

"Christ is the Protagonist in the liturgy"

In his 3 February general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer, speaking about the encounter with Christ in the liturgy.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the history of the Church, there has often been a temptation to

practise an intimist Christianity, which does not recognise the spiritual importance of public liturgical rites. Often, this tendency claimed the supposed greater purity of a religiousness that did not depend on external ceremonies, which were considered a useless or harmful burden. At the centre of the criticism was not a particular ritual form, or a particular way of celebrating, but rather the liturgy itself, the liturgical form of praying.

Indeed, in the Church one can find certain forms of spirituality that have failed to adequately integrate the liturgical moment. Many of the faithful, although they participate assiduously in the liturgy, especially Sunday Mass, have instead drawn nourishment for their faith and spiritual life from other sources, of a devotional type.

Much has been achieved in recent decades. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council represents a pivotal point in this long journey. It comprehensively and organically reaffirms the importance of the divine liturgy for the life of Christians, who find therein that objective mediation required by the fact that Jesus Christ is not an idea or a sentiment, but a living Person, and His Mystery a historical event. The prayer of Christians passes through tangible mediations: Sacred Scripture, the Sacraments, liturgical rites, the community. In Christian life, the corporeal and material sphere may not be dispensed with, because in Jesus Christ it became the way of salvation. We might say that we must pray with the body too: the body enters into prayer.

Therefore, there is no Christian spirituality that is not rooted in the

celebration of the holy mysteries. The *Catechism* writes: “The mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays” (2655). The liturgy, in itself, is not only spontaneous prayer, but something more and more original: it is an act that founds the whole Christian experience and, therefore, also prayer. It is event, it is happening, it is presence, it is encounter. It is an encounter with Christ. Christ makes himself present in the Holy Spirit through the sacramental signs: hence the need for us Christians to participate in the divine mysteries. A Christianity without a liturgy, I dare say, is perhaps a Christianity without Christ. Without Christ in full. Even in the sparest rite, such as that which some Christians have celebrated and continue to celebrate in places of incarceration, or in the seclusion of a

house during times of persecution, Christ is truly present and gives Himself to His faithful.

The liturgy, precisely because of its objective dimension, demands to be celebrated with fervour, so that the grace poured out in the rite is not dispersed but instead reaches the experience of all. The *Catechism* explains it very well; it says: “Prayer internalises and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration” (*ibid.*). Many Christian prayers do not originate from the liturgy, but all of them, if they are Christian, presuppose the liturgy, that is, the sacramental mediation of Jesus Christ. Every time we celebrate a Baptism, or consecrate the bread and wine in the Eucharist, or anoint the body of a sick person with Holy Oil, Christ is here! It is He who acts and is present just as He was when He healed the weak limbs of a sick person, or when at the Last Supper

He delivered His testament for the salvation of the world.

The prayer of the Christian makes the sacramental presence of Jesus his or her own. What is external to us becomes part of us: the liturgy expresses this even in the very natural gesture of eating. The Mass cannot simply be "listened to": it is also an expression incorrect, "I'm going to listen to Mass". Mass cannot merely be listened to, as if we were merely spectators of something that slips away without our involvement. The Mass is always *celebrated*, and not only by the priest who presides over it, but by all Christians who experience it. And the centre is Christ! All of us, in the diversity of gifts and ministries, join in His action, because He, Christ, is the Protagonist of the liturgy.

When the first Christians began to worship, they did so by actualizing

Jesus' deeds and words, with the light and power of the Holy Spirit, so that their lives, reached by that grace, would become a spiritual sacrifice offered to God. This approach was a true "revolution". Saint Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (12:1). Life is called to become worship to God, but this cannot happen without prayer, especially liturgical prayer. May this thought help us all when we go to Mass: I go to pray in the community, I go to pray with Christ who is present. When we go to the celebration of a Baptism, for example, it is Christ who is there, present, who baptizes. "But Father, this is an idea, a figure of speech": no, it is not a figure of speech. Christ is present, and in the liturgy you pray with Christ who is beside you.

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