

Excerpt of

Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy

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### **PART 3**

### **LITURGY AND BIBLE**

## 1. The Foundation: The Concept of the Unity of the Two Testaments and of Sacred History

The law of the liturgical interpretation of the Scriptures can be formulated thus: The liturgy reads the Scriptures in the light of the supreme principle of the unity of the mystery of Christ, and therefore of the two testaments and of the whole of sacred history, an organic-progressive unity under the primacy of the New Testament over the Old, and of the eschatological realities over the reality of the present economy.

To understand the import of this law, we must refer again to the first chapter, and especially to that outline in which we traced the various phases of the mystery of Christ, and take account of the profound unity which binds these phases to one another. This intrinsic unity depends on the fact that history, centered in Christ, is wholly in the hands of a single, all-powerful director, God Himself, who grasps its threads firmly yet with complete respect for human freedom, and infallibly directs its course, whether in general or in its smallest details, to a single and precise end: the establishment of the heavenly Jerusalem of the redeemed in Christ together with the faithful angels.

In the historical unfolding of this plan, nothing escapes the supreme purpose of God. The phases which follow one another are all realizations and concretizations of one and the same supreme idea. They are ever more perfect approaches to a single ideal, because He who realizes them does not leave them to follow one another chaotically but in an orderly fashion, keeping and a prophetic passage (Law and prophets). Other notable liturgical passages: the triagion of Isaias; some psalms more especially in use, whether every day or according to a weekly distribution or on particular feasts. Everything leads to the conclusion that the Christians too, who in the beginning continued to frequent the temple and whose apostles willingly made their propaganda in the very meetings of the synagogues (Acts 13:15; 15:11), continued to read passages from the Old Testament and sing psalms even when they became separated from the synagogue in their worship.

St. Justin the Martyr, who is the first to give us an adequate description of the way in which the Eucharist was celebrated, mentions expressly (in the first part of the *synaxis*) the reading of the "Memoirs of the Apostles," and of the "writings of the prophets" (*First Apology* 67 [Jurgens, no. 129]). Tertullian adds mention of the singing of the psalms (*The Soul* 9). Later testimony is abundant.

The reading of the Scriptures and the chanting of the psalms took on a very great development in the liturgy, especially in the divine

office, with the rise of monasticism in the fourth century. Then also the cycle of the scriptural readings of the Mass was fixed, often in agreement with the readings of the office, especially on the feasts and in paschal time. The cycle then established remained much the same until our own time and the liturgical revisions subsequent to Vatican II. But there also prevailed, especially under monastic influence, the system of the so-called *lectio continua*, that is, the concept of reading in the course of one year, especially in the office, the passages of Scripture in the order in which they follow in the collection of the sacred books. This too had its influence as historical antecedent upon the later status of the use of the Bible in the Roman liturgy; and at least the concept itself has clearly influenced the reforms of our own times.

For the use of the Bible in the liturgy from the more descriptive point of view, see the chapter by P. Jouan in *The Liturgy and the Word of God* (a fruit of the Strasbourg Conference, 1958), published by The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

always in view the total picture and the ultimate goal. Thus there is an intrinsic connection between these phases: each one prepares and announces the one that follows and is like a first imperfect realization of it; a roughcast, while all are fulfilled in a most perfect way in the last, the general goal toward which they tend.

And since all the phases are nothing but an ever more perfect realization of the unique mystery of Christ, each one of the realities in which this mystery is successively concretized, besides being and signifying that which it is in itself, has also a functional meaning in respect to something else beyond itself which is like the future goal to which it tends. The mystery of Christ in the unfolding of salvation history is fulfilled, therefore, by successive roughcasts, as it were, in which the preceding ones prepare for, announce, and prefigure the subsequent ones.

It is through the texts of the Old and New Testaments that we know the realities of the phases in which the mystery of Christ is successively concretized. It follows that to understand in depth the meaning which the realities spoken of in the Scriptures have in the eyes of God (the only meaning that counts), it is necessary to consider them also in relation to the subsequent unfolding of the same sacred history, since only in this does each one find its connatural fulfillment, its full significance.

The whole of the Old Testament, then, and the realities of which it speaks, besides being what they are, prepare for, announce, and prefigure as if in an initial roughcast those realities which will be realized later in the historical life of Jesus and which are realized continually in the real, mystical life, liturgical and extralitururgical, of Christians in the Church, in the present economy between the ascension and the parousia. In their turn, the realities of the present economy prepare for, announce, and prefigure the realities which will be fulfilled in the final eschatological phase.

Practically speaking, this means that the complete significance of the realities of which the Old Testament speaks can be understood only by a person who places them in relation to the realities of which the New Testament speaks and to those which are now being fulfilled in the Church in the ascetical and mystical life, liturgical and extralitururgical, of Christians. It means also that to understand the full import of the realities which are now being fulfilled in the Church in the ascetical and mystical life of the faithful, a person must consider them first by looking backward in the light of the realities of which the New Testament speaks, and further backward to those of which the Old Testament tells; and then by looking ahead to the light of the future eschatological realities. For only thus will he understand how the realities which are fulfilled today in the Church in the supernatural life of the faithful were prepared for, announced, made possible, prefigured in the history of the world before Christ; how in their own way they were

oughly understood, the texts of the Scriptures, especially of the Old Testament, must be examined under four lights and, as it were, sounded to four depths.

*First:* in the light which these texts, and hence the things of which they speak, had or could have had in the minds of the persons living at the time when the respective texts were written and for whom such compositions were immediately intended. We call this the sense or meaning grasped by the contemporary mind, or better, the "contemporary depth" of a biblical text, viz, the *literal sense*, in technical biblical textbooks.

*Second:* in the light which these same texts and these same things have to the eyes of those who consider them at a later date in the context of events which happened sometimes generations or centuries after the composition of the texts under consideration. In fact, in God's intentions, these later events were destined precisely to concretize in a more perfect way that very idea concretized or expressed at first in a less perfect way, as in a roughcast, in the previous events and texts. It is clear, therefore, that the functional meaning of the prior texts and of the things expressed in them toward those later events will be evident only to the later witnesses of these events, who have at their disposal, for understanding the ancient things, a light which the people contemporary with the original setting could not make use of.

Thus, within the limits of the Old Testament itself, texts and events of an earlier age can have to the eyes of later sacred authors a significance, not arbitrary but true, which far transcends that which the more ancient contemporaries were able to perceive. Thus again, and with greater reason, the whole ensemble of events and texts of the Old Testament, for the sacred authors of the New—and for all the faithful who live after that decisive event which is the incarnation of the Son of God, His redemptive life and death and glorification—takes on a meaning which is not at all arbitrary because first it corresponds to the deep realities of the events, while immensely transcending anything the contemporaries of those events could possibly suspect. All this is the simple and inevitable consequence of the concept of the unity of the two testaments and of history. For the believer who lives in the economy inaugurated by Christ, texts and facts of the Old Testament are illuminated by a new light, because they are considered in view of the realities which have already taken place in Christ Himself, realities toward which the whole of the Old Testament tended functionally. This depth which is discovered by the light of the person of Christ we may call the "Christic depth" of the Old Testament.

*Ephemerides theologice Louanienis*, Vol. 22 (1946), pp. 70-89, and especially 70-71). The reason for this, I think, is that in treating of the question they adhere too much to the terminology of the ancients, who spoke of the "senses" of Scripture. Such a way of speak-

ing, however, gives rise to many difficulties. It is necessary, I think, to pay heed to the things themselves without becoming entangled in the terminology in which the ancients expressed them.

*Third:* but Christ is never separated from Christians, nor are the Christic realities separated from those realities which take place after Christ in Christians and among Christians. Indeed, Christ is in some way extended and fulfilled in the Christian realities. Thus, in the light of the Christian realities, the texts of the Scriptures reveal a new depth. We call it the "Christian depth."

These Christian realities are either extrinsic to each individual and more directly social, such as the Church, the sacraments, the liturgy, or they may be intrinsic because they take place in the interior of each of the faithful, comprising in some way the vicissitudes of the ascetical and mystical ascent toward perfection. Indeed, the mystery of Christ in Christians includes precisely this. Truly, it must be said that these vicissitudes of the intimate and personal relations of each soul with God are in some way the ultimate seal in which the mystery of Christ is fulfilled in every soul. Although they must never be divorced from those realities which are also extrinsic and of which we have spoken, yet it is true that it is to this ultimate seal, intimate and personal, that all the rest is in some way ordained. It is certainly a mistake, therefore, to think that no account need be taken of these intimate and personal realities of ascetical and mystical life when the concern is with reading and understanding the Old Testament in the light of the Christic and Christian realities.

It is not my intention to justify here the arbitrariness of Origen and his school when, with their system of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, they claimed to read in every text of the sacred page even the smallest details of their systematic ascetical and mystical theories, however arbitrary those theories might be. Still, I do not see how anyone can reject the fundamental principle that in the Sacred Scriptures are prefigured and prepared the realities even of the highest ascensions of the perfect life in Christ, ascetical and mystical, and that, in fact, it is precisely these realities which, in the final accounting, will give us the strongest interpretive light for understanding the Bible in the sense intended by God. Nor do we wish to fully justify the manner in which the mystics are accustomed to read the Scriptures. We wish only to invite the reader to reflect whether, in this manner of reading, their fundamental principle is not correct, and whether the scientific reaction in the opposite direction has not been exaggerated. All this, as is easily understood, will be of great importance in the question of the relations between spiritual life and liturgy.

*Fourth:* a fourth light, finally, is necessary to exhaust, insofar as possible, the meaning of the Scriptures, whether of the Old or of the New Testament, namely, the light of the eschatological realities which have not yet occurred, but on which we are nevertheless informed in some way by the revelation of the New Testament. Indeed, with the arrival of the new economy which begins with Christ, the mystery of Christ, or sacred salvation history, has not

quite justified; God really did announce and promise that Israel would be forgiven spiritually, would be liberated from exile in Babylon, and Jerusalem would again become a center of life on earth that was divinely acceptable. The only trouble was that the Jews later concretized this revelation into a material and national ideology, while God intended a much more sublime, spiritual, and universal fulfillment of it, a fulfillment which was verified in the appearance of Jesus on earth (Epiphany) and is verified in mystery every day in the Church, in the Mass, and in souls.

When the liturgy of the Epiphany reads that prophecy in the Mass, it is the whole complexus that is under consideration. The further light which comes to this text with the advent of the Son of God on earth at Bethlehem and every day in the Church at Mass and in the souls of the faithful does not cause the message given Judaism in exile to evaporate but presupposes it, so that the total theological-liturgical meaning of this text read on the day of Epiphany is this: What God promised and announced to the Jews in exile, namely, that in virtue of the Messiah the people of God would be liberated from their enemies and, resplendent with extraordinary glory, would become the center of the whole world, was indeed verified as if in a first very pale sketch in the end of the Babylonian exile, but in reality had its consummate fulfillment in a manner immensely more sublime than that which the Jews could suspect, with the appearance of the Son of God on earth in Palestine many centuries later and with the sacramental coming of the Son of God every day in the Church, in the Mass, and with His spiritual coming into souls. There is no interruption, therefore, but rather a sublimating continuity between the understanding which the contemporaries had of that oracle and the further insights stressed by the liturgy.

In the same way it must be said that the theological-ascetical interpretation of the psalms in liturgical use, to keep from being arbitrary, must start from the sense of the contemporaries, and the other "senses" must always, in some way, be connected with that original one and be a deepening of it, never foreign to it. Otherwise one would fall into full Hellenistic allegories, with no guarantee that we are still understanding the sacred text in the sense of the author, God. In a word: every interpretation of the Bible, including liturgical interpretation, which would want to abstract from the literal, historical sense, i.e., the meaning originally intended by the inspired author and understood by his contemporaries, would build on emptiness.

#### 4. The Deepening of the "Contemporary or First Perspective" in the Texts of the Old Testament Used by the Liturgy

To understand the use which the liturgy makes of the Bible, we must resolutely affirm that the sense which contemporaries had or could have given to a biblical text at the time of its composition is always surpassed

when such a text is used in the liturgy, surpassed precisely by means of that deepening which is obtained by putting the text into relation with the realities which have already taken place in the historical life of the Redeemer in Palestine; with the realities of the Christ-mystery which are verified in a real mystical way every day in souls and above all by way of the liturgy in the present period from the ascension to the parousia; and finally, with the future realities of eschatology about which we are already in some way informed.

Let us illustrate this rule with a series of examples showing the prolongation which the liturgy gives to the sense of the contemporaries. Let us consider first the liturgical use of Old Testament texts accordingly as the concern is with texts which express:

- a) doctrinal affirmations about God, His nature and attributes; or about other things, especially about the relations between God and man;
- b) moral, juridical, liturgical precepts and admonitions;
- c) prophecies properly so called;
- d) historical persons, things, and events.

#### Doctrinal affirmations

If the concern is with texts of the Old Testament which speak, whether under didactic form or under the form of prayer or some other form, of God's attributes, the fact that they have come to be inserted into the Christian liturgical picture and recited by the Church and by the believer in this framework interprets these attributes under a light much more profound than that under which they could possibly appear to the Jews. Actually, a philosophical analysis of such attributes is never made in the Scriptures, but the story of their manifestation through God's action in the world is told. Scripture does not analyze speculatively what wisdom or goodness or power or freedom is in God; rather, it shows God acting in the world with wisdom, goodness, power, and freedom.

Now the record of God's interventions in the world is that sacred salvation history which, as we know, is wholly centered in the mystery of Christ. It is clear, therefore, that with the manifestation of Christ and of the Christian realities, the attributes of God affirmed and sung in the Old Testament appear in the New with a depth unsuspected in the sole light of the Old, but obvious to that of the new reality. That is precisely what happens when the texts of the Old Testament affirming the attributes of God are recited in the liturgy in the further light of the realities of Christ, of the Christian economy, and of the future eschatology.

Thus, for example, in Psalm 135 [Vulgate or liturgical numbering], *Confitemini Domino quoniam bonus* (new translation: *Laudate Dominum quoniam bonus*), in which the refrain *quoniam in aeternum misericordia eius* is constantly interjected, the goodness and mercy of God is exalted as it is

"He who listens to me will not have to blush, and those who act by using me will not sin; those who put me in the light will have life eternal. All this is the book of life and the alliance of the Most High, and the knowledge of truth."

Now, this passage frequently serves as one of the liturgical readings, with evident reference to our Lady. In this context the sense with which the encomium on the wisdom of God is colored is this: The wisdom of God, which was manifested in a marvelous way in the creation of the world and in the Mosaic law, manifests itself in a still more marvelous way in the Blessed Virgin Mary. And in fact one who thinks of the close relationship between Mary and Christ, the concretized and incarnate Wisdom of God, one who thinks of the marvels God has wrought in Mary, of the place she has in the life of Christians, cannot help counting Mary among the most marvelous works of the divine Wisdom: *beatam me dicent omnes generationes quia fecit in me magna qui potens est*. There is nothing arbitrary, therefore, in her insertion into the message of scriptural passages which praise the wisdom of God manifested in creation, in providence, and in the Torah!

Those texts also, so frequent in the Old Testament, in which God the Creator is spoken of take on a wholly new light from the context in which they have been inserted when they are read in Catholic liturgy. For the liturgy, as the New Testament has already done (see Col. 1:15-20), reads the work of creation in the light of Christ, of His work of redemption, and of future eschatology, so that the vision of God the Creator which the Jew could have is different from that which the Christian has.

Hence the oration after the ninth prophecy of Holy Saturday used to say: "O God all-powerful and eternal, wonderful in the disposition of all Your works, may those whom You have redeemed understand that the creation of the world, which took place in the beginning, was not more excellent than the immolation which Christ, our Passover, accomplished at the end of the ages."

In the older rite the "first prophecy" was a reading from Genesis, the creation narrative; now in the Pauline Roman Missal the same passage is the first reading during the Paschal Vigil service. The oration which formerly was read after the first prophecy may now be read after the first lesson. The text of that prayer is: "O God, in a wonderful way You created man, and still more wonderfully You have redeemed him . . ."; one may add: "still more marvelously You will glorify him at the parousia."

The Old Testament often speaks of God present among His people, especially in the sanctuary. Very marked is the sign of God's presence in the erection and dedication of Solomon's temple is related. The deepening of the sense of these texts is obvious when they are read in the Catholic liturgy for

the dedication of a church — material edifice of the spiritual Church, where God makes Himself present in the Eucharistic sacrifice and where the influx of sanctifying grace (derived from the Eucharist for every soul and which can go as far as the mystical experience of the presence in oneself of the persons of the Trinity) is immensely greater than in the temple of Solomon. In fact, in the Office of the dedication of a church, the continual allusions to the presence, still more extraordinary, of God among the people of the heavenly Jerusalem (see, for example, the responsory to the former eighth lesson, the chapter at Lauds, the hymns *Caelstis urbs Jerusalem* and *Alto ex Olympi vertice*, and the first reading of the Mass: Apoc. 21:1-5) prolong the sense of the texts of 2 Paralipomenon on the presence of God even to the triumphs of the Apocalypse.

The prophets of the Old Testament often sing the tenderness and the greatness of God's love for His people, comparing it to that of a husband for his wife (Osse 1:2; 2:3-15; 4:10-19; Jer. 12:7-9; 31:3; Is. 54:5-8; 62:4 ff; Ezech. 16; 23; Mal. 1:2). The whole Canticle of Canticles, after the fashion of a parable, is simply celebrating this conjugal love between God and Israel. The texts of the Canticle are sometimes read in the liturgy in the votive Mass for religious profession and on the feasts of various saints. Transported into these Catholic surroundings, those texts are read in the light of all those manifestations of the love of God for the Church and the individual souls within the Church, especially for Mary, in whose case the relations between God and Israel were but a pale foreshadowing. And in the background is always the heavenly Jerusalem where the nuptials of the Lamb with the Church and with individual souls will have their perfect fulfillment (Apoc. 19:7-9; 21:2 ff).

God the protector of the just and pious Israelite is very often sung in the psalms and in the sapiential books. These texts are often read by the liturgy in the light of the still more wonderful protections which God has granted the just of the New Testament (see, for example, the readings of the Commemoration of Martyrs outside of Paschaltide).

In short, the Old Testament texts of a doctrinal type in which some attribute of God or something of the relations between the world and God is affirmed, when read in the liturgy, are, as it were, deepened and prolonged by it in the light of the realities present in Christ and in the Church and of the realities proper to the consummation of Christ's redeeming work in the eschatological future.

#### Precepts and admonitions

The moral, liturgical, juridical precepts and admonitions directed immediately to the Israelites in the Old Testament are often accepted into the New Testament and held valid in the new economy, and hence are repeated also in the liturgy. But it is clear that these precepts and admonitions as read in

12:1-11, it was clear that the sense of those liturgical precepts is to be seen against the background of the immolation on Golgotha and of its unbloody re-enactment in the Mass.

The liturgical precepts of Exodus (13:1-3, 11-13) and of Leviticus (12:1-8) in the breviary liturgy of February 2, are read with reference to the historical fact of the presentation of Jesus in the temple and to the real mystical fact of His sacramental coming in the Mass.

Very appropriately, therefore, did the former antiphon of the Candlemas procession, still recited in part in the first responsory after the first lesson of the breviary, proclaim: "Adorn your bridal chamber, O Sion" (understand Jerusalem and the Church), "and receive Christ the King. Welcome Mary with love; she is the gate of heaven. For she carries the King of glory, the new light. The Virgin stops, presenting in her arms the Son, begotten before the dawn. Simeon receives Him in his arms and to the nations heralds before Lord of life and death and Savior of the world."

Or the entrance antiphon: "We have received Your mercy, O God, in the midst of Your temple; as Your name, O God, so also Your praise goes even to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is full of justice."

It is proper also that the Catholic worshipper think of the full realization of these realities in the heavenly Jerusalem.

#### Prophecies properly so called

The continuance of the first or original message of the prophecies properly so called of the Old Testament when used in the liturgy is easy enough to understand; we have given an example of it above. Actually, any prophecy properly so called from the Old Testament in its essence touches upon the messianic work, the Messiah, or His reign in the last times, the eschatological era of history; or at least, among the prophecies properly so called of the Old Testament, it is this aspect that interests the New Testament and the Church.

Now, according to the New Testament, the Messiah of prophecy is Christ Jesus; and with Him begin the last eschatological times of which the prophets spoke. These eschatological times are not yet completed, but are still in progress; they will be completed perfectly in the second coming of Christ, in the parousia, and in the final, definitive establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Thus, theologically speaking, the prophecies of the Old Testament about the Messiah and His Kingdom, besides the message which they could convey to their first or original audience, can and should have, as it were, three further levels of deepened meaning, three further stages of integral realization, in the light of which the fundamental sense perceived by contemporary Is-

rachies is prolonged and deepened: the level of Christ's historical life; the level of the real mystical realization of the mystery of Christ in souls and in the Church by means both liturgical (chiefly the sacrifice and the sacraments) and extraliturgical (as takes place every day in the present phase from the ascension to the parousia); and the level of final eschatology.

In the liturgy the prophecies of the Old Testament about the Messiah and His Kingdom are important principally in the period from Advent to the Epiphany, the season during which the mystery of Christ, in its complete unfolding from the beginning of the world to the Apocalypse, is seen in the perspective of the Lord's epiphanic coming.

Secondarily, these oracles have a certain importance also in the Quadragesima-Pentecost period, the time during which the whole mystery of Christ is once more viewed in perspective, but from the viewpoint of redemption. Some particular feasts, such as those of the Immaculate Conception and of the Sacred Heart, may be added for consideration here.

In the Advent-Epiphany period, precisely because the primary objective is the unfolding of the mystery of Christ as that of the coming of the Lord, the scriptural background, particularly abundant in the breviary, is constituted of Isaian prophecies on the future Messiah, His coming, and His Kingdom. Now, the sense which these prophecies had for Isaiah and his contemporaries undergoes a continual transposition in the liturgy by way of deepening, because they are seen in the light of Christ's historical coming on earth in Palestine, of His continual real mystical coming in souls, in the Church, in the sacrifice of the Mass in the sacraments, in the private life of every Christian soul, and finally in the light of His future second coming at the end of time.

Thus when the Roman liturgy on the Fourth Sunday of Advent recites the entrance antiphon, "Drop down your dew, O heavens, from on high, and let the clouds rain down the just one; let the earth open and bud forth the Savior" (Is. 45:8), this is indeed the cry of the Jews who, in the exile of Babylon, awaited the coming of the Messiah, liberation by the hand of Cyrus (see the former fourth lesson in the Office of Ember Saturday in Advent), and the establishment of the kingdom of God—all things which God was promising by the mouth of His prophet.

But in the vision of the liturgy, Is. 45:8 is also the cry of the whole Old Testament for the coming of Christ, an event realized by the incarnation of the Son of God and His birth of the Virgin Mary in Palestine. Is. 45:8 is also the cry of every Catholic who annually awaits the feast of Christmas, in fact, who each day awaits Christ's sacramental coming in the sacrifice of the Mass and His mystical advent into the soul. And it is, finally, the cry of this same individual as he awaits the second and triumphal coming of the Lord in the parousia and the beatific vision.

