

## Play and Liturgy Towards a Transcendental Sense of the Experience of the Mystery

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### Abstract

In *The Spirit of Liturgy*, Romano Guardini argued that liturgy is a playful activity. But one may ask, can liturgy really be analysed in light of the experience of play? This question opens up different theoretical problems, which range from a fundamental understanding of play and its celebratory spirit to a consideration of liturgy as an event of the divine *Mystery*. In this paper, I will therefore explore the nature of Christian ritual performance, drawing on a phenomenological analysis of the connections between play and liturgy in the process, before concluding that the liturgy – from a transcendental perspective – is in fact a playful activity. The argument will thus include a study of the particularity and difference of the original ritual patterns and the universe of play, thereby bringing into focus the *interplay* between the sense of rite and the experience of play. In such a way, I will show that play provides us with one of the possible ways of approaching the essence of the Christian ritual celebration as a transcendental experience of Mystery, as well as shedding light on the interrelation between *homo ludens* and *homo liturgicus*.

### Keywords

Liturgy, Play, Mystery, Romano Guardini, *homo ludens*, *homo liturgicus*

### Introduction

In his famous book, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, Romano Guardini (1885-1968) argued that liturgy is a playful activity.<sup>1</sup> The ongoing question

<sup>1</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of Liturgy* (New York: A Herder & Herder Book, 1998). On the key role played by the work *The Spirit of Liturgy* in the Liturgical Movement see: Burkhard Neunheuser, 'La liturgie dans la vision de Romano Guardini' in Alessandro Pistota, Achille M. Triacca, ed., *La liturgie: son sens, son esprit, sa méthode*, Conferences St. Serge (Roma: CLV, 1981), pp. 179-189; Martin Marshall, *In Wahrheit beten: Romano*

is to what extent can liturgy be analysed within the context of play as he suggested about hundred years ago in 1918?<sup>2</sup> This inquiry often raises a number of theoretical problems which range from a fundamental understanding of play and its celebratory spirit to a consideration of liturgy as an event of the divine *Mystery*. However, the fundamental problem concerns the understanding of play. There is an evident loss of the genuine sense of play. In the age of secular modernity, play might not be capable of mediating the relationship with the sacred and gratuity, which originally characterised the world of play and had already disappeared under the effect of commercialisation and the society of spectacle. Blaise Pascal, moreover, claimed that play seemed to be a futile amusement, distraction and diversion.<sup>3</sup> Such “distractions” may involve behaviour and habits that are merely wasteful and self-deceptive. There are many reasons to support the thesis of Joseph Ratzinger who reflects on the possible risk of reducing Christian worship (Liturgy) to play. Such a consideration he noted is quite dangerous since it lures the Church into celebrating itself.<sup>4</sup>

The second series of consideration involves the significance of liturgy. In fact, the focus here is on the *form* and *category* of activity in which play and liturgy could be recognised. The epistemological issue arising from here is the identity of Christian rite and its interactions with other forms of human activity. Thus, this concern brings us to the following questions: Is it appropriate to deduce liturgy and its theological essence from ludic experience? Does it risk losing the truth of Christian liturgy? Finally, is it epistemologically acceptable to explain sacred liturgy from the point of view of being and performance *sub specie ludi*? In the current moment of crisis and liturgical renewal, the ludic experience does not seem to represent a source of inspiration for liturgical praxis, in spite of the great theological tradition of reflection upon play since the patristic age.<sup>5</sup>

*Guardini – Denker liturgischer Erneuerung* (Sankt Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 1986); Frédéric Debuyst, *Romano Guardini. Einführung in sein liturgisches Denken* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag, 2009). On the concept of liturgical play in Guardini see: Silvano Maggiani, ‘Per una definizione del concetto di liturgia: le categorie di ‘gratuità’ e di ‘gioco’. La proposta di Romano Guardini’, in Ferdinando Dell’Oro, ed., *Mysterion. Miscellanea liturgica in occasione del 70 anni dell’abate Salvatore Marsili* (Torino: Leumann, 1981) pp. 89-114.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction the English language makes between *play* and *game* involves certain difficulties. What the author like Guardini calls *Spiel* cannot be translated as either game or play. However, in the English translation of Guardini’s *Spirit of Liturgy* the word *Spiel* is translated as play.

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, translated by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), n. 169-171, pp. 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) pp. 13-15.

<sup>5</sup> See Hugo Rahner *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). In addition, within Western theology some scholars attempt to define God as a creative player. Play

Nevertheless, play and rite are interconnected irrespective of their phenomenal distinctions. In the course of the systematic theological research on liturgy in the Liturgical Movement, play has been one of the privileged themes. Romano Guardini and Odo Casel, for example, applied this attractive anthropological figure to liturgy in order to grasp the essence of Christian worship and explore the conditions of an authentic liturgical experience.<sup>6</sup> Such an impressive adaptation of the concept of play was aimed at promoting the liturgy as a celebration of divine mystery as well as a world for the subject and their human experience. Instead of being an obstacle, due to its ambivalences and profanity, play became a bond and the basis of understanding being and rite together. In that way, the discovery of *homo ludens* indirectly opened the way to understanding being as *homo liturgicus*.

### Playing and celebrating: towards the ritual play of liturgy

It is important to explore first the nature of Christian ritual performance, by making a phenomenological analysis of the connections between play and liturgical celebration, before delving into the transcendental perspective which tends to consider liturgy as a playful activity. The latter provides an experience of the *divine Mystery* celebrated in the liturgy of the Church. Moreover, the evaluation will be made by considering both the theoretical perspectives and the specific phenomenological aspects.

Phenomenologically, play and liturgy share certain common transcendental features. The most outstanding is the the *celebratory spirit*. It is obvious that celebration directly reveals the abundance of play without losing its “sacred seriousness”.<sup>7</sup> The celebratory spirit of play therefore shows that play in its essence is a ritual performance involving precise rules, patterns and gestures. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of ritual play seeks a further clarification arising from anthropological research for an adequate understanding of liturgy.

could then be thought as a theological phenomenon rather than a purely cultural and anthropological issue. The theology of play having evolved in the 20th century has had a considerable theoretical impact. See also Jürgen Moltman, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Alan Watts, *Beyond Theology: The Art of Godmanship* (New York: Pantheon, 1964). See more recent studies: Francesco Giacchetta, *Gioco e trascendenza. Dal divertimento alla relazione teologica* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2005); Aldo N. Terrin, *Liturgia come gioco* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Nasini, ‘Il “gioco” liturgico in Romano Guardini e Odo Casel’, *Rivista liturgica* 99 (2012), pp. 484-509.

<sup>7</sup> Hans G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 102.

The most influential theorist of play Johann Huizinga (1872–1945) defines play as the primary formative element in human culture. According to Huizinga, play is a free activity, separate from “ordinary life”, unproductive, regulated by an absolute and supreme order at the same time possessing an imaginative function. All these characteristics, however, are profoundly linked with the *celebratory spirit*.<sup>8</sup>

Ritual celebration along with play are free activities. Following its deictic function, rite defines the *where*, *who* and *when* of the celebration.<sup>9</sup> Above all, rite should be separated in time and space; in order to define the subjects of celebration. It should be noted that rite appears as a useless activity, immersed in pure gratuitousness. The ritual celebration is regulated by rules because it is only through the observation of the rules of play that it is possible to reach the celebratory spirit. Hence, rite is a fictional activity, directed by a different logic in the sense that the ritual celebration projects here and now *the world as it should be*; and it constitutes a hypothetical way of feeling and thinking. In this perspective, rite and play resemble two sides of the same reality. As a matter of fact, the anthropological theorists symbolize play as a sort of ritual. This is not due to the analogous formal features but the celebratory spirit which embraces the participants and gathers them into a unity. Finally, play is considered a *holistic experience* because it is made manifest through the celebratory spirit.

### *Festive ethos*

The *celebratory spirit* of ritual play realises itself properly in the sphere of the *feast*. Such a *celebrative* function of play can be emphasised by what the anthropologists call “ethos”.<sup>10</sup> This feature was highlighted by the German theologian, and “the father of liturgical theology”, Odo Casel (1886-1948) in his brief work *Zur Idee der liturgischen Festfeier*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in the Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 21

<sup>9</sup> Terrin, *Liturgia come gioco*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of *ethos* here is understood in the anthropological sense, as it was suggested by C. Geertz: “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world view is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order.” Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Odo Casel, ‘Zur Idee der Liturgischen Festfeier’, *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 3 (1923), pp. 93-99.

Casel links liturgical celebration to an anthropological universe of play by emphasising that play is surrounded by a particular festive mood – a celebratory spirit. He argues that a festive celebration is not only a response to human necessity of recreation and entertainment but reveals a much deeper need for the sense of activity as such. Thus, feast “transfers” being from an ordinary life to a ritual one in which he lives the effervescence of the celebration and within which we perceive the epiphany of transcendence. In the feasts, the human person is gladly dedicated to play without an utilitarian motive by disclosing a high sense of being. The sense appears where human action is not subjected to the functional logic of production, but to the symbolic recognition of the sense reflected in it. The ritual action, in its gratuitousness, is articulated precisely as a joyful event. This is what creates a *festivitas* in which being experiences the profound joyfulness of livelihood and affectionate adherence to the sense of being.<sup>12</sup> In this way, human activity reaches its fullness in a festive ritual play at all times.

However, the ritual play is not a self-reflective action centred on being itself. It is above all an opening and an encounter with the other. From this point of view, Casel underlines a reciprocity between human and divine acts. The ritual act, because of its dramatic character becomes an *epiphany* of the divine (*Erscheinung*) – a manifestation of a higher sense which cannot be produced through human labour, but only received as a gift and participated in. The human action in the ritual celebration is allowed, fulfilled and brought to its fullest sense by the divine action. The liturgical action, therefore, is not a product of particular effects of grace, but the actualisation of the divine event which involves the human person who is being provided with the opportunity to participate in the joyful celebration.

According to Casel, the ludic character of festive celebration does not represent a pure superfluous fact. Asserting that liturgy is “sacred play”, Casel is convinced that play, to the contrary, is the prerequisite for discovering the profundity of the liturgical act as gratuitous epiphany of the divine Mystery. Play shows the liturgical nature of participation and reveals the fact that the celebration is not governed by a rigid causal system of effects, but an encounter between the human liberty and the gift of God’s presence.

For Guardini it is also important to show how the sacred play of liturgy is immersed in the gratuity of God’s presence. Liturgy overcomes a causal logic and realises itself in the logic of gratuity. It is based on what constitutes the essences of play and liturgy as a feast, respectively. Rite constantly occupies the main moments of life. It liberates them of productive oppression, of ordinary and profane

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

everyday life and opens human life towards sacred. In that way, rite is shaped as a celebratory play that enables the realisation of human freedom and its adherence to a higher sense. “The liturgy has no purpose, or, at least, it cannot be considered from the standpoint of purpose.” – declares Guardini.<sup>13</sup> Gratuity is a requirement that the liturgy occur as a celebration. Uselessness and overwhelming gratuity are features transforming ritual play into a kind of “world-play”.<sup>14</sup> Such a symbol, as Eugen Fink defines play, is capable of expressing the presence of the Absolute because it properly contains the character in which the Absolute exists – an all-encompassing gratuity, a complete self-determination. This is the mode of divine existence which does not refer in causal way to the other and it is not determined by something other than itself. Thus, ritual play acts as a festive, epiphanic and gratuitous activity which suspends time, overcomes the rational and utilitarian protocols and opens up towards the protological and eschatological senses.

### *Protological and eschatological sense*

Almost all the theorists of play emphasize the celebratory spirit of play. They acknowledge the ritual nature of play, as well as the playful nature of the ritual that characterize its festive dimension.<sup>15</sup> But what does play celebrate? When we remove all superficial views and prejudices, play from a transcendental perspective appears as a return to the *sources* celebrating the anticipation of the *end*. Play is affirmed as a celebration which comprises in the *now* both the protological origin and eschatological fulfilment. Guardini thus offers two examples to illustrate how ludic activity can be filled with celebratory sense in a protological and eschatological manner: *the movement of the cherubim and the play of children*. Both are pure expressive movements, they flow freely and they both stand for joy and freedom. In fact, they *celebrate* being inserted into God’s life. Liturgy as play is properly realised as a celebration of the divine Mystery. In this light, the liturgy offers all created things to realize themselves *as they should be* as a redeemed existence, immersed into God’s eternal life.

However, except for the figures of *child* and *angel*, the essence of playful rite is found in the fundamental Christological mediation. According to Guardini, liturgy is the play of Wisdom (cf. Proverbs

<sup>13</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Eugen Fink, ‘Play as Symbol of the World’, in Eugen Fink, *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 160-178.

<sup>15</sup> Paola de Sanctis Ricciardone, *Antropologia e gioco* (Napoli: Liguori editore, 1994), pp. 57-107.

30, 31) as is the play of the Son before the heavenly Father.<sup>16</sup> Liturgical action has a participative nature; it is founded on the act in which the Son glorifies the Father, but it actualises itself in analogy with the celebratory spirit of the play of children and the angelic movement. Thus, in the liturgical act, we celebrate the event through which the Son redeemed the world and renewed the image of the entire humanity. The *Holy play*, hence, reveals the celebration of the new creation redeemed by Christ. It entails celebrating liturgy as a renewed relationship with the sacred origin bearing in mind its eschatological thrust. In other words, it is a return to the childlike state in anticipation of the angelic heavenly state. Nevertheless, the depth of play as a protological and eschatological activity discloses the depth of the liturgy as an actualisation of the Mystery of Christ. This demonstrates that humanity is capable of participating in the sacred beginning and anticipating in the final fulfilment.

In particular, play illuminates the nature of the liturgical act, its gratuitous profile; shows a “radical structure” of human activity that is rooted in the principle of participation according to which sense is given only through an effective participation in this fundamental reality. Grace is not only applicable to liturgy; it is an integral part of the practical disposition of symbolic action and experience emerging from that activity. The relation, which is given in the liturgical celebration, is a free, joyful and all-encompassing – childlike and angelic – adherence to the God of salvation. It is in this way that holy play is established as a form of the manifestation of the divine in which human liberty participates and from which it takes strength for its realisation.

Liturgy exists in the perspective of the actualisation of subject and at the same time on the horizon of actualisation of the Mystery. The experience of a ritual play between God and humanity in such sense is paradigmatic: in this event, the human person finds itself in the middle of an initiative which does not belong to it but precedes and enables its activity. Play shows that the sense cannot be reduced to the material nor to the productive aims, but that it emerges from the abundance of transcendence which offers itself as the solemn and sacred *beginning* and solemn and sacred *end*. In fact, in its festive immersion into the sacred beginnings and glorious end, liturgy establishes itself in the festive ethos of “here and now” as an “experience of totality”.

<sup>16</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 67.

### The *mystic meaning* of Ritual Play

Ritual can be compared with play by highlighting only the formal aspects. In phenomenology, nevertheless, the essence of ritual play is incomprehensive if it considers a series of external (formal) features which distinguishes it from others. Otherwise, there is a risk of equating play with fun and reducing liturgy to triviality. Their analogies and differences can be identified only by going into the depths for an adequate phenomenological analysis of “what appears” (*phainomenon*). As a matter of fact, phenomenology does not deal with the “objects” of play or religion rather it is aimed at exploring how the objects are articulated in human perception and consciousness. Play – as we well know – is tied not only to the external objects but to the internal states; it opens up towards the experience of consciousness, attention, precision, coordination, internal attitude, and the experience of totality. In fact, it is a special way of approaching the real, as it actually appears in consciousness and perception. Thus, phenomenology is primarily concerned with phenomena (“what appears”). Phenomenology therefore captures the transcendental modes of consciousness marking the indicators and acts by opening to a specific experience. The real essence of play occurs in the innermost depths, in the modes, experiences, and emotions of the player’s consciousness. That experience shows an extraordinary similarity with the eidetic modalities of the religious experience. At this point, may we note for instance the hypothetical manner of thinking that is common to both play and ritual. They demonstrate the transcendental modality through which being approaches reality in play or ritual and opens itself to the essence, which phenomenologists call *the vision of essence* (*Wesensschau*).

The phenomenological approach to play inevitably attempts to examine the “lifeworld” experience of celebration and its capacity to mediate the *total experience* which the French philosopher and anthropologist, Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1865-1939) calls the *mystic meaning*.<sup>17</sup> Such form of knowledge existing in the “primitive mentalities”, according to Levy-Bruhl, is participative and self-reflective in contrast to modern dualistic and logical mind. Such experience is open to totality and becomes the transcendental meaning of totality.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Gluckmann asserts that ritual is distinguished by ‘mystical notions’<sup>19</sup> In that way, ritualized play leads human thinking, feeling,

<sup>17</sup> Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (London & New York: George Allen and the Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto Tagliaferri, *La violazione del mondo. Ricerche di epistemologia liturgica* (Roma: Centro Liturgico Vicenziano, 1996), p. 213.

<sup>19</sup> Max Gluckmann, *Les rites de passage*, in Max Gluckman, ed., *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), p. 22.



and acting towards the mystical landscapes and shapes it in the form of a *mystic meaning*. Finally, play is an attitude of mind, a perspective of life, together with the action that is involved, it creates, and gains a particular experience of *vision*.

### *The vision (Wesensschau) of the ritual play*

The impact of phenomenology is very crucial since it helps us to understand the cognitive aspects of play in this context. Here, play manifests itself as an opening towards being, or more precisely, it illuminates the modes of access to an ontological experience. Play is presented as a singular relational or intentional mode, a specific way of mediating the sense *for* and *in* the consciousness while ritual play situates the being in the centre of such an experience by opening it to the vision of original sense. Ritual play thus becomes a symbol of overcoming the world by immersing it into the heart of reality as a *total reflection*: the meaning of totality and total experience of being. Hence, experience becomes a particular way of reaching the original play-element generating all kinds of binary oppositions. Rite is an expressive action confronting “the mystical world”; it does not follow any logic of instrumental action with the purpose to reach some goal outside itself. Play and rite both belong to the order of *useless* but *meaningful* actions which do not produce any practical effects rather than to lead human consciousness beyond the ordinary world by supplying a special power of thought and imagination that allows being to touch the original sense. In fact, both inherently imply the dialectics of *forgetting* the world and *sticking to the heart of reality*, both imply mobilisation of the energy of imagery and a specific way of sensing, that is very close to the experience of art as well.<sup>20</sup>

It is from the point of view of theology that Casel and Guardini recognise the necessity of a phenomenological clarification of liturgical experience of the Mystery in the light of play in order to point out the mystagogical dynamism of liturgical celebration which brings humans close to the truth of rite: The Mystery of Christ. In fact, both deal with the modality of access to the Mystery. Such a transcendental precondition of liturgical experience manifests itself in the form

<sup>20</sup> Guardini, besides play, cites art as well as the mode of total experience, because art, along with play – useless but meaningful – shows its power to bring man close to the heart of reality. Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 71.

Hans G. Gadamer founds his aesthetics upon the concept of play-festival-ritual. Discussing the concept of play and festival, Gadamer also emphasises the phenomenon of art and, in considering play in relation to the celebratory spirit of art, he recognises its place as inherent to “the being of the work of art itself”. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 87.

of *mystical meaning* which leaves behind the causal logic and fulfils itself as a *participation* and *total reflection*.

Mystical meaning, as emphasised by Levy-Bruhl in his anthropological studies, is a non-rational and non-logical reflection. As an ecstatic *holistic experience* and a participation in divine presence, it represents an original mode in which Mystery enacts the liturgical mediation. For Guardini, play is nothing else but the original mode of access to the Mystery. Play dissolves the subject-object relation which dominates modern epistemology, and generates participation as a source of approaching the Mystery. The true *spirit of liturgy*, in fact, is given where individuals *plays* with the ritual form and through play experiences beauty, harmony, totality in which grace is incarnate. The liturgy as an event of grace should be lived in this mystico-aesthetical mode which reveals the Mystery, resonating through a particular experience of totality.

What is most remarkable in liturgy is this: a liturgical celebration due to its playfulness has no purpose than that of “living and existing in His sight”, claims Guardini.<sup>21</sup> Such a gaze can be identified as a *Wesensschau* – the vision of essence: liturgy creates a specific point of view, a specific *Weltanschauung* in which being participates in the gaze of God and contemplates the world and himself in the light of God’s vision. Liturgy brings one to the depths of such a vision, in its profundity and otherness; liturgy is thus a continual crossing of the threshold and an invitation to the sacred vision. The convergence in the synthesis of sacred vision becomes a sort of *mystical meaning*, suggests Guardini:

“In the liturgy [being] is no longer concerned with himself; his gaze is directed towards God. In it [being] is not so much intended do edify himself as to contemplate God’s majesty. The liturgy means that the soul exists in God’s presence, originates in Him, lives in a world of divine realities, truths, mysteries and symbols, and really lives its true, characteristic and fruitful life.”<sup>22</sup>

In the sacred liturgy, the divine is manifested in humans not through the objectivistic interpretation and causal deduction, but through the acting and perceiving, shaping, and contemplating, which initiates the person into participation in the divine Mystery and reflection as an experience of self-integrity. The rite allows one to recognise the difference and otherness of the Mystery, and simultaneously to reinforce the selfhood into the participation. Participation, therefore, has both an intersubjective and a self-reflective character. Since liturgy makes transparencies of the divine into human, *homo ludens* discovers himself as *homo liturgicus*.

<sup>21</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 66.

### From ludic to liturgical experience

The phenomenological approach leads us to the fundamental interrogation: What is really *evident* in the experience of those who celebrate and who ‘ritually play’? Can the experience of play illuminate liturgy and its experience of Mystery? The answer to these questions could have been grasped in the previous reflection. The liturgical celebration, as a specific mode of experiencing, points to the deep perception, a *sacred vision* (*Wesensschau*) which is not just a rational speculation, but also imagination, not spirit but also body, not fictions, but profound reality; liturgy is the lived experience of the Mystery recognised as truth, salvation, and gift of life. However, the way of approximating and experiencing the Mystery of Christian worship follows a certain transcendental modality which enables the recognition of a specific mode of reflecting, feeling, and experiencing characteristic for *homo ludens*. The aesthetic and the hypothetical modalities are the two points that can be emphasised within the context.

#### *Aesthetic modality*

The focus here is on play as an aesthetic performance. The ritual form that enacts a festive mood by which humans adhere to the content of ritual celebration is Mystery. Under such a light, individuals discover their ‘ludic existential’ in the series of aesthetical syntheses related to body, imagination, and perception. Liturgy mediates the Mystery through the form of holistic perception. This celebratory fervour which gathers everyone in unity and totality is achieved through different aesthetic modalities. According to Guardini, liturgy “speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colours and garments foreign to everyday life; it is carried out in places and at hours which have been co-ordinated and systematised according to sublime laws than ours. It is in the highest sense the life of a child, in which everything is picture, melody and song.”<sup>23</sup>

From this point of view, it is evident that liturgy exists by playing with the human senses, by enchanting and involving humanity totally in its event. The anthropological holistic experience of melody, formal, gestures, clothes, colours, places and times is not just a presupposition but the form in which liturgy occurs as a human-divine action. Therefore, liturgy intrinsically performs a kind of *aesthetical transformation* of our world, liturgy “transfers” the ordinary things

<sup>23</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 69.

and puts them within a different context of the sacred by filling them with the presence of the divine.<sup>24</sup> This transition from one existential domain to another is marked by the experience of emotional release, well-being of joy, harmony, and integrity.

But at the centre of *sacred play*, liturgy transfigure individuals and their perspectives of openness to the sacred. The one who celebrates is absorbed by the celebration, he “loses himself” and “forgets himself”; becomes an instrument in God’s hands, fills himself with the objective that comes from the depths of celebration, which involves and surpasses him. Therefore, being is not at the centre of liturgical play, as it might be assumed. On the contrary, liturgy takes primacy and decentres the subject by placing the human person in a relative position, in the *relation* to the objective reality of Mystery. “In the liturgy [being] is no longer concerned with himself; his gaze is directed towards God” – claims Guardini.<sup>25</sup> Yet in this intensity lies the very essence, the primordial quality of ritual play and its transcendent order.

Liturgy becomes sacred play by being supported by separation from and suspension of the external world, time and initiation into its own world. Thus, raising the boundaries becomes a requirement for approaching the heart of reality. The construction of a “transitional space” allows the experience of alternative realities and orders. By participating in the ritual celebration, the rational protocols are abolished and a kind of playful stupor is established. Through the embodiment of such an aesthetical consciousness, what is imagined becomes real and reality is fulfilled by a kind of eternal continuance and abundance. All this brings us to the conclusion that the ritual and playful acts constitute a special form of intentional activity in the sphere of aesthetical dimension. In play, the consciousness is initiated into a new dimension of reality, vigilant owing to the margins and deceleration of time, the emotional release of joy and vigour. The affective tonality of joy is an immediate effect of this dynamism. Hence, liturgy both leads to the transcendence of Mystery and self-realization. It implies an overcoming and immersion into the new reality that leads consciousness to a new perception characterised by effervescence and wholeness.

The emphasis on the alogical intensity of play does not, however, entail that the aesthetics of ritual play is merely a reflection of perceptive synthesis. Both play and liturgy overcome the descriptive-analytical modality of reflection, typical for the dualistic, rational approach, and favours an aesthetical consciousness through the liturgical act, space, time, art, speech etc. The one who plays and

<sup>24</sup> Terrin, *Liturgia come gioco*, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 66.

celebrates does not see things from the outside, but is given the inner vision of essence. Play and liturgy as an act that involves the human person totally and inserts him into the new order of existence is therefore a diffused experience; a holistic modality through which individual's lives.

Seen in this light, liturgy occurs not only as an event of the Mystery, but also as an event of the human *coram Deo*. It is a work of an incessant and symbolic construction of our identity. *Liturgical play* is thus expressed as a factor opening, overcoming, and uplifting the human person to a transcendent horizon. At the same time sacred play is an act of intense faith, here understood as a total involvement and adherence to the *spirit of liturgy*. Such an "act of faith" is evident particularly in the second point: hypothetical modality.

### *Hypothetical modality*

*Gratia supponit naturam*. It is precisely this "supernatural" dimension of liturgy that reveals the "nature" of play as the principle of its realisation. *Gratia supponit homo ludens*. Grace is enacted in the symbolic arena of play. "All this is, of course, on the supernatural plan, but at the same time it corresponds to the same degree to the inner needs of [hu]man's nature" – claims Guardini.<sup>26</sup>

As the previous description indicates, liturgy seems to lead not only our body, our senses and thoughts; but it also plays with our imagination; it is constantly expanding into the sacred otherness which does not belong to this order of reality, the reality of liturgy being much deeper.

Recent anthropological researches deal with specific cognitive aspects of ritual activity related to hypothetical modality. J. Z. Smith speaks of the "imaginary nature of the ritual"<sup>27</sup> and A. B. Seligman observes a "subjunctive" or "hypothetical" function of ritual that allows it to create a unique world of participants and gathers their thoughts and feelings as well as their beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, other anthropologists highlight the cognitive aspect of liturgical experience as an interplay between the real and the imaginative.

With respect to the cognitive modality, the authors observe the discovery of the subject's self-reflection in the creation of the

<sup>26</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 69.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 53-65.

<sup>28</sup> Adam B. Seligman, 'Ritual and the Subjunctive', in Adam B. Seligman – Robert P. Weller – Michael J. Puett – Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences. An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 17-42.

subjunctive – *as if* or *could be* universe – which demonstrates the principle of the ritual play as well as the power of the rite to initiate the human person in its event. In the rite, it is *as if* the divine becomes present, whereby the human person is *as if* it lives in plenitude. Moreover, with the idea of ‘as if’, rite has no function of likeness, but it is rather characterised by enactment. It is indeed the subjunctive sense that makes it real and present. This interplay allows the access to the real world of rite. What the rite makes real and accessible to our consciousness is exactly the hypothetical modality ‘*as if*’. The ritual act as well as the ritual language is permeated by a subjunctive use of the invocatory language (desiderative, optative, modal verbs which define the possible world of meaning) and the principle of dramatic imitation (*mimesis*). The participants live the liturgical event *as if* the original event were present here and now; they speak the language which has a function of enacting. By repeating itself, the ritual act “imitates” the primordial event and makes it present. This is what is responsible for the transposition from the subjunctive (*as if* the body of Christ) to the indicative (*this is* the body of Christ). Furthermore, such a representative transcendental function of rite and play proves that all activities are located in the sphere of the possible and the desired, but deeply real and present. Rite however ushers us into the world of possibility, even by performing a decisive transfer from the deeply imagined to the truly real. The same phenomena can be found, according to Guardini, in art: “That which formerly existed in the world of unreality only, and was rendered in art as the expression of mature human life, has here become reality. These forms are the vital expression of real and frankly supernatural life.”<sup>29</sup>

Liturgy is generated from the future, in that which comes in our present, from the whole and holy, the eternal enacting here and now; liturgy does not remain at a hypothetical level, but transfers everything into life, body, and act. In addition, liturgy offers something higher. Therefore, an individual, aided by grace, is given the opportunity to realise his fundamental essence, to truly become that which according to his divine destiny he should be and longs to be, a child of God. Within liturgy, he is to go “unto God, who giveth joy to his youth”.<sup>30</sup> Becoming that which he should be – that is the transformation made by liturgical play.

*Introibo ad altarem Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.* Liturgy does not just “step backwards” in returning the human person to a childlike state, restoring him to *juventutem meam* and enacting the state of *homo ludens*. Liturgy does something much higher and

<sup>29</sup> Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

“steps forwards” – “towards the altar”, not only by initiating the individual into its divine destiny, but by assisting the person in living such a state and by transforming the human person into *homo liturgicus*.

According to this perspective, the hypothetical as well as the aesthetic modality essentially influences the transformation of subject, deeply reflected in his subjectivity, in the consciousness of what he does and what he is. Within the holy play of celebration, the human person not only interprets the rules, the signs or the actions, but, he is put into the interpretation of himself in the light of rite. From the first moment the rite illuminates human beings. Consequently, it considers humans not only as a hypothetical *ludens* but as a real *liturgicus*. With the images of a *child* and an *angel* – the identity of the *homo liturgicus* will become clearer without opposing the human *ludic* nature. Liturgy is the “sacred play” which opens up access to the Mystery and at the same time realises the human being as it leads him to the plenitude of existence. Yet *homo liturgicus* lives in this new order of existence in which he feels the closeness of the Kingdom becoming *like a child* (cf. Mt 18:3).

Such hypothetical and indicative modalities of being express, indeed, the essential characteristic of the relation between the person and the rite (faith). Where there is play, there is also “faith”. Playing makes believing. In the sacred play, an individual acts not only hypothetically by following the rules of the play but also by trusting in them. Through the sacred reality of liturgy, human existence is transformed in the “childlike confidence” with the sacred reality of liturgy. Sacred play therefore brings humans into a *confident mode of existence* and adherence to the truth.

For outsiders, emphasises Guardini, liturgy appears useless. “They incline to regard it as being to a certain extent aimless, as superfluous pageantry of a needlessly complicated and artificial character”.<sup>31</sup> Only those participating in the liturgical play and adhering to its spirit can understand it in the fullness of its sense. Only those playing within liturgy can live a profound experience of truth. Here, the truth does not refer to the external fact, rational and independent of the human realm rather it is an illuminating emergence from the origin, the free adherence to the epiphany of God’s presence, the gratuitous communion and profound faith. Therefore, liturgy can be understood as an epiphanic event of truth which transforms individuals and impress on them the image of what they should be. By being associated with the category of play the transcendence of the liturgy is not reduced, but its relationship of donated communion is

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

fully affirmed; liturgy is not reduced to the immanent desire, but is recognised in the sense of the new, transfigured order of existence.

## Conclusion

Play is an open category. Nevertheless, by using the concept of play, full of potentialities, scholars usually end up equating play with an ideal act carrying certain ritual, ontological experience or protological/eschatological sense. Gratuity, freedom, festive mood all appear as attractive propositions, which are more ingenious than real. Could it be that theologians are too optimistic and overlook the contradiction between real play and real worship of the Church? After all, the reflection of play represents the heritage of Romanticism and at least, the humanistic approach to the “ideal type” of play which recalls a way of thinking typical of Romanticism. However, because of its “unreality”, play appears as one of the original cultural frameworks within which Liturgy can be manifested as ritual openness to transcendence. The phenomenological account of play, its celebratory spirit and ritual patterns as well as its analogies with the ritual act direct this potential transcendental moment towards a categorical level by showing that Christian liturgy is a celebration of gratuitous epiphany of God and his Spirit in Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Along these lines, the transcendental reflection on the experience of play and liturgy is not aimed at imposing certain “significance” to the liturgy, but at discovering *how* the human person approaches particular categorical levels given in the celebration of faith with regard to Mystery as the essence of Christian worship. The ultimate measure is the event of Jesus Christ from which Christian worship finds its source and essence. Worship is *anamnesis* of the absolute event of salvation; it is the enactment of the event in which God in Christ and the Spirit saved the world. Christian liturgy makes this event present, not through human forces, but through God’s action. Thus, liturgy remains the divine epiphany in which the Christological event reaches its sacramental manifestation, representing gratuity in its fullest sense in order to be accepted and participated within.

Consequently, in this account, play is not liturgy; nor can liturgy be reduced to the phenomena of play. Although play remains play and liturgy worship, the ludic element is present in liturgy and ritual element remains the fundamental factor of play. The doxological practice of liturgy brings this “ludic existential” to its final truth: invoking and celebrating God’s presence.

Here it becomes evident that in the experience of divine Mystery, there is always the human experience involved. Play can illuminate the world of human experience in terms of discovering a deep sense of worship *propter nos* without reducing the truth of the Mystery to



human measure. From a transcendental perspective, liturgy emerges as a playful activity and playfulness appears as a fundamental human existential. However, it is a sacred, serious and solemn activity wherein we participate in the divine act experiencing the truly, redeemed, and consecrated Reality.

Although transcendental and categorical experiences can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. The transcendental experience of play is not, however, just an accompaniment to categorical experience of liturgy, a sort of supplement. Play illuminates the rite and the rite illuminates play. “Gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself upon it; but the primary thing is and remains play.”<sup>32</sup>

Although the ritual, along with the playful experience, essentially unfolds within a structured situation, the two phenomena are not purely “subjective”. The celebratory, festive, aesthetical, and hypothetical world of play maintains a favourable condition enabling the real categorical experience without which we would not be able to have any real experience of liturgy. The lived quality of play is always a shaping moment within the experience of the celebration of the divine Mystery: what is experienced in the liturgy is partly determined by its influence upon the structured action and situation. The essential function of ritual play is the modulation of experience: through the celebratory spirit and the festive mood, through the aesthetical and the cognitive mode, and lastly through language and liturgical form.

The absolute event of Jesus Christ does not eliminate the transcendental experience of ritual play. Christ commits his Mystery to the rite. The truth of the Mystery can be preserved only if the ritual maintains its original features, among which the ludic experience ought to be mentioned as well. In the light of the transcendental sense of play, liturgy surmounts the rational, causal principle and establishes a different type of rationality by immersing into pure gratuity, totality and participation. Liturgy thus transfers being from ordinary life to the world of the sacred in order to discover the real image of its personhood (*who it ought to be*).

We would hereby wish to conclude this reflection by pointing out two epistemological claims.

Play undoubtedly helps to reformulate the notion of liturgical experience by revealing the transcendental mode of human experience. Such a reflection promotes the meaning of worship as an event of the Mystery. In that way, two opposites – human and divine – should not be thought separately, but together respecting their specificity. Play, in its inclusiveness and openness, can serve as analytic term for the

<sup>32</sup> Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, p. 18.

purpose of discussion, helping to locate the focus of liturgy – the encounter between the human and the divine in Jesus Christ.

However, liturgy could be epiphany of the Mystery insofar as it remains a playful activity. The transcendental and categorical aspects cannot be separated. This dialectical relationship is central and irreducible. In the liturgy the truth of play is revealed; just as in play the mode of approaching the sacred is revealed. This dialectic resists all logical reductions, wherein the tension between play and liturgy is never erased.

Since liturgy is given and shaped as an action within the transcendental pragmatics, the rite assumes an epistemological value by performing in its proper mode through its special mode of thinking, sensing and believing, and considering imaginations and realities, hypothetical and indicative, and lastly the past and the future. “The ritual act is a theophany and, at the same time, an anthropology (...): the *unity* between subject and object, in the sequence of its relation as *praxis* (dialectic) and *experience* (hermeneutics). *Above all, phenomenologically*, the ritual act is enacted by having in view the *meeting* and *experienced union* between God and man.”<sup>33</sup> Play ranks among the possible approaches to an understanding of that ultimate truth and essence of liturgy (*what* do we celebrate?), in which a transcendental sense of the experience of the Mystery is provided (*how* do we celebrate), and light is also shed onto the question of *who* celebrates.

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<sup>33</sup> Ângelo M. Dos Santos Cardita, *Liturgical Polarity and Symbolic Hermenutics*, in James G. Leachmann, ed., *The Liturgical Subject. Subject, Subjectivity and the Human Person in Contemporary Liturgical Discussion and Critique* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p. 33.