

Liturgical Irenicism and the Unity of the Church

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Abstract

The liturgy has often been a source of conflict within Christian communities. After comparing several recent exhortations by Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI concerning the importance of the unity of the Church, this essay examines resources for articulating an approach of “liturgical irenicism” on the basis of texts from Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and the Magisterium of the Church.

Keywords

Liturgy, Augustine, Aquinas, Magisterium, Unity of the Church

One of the bitter ironies of the history of the Church is that the liturgy, meant to unite Christians in the worship of God, has often become a matter of division and unrest. It is understandable why this is the case: the sacraments have been instituted by God as visible signs of invisible grace specifically in accord with our nature as sensible creatures—and yet, in addition to being sensible, our nature is also fallen. Through sin, we take what is best, and make it the worst. It is because we are composed of flesh and spirit that we have the happy privilege of worshiping God not only with our minds, as the angels do, but also with our bodies. And yet, it is also because we are flesh, taken in the biblical sense, that our souls can become so weighed down by the weakness of the flesh that the enfeebled intellect can be easily misled and hindered from operating as it should (cf. Wis 9:15). As we learn from St. Paul, the weakness of the flesh has terrible consequences, including not only sins that concern the body as such, but also those which are directed against God, and finally those which harm our neighbor and society, such as enmities, contentions, dissensions, and sects (Gal 5:19–20). In one sense, these vices are natural to us in that they arise in us spontaneously due to our fallen state. In a more profound sense, however, they are unnatural, like alien growths of which we must be purified and cleansed by God’s grace if we are to live with one heart and mind, glorifying God not

only as individuals but as members of Christ's mystical body, the Church. We must be on guard, therefore, lest we turn the sacrament of unity into an instrument of division.

In a catechesis on the Church given on September 25, 2013, Pope Francis called for an examination of conscience concerning the unity of the Church: "Let us go a step further and ask ourselves: are there wounds in this unity? Can we hurt this unity? Unfortunately, we see that in the process of history, and now too, we do not always live in unity. At times misunderstanding arises, as well as conflict, tension and division which injure her and so the Church does not have the face we should like her to have; she does not express love, the love that God desires. It is we who create wounds! And if we look at the divisions that still exist among Christians, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants . . . we are aware of the effort required to make this unity fully visible. God gives us unity, but we often have a lot of trouble putting it into practice."¹

In this fervent exhortation, Pope Francis echoes the concern expressed by his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI in his letter to the bishops accompanying the *motu proprio Summorum pontificum* of 2007: "Looking back over the past, to the divisions which in the course of the centuries have rent the Body of Christ, one continually has the impression that, at critical moments when divisions were coming about, not enough was done by the Church's leaders to maintain or regain reconciliation and unity. One has the impression that omissions on the part of the Church have had their share of blame for the fact that these divisions were able to harden. This glance at the past imposes an obligation on us today: to make every effort to enable for all those who truly desire unity to remain in that unity or to attain it anew. . . . Let us generously open our hearts and make room for everything that the faith itself allows."²

Since the liturgy is at times an occasion of division and disunity, we should recall first of all that even knowing the proper manner of praying to God is itself a gift of God: "For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings" (Rom 8:26). In reflecting on the unity of the Church, Francis and Benedict each emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in establishing and preserving unity. In a homily given at Vespers of the Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle on January

¹ Pope Francis, General Audience (25 September 2013). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130925_udienza-generale_en.html.

² Pope Benedict XVI, "Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops on the occasion of the apostolic letter 'motu proprio data' *Summorum pontificum* on the use of the Roman liturgy prior to the reform of 1970" (7 July 2007). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070707_lettera-vescovi_en.html.

25, 2013, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI recalled that “Our search for unity in truth and in love, lastly, must never lose sight of the fact that unity among Christians is the work and gift of the Holy Spirit and goes far beyond our own efforts.”³

Pope Francis, in his September 25, 2013 audience, likewise emphasizes the Holy Spirit’s role in the generation and preservation of unity: “Who is the driving force of the Church’s unity? It is the Holy Spirit, whom we have all received at Baptism and also in the Sacrament of Confirmation. It is the Holy Spirit. Our unity is not primarily a fruit of our own consensus or of the democracy in the Church, or of our effort to get along with each other; rather, it comes from the One who creates unity in diversity, because the Holy Spirit is harmony and always creates harmony in the Church.”⁴ In his audience on October 9, 2013, Pope Francis developed further the image of the harmony of the Holy Spirit: “The Church is like a great orchestra in which there is great variety. We are not all the same and we do not all have to be the same. We are all different, varied, each of us with his own special qualities. And this is the beauty of the Church: everyone brings his own gift, which God has given him, for the sake of enriching others. And between the various components there is diversity; however, it is a diversity that does not enter into conflict and opposition. It is a variety that allows the Holy Spirit to blend it into harmony. He is the true ‘Maestro.’ He is harmony.”⁵

In reflecting on the theme of the unity of the Church in his September 25 catechesis, Pope Francis focuses our attention on the fourth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians: “Our world needs unity, this is an age in which we all need unity, we need reconciliation and communion and the Church is the home of communion. St Paul told the Christians of Ephesus: ‘I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (4:1–3). Humility, meekness, magnanimity, love to preserve unity! These, these are the roads, the true roads of the Church. Let us listen to this again. Humility against vanity, against arrogance—humility, meekness, magnanimity, love to preserve unity. Then Paul continued: there is one body, that of Christ that we receive in the Eucharist; and one Spirit, the Holy Spirit who enlivens and constantly recreates the Church; one hope, eternal life; one single

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (25 January 2013). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20130125_vespri_en.html.

⁴ Pope Francis, General Audience (25 September 2013).

⁵ Pope Francis, General Audience (9 October 2013). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20131009_udienza-generale_en.html

faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (cf. vv. 4–6). The wealth of what unites us! This is the true wealth: what unites us, not what divides us.”⁶

The unity of the Church derives from the unity of the fonts of the Church’s life: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6). St. Paul makes this statement immediately after exhorting the Ephesians to strive for ecclesial unity, now offering them a glimpse of the form of the unity to which they are called. The one Lord has given us a unified faith through his self-revelation and has instituted the sacraments as a means of uniting us with himself.

In the midst of these three unities, however, there are analogous distinctions: the one Lord is three persons; the one faith is a gift of God, but also involves man’s response; and the one baptism, although interiorly performed by Christ no matter who performs it, is celebrated with various liturgical forms that nevertheless confer the same reality. In the present context, I would like to emphasize the third point as a way addressing the problem of the temptation to strife on account of liturgical differences.

In baptism, Christ exercises his divine power through human ministers, applying the power of his death to us who are buried together with him by baptism so that we may walk in newness of life (cf. Rom 6:4). Just as Christ “died for sins once for all” (1 Pt 3:18), baptism may only be conferred once in the life of each individual, for it transforms us in such a way that our souls are forever marked by the effect of Christ’s passion applied to us in the sacrament. Baptism derives its unity from its institution by Jesus Christ, who commanded the apostles to baptize in the name of the one Triune God, that is, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

Despite the fundamental unity of the nature and effect of baptism, the Church nevertheless celebrates the sacrament with different liturgical forms. In the Western Church, the immersion or pouring of water is accompanied by the formula, “N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” whereas in the Eastern liturgies a different formula is used: “The servant of God, N., is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the Western formula emphasizes both the principal cause of the sacrament (the Trinity) as well as instrumental cause (the minister), whereas the

⁶ Pope Francis, General Audience (25 September 2013).

⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1240.

Eastern formula, by stressing the principal cause, “strives to avoid the error of those who in the past ascribed the baptismal power to the baptizers.”⁸ The two liturgical forms emphasize different aspects of the one baptism, but do not in any way derogate from the unity of the sacrament.

Aquinas is able to take an irenic view of liturgical differences such as those found in the baptismal formulas precisely because of the distinction he draws between what is essential to the sacraments and what pertains to the liturgical solemnity of the sacraments. In the case of baptism, “what is essential to the sacrament are the form which designates the principal cause of the sacrament; and the minister who is the instrumental cause; and the use of the matter, namely, washing with water, which designates the principal sacramental effect. But all the other things which the Church observes in the baptismal rite, belong rather to a certain solemnity of the sacrament.”⁹ The elements of liturgical solemnity are nevertheless of tremendous importance, for the liturgy arouses the devotion of the faithful and helps them to understand and participate in the sacraments. Further, Aquinas emphasizes that the rites legitimately approved by the Church must be treated with trust and reverence because “the Church is ruled by the Holy Spirit, who does nothing inordinate.”¹⁰

St. Augustine likewise observes that while the essentials of the Church’s sacraments are universal, there are aspects of their celebration that vary from place to place. With respect to the latter category, Augustine states that there is no “discipline in these matters better for a serious and prudent Christian than to act in the way he sees the church acts to which he may have come. For what is proved to be neither contrary to the faith nor contrary to good morals should be regarded as indifferent and should be observed in accord with the society of those with whom one is living.”¹¹ Augustine observes that when this principle is not observed, the concord of the Christian community is weakened: “For I often saw with sorrow and grief that many of the weak are upset by the quarrelsome stubbornness or superstitious timidity of certain brothers. For they stir up such quarrelsome questions in matters of this sort that cannot be brought to a definite end by the authority of holy scripture or by the tradition of the universal Church or by the benefit of amending one’s life.”¹²

Augustine states that although some local customs are more meritorious than others, “the Church of God that is situated amid much

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 66, a. 5, ad 1.

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 66, a. 10.

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 66, a. 10, *sed contra*.

¹¹ St. Augustine, Letter 54.2.2, tr. Roland Teske, S.J., *Letters 1–99*, The Works of Saint Augustine II/1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), pp. 210–211.

¹² St. Augustine, Letter 54.2.3, tr. Teske, p. 211.

straw and many weeds tolerates many things—and yet she does not approve, does not pass over in silence, and does not do those things that are opposed to the faith or to a morally good life.”¹³ Differences that truly impinge on faith and morals must therefore be dealt with: “For these reasons, that is, on account of faith or on account of morals, one must correct what was being done wrongly or begin to do what was not being done.”¹⁴ Such corrections must be undertaken with tremendous care, however, because “the very change of a custom, even one that is helpful in its benefit, causes a disturbance by its novelty.”¹⁵ Practices that are not in themselves against the faith but which are notably imperfect should “be eliminated, not harshly, but in a spirit of gentleness and kindness . . . not with harshness, not with toughness, not in an imperious manner, but by teaching rather than commanding, by warning rather than threatening.”¹⁶ Augustine’s writings display a marvelous spirit of liturgical irenicism, striving to preserve peace and good order in the Church both through tolerance of legitimate diversity and through prudent correction of liturgical abuses.

Equipped with these principles, we are able to draw important distinctions when we compare different liturgical rites that are employed in the Church: so long as the fundamental nature of the sacrament is conveyed, different liturgical forms approved by the Church must be treated with respect and reverence. This does not rule out the possibility of liturgical reform in itself, for the Holy Spirit who has guided the Church in past liturgical development certainly continues to do so. This means that, in the proper contexts, charitable criticisms or suggestions may be made concerning the various rites that may be legitimately in use at a particular time, for otherwise there would be no possibility of further development. Nevertheless, any such critiques must be done in a spirit that respects the legitimacy of those rites already approved by the Church, offering paths for future development in a peaceful and non-polemical mode.

In the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII articulates a balanced principle of the need to show reverence to both older and newer rites of the Church: “The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But ancient usage must not be esteemed more suitable and proper, either in its own right or in its significance for later times and new situations, on the simple ground that it carries the savor and aroma of antiquity. The more recent liturgical rites likewise deserve reverence and respect. They, too, owe

¹³ St. Augustine, Letter 55.19.35, tr. Teske, p. 234.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, Letter 54.5.6, tr. Teske, p. 213.

¹⁵ St. Augustine, Letter 54.5.6, tr. Teske, p. 213.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, Letter 22.1.5, tr. Teske, p. 60.

their inspiration to the Holy Spirit, who assists the Church in every age even to the consummation of the world.”¹⁷

Although the context of *Mediator Dei* differs from our own in important respects, the same principle applies today in the context of evaluations of the older and more recent liturgical forms approved by the Church. Pope Pius XII articulates the principle that “the Sovereign Pontiff alone enjoys the right to recognize and establish any practice touching the worship of God, to introduce and approve new rites, as also to modify those he judges to require modification.”¹⁸ Pope Pius goes on to warn that “private individuals, therefore, even though they be clerics, may not be left to decide for themselves in these holy and venerable matters.”¹⁹ No private individual, therefore, has the right to repudiate a rite that has been recognized and approved by the Sovereign Pontiff. It may be possible in certain circumstances to raise concerns regarding particular contingent decisions regarding liturgical reform, but this must be done in the proper contexts and with due respect for the authority of the Holy See. Intemperate remarks, on the other hand, are of great danger precisely because questions of the liturgy are “intimately bound up with Church discipline and with the order, unity and concord of the Mystical Body and frequently even with the integrity of Catholic faith itself.”

The integrity of the Catholic faith must be carefully guarded by the Magisterium of the Church, but in evaluating liturgical reform it is of tremendous importance to distinguish between matters of faith and matters of pastoral prudence. As Pope Pius XII states, “The sacred liturgy does, in fact, include divine as well as human elements. The former, instituted as they have been by God, cannot be changed in any way by men. But the human components admit of various modifications, as the needs of the age, circumstance and the good of souls may require, and as the ecclesiastical hierarchy, under guidance of the Holy Spirit, may have authorized.”²⁰ The Second Vatican Council takes up this distinction in similar but expanded terms: “For the liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the

¹⁷ Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 61 (20 November 1947). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei_en.html

¹⁸ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 58; cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium* 22.1, Code of Canon Law (CIC/1983) can. 838.

¹⁹ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 58; cf. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium* 22.3.

²⁰ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 50.

liturgy or have become unsuited to it.”²¹ Taken together, these passages indicate both the limits to the scope of the Church’s authority over the liturgy as well as the need for the Church to be constantly attentive to the ongoing need for liturgical renewal. They demand perennial reflection about whether in the course of liturgical renewal anything has intruded into the liturgy that is out of harmony with its inner nature. Nevertheless, this reflection must always be undertaken in a spirit of fidelity to the Church and of respect for legitimately promulgated rites.

Fundamentally, we must strive not to provoke each other over liturgical questions where the faith itself allows freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1), and yet we should not use our freedom “as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another” (Gal 5:13). The Church in the present era allows a great deal of freedom in liturgical matters, most of all through the great variety of approved rites employed throughout the Church. In contrast to the liturgy as practiced in the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council, the contemporary liturgy also includes a greater degree of freedom in the texts and gestures. This should not be understood as a freedom of indifference that authorizes the celebrant or community to arbitrarily change the liturgy according to their own whims, but should be used as an opportunity for freedom of excellence, which develops the ability to act freely in carrying out the liturgy with excellence and perfection, uniting mind and body in carrying out reasonable worship (cf. Rom 12:1). Sadly, this freedom has at times been abused in ways that have weakened the faith of the people of God, clergy, religious, and laity alike. Thus, in the Ordinary Form we should use the freedom legitimately conceded in a mature manner governed not by ideology but by the Spirit of Christ.

But although there is a tremendous freedom in the Ordinary Form, there is sometimes a lack of willingness to extend a spirit of generosity and freedom to those who want to exercise their freedom of worship in a way that is more closely attuned to their own religious sensibilities. A generous fulfillment of the desire of the faithful to celebrate the liturgy in the various historical forms of both the East and the West in no way impedes the legitimate freedom of the Ordinary Form; it rather contributes to a more mature use of that freedom. We rightly pray and work so that those attached to the Extraordinary Form may be purified by the grace of Christ from certain exaggerations or ideologies concerning the reformed liturgy, and yet we must also be cleansed of any ideologies or exaggerations that unfairly

²¹ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium* 21. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

stigmatize the earlier liturgical traditions in themselves, or those who are attached to such traditions.

We should not reject the pre-conciliar Mass as something alien to the true spirit of the Second Vatican Council, for it was precisely this form of the Mass that daily put the Council Fathers in contact with the saving sacrifice of Christ as they undertook the great work of reforming the Church and articulating the perennial message of the Gospel for the men and women of their day. It is true that after the Council the question of the Mass took on a sort of symbolic value as a synecdoche of the question of the Council, such that to be attached to the older Mass was seen by some as a rejection of the Council. Today, however, we are in a position to judge this issue with greater nuance and perspective, making distinctions that were unfortunately not always made by the protagonists in the post-conciliar crisis concerning the liturgy. For instance, we can now acknowledge certain weaknesses in the reform of the liturgy without thereby being seen as rejecting the whole reform in principle, as was exemplified by the liturgical writings of Cardinal Ratzinger.

In liturgical matters, we must most of all avoid enmity, strife, jealousy and anger, and instead cultivate peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Galatians 5:19–23). We must not only react, either by rejecting in principle the reformed liturgy because some abuse the freedom it offers, nor reject the older liturgy because some have used it in an ideological manner. We must strive, with the help of the Spirit, to avoid being instruments of division and become instruments of unity, allowing the liturgy to be a manifestation of the beautiful unity bestowed on the Church in the diversity of its liturgical forms.

“Let us remember this well: being part of the Church means being united to Christ and receiving from him the divine life that makes us live as Christians; it means staying united to the Pope and to the Bishops who are instruments of unity and communion; and it also means learning to overcome subjectivism and division, to understand each other better, to harmonize the variety and the richness of each person; in a word to love God and the people beside us more, in the family, in the parish, in associations. Body and limb, in order to live, must be united! Unity is superior to conflict, always!”²²

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²² Pope Francis, General Audience (19 June 2013). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130619_udienza-generale_en.html