Excerpts from

The Sacred Liturgy—Our Encounter With God: A Christological and Ecclesiological Perspective

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Note: The Cardinal’s entire address has not been released to the public. The excerpts below appear on the Sacra Liturgia Facebook page.

Once again, I am very happy to thank His Excellency, Bishop Dominique Rey, Bishop of Fréjus-Toulon, France, for his words of welcome and for his invitation to be present with you again this year at the fourth international “Sacra Liturgia” conference, and to give this inaugural address this afternoon. Your Excellency, the ongoing initiatives that you organise under the name of “Sacra Liturgia” are one of the many valuable contributions to the new liturgical movement in the Church of the twenty-first century. I encourage you to continue them so that authentic liturgical formation and celebration will be promoted further and will increasingly ground and nourish the life and mission of the Church of today and of tomorrow.

Bishop Rey has very kindly referred to the words with which the Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, prefaced the recent German edition of my book The Power of Silence. I am profoundly humbled by Pope Benedict’s words and I take this opportunity to thank His Holiness for this encouragement he has given me as I seek faithfully to accomplish the ministry to which our Holy Father, Pope Francis has called me.

I pray intensely for all those who have the patience and will take the time to read this volume carefully: may God enable them to forget the vulgarity and baseness with which some people have spoken of the “Preface” and of its author, Pope Benedict XVI. The arrogance, the violence of language, the disrespect and the inhuman contempt for Benedict XVI are diabolical and cover the Church with a mantle of sadness and shame. These people demolish the Church and its profound nature. A Christian does not fight anyone. A Christian has no enemy to defeat. Christ asks Peter to put his sword into his scabbard (cf. Mt 26: 52-53). This is the command of Christ to Peter, and it concerns every Christian worthy of the name.

These are very important questions. For whilst today the value of social and humanitarian action is clear, and widely esteemed, the necessity of giving acts of worship priority can be misunderstood or even ridiculed both by those outside of the Church, and are even questioned by some of those within. But as our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has said often, the Church is not an N.G.O. It is something fundamentally different.

To explore this issue and to understand this difference clearly, I propose that we consider three questions: 1. Who is Jesus Christ? 2. How do we encounter Jesus Christ? 3. What is a Christian? When we have answered these questions I think we shall see clearly why the Church stands or falls with the liturgy, and why the Sacred Liturgy enjoys priority in the Christian life. In the light of this, it will be possible to propose some implications for our liturgical encounter with Almighty God in the Sacred Liturgy today.
Modern Christology, as a result of the “quest for the historical Jesus” in which some scholars engaged since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has distinguished between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.” This attempt to separate the historical man from his divine mission resulted in a demythologised version of Jesus; in a Jesus who is almost surprised, as it were, to find himself as the saviour of mankind. This approach emphasises his contingent humanity, with his divinity being seen as a matter of faith, almost something ‘added-on,’ and not a part of his historical reality. In this way of thinking, in matters spiritual and liturgical, Jesus can be regarded more as my brother than as our Lord.

A great deal more can and has been said about the person and natures of Jesus Christ. I raise the question because, if we are to understand the Sacred Liturgy, and if we are to celebrate the rites of the Church faithfully, fittingly and efficaciously, we must be clear about who the person who is at their heart in fact is. We must be clear that the Sacred Liturgy is similar to the encounter with the risen Christ by Saint Thomas eight days after the resurrection: an encounter with the resurrected Christ, fully human and fully divine. It is an encounter with Christ truly alive and present to me, who is my brother, certainly, but who is also, and indeed who is pre-eminently, my Lord and my God, my saviour, my creator and my redeemer.

To put it another way, whilst it is certainly legitimate to study the question of Jesus’ person and natures, and whilst it can at times be beneficial in private prayer and devotional exercises to contemplate one or other of his natures, in the Sacred Liturgy the Church worships the whole Christ. We do not celebrate the “Jesus of history” or “the Christ of faith.” We humbly confess the one risen Christ to be our Lord and God. We do not demythologise him in the sense of trying to strip away all that pertains to the realm of faith: whatever its academic value, such an endeavour is simply not legitimate in the Church’s worship. When we celebrate the Sacred Liturgy we worship him who became man for our salvation, he who was and is fully human and fully divine.

The God we believe in, the one we worship and before whom we stand in silent prayer, is God made man: Jesus Christ. Indeed, in order to bring men his doctrine of salvation and to show them the love of God, Christ, the perfect God and perfect man, acted in both human and divine ways. God condescends to become man so that man becomes God: “Deus homo factus est ut homo fieret Deus,” says St Irenaeus. He takes our human nature without reserve, except for sin (Heb 4:15). God has thus made us partakers of His divine nature (cf. 2 Pt 1:4). Who would not tremble with amazement and fall upon his knees before such an unheard of privilege?

Having established that he whom we worship is the whole and undivided Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, let us ask how it is that we, and how men and women of every age, encounter him? Of course, as God, our Lord Jesus Christ is capable of revealing himself in extraordinary ways to individuals, as the lives of the saints sometimes testify. But ordinarily, how do we encounter he who offered himself in loving sacrifice for our salvation? This question may be answered in one word: we encounter him ecclesially. We come into relationship with Christ in and through the one true Church which he founded for that very purpose. To use the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “It is in the Church that we discover Christ, that we know him as a living Person. She is ‘his Body.’” (General Audience, “The Ecclesial Nature of Liturgical Prayer”, 3 October 2012)
Hence we do not ordinarily encounter the person of Jesus Christ as individuals. Rather, we come into relationship with him in and through the Church. It is certainly possible that our initial contact with Christ may be through the witness and mission of Christian individuals, but even then such Christian persons are more than himself or herself: they are part of the Body of Christ, and what I experience through them is more than simply a one-to-one human encounter: Christ is present there, calling me and inviting me to become part of the Church through the grace of baptism and the graces of the particular vocation alive and working in the Christian man or woman with whom I have come into contact.

Thus, as a member in full and unimpeded communion of the Body of Christ, the Church, my Christian life and ministry are able to grow and to flourish. I, as a human person created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26) take up my God-given place in his divine assembly. I am no longer alone. The desire expressed in the prayer of Saint Augustine, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,” is realised. I have not only encountered Jesus Christ, but as a member of the ecclesia I am able now to rejoice in that ongoing and life-giving relationship with him that is Christian life and, in my turn, hope to receive the praise of the Master of the parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14-30) “Well done, good and faithful servant,” for the fruit that my Christian life has borne.

What is this turning to the east and beholding Christ face to face? It is the very life into which the new member of the Church has been initiated. It is the ecclesial worship of Christ, our Lord and God: the Sacred Liturgy. Standing together with his or her brothers and sisters in an attitude of worship and adopting a common and profoundly meaningful physical posture (facing east) the neophyte takes his or her place as a Christian, as a part of the ecclesia at worship.

I have spoken many times about the importance of recovering this orientation, of facing east in the celebration of the liturgy today, and I maintain what I have said on those occasions. Here I would simply note that in these words of Saint Ambrose we can see something more of the power, the beauty, and indeed of the purpose of facing east, of being united as the Church turned toward the Lord in worship, to behold Christ “face to face”. Let us be clear that what the neophyte is initiated into is the liturgical worship of Christ. He or she physically takes their place in the liturgical assembly. Saint Ambrose speaks of the deacon, the priest, the bishop, and goes on in further chapters of his treatise to explain the spiritual realities incarnate in the many words, rites and other symbols used in the Church’s liturgy. The rites and words and other created ‘things’ which make up the liturgy are themselves infused with divine purpose: they are what we call sacramentals. It is this principle, of the sacramentality of Christian worship, that Saint Ambrose taught his flock—and teaches us today—in De mysteriis.

There is, then, no such thing as a stand-alone or non-liturgical Christian. Every Christian by their very baptism is a liturgical being who in the Church’s worship beholds Christ the Lord “face to face,” who drinks ever more deeply from the wellsprings of grace the Sacred Liturgy opens up, and who find in it the efficacious for all supplication and thanksgiving that the Christian life affords.

The liturgy is not, therefore, the individual — priest or member of the faithful — or the group celebrating the liturgy, but the liturgy is primarily God’s action through the Church which has her own history, her rich tradition and her creativity. This universality and fundamental openness, which is proper to the whole of the
liturgy, is one of the reasons why it cannot be conceived of or modified by the individual community or by experts, but must be faithful to the forms of the universal Church.

The first is that we must recognise that it is a grave and ongoing scandal in the Church of our day that so many of our baptised brothers and sisters absent themselves from the Sacred Liturgy. This is a grave evil which endangers their spiritual lives and eternal salvation. The scandal of the absence of any one of our baptised brothers or sisters from the assembly of the Church impels each of us to exercise fraternal correction in love. Already about the year 67 AD, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews vigorously shook the small number of Christians who had become tepid, and called on them not to abandon religious practice: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,” he wrote to them, “for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Heb 10:23-25). This exhortation also applies to our times.

The Church’s liturgy, as Pope Benedict said, “cannot be conceived of or modified by the individual community or by experts, but must be faithful to the forms of the universal Church.” The liturgy is not drawn up anew every time there is a development in ecclesiology. The Church before the Council and the Church after it are not two separate entities. The Council did not call for rupture, but for development and enrichment. Where there has been rupture it must be healed—not to satisfy some esoteric scholarly desires, but for the good of souls.

The second proposal I wish to make is that we reflect more profoundly on the fact that is the whole Christ himself who acts in the Sacred Liturgy, that first and foremost it is him whom we worship. Such a reflection will, I believe, reveal how a disposition of reverence and of awe is absolutely necessary before all things liturgical, before the privileged divine encounter that the liturgical rites facilitate. It will remind us that we must prepare ourselves for this encounter so that it may be ever more profound, so that we may draw more deeply from its riches and so that it will bear ever greater fruit in our Christian lives. Silent prayer and contemplation, fasting, confession and above all a disposition of profound humility before the great mysteries that the Sacred Liturgy contains and celebrates, are all necessary.

The liturgy is made up of so many small rites and gestures—each one of them capable of expressing these dispositions. Today I would like specifically to propose that we reflect on the beauty, appropriateness and pastoral value of one practice which developed in the Church’s life and tradition, namely the reception of Holy Communion kneeling and on the tongue. For if, as St Paul teaches, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10), how much more should we bend our knees when we come to receive the Lord himself in the most sublime and intimate act of Holy Communion!

The Heavenly Liturgy insists and recommends on prostrating oneself before the slaughtered Lamb: Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Rev 5:6-8)
For our reflection I propose the example of two great saints of our times: St John Paul II and St Teresa of Calcutta.

The whole of the life of Karol Wotyla was marked by a profound respect for the Blessed Eucharist. Much could be said, and much has been written about this. Today I simply ask you to recall that at the end of his life of service, a man in a body wracked with sickness, John Paul II could never sit in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. He forced his broken body to kneel. He needed the help of others to bend his knees, and again to stand. What more profound testimony could he give to the reverence due to the Blessed Sacrament than this, right up until his very last days.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta: this exceptional nun, whose faith, holiness and total gift of her life to God and to the poor are world-renowned, had absolute respect and worship for the Divine Body of Jesus Christ. Certainly, she touched daily the "flesh" of Christ in the dilapidated bodies of the poorest of the poor. But, amazed and full of respectful veneration, she refrained from touching the transubstantiated Body of Christ. Rather, she adored him. She contemplated him silently. She knelt and prostrated herself before Jesus in the Eucharist. And she received him, like a little child who is humbly nourished by his God. She was saddened and pained to see Christians receive Holy Communion in their hands. Here are her own words: “Wherever I go in the whole world, the thing that makes me the saddest is watching people receive Communion in the hand.

In the General Audience of Pope Benedict that I cited earlier (3 October 2012), he cited from his Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est, refering to “the love-story between God and man,” into which we enter as nowhere else in the Sacred Liturgy. In that Encyclical he teaches:

In the Church’s Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has “loved us first”, love can also blossom as a response within us. (n. 17)

Thank you for your attention. May God bless each one of you, particularly in your liturgical apostolates. Please pray for me.

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