant directors or talented actors. The liturgy does not thrive on 'pleasant' surprises or captivating 'finds', but on solemn repetitions." (*Ibidem*)

Let us say a few words about solemnity. Above all, it should not be confused with decorum. Far from weighing heavily like an overload, the solemnisation of rites seeks to express the splendour of the supernatural through transparency. Once it has reached a certain level, all sacred liturgy tends, through ritual, to lift us out of the mundane and everyday, not for aesthetic purposes, but to suggest to the faithful that the action taking place comes from God. The majesty of the liturgical display has no other purpose; it signifies that something heavenly is touching the earth. Saint Gregory, the great Benedictine pope of the 6th century, wrote in his Dialogues: "At the hour of sacrifice, heaven opens to the voice of the priest; in this mystery of Jesus Christ, the choirs of angels are present, what is above joins what is below, Heaven and Earth are united, the visible and the invisible become one." (IV, 60)

The solemnity of worship is an integral part of Catholic liturgy and must be cultivated as an element of its own message, provided, however, that this solemnity does not descend into pomposity and mannerism. The supreme success of ornamentation is to be so appropriate that it is forgotten. But accusations of triumphalism are an insult to the joy of the poor who love to see greatness exalted. Here is what Cardinal Ratzinger has to say on the subject: "There is no trace of triumphalism in the solemnity of worship with which the Church expresses the glory of God, the joy of faith, the victory of truth and light over error and darkness. Liturgical richness is not the richness of some priestly caste; it is the richness of all, including the poor, who in fact desire it and are not at all scandalised by it." (*Ibidem*)

Do we want to fully grasp the converting power of liturgical beauty? Nothing is more enlightening on this subject than *Nestor's* delightful *Chronicle*. It recounts that when Prince Vladimir of Kiev, still a pagan, wanted to worship the one God, he listened to Muslims, Jews and

Greeks, who each came to explain their religion to him. He therefore sent an embassy of ten men to see for themselves how each of the suitors practised their liturgy. After visiting the mosques of the Bulgarians, they arrived in Constantinople.

“The Emperor of Byzantium,” Nestor recounts, “sent a message to the patriarch saying: ‘Russians have come with the intention of studying our religion; prepare the church and your clergy, put on your pontifical vestments so **that** they may see the glory of our God’. So the patriarch called the clergy; the solemnities were celebrated according to custom, incense was burned, and choirs sang. And the emperor went with the Russians into the basilica, and they were seated in a place where they could see well; then they were shown the beauties of the church, the chants and the service of the bishop, the ministry of the deacons, and the divine service was explained to them. (...) When they returned to their country, they said to the princes and boyars: 'We first went to the Bulgarians and observed how they worship in their temples; they stand without belts; they bow, sit down, look here and there as if possessed, and there is no joy among them, but only sadness and a terrible stench. Their religion is not good. It was then that we went to Greece and were led to where they worship their God. From that moment on, we no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth, for there is no such spectacle here below, nor such beauty. We are unable to describe it; but we only know that it is there that God dwells among men; and their service is more marvellous than in other countries'.

The lesson is self-evident. The liturgy does more than describe the wonders of the heavenly homeland. It opens the doors of the Kingdom to us. Man enters it with his whole being: sight, hearing, smell, everything speaks to him of God. But how many of our contemporaries, and even, alas, how many sons of the Church, know that they have there the golden key to Paradise?

3. The sense of the Church

What theologians call the *sensus Ecclesiae* is a supernatural sensitivity by which the faithful intuitively sense what is in accordance with the faith and tradition of the Church. It is a little like children in a family who sense what is in accordance with or contrary to the spirit of the home: "We don't do things like that in our house," they will say. Similarly, the "sense of the Church" is not the result of didactic teaching, but the effect of a higher instinct often granted to the most disadvantaged, which centuries of liturgical practice illuminate from within, enabling them to feel how to bear witness to their faith, even in the presence of more learned minds.

We sometimes wonder about the reasons for maintaining faith in times of persecution, especially in regions of the world where religion is deprived of its external means of expression, such as freedom of the press and preaching. Here is what Maxime V, Melkite Patriarch, said at the First Synod of Bishops (1977) devoted to catechesis: "What has preserved the faith of the faithful during centuries of Muslim persecution is the celebration of the Divine Liturgy."

The same phenomenon was observed in Eastern European countries: baptism and the Eucharist constituted the sole but irreplaceable support for the faith that the communist regime came up against. Here we touch upon the social and missionary character of the liturgy: it exercises a ministry of gathering around a fixed point, it keeps the faithful from slipping into oblivion and drifting away, it is, as Dom Guéranger said, Tradition at its highest degree of power and solemnity. The abbot of Solesmes, quoting Bossuet several times, refers to the liturgy as "the principal instrument of Tradition," showing that it can be called "the professed Tradition" as opposed to the proposals of the councils, which represent "the defined Tradition." Father Clérissac reports that in the Middle Ages a Jew had asked for baptism because he had noticed that the lyricism of the synagogue had passed into the liturgy of the Church. In order for the Church of Christ to distinguish itself from other religions, its prayers and sacraments must be surrounded by a veil transparent enough to allow the mystery of its origins to be glimpsed. The profound reason for a sacred language: not only to express the universality of a religion, but also to serve as a fixed reference point in the changing flow of history.

The popes know very well that the people do not read encyclicals. When Pius XI wrote *Quas Primas*, his great encyclical on Christ the King, his intention was to combat what he called the plague of secularism. However, the text of the encyclical itself contained the announcement of a new feast in honour of the social kingship of the Redeemer. Here is how Pius XI justified the introduction of this Mass, unknown until then, into the liturgical year: "To penetrate the people with the truths of the faith and thus raise them to the joys of the interior life, the annual solemnities of the liturgical feasts are much more effective than all the documents, even the most serious ones, of the ecclesiastical magisterium: the latter usually reach only a small number of the most educated (...) the former extend their salutary influence to the heart and mind, and thus to the whole person."

Here we see the close link between faith and liturgy. Through the liturgy, I enter into the very being of the Church, into her inner sanctuary. I see that it comes from God, and therefore knows better than I do how to believe, how to speak to God, how to stand before the divine majesty, and when I say the amen that concludes its prayers, I subscribe to an objective thought that I make my own and that infinitely surpasses me. Thus, little by little, this supernatural instinct is acquired, which will naturally lead the faithful to *sentire cum Ecclesia*: the desire to feel and think with the Church.

When, in the terrible post-conciliar 1970s, a devastating clergy mocked kneeling, sacred rites, Gregorian chant, and the worship of angels and saints, what saved the faith of the Christian people was the love for these holy things that the liturgy had kindled in their hearts. And the Church itself, so attacked and sometimes, alas, so badly represented, how could we retain our admiration and love for her, if not through the gentle and continuous influence of her prayer and sacraments? It is there that we recognise her as Virgin and Mother, composed of sinners but without sin, embedded

in time but already belonging to eternity through the attraction that the Head, who has attained glory, exerts on her Body.

How could believers and non-believers recognise the face of *Ecclesia Mater* if she herself did not constantly demonstrate what could be called her power of sanctification? Dom Vonier remarks: "The power of the Catholic Church to sanctify is truly prodigious; she makes no secret of it; she proclaims it before the whole world; she fulfils her special mission in a magnificent way, as queen of the spiritual world. The consecration or dedication of a church is the God-inspired counterpart of the efforts of the unclean spirit, of which Christ gave us a picture in the Gospel. The Church launches an assault on the completed material construction, enters it in glory and grace, and invites her children to follow her and find rest for their souls in a house reserved for holiness." (*Christianus*)

If we ask converts, their testimonies will always point in the same direction: "The young man I was at eighteen, searching for his way in great darkness, seeking a truth he sensed vaguely—a living truth, made for the soul and not only for the mind—had a revelation of holiness through Gregorian chant. (...) In its nakedness and simplicity, Gregorian chant took me much further than human music, giving me a glimpse of the reality of mysteries I had never suspected; it filled me with the 'fullness of God' of which St Paul speaks; it told me that this fullness was mine if I wanted it; I was certain that it was God himself speaking to me through this chant." (André Charlier, *Le Chant Grégorien*)

Dom Grammont, at the end of a solemn Mass attended by Protestant ministers, noticed one of them who was visibly moved as he approached him, exclaiming with emotion: "I have seen the Church!" He had seen it through the unfolding of its purest and most ancient tradition. It is through words, songs, and the unchanging ritual of the liturgy that the Christian soul finds itself connected to a homeland that transcends the centuries.

4. The education of the inner man

The most hidden and secret thing in each of us, that which is hidden from the gaze of men and which gives true meaning to life, the precious pearl, the treasure buried in the field, which contemplatives seek and, having found it, would not want to lose for all the gold in the world, is the discovery of the inner God.

The highest benefit of the liturgy, and its deepest *raison d'être*—for sacred beauty is not an end in itself—is to lead us with a sure hand into the sanctuary of the soul, where the only truly essential drama of human existence unfolds: the growth of our supernatural life.

Apart from Carmelite nuns, those angels of heaven imprisoned by time, whom a special vocation calls to seek God without images, most of us must draw on the immense treasure trove of signs, words and ritual actions to fuel our meditation. For sixteen centuries, the Church has taught

her children the difficult art of praying not with the help of human endeavours but through a divine pedagogy whose secret she alone possesses.

The taste for prayer and silent prayer is not acquired through reasoning; it is by learning to merge the inner movement of our soul with that of the Bride of Christ that we enter into God.

Let us listen to an abbot speaking to his monks: "Prayer as conceived by Saint Benedict has as its theme the very text of the Work of God. It springs from the depths of the Divine Office. So let yourselves be taken in. Then continue to draw on what you have gathered during the Office. God bowed down at that moment. In silence, examine the ideas thus sown. Prayer is the intimate note of the Work of God during its celebration, to then become its prolonged echo, the precious fragrance, the personal fruit appropriate to the dispositions and needs of each person according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the Work of God begins seven times a day and once at night, the river of prayer flows ceaselessly among the children of St. Benedict, and the soul that dwells constantly on its blessed bank can drink deeply from it so as to feel its healing freshness from morning to night and from night to morning." (Dom Romain Banquet, *La Doctrine Monastique*)

Dom Delatte spoke no differently. Referring to *L'Année Liturgique*, Dom Guéranger's great work, he summed up in a few words the secret of its influence: "Certainly revolutions make more noise, human works often have more splendour, whereas supernatural good is done quietly and hides itself in silence. But who could calculate the gentle and quiet penetration of this universal teaching, which souls, once they have tasted it, can no longer do without, as if they recognised in it the accent of the Church and the flavour of their baptism?" As for meditation on liturgical texts, he defines it in a few words: gathering the thoughts of God from the lips and heart of the Church.

This is not only true for religious people. Georges Bernanos, a man firmly rooted in his century, was a living illustration of this: his inner life, drawn from the sources of the liturgy, transformed him from a brilliant pamphleteer into a writer of the soul. Here is how Bruckberger captured him in action: "Every day, he read the newspaper and listened to the radio. However, every morning, no matter what happened, there was a sacred half-hour reserved for him. Before the house awoke and filled with hubbub, he would read the Mass of the day in Latin from his old, worn missal, with all the concentration of mind and soul he was capable of: this predestined man had received the divine privilege of attention. He eagerly fed on the unchanging formulas of the liturgy, finding them fresh and new every morning: every morning, it was to him alone that these words were spoken for the first time in the history of the world; they were his daily and supersubstantial bread. Thus began his day. On Sundays, he went to Mass with the whole family and usually took communion." (*Bernanos Vivant*).

But the education of the inner man is not only indebted to the calm and contemplative atmosphere of church services. There is, like an energy accumulator, the quasi-sacramental presence of Christ inserted into the mysteries of the liturgical year.

What are mysteries? They are the actions of Christ Jesus accomplished in a portion of time, such as his passion, resurrection and ascension, abolished forever in terms of their historicity, but prolonged and conveyed during the sacrificial action, like a star that has been extinguished for thousands of years, whose light continues to shine in the night; thus Christ in his various mysteries comes to meet souls during the liturgical year to recreate them in his image. This work of identification with Christ found admiring accents in Dom Delatte, who exalted "the supernatural beauty, that perfect resemblance to Him that the whole supernatural economy strives to engrave, that divine imprint that the stroke of the liturgical pendulum perpetually imprints on our souls". We will therefore see in the unfolding of the liturgical year not a cold and inert representation of the life of Our Lord, but a radiance of the person of the Redeemer, reviving in each of the faithful the saving action of his passion and his ascension into glory. Thus, concludes St. Leo, what was visible in the life of our Redeemer has passed into the mysteries: *Quod itaque Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit in sacramenta transivit.*

For the Fathers, the words *mysteria* and *sacramenta* are synonymous. They refer to a sacred action in which the work of our redemption is made present, not as a purely symbolic emblem would do, but as the ritual envelope of an ineffable reality. This doctrine of sacramental realism is of the utmost importance for the life of prayer. It was lost sight of in the 16th century in favour of an emphasis on individual and psychological effort, to the detriment of an objective piety centred on the mysteries. When the Easter liturgy takes up Scripture, it does not merely recite a narrative designed to encourage personal meditation, which each person can then engage in afterwards. Rather, it brings about the Lord's present presence, with which we are free to commune throughout the service. It is the whole Church that participates in the death and resurrection of her Saviour, and we in her. This participation is not the result of an effort of the mind or imagination; it is objective, that is to say it develops through its own dynamism and not through human industry, as is the case with private devotions.

What broadening of our perspectives this implies, and what deepening of our faith, if at least, through our appreciation of liturgical action and its sovereign efficacy, we consent to let the divine work of our redemption live and be accomplished in us. It is then that the judicious choice and calm repetition of the great texts of Scripture, their power of expression, the art of Gregorian chant, the sacraments and the mysteries of Christ's life, which pass before our eyes again and again, imprint on our souls this image of the Son who transforms them and reconciles them with the Father.

Happy, four times happy are the souls formed in the school of the holy liturgy! It is the joy of God and of men. It offers us, if we so desire, a remedy for the sadness of exile and gives us a foretaste of eternity.