

The Liturgy: Sign and Mystery of Faith – Towards a Metaphysics of the Liturgy

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‘It was moving, it is true, these Vespers celebrated amidst the immense leisure of the Sunday countryside, amidst that sudden stillness of the fields! The voices of these people blended with the crackling of the sun-drenched spaces, becoming, through the repetition of notes and accents, an expressed form of that inexpressible gratitude which rises from the earth—from the earth filled to the brim—towards the firmament, towards the unfathomable void. This pounding of the Latin verses seems, like the vibration of the ground, to rise towards the heights, which they probe in search of the God spread out across the infinite.’ ^{‘ 2}

Who, better than La Varende, could have expressed the astonishing alchemy of this liturgy of the humble, this triumph of faith? One had to possess a sense of the Incarnation, of the weight of its mystery in its cosmic dimension, where creation—earth, sun and firmament—itself takes part in praise and Redemption, where the most sublime vies with the most intimate, unless they intermingle to the point of merging—*the Word made flesh*—into the same Truth. One needed a sense of the depth and limits of language, which he wields like a goldsmith, to grasp in this jubilant fervour—which is pure thanksgiving—the very genius of the liturgy, the ‘joy of God’, in the words of Alcuin ³, but a joy spread and communicated by his Church to people of good will, pulsating at its very heart.

Through faith, the liturgy truly becomes a sign, a language of divine things, to the point of making them present. Yes, as Cardinal Ratzinger reminds us ^{r4} in this book, in which he calls for a new liturgical movement ^{que5}, we need a sacred place, a sacred time, and mediating signs to ‘see the heavens half-open and recognise the mystery of God, in the open heart of the Crucified One’, since it is indeed ‘through the earthly signs that the Redeemer has given us’ that ‘we take part in the heavenly liturgy’.

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² Jean de La VARENDE, ‘Après vêpres’, in **Seigneur, tu m’as vaincu**, pp. 164–165.

³ Quoted in **La sainte liturgie**, by a Benedictine monk, Ed Sainte-Madeleine

⁴ **The Spirit of the Liturgy**, Ad Solem 2001, p.

⁵ ‘If this book were to give rise to a new liturgical movement, or help to rediscover a dignified way of celebrating the liturgy, both in its outward form and in the inner dispositions it calls forth, the intention that inspired this work would be fully realised.’

Intelligibility and Sacredness

The intelligibility of liturgical language, if it exists at all, is nevertheless of a particular kind: on the one hand, it calls upon a knowledge of faith, which alone is suited to entering into the mystery, beyond discursive reason; on the other hand, it is expressed through signs which must have a meaning accessible, in one way or another, to human beings, who are ‘a soul expressing itself through a body, and a body animated by an immortal spirit’.⁶ In describing what he called the Protestant reaction against a religion whose expression veered towards superstition—and in doing so risking the assertion that ‘every modern Catholic may be regarded in this respect as a Protestant who is unaware of it’⁷—Father Bouyer lamented in 1962: ‘Ultimately, the truth [of religion] will be reduced to its intelligibility, an intelligibility which conceives of itself as transparent, as self-evident.’⁸

The preliminary question is therefore: what relationship of intelligibility do liturgical forms maintain, or ought they to maintain, with the sacred? Let us consider four propositions here. First proposition: the unintelligible constitutes the sacred and forges the religious bond. Objection: the trumpeting of an elephant is scarcely intelligible to humans in its quintessence, yet it is not sacred, except perhaps among certain primitive tribes. Undoubtedly, however, insofar as they proclaim and make present the *magnalia Dei*, and bring humankind into contact with the invisible, liturgical signs, by their very nature, transcend the sphere of logical understanding.

A second proposition, which reverses the first: the incomprehensible is necessary to the sacred, to religion. If we take the example here of the prayers in the Latin missal, they were clearly written to be understood and put into practice, to the extent that the collection as a whole undoubtedly constitutes a veritable compendium of Catholic doctrine, a marvellous guide to Christian life and prayer. We are also aware of the importance of accurate translations. Yet reducing the liturgical act to doctrinal teaching or moral exhortation inevitably paves the way for the horizontalism and narcissism of a social gathering, and misses the very essence of the liturgy, which is above all *Opus Dei*, ‘the work of Christ the Priest and of his Body which

⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, note 91.

⁷ Louis BOUYER, **Le rite et l’homme**, Cerf, Paris 1962, p. 86.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 87.

is the Church, and the sacred act par excellence⁹, even though doctrine, morality, and indeed conviviality – or at any rate harmony – are not to be excluded from the sacred precinct.

Third proposition: the intelligible constitutes religion, which must, by its very nature, be made comprehensible to the extent that liturgical worship becomes, first and foremost, a matter of communication. We shall return to Gustave Thibon's formidable statement: 'Man decrees that God created him in his own image – which puts him at ease in creating God in his own image – and what an image! all his passions, his miseries, his ignorance ascribed to God. Then he reflects—philosophy is a reflection on religion, as Hegel said—and he gradually frees himself from anthropocentrism. This, incidentally, often leads him to atheism. Finally, he reflects even more deeply and rediscovers God in that divine part of himself which judges and rejects false gods. He thus moves from the anthropomorphic idea of God to the theomorphic idea of man. And therein lies the

confluence of atheism and faith.¹⁰ Yet how can one fail to acknowledge the fruits of the immense effort at explanation undertaken by a Dom Guéranger or a Blessed Dom Schuster to help the faithful understand the liturgical year and ceremonies? As Pius XII emphasised, drawing on the Preface of the Nativity, 'Divine Providence has willed that, through knowledge of visible realities, we might be drawn to the love of invisible realities'¹¹, 'Ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur.'¹²

Fourth proposition: the intelligible is necessary for religion. One might therefore conclude that the child who learns the first gestures of prayer on his mother's lap is lost in vain gesticulation; indeed, that the little one, baptised and immediately called to God, cannot enter into the joy of the beatific vision. Nevertheless, Saint Thomas observes that 'it is in the nature of man to attain knowledge of intelligible things by means of sensible things. And a sign is the means of attaining knowledge of something else. Therefore, since the sacred things which the sacraments are meant to signify are spiritual and intelligible goods through which man is sanctified, it is by means of sensible things that the sacramental significance will be fully realised.'¹³ Further on, Aquinas clarifies with

⁹ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 7.

¹⁰ G. THIBON, **L'ignorance étoilée**, Fayard, Paris 1984, p.

¹¹ PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, 20 November 1947.

¹² LITURGY, *Christmas Preface*.

¹³ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 60, a. 4, corp.

St Augustine states that, amongst signs, ‘words occupy the first place’¹⁴, within the framework of the doctrine of sacramental hylomorphism, where they determine the meaning of the sensible elements employed. *Ipso facto*, let us note this at the outset: the word is therefore not the only sign—far from it—and, moreover, it is not sufficient in itself, except when it is divine: ‘*Dixit et facta sunt*’.

A brief examination of these four hypotheses, whilst allowing us to establish a few milestones, does not therefore resolve anything, since no proposition is entirely true or entirely false. We find opposites here, not contradictions. It appears, then, that the question was poorly posed, or too summarily put; at the very least, it did not encompass the full reality it claimed to address, and that we must look elsewhere for the nature of the religious bond—the relationship between the visible sign and the mystery. On the one hand, the very fact of whether liturgical language is intelligible or unintelligible to humans touches only on the surface of liturgical reality. On the other hand, it is nevertheless, in this respect, a distinctive element of it, as Blessed Dom Schuster explained in 1925 in his **Liber sacramentorum** to account for the emergence of missals in the Early Middle Ages: ‘The ancients wished *the actio* to be truly social, collective and eminently dramatic, so that not only the bishop, but also the priests, deacons, clerics, cantors and the people, each had their own distinct role to fulfil.’¹⁵ Be that as it may, strangely enough, it was often this aspect of the intelligibility or unintelligibility of the liturgy that was first highlighted during the last century to justify or reject a particular ritual form.

Anthropocentrism in theology

This drift was not unrelated to the evolution of much of theological thought which, in its engagement with the major philosophical systems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—whether through collusion, or all-too-human deference, or even an inability due to a lack of the right tools, preferred to abandon the Magisterium and the light of the Church and Scripture in favour of that of ideologies—which has since been supplanted by that of public opinion. As the sacred vanished under the onslaught of new philosophies, it was ‘that divine part’ which man finds within himself that became the heart of thought. As was observed,

¹⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 60, a. 6, corp.

¹⁵ Blessed I. SCHUSTER, **Liber sacramentorum**, Vol. I, Ed. Vromant, Brussels 1925, p. 14.

In the liturgical sphere, Dom Casel wrote in 1945: ‘This modern mindset has even managed to creep into the sacred precincts of theology defended by dogma. There has been a weakening, an adulteration of the great ideas of ancient theology. God, Christ, the Church and the sacraments are viewed from a perspective more in keeping with man, his reason and his intellectual vanity.’¹⁶

Here we find a twofold observation that is particularly revealing, especially given the author’s authority in the development of the liturgical movement. Having acknowledged a certain persistence of rationalism in the lower strata of society, Dom Casel first asserts: ‘In the educated world, however, the light of a new era is truly dawning, a light that frees itself from all rationalism and all materialism to turn increasingly towards new horizons, towards an understanding of the symbol—in a word, towards mysticism.’¹⁷ Yet less than thirty pages later (in 1945, therefore), he issues this warning: ‘It is deeply worrying to see that the powerful mystical current succeeding the tides of rationalism is spreading throughout the contemporary world without managing to take root in Christianity, without seeking either its expression or its fulfilment in the Christian Church. It is almost entirely and needlessly lost in stagnant waters that suffocate it.’¹⁸ And the monk of Maria-Laach analyses this drift: ‘If one wishes to seek the underlying reason why this mysticism of worship has been sidelined and misunderstood, it is easily found in the modern mind’s abandonment of the form objectively given by God—that form which dominated and characterised antiquity and the entire early Middle Ages. Through humble acquiescence to the nature of things, through recognition of God’s creative intention, antiquity truly bore witness, albeit in a confused manner, to a theocentric mindset. [...] Yet this humble and submissive—and thereby sublime—state of mind has been cast aside and replaced by the emancipation of the individual self, a product of the Gothic and Renaissance periods. It was like a second fall of humanity.’¹⁹ One would agree that the diagnosis is as pertinent as it is harsh.

May we, however, put forward a suggestion? Dom Casel would no doubt be even more scathing today in the face of the anarchic proliferation of cheap spiritualism, esotericism or Eastern religions presented as safe havens. Their element

¹⁶ O. CASEL O.S.B., **The Mystery of Worship in Christianity**, Cerf, Paris 1946, p. 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

is the absence of a precise metaphysics. Dom Casel attributes this to the prevailing anthropocentrism. Granted, but this tendency of the mind—which dates back to original sin and is reinforced by the philosophical deviations just mentioned—is fuelled above all by the neglect of the elementary concepts brought to light by a sound metaphysics, which alone is capable, by satisfying the demands of the human mind, of enabling it to glimpse the harmony and order of the hierarchy of beings. In the liturgical sphere, for example, the role of the liturgical sign, the very object of faith and, consequently, its life, and the nature of the mystery are now accessible only within a vast nebula that gives free rein to all manner of illusions. On the subject of mystery, Thibon put it beautifully when he said that ‘it is important not to make it a shackle on thought. Mystery is not a wall against which the intellect shatters; it is an ocean in which the intellect is lost.’²⁰

The rejection of metaphysics

More specifically, it may be argued that one of the most grievous shortcomings of the early liturgical movement—and, at times, of its critics—was, alongside the weakening of the sense of the Church and its Tradition, a lack of metaphysics, often in favour of historicism. The various forms of anthropocentrism of which it may have been burdened—and which are concretely reflected in liturgical forms or attitudes—stem largely from an almost universal absence of metaphysics, an absence which bars access to a sense of the sacred. The same observation could be made regarding spirituality, morality, and many other areas of thought. The rejection of metaphysics, on the natural plane, is the exact parallel to the dimming of the gaze of faith on the supernatural plane. The forgetting of what is – the metaphysical path – paves the way for the forgetting of *the One* who is, and who brings all things into being – the theological path. Individual thought then takes the place of what is, or of the One who is. ‘I think, therefore I am’: being is reduced to mere physical individuality, closed off from the symbolic, cosmic or simply religious dimension, and destined for idolatry, which is another form of religion. For Father Cottier, ‘idolatry will develop to the extent that the sense of truth declines. That the contemporary world, which has seen the emergence of the great atheistic movements, is also idolatrous should come as no surprise to us: one strays from the true God either by denying Him or by substituting false gods for Him. It sometimes happens that the two approaches go hand in hand. But,’ he concluded, ‘the knowledge that man can have of God is based on the knowledge

²⁰ G. THIBON, **Destin de l’homme**, DDB, Paris 1941, p. 13.

of the creature. This is why St Thomas observes ²¹ that ‘an error concerning the nature of creatures can bar all access to God and prove ruinous to supernatural faith itself.’ ²²

May we first highlight this observation? This deficiency in metaphysics has been denounced by a wide variety of thinkers, a number of whom we shall cite, since, according to the most reassuring truth recalled by Aquinas: ‘Every truth spoken by anyone comes from the Holy Spirit’.

Maritain: ‘What makes Western culture so tragic is that its common metaphysical foundation has been reduced to an absolutely insufficient minimum, so that it is held together only by matter, which is incapable of sustaining anything.’ ²³

Blondel: ‘The personal faith of a man like Descartes did not prevent Cartesianism from paving the way for the modern schism between metaphysical speculation and religious meditation.’ ²⁴ Cardinal Daniélou: ‘The crisis of modern thought has been, and remains, to a largely a crisis of metaphysics.’ ²⁵

Fr Cottier, quoted above: ‘Modern rationalism has grown out of the ruins of metaphysics.’

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Finally, Jean Madiran, in a more optimistic yet incisive vein, pays tribute to Gilson for having ‘helped to reopen the paths of Catholic thought by restoring to us an understanding of two concepts. Firstly, that of intellectual *realism*, which ‘eminent Thomists’ had watered down, or even completely erased, under the influence of Cartesian criteriology or Kantian problematics. Secondly, the concept of *being*, or, if you will, that of *Christian philosophy*, for it is in fact the same issue: Saint Thomas received the concept of being not (solely) from Aristotle, but (above all) from Revelation. To say this is to express the intimate connection between the two questions: that of the Christian use of natural reason and that of the first principle of metaphysics.’ ²⁷

²¹ Cf. *Contra Gentiles*, II, 3.

²² G. M.-M. COTTIER, *Horizons de l’athéisme*, Cerf, Cogitatio fidei no. 40, Paris 1969, p. 161.

²³ J. MARITAIN, **Le Docteur Angélique**, Atlantica Editora, Rio de Janeiro 1945, p. 72.

²⁴ M. BLONDEL, **L’être et les êtres**, P.U.F., Paris 1963, p. 522.

²⁵ J. DANIELOU, *Scandaleuse vérité*, Fayard, Paris 1961, p. 10.

²⁶ G. M.-M. COTTIER, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

²⁷ J. MADIRAN, **Gilson**, Ed. Diffralivre, Paris 1992, p. 105.

More recently, following in the footsteps of many others, Father Tomas Tyn analysed this situation in a few words which we reproduce here, more for the clarity of his diagnosis than for the well-known historical account: ‘A decisive step towards the dissolution of metaphysics was taken by William of Ockham, through a form of nominalism that rejects analogy, which significantly illustrates the link between the philosophy of being and the doctrine of its participation. In this thinker’s work, the denial of the reality of the universal coincides with such an exaltation of individual existence at the expense of essence that we are faced with a veritable collapse of reality, shattered into isolated relationships and separated from mental concepts. It is no coincidence that a world removed from the shared reality of essences frees itself from submission to God, which inevitably leads not so much to the denial of the divine as to a secularised fideist conception of it.’²⁸

This list may well become repetitive, granted. It could be generously expanded without ever fully capturing the depth of the menace. But let us return to the principles.

In the encyclical **Fides et ratio**, John Paul II wrote: ‘A theology devoid of a metaphysical perspective could not go beyond the analysis of religious experience, and it would not allow *the *intellectus fidei** to express in a coherent manner the universal and transcendent value of revealed truth. ‘If I place such emphasis on the metaphysical component, it is because I am convinced that this is the necessary path to overcoming the crisis currently spreading across large sections of philosophy and thus to correcting certain deviant behaviours prevalent in our society.’²⁹

Mystery, faith and the liturgical sign; being, thought and speech; the three levels of truth

What of the subject at hand? We are concerned with the liturgical sign, faith and mystery. The sign, as such, is in itself a language, or, according to the classical definition of Saint Augustine, used by Saint Thomas³⁰, ‘a thing which, in addition to the image it imprints on our senses, thereby leads us to the knowledge of another thing.’³¹; faith is a theological virtue which involves the mind’s adherence to the , the uncreated Truth, through the mediation of the Church, our Mother and Teacher; the mystery, according to

²⁸ T. TYN, O.P., **Metaphysics of Substance: Participation and Analogy of Being**, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna 1991, p. 243

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 14 September 1998, no. 83.

³⁰ Cf. St THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 60, a. 4.

³¹ St Augustine, **De doctrina christiana**, Book II, Chapter 1; *P.L.* 34, col. 35.

According to the teaching of the First Vatican Council, it is a truth, a supernatural reality hidden in God, knowledge of which can come to us only through revelation, and which, even then, can be grasped only dimly, ‘as in a mirror’ (1 Cor 13:12), as the Apostle said. At least, this is what appears to be the case at first glance. From this initial perspective, it is not forbidden to draw an analogy by transposing the concept to the natural order, where we find the three major categories around which metaphysical knowledge is structured: language, thought and being. Thirdly, one might ask whether it is possible, without straining the analogy, to establish a connection with the three aspects of truth as distinguished by Saint Thomas in the first question of *the *De Veritate**³²: manifested, or phenomenal, truth; logical, or formal, truth; and ontological, or transcendental, truth. A brief examination of these apparent aporias may perhaps help to reveal a unity. Let us first list these nine concepts, grouped in threes, insofar as they are relevant to our discussion here.

Mystery, faith and sign The sign

The general concept of the sign, as defined by Saint Augustine, applies to three main types³³: the natural sign, whose meaning derives from the nature of things, such as smoke signifying fire; the conventional or arbitrary sign, established by human convention, such as flags or road signs; and the symbolic or mixed sign, where the convention is based on the nature of things, such as the colour of liturgical vestments. With regard to liturgical signs, particularly the sacraments, Saint Augustine observes that they combine the *signum datum*, the sign that is given—and is therefore conventional—and the *signum naturalium*, the natural sign, with the distinction essential to the sacrament being that this sign is given through Christ’s divine institution. ‘The divine will, which definitively established the relationship between the sign and the signified, found, in the manner of being or acting of the sign, a foundation for its choice. “ ”’³⁴ Similarly, Saint Thomas summarises by saying that ‘sensible things have a certain capacity to signify spiritual effects by virtue of their own nature; but this capacity is determined to a speculative signification by virtue of a

³² St Thomas Aquinas, **De Veritate**, q. 1, a. 1.

³³ Cf. Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, Vacant, Mangenot and Amman, Letouzey, Paris 1941, Vol. ^{XIV}2, col. 2054.

³⁴ Saint Augustine, **De Doctrina christiana**, II, 3.

divine institution.’³⁵ Here we see how, in the case of the sacrament, divine causality is superimposed upon the sensible sign—assuming and elevating it—to make it an efficacious sign, and how the entire authority of this sign derives from its divine origin. As for the aspects of the forms that these signs must take—which are not substantial but secondary—their authority derives from the Church, whose liturgy is public worship. As Pius XII taught in **Mediator Dei**, ‘Since the sacred liturgy is performed primarily by priests in the name of the Church, its organisation, regulation and form cannot but depend on the authority of the Church.’ That is why, Pius XII continues, ‘from time immemorial, the ecclesiastical hierarchy [...] has not hesitated – whilst safeguarding the substantial integrity of the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments – to amend what it judged not to be entirely appropriate, to add what it deemed more suitable for increasing the honour rendered to Jesus Christ and to the august Trinity, and to instruct and edify the Christian people in a more beneficial manner.’³⁶ This authority is itself a servant of the tradition handed down and develops in line with it; the Second Vatican Council, drawing on the teaching of Pius XII, thus recalled that ‘innovations shall be introduced only if the good of the Church truly and certainly requires them, and after having ascertained that the new forms arise from the existing ones through a sort of organic development.’³⁷ Drawing on recent experience, Cardinal Ratzinger observes in ‘The Spirit of the Liturgy’ that after Vatican II, ‘the idea of the liturgy as a given, a reality that cannot be manipulated, gradually disappeared from public consciousness in the West. On the contrary, the First Vatican Council had defined the Pope not as an absolute monarch but as the guarantor of obedience to the revealed word, whose full powers are linked to the transmission of the faith.’³⁸

A sign that is, of course, given—and thus transmitted—which draws its profound richness from the intimate link between cosmological symbolism and theological symbolism, where the visible sign ‘merely makes explicit a spiritual reality that already exists implicitly in the object, at the very heart of the object where it lies as its innermost essence’. Such is the case with the water of baptism or the Eucharistic bread

³⁹ Here, a passage from a 1964 article in **La Maison-Dieu** seems

³⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, IIIa, q. 64, a. 2. A detailed exposition of these concepts can be found in Jean Borella’s work, from which these quotations are taken: **Le mystère du signe**, Ed. Maisonneuve & Larose, Paris 1989; see Chapter VI on this point.

³⁶ Pius XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, 20 November 1947.

³⁷ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 23.

³⁸ J. RATZINGER, **The Spirit of the Liturgy**, Ad solem, Geneva 2001, p.

³⁹ J. HANI, **The Symbolism of the Christian Temple**, La Colombe, Paris 1962, p. 17.

particularly illuminating regarding developments in recent years, and regarding the influence of a certain positivism, or of a historicism steeped in anthropocentrism—and thus characterised by an absence of metaphysics—on the projects undertaken. Please forgive this somewhat lengthy but, it would seem, deeply revealing quotation: ‘Modern man,’ the author observes, ‘has lost the sense of the symbolic dimension of cosmic and natural realities. Water and fire, bread and wine, oil and salt once held a sacred meaning for man. Modern man has lost this meaning. For him, the world has been desacralised. I am not here raising the question of whether this is a temporary affliction or an irreversible development. I am merely stating the fact. But the symbolism of liturgical celebration is not, in fact, based on analogies drawn from the cosmos. It is not a question of the natural symbolism of water or wine, oil or salt. Or at least this symbolism is secondary. It is, above all, a question of the analogy between historical situations, that is to say, essentially between human realities. Yet it is precisely modern man who is particularly sensitive to human realities. [...] Here we touch upon the crux of the matter. Just as the realities of the sacraments refer to human situations, so their signs refer to human situations and not to cosmic symbolism. This is of paramount importance. For one of the great difficulties of our age is that the cosmos no longer holds any mystery, insofar as it has been explored by humankind. ’ And, further on: ‘People today are rediscovering the sacred at the level of human situations. ’⁴⁰ What remains mysterious, and regardless of any judgement on the man himself, is that the author of these lines, in a few words already quoted, asserted that ‘The crisis of modern intelligence has been and remains, to a large extent, a crisis of metaphysics. ’⁴¹ As he himself admits, however, one difficulty remains: the transition from signs to realities, and ‘this is the very difficulty of faith.’

Faith

⁴⁰ J. DANIELOU S.J., ‘*The Liturgical Mystery: God’s Present Intervention in History*’, in *La Maison-Dieu* 79, 1964 III, pp. 36–37.

⁴¹ J. DANIELOU, **Scandaleuse vérité**, Fayard, Paris 1961, p. 10.

To define the act of faith, St Thomas draws on the Augustinian formula: ‘Credere est cum assensione cogitare’⁴², to reflect whilst giving one’s assent. Faith, received freely, is a heartfelt knowledge, an active submission to divine teaching, ‘lucent intellect filled with love’, as Dante put it. It is faith that enables us to discern, in the visible sign, the invisible reality of which it is the outward expression. Aquinas distinguishes here between the object—the reality to which faith is directed, that is to say, God himself, the First Truth, and the mode of know^{re}⁴³, proportionate to our nature, which reveals this reality to us only ‘under the guise of objects first apprehended by concepts and names—which are our natural means of knowing—and which God uses, through the ministry of his Church, to reveal himself in human language.’⁴⁴ It is clear that the object of faith absolutely transcends the liturgical forms through which it is to be known and loved, adored and served, but also given and offered, as demonstrated by the diversity of rites throughout the world, which are varied expressions of a single mystery. As Cardinal Journet emphasised, ‘from the perspective of faith and contemplation, the mystery of redemption continued in every Mass is one, perfect, immutable, infinitely simple, encompassing within its horizon the universality of time and space, and absolutely transcendent in relation to its liturgical forms, which can only have a secondary value. Yet the proper order and life of the ecclesial community depend precisely on these liturgical forms; they are the subject of pastoral authority, which must be attentive to the changing concerns of the faithful, and whose task is to move forward in time and space as one walks, emphasising in turn one aspect or another of the mystery.’⁴⁵

The mystery

Mysterium fidei is at the heart of liturgical action. Here, the Apostolic Fathers distinguished between two levels of reality: the mysteries as they are ritually performed, through the words, gestures and objects used by the officiants and the community in the name of

⁴² St Augustine, **De Praedest. Sanct.**, ch. 2, n. 5, **P.L.** 44, 963. In St Thomas Aquinas, **III Sent.**, d. 23, q. 2, a. 2, 1m; *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 1; *Sum. Theol.*, IIaIIae, q. 2, a. 1. A comprehensive account can be found in the book by Rev. Fr. B. DUROUX O.P., **La psychologie de la foi chez saint Thomas d’Aquin** (Desclée, Tournai 1963), particularly regarding these quotations in Chapter 1 of Part Two.

⁴³ Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, **Summa Theologiae**, IIaIIae, q. 1, a. 2, corp. and 2m.

⁴⁴ J. MARITAIN, **Les degrés du savoir**, DDB, Paris 1963, p. 645.

⁴⁵ Ch. JOURNET, **La Messe**, Fribourg 1957, p. 317.

of the Church, and the mystery of God which is then truly fulfilled, though in a hidden, veiled manner.

In recent times, the liturgy has often been compared to the theatre. Undoubtedly, this comparison is not without foundation: the medieval mystery plays, which drew on both, demonstrate this sufficiently. Furthermore, we are aware of the origin of the word ‘personage’ as used in the expression **in persona Christi**, which has now entered the sacramental realm. However, whilst in the theatre, gestures and words form the fabric of the action, in the liturgy, the reality of the mystery precedes its expression; moreover, this expression is not merely a description, but a vital—because sacramental—entry into the reality itself, whereas in a play it can only be moral in nature. It is only through the knowledge of faith that liturgical signs take on meaning—the meaning of their institution, whether divine or ecclesial. In the theatre, it is the expression that transcends reality—and this is the very genius of literature: knowing how to make the most of it—whilst in the liturgy, it is the reality of the mystery that can only be partially articulated. In the first case, it is the imagination that responds to the language; in the second, it is the knowledge of faith that draws us into the pre-existing mystery through the symbol.

Here, the liturgy as a whole—as the language of faith, as the teaching of that faith, and as an entry, through worship, into the very mystery of faith, the divine Being—is therefore essentially the work of the Incarnate Word, who recapitulates everything in himself, and whom we can contemplate only in a piecemeal and fragmented manner. It is fair to note, with Fr Bourgeois, that unlike a musical or aesthetic work, ‘the liturgy is not a structured set of signs constituting, as it were, an intermediate reality between man and God, but precisely that point of encounter which is, so to speak, already beyond this world, an anticipation of its fulfilment, a point of encounter where God and man give themselves to one another—the former in a purely gratuitous initiative, the latter in the very dynamic of that grace which he has received.’⁴⁶ Moreover, the mystical life consists of nothing other than immersing the faithful in this mystery, and finds its culmination in the liturgy of the Church, where this mystery is made truly present, with its active power that unites God and humankind in Christ. This tripartite division is found in the natural order, between being, thought and language, or ‘speech’ as the ancients put it.

⁴⁶ D. BOURGEOIS, ‘*The Liturgy: Work or Action?*’, in **Communio** 1993, no. 108, p. 37.

Being, thought and speech

Being ontologically precedes thought. More precisely, things exist because God thinks them, but man can think of things because they exist. Man can therefore think of something of what is, whilst knowing that this ‘something’ is not all that is; Aquinas spoke here sympathetically of the ‘weakness of the human mind’.⁴⁷ Similarly, language is only part of the expression of thought, or may even distort it, whilst thought itself may err in its knowledge of being. Thibon put it perfectly: ‘Man’s language is shorter than his thought, and his thought shorter than Thought *itself*. And even on the mere human scale, we have been too quick to equate the verb with the word, thought with its expression.’⁴⁸ Parmenides was the first to attempt to articulate these three aspects, only to conclude—faced with the difficulty of unravelling the close unity that bound them and the obvious disparity that distinguished them—that ‘being, thinking and speaking are one and the same thing’. Highlighting the necessity of being, yet unable to account for its multiplicity, he had concluded that the One takes precedence, as it encompasses being, thinking and speaking.

Later, Plato, through participation, and Aristotle, through analogy, would find ways to account for the unity and diversity of being. With Aquinas, the philosophy of being would find the balance with which we are familiar. The epistemological break established by Descartes would gradually shift the focus of interest from being towards language, a process continuing into the twentieth century. Human thought takes itself as its object and, in stages, recedes from its primordial source of knowledge—being—towards its expression—language. The focus of research then lay in the sign: discourse was centred on language itself, and the philosophies of language have constituted the metaphysics of the last fifty years.

By way of contrast, let us consider this discussion at a liturgy symposium in 1967 involving several leading specialists, on the theme of ‘Liturgy and the Humanities’. Regarding communication within the liturgical assembly, one speaker noted the cultural fragmentation of those attending liturgical assemblies, whilst a second highlighted the ‘variety of levels of faith’. A third speaker then replied: ‘Is this not what has compelled the liturgy to create its own conditions of perception, to teach decoding at the same time as it imparts its

⁴⁷ St Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.*, Ia, q. 1, a. 5, ^{1m}.

⁴⁸ G. THIBON, **Destin de l’homme**, p. 58

‘Does the code lead to a proliferation of gloss, that is to say, language about language? Language is not immediately perceived, which gives rise to multiple explanations of rites and signs, resulting in an enormous cluttering of the liturgy, and means that it is no longer something immediate, but truly a language about language.’⁴⁹

This does indeed accurately describe the development, and shows how much it is dependent on an intellectual—and therefore philosophical—attitude that was very much in evidence at the time when this movement reached the liturgy. This question of the relationship between being, thought and speech raises another, related question, concerning the three levels of truth.

The three levels of truth

In St Thomas, albeit in a different way, the question of the nature of truth also gives rise to a tripartite division. In the **De Veritate**⁵⁰, he distinguishes between truth as manifestation, or glory—and thus the language of being, in line with Saint Hilary—logical truth, which is the correspondence between the thing and the idea conceived in the human mind, and ontological, or transcendental, truth, which is the very being of the thing, insofar as it is intelligible. Here again, the profound unity and the irreducible distinction appear clearly, except that this time they are ordered and genuinely distinguished so as to be ultimately united in an ordered manner.

The expanse of the sea that presents itself to the gaze is first brought to mind as manifested by its qualities; then its existence is established by a logical judgement, which can be communicated in words; finally, this property of the known thing—that it is grasped by the intellect—simply indicates that, irrespective of the knowledge one may have of it, ‘the more a thing has of being, the more intelligible it is.’⁵¹ Here again, we encounter a profound unity, alongside a real distinction.

‘The Way, the Truth, the Life’

Faith, through the sign, leads us into the mystery.

Thought, through language, leads us into the reality of being.

⁴⁹ *Liturgy and the Human Sciences*, in ‘La Maison-Dieu’ 93, 1968, I, pp. 128–129.

⁵⁰ Saint THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1.

⁵¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 16, a. 3, corp.; *Contra Gentiles*, I, 1.

Logical judgement, by abstracting from external forms, attains something of the truth of being.

All this is true, but, as we can see, it is not sufficient. Neither does faith exhaust the mystery, nor does thought subdue being, nor does logical judgement confine creatures.

In his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the Common Doctor argues that poetry, through the metaphysical gaze—that of natural wisdom—provides access to something that logical judgement cannot attain: 'What allows us to say that wonder is at the origin of philosophical inquiry is that, in a certain sense, the philosopher loves myths; he is, as it were, a lover of fables. This is the hallmark of poets. Hence the earliest thinkers who dealt with the principles of things in the form of some fabulous narrative are called poet-theologians, such as Perseus and a few others who form the group of the Seven Sages. The reason the philosopher is compared to the poet is that both are concerned with the marvellous and the astonishing. For the fables constructed by poets are made up of marvellous elements. Philosophers themselves were driven to engage in philosophy out of admiration.'⁵²

Ultimately, it is not an idea, but a Person who fully and perfectly realises this total unity sought by Parmenides: 'I am the Way, the Truth, the Life' (Jn 14:6): the Way, and thus the visible sign, the utterance; the Truth, and thus Thought, the Word, the Logos; and Life, and thus Being itself, which is the name of God. The final word of knowledge is union with this Person, and thus living faith and charity, which enable knowledge through connaturalness.

Three phrases enable us to arrive, via the metaphysical path, at theological truth for a true liturgical life.

The first expresses the mystery, Being, the First Truth: 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14). The second expresses faith, thought and the Truth known through revelation: 'The Word became flesh.'⁵³ The third expresses the liturgical sign par excellence, language in its fullness and the irruption of Truth into the world: 'This is my Body.'

Christ alone recapitulates not only all human beings, but also all reality, every level of reality, within himself. It is, moreover, no coincidence that, as Cardinal Ratzinger points out, 'it was through the word "logos" that the philosophy of the word developed by Greek thought penetrated this new vision of worship, and ultimately raised it to the level

⁵² St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, III, 55.

of a mystical union with the Logos, with the One who creates and gives meaning to all things.”⁵³ Nor is it, no doubt, a coincidence that this threefold division exists, since it is the mystery of the Holy Trinity—the source, end and life of every other mystery, beginning with that of the Church—which gives form to every being and to every level of the hierarchy of beings.

Liturgical language cannot fabricate the mystery, the ‘sense of the sacred’. The mystery is not manufactured; it is received, one enters into it. It is life; it is life at its very root. It is the mystery of the Church itself that acts through language, and it is the causality of the divine Act that gives the liturgical sign its full value.

On liturgical silence

This is why silence is itself liturgical language in the highest degree. Speech has no existence other than that which silence allows it; it is born in silence and ends there. Louis Lavelle sums it up aptly: ‘Silence is sometimes so laden with meaning that it abolishes speech, not only because it renders it superfluous, but also because speech would disperse—by dividing it and spreading it outwards—that essence too subtle to be grasped, which silence bears within itself without, so to speak, allowing us to touch it. Silence is a tribute that speech pays to the spirit. Thus, the Word of God, in which nothing is lacking and which is a total revelation, is indistinguishable from perfect silence. All words are enveloped in this atmosphere of silence, which must be created rather than broken, and in which one listens to the secret of the soul without needing the intermediary of words.’⁵⁴

The words themselves, through their repetition and familiarity—for example, ‘that hammering of the Latin stanzas’ described by La Varende—gradually come to resemble silence: ‘Words that have been passed down for centuries from mouth to mouth have, it is said, become worn like coins,’ continues Louis Lavelle. ‘But usage has not merely worn them down; it has imbued them with meaning; it has given them a density and a fullness, a multiplicity of meanings and resonances, associated and intertwined with one another, which we are unable to fully grasp or exhaust. Language contains, in a latent form, all the powers accumulated within it by the experience of the centuries, all the ideas, all the

⁵³ J. RATZINGER, **The Spirit of the Liturgy**, Ad solem 2001, p.

⁵⁴ L. LAVELLE, **La parole et l’écriture**, ‘L’artisan du livre’, Paris 1959, pp. 129–130.

feelings, all the hopes that have passed through the human consciousness. ' ⁵⁵ One might think this describes the virtue of the Divine Office, whilst knowing that it is still only the outer shell, since God speaks but a single Word, which is the Word, eternally, and which is itself the voice of the Divine Office, spread and communicated amongst communities and human beings. There is a silence within the rite, in which Christ himself speaks through the forest of symbols built up over the centuries by the wisdom and prayer of the Church. There can be no metaphysics of the liturgy without a metaphysics of the Incarnation, which begins with a sense of wonder, sung in the Christmas carol: 'In your silence, Wisdom has spoken.'

Silence is therefore not, first and foremost, the absence of language, just as eternity is not, first and foremost, the absence of time; it is the fullness and quintessence of all language, the full, perfect and simultaneous possession of all language, just as eternity is the perfect and simultaneous possession of every moment in time, and just as the colour white is the simultaneous encounter and union of all the colours of the rainbow. This requires a principle, and therefore an order: silence is the very fabric of the order of things and of the people who take part in *the Opus Dei*. Gregorian chant or the clinking of the censer emphasise and highlight this, rather than disrupting it.

Towards a metaphysics of the liturgy

Clearly, however, this silence is accessible in its fullness only through the prism of faith—living faith, *the sensus fidei* and *the sensus Ecclesiae*. It is therefore important to restore theology to its rightful place within the liturgy, or more precisely, to restore the liturgy to its rightful place within theology. But it is equally necessary to restore the essential role of metaphysics in theology, including in the liturgy, for it would be dangerous, as Fr Nichols has already noted, to 'leave it solely to liturgists' (. ⁵⁶).

There are three main reasons for this, which simply reflect the role of metaphysics.

It enables us to define terms more precisely, by focusing on what is, and to situate them in their true depth.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 28

⁵⁶ A. NICHOLS, O.P., **Regard sur la liturgie et la modernité**, Ad solem, Geneva 1998, p. 17.

Its function is to structure the contributions of the other sciences—all of which are subordinate to metaphysics—to organise them and, where necessary, to qualify them. *Sapientis est ordinare*: as natural wisdom, it plays an architectonic role that prevents dispersion or optical error.

It purifies the gaze by granting it access to the being of things, by keeping it in obedience to being, and by distancing it from the pretensions of systematic thought. By thus freeing it from the realm of the passions, it predisposes it to the vision of faith, to a more contemplative outlook.

Let us revisit each of these three reasons.

Defining the terms; the liturgical *movement*

It helps to define the terms, through constant training in the submission of the mind to reality, to the ultimate causes of reality, without any immediate imperative of utility or efficiency. According to

Fr Elders, ‘the supreme value of metaphysics lies precisely in the fact that it provides us with the ultimate and deepest truth concerning reality. It gives us the nourishment we need most. It can, in fact, bring us as close as possible to our ‘true home’ and prepare us for a new and higher knowledge of the First Being.’⁵⁷

Take, for example, the expression ‘liturgical movement’. Opinions vary as to its exact origins, its aims and its influence. Whilst the expression itself has given rise to numerous explanations, the term ‘movement’, as such, has scarcely been analysed in this context, which would undoubtedly not have been superfluous in order to avoid certain misunderstandings. A distinction is indeed made between substantial movement—which may involve generation or corruption—and accidental movement, which may occur either in terms of quality, through alteration; or in terms of quantity, through increase or decrease; or in terms of place or time, by ‘moving towards’ or ‘moving away from’. Each person, no doubt, will have defined what they meant by ‘liturgical movement’, but not everyone had the same understanding of movement. A substantial liturgical movement is not an accidental liturgical movement. A qualitative movement is not a movement regarded as a displacement, where the imperative would be progress, from *progressus*, a step forward supplanting the previous one.

⁵⁷ L. J. ELDERS, *The Metaphysics of St Thomas Aquinas*, Vrin, Paris 1994, pp. 43–44.

On the occasion of the gathering of Ecclesial Movements held in Rome from 27 to 30 May 1998, Cardinal Ratzinger offered this reflection, which undoubtedly provides an important insight into the nature and function of these movements: ‘In order to be able to provide sound answers, we would first need to define the concept of a “movement” a little more precisely, and perhaps finally attempt to propose a typology of movements. But, of course, that is impossible here. We should also be careful not to propose an overly rigid definition, since the Holy Spirit has surprises in store for us at every turn, and it is only in retrospect that we can recognise, amidst great diversity, a common essence.’ However, to begin a conceptual clarification, I would like to briefly outline three different types of movements which, in recent history, can at any rate be distinguished. I shall refer to them by the following terms: movement, current, action. The liturgical movement of the first half of our century, as well as the Marian movement, which grew ever stronger within the Church during the nineteenth century, I would characterise not as movements, but rather as currents, which subsequently took concrete form as movements—such as the Marian congregations or Catholic youth groups—without their enthusiasm ever waning.”

An architectural principle

It provides an architectural principle, enabling the other sciences and their findings to be organised, whilst providing access to all aspects of reality. For Saint Thomas, who, as we know, held all forms of knowledge in such high esteem, not only are ‘all the other sciences ordered to it as to an end’⁵⁸, but furthermore, the little that man possesses through it ‘is already preferable to all that he knows through the other sciences’⁵⁹ – a statement that is bound to surprise... but astonishment is precisely the main source of metaphysics.

Undeniably, particularly amongst the Anglo-Saxons, a rich and constructive body of thought has been flourishing in recent times to foster a true understanding of the liturgy, drawing as much from historians and artists as from philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. The work is remarkable, as has been noted in particular by

⁵⁸ St Thomas Aquinas, **In I Metaph**, Book 3, no. 59.

⁵⁹ St Thomas Aquinas, **In I Metaph**, Book 3, n. 60.

Father Nichol's book * * ^{s60}, which also analyses this work, and whose findings are all the more clear-cut in that they draw on a form of realism that is readily verifiable through experience.

Nevertheless, as Bishop Léonard emphasised, 'the metaphysical and theological approach makes it possible to avoid, in both philosophy and theology, any form of cosmological or anthropological reduction.' ⁶¹ By enabling the human mind to situate each domain of knowledge precisely, by ordering them towards unity and by giving them their true weight, it makes it possible to organise the other sciences truthfully, without contradicting or diminishing them. More specifically, as Maritain has already noted, 'Thomist metaphysics could bring the vast body of the particular sciences—which are currently in a state of chaos, and whose admirable progress risks being exploited by aberrant philosophies—into a true intellectual order.' ⁶² And no one can claim that this danger no longer exists today, even though it was once identified. More positively, and just as effectively, 'the Thomist order, properly understood, would dispel countless misunderstandings and allow for unexpected encounters.' ⁶³

'If your eye is single'

It purifies the mind by predisposing it to a gaze of faith. This is ultimately the ultimate role of metaphysics: to prepare this *oculus simplex*, this sense of wonder and this thanksgiving which form the very essence of the liturgical attitude. At the heart of metaphysics shines wonder, amazement. At the heart of the liturgy lie thanksgiving and the Eucharist.

'Vere dignum et justum est, aequum et salutare, nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere'. Semper: indeed, always. Ubique: everywhere. The reasons for this are as numerous as the *mirabilia Dei* celebrated throughout the liturgical year in so many prefaces that speak of God's goodness, greatness and omnipotence through the variety of his works. And if there is nothing left to say but to return to the essential, what remains is perpetual thanksgiving, the Preface of the Holy Trinity. It is rather on descending from this mountain that the metaphysician can cast a serene gaze upon the world and all things, accustomed by this contemplative disposition to see 'all in God, and God in all', according to the words of Saint

⁶⁰ A. NICHOLS O.P., **A View of Liturgy and Modernity**, Ad Solem, Geneva 1998.

⁶¹ A. LEONARD, *Faith and Philosophies*, Culture and Truth, Namur 1991, p. 296.

⁶² J. MARITAIN, **Le Docteur Angélique**, p. 74.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Dominic, and thus to be able both to integrate all truth through a genuine breadth of vision—which is more a matter of obedience and submission of the intellect than of naïve irenicism—and at the same time to preserve the rectitude of thought in the apprehension of things, for the same and sole reason. There is certainly a danger in this absolutisation of the metaphysical and theological path to the detriment of other sciences—which would, moreover, be a lack of realism and of true metaphysics—but it has been recognised that the child, the metaphysician and the believer go hand in hand. Metaphysics itself must be supported, guided and strengthened by an essential spiritual attitude: the highest object of metaphysical study is, first and foremost, ‘the One in whom we have life, movement and being’ (Acts 17:28).

A dual demand for truth

Metaphysics is certainly not the whole of theology, since the latter draws its wisdom from Revelation itself, from the One who is Wisdom incarnate. Moreover, the secularisation of theology may just as easily stem from a lack of metaphysics, leading it to veer towards sociology, anthropology or historicism – right up to the Marxist dogmatism regarding the meaning of history, which is anti-metaphysical par excellence – as it does from an excess or misuse of the tools of metaphysics, leading to ratiocination, discourse in general and rational reasoning

However, when used under certain conditions, metaphysics remains indispensable to theological reasoning, for the three main reasons mentioned above. Consequently, and in accordance with the proper relationship between theology and liturgy, metaphysics is also indispensable to the emergence and continuation of the liturgical movement.

Provided, essentially, that one refrains from turning it into a conceptual game into which only those swordsmen venture whose minds are sufficiently sharp and whose training has been verified in the right schools – a danger which, to tell the truth, is very slight today, for lack of combatants – it guarantees true humility of mind in the face of reality, enables one to arrange everything with ‘strength and gentleness’⁶⁴, and subsequently predisposes one to the contemplation and adoration of this supra-essential Wisdom, in her being or in her works, especially in *the Opus Dei*.

⁶⁴ LITURGY, *Antiphon ‘O Sapientia’*, for 17 December.

A liturgical movement is not a metaphysical movement. But a liturgical movement without metaphysics would be an atheological movement, and therefore a non-liturgical movement.