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60 Years and looking forward: possible liturgy futures

By Gerard Moore

There is no need to warn against predicting the future. We are all too well aware that the future is an unknown land, and any prior mapping of the terrain a trifle premature. Yet, there are inklings in the present, and indeed in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, that do allow for prophecy. The future may be different, but there are forces in the present shaping it. What follows is a forecasting of where those forces can lead!

Voice: whose voice?

The move to the vernacular, the resultant worship in our own language, and even the ructions around translation and its processes all open onto the question of 'voice'. We are now praying in our own language, experiencing the rites as comprehensible, vocalising the responses, hearing commentary and engaging with the ritual forms. The scriptures are proclaimed in our tongue and the psalms sung in our language. This remarkable turn of events, overturning over a millennium of poor practice, has transformed us and our baptismal belonging. However, it is but a beginning.

What begins to emerge from a critical review of the scholarship that led to the reformed rites is the question of whose voices are we hearing in the texts and the rituals. It is not an obvious question but let me put it this way. Each rite, each prayer, each chant, each rubric has behind it author/s, editor/s, a receptive community and a smoothness polished from use. The Kyrie, the introit, the collect, processions, the Roman Canon, unleavened bread all emerge from particular circumstances and are a response to communal requirements. They are a snapshot of a past community, and traces of that origin are embedded within them. In a way this should not be surprising as all texts and documents have this characteristic: it is the way of being in language and history.

It is precisely here that our reform needs to take a deep breath. The liturgy that was reformed had remained outside the norms of vernacular development. The prayers, rites and ministerial roles were somewhat 'static'. We still pray orations written fifteen centuries in the past. The experts guiding the conciliar reform of the liturgy, all specialists in ancient texts, held to the importance of bringing these ancient, indeed venerable, voices and forms and roles into the present. In part this was an accident of their scholarship: they were asked to lead the reform because they knew the recently discovered ancient sources so well. Further, the Church leaders and their experts saw the path forward to a renewed liturgy through the lens of 'organic development' so that the new prayers were a continuation of the ancient liturgy, yet now translated. Newly minted prayers tended to be retrieved from ancient sources or prayers combined from parts of ancient prayers or inspired by the documents of Vatican II. The initial Vatican II inspired creation of new liturgical books was a bold

and innovative adventure, however if the process is maintained beyond its current sixty years it will begin to appear timid and too backward looking. We are now facing the question of voice!

Before we go further it is important to set one theological truth in place. There is only one text that remains unchanged across time and geography and culture, and that text is the scriptures. All other writings and rituals are passing and have no particular right to remain in use or unmodified.

Whose voice then are we using when we pray? The Roman Canon and its multiple prefaces, the Roman collects, the Roman processions, the Roman chant reflect the theological, cultural and aesthetic practices of the later phases of the Roman empire. There are some variations between Rome and Milan, and still further stylistic differences between the prayers from Gaul and those of Roman origin. Many of the prayers are responses to particular historical situations, whether the siege of Rome, a fracas in a monastery, the celebration of a pagan festival, the devotion to a particular saint. Moreover, these prayers all have particular linguistic features characteristic of Roman tastes. The Roman Canon, the prefaces and the collects all reflect different literary forms and musical modes. Now that we are hearing these prayers in translation as our own prayers, can we not ask: if the Romans could create prayers in their language can't we create prayers and prayer forms that match the genius of our language, and reflect the particular circumstances of our history? Where is our voice? Why is the Roman voice a privileged one?

There is also another level of 'voice'. The ancient Roman prayers we continue to pray were most certainly written by male clerics and so reflect only one aspect of the experience of the events and needs of Rome and its citizens. This was further reinforced in that the ritual forms were almost always led by male clerics. This is no longer sufficient for the community of the baptised.

This discovery that there is 'voice' behind our prayers, that they are not timeless classics but classical exemplars of a particular place and time and culture, opens up the challenge of the future. Whose voices will inform our prayers. Will we create orations that reflect the thought patterns and experiences of women, migrants, differently gendered, non-clerical males, emerging adults? To do this is to create a living liturgy, one which closely identifies with the dynamics of ancient Roman prayer-making, though differs in content and context.

Culture: whose culture?

Voice is embedded in culture. There is a working supposition in the reformed liturgy that the primary exemplar for worship is found in the culture of the city of Rome, perhaps across the third to the seventh centuries. This accounts for many features to which we are accustomed, such as the style of the Roman Canon, the genre of the collect, the shape and use of processions, the preference for chant. It also reflects why some aspects of worship are curtailed or discouraged, such as dance, song singing, bodily movement. Many of these aspects reappear in devotions, so they are not entirely lost to us. However, the point here is that there is nothing sacrosanct

about the culture of the city of Rome. It is not a biblically prescribed requirement for faith or worship.

There is much of Western culture and history that is at home with the Roman substrate, but there is little to recommend it as essential to the faith to the churches of Asia, Africa, South America and the South Pacific. Nor is there necessarily value in the ways of a particular ancient city being imposed on indigenous peoples worldwide.

The reforms of Vatican II uncovered that the 'norms of the fathers' (or variously 'the vigour of the fathers') were responsive to the cultural and historical circumstances of those patristic times. The next stage of the reform is to bring this radical cultural openness to the cultures and languages of the people of faith. One example perhaps may suffice. The Roman collects are renowned for their brevity and succinct form and lauded as good examples of prayer. Yet in cultures where there is a strong emphasis on oratory such as in the South Pacific cultures, the collect does not pass the test as a true prayer. It is too short, with too little involvement of the people, and too little virtuosity. As beautiful an oration as they are, the prayer is not a universal form.

Why on this night of nights do we ...?

Once the imperatives of voice, culture, history and body have been given space for discussion we are left with the type of questioning we see in the interrogation of the youngest around the Jewish Passover meal: why on this night of nights do we ...?

The ongoing reform of the liturgy means that while these questions may remain suppressed, they are common to many of the faithful and the formulaic responses no longer hold. Why is leadership understood only within an ancient Roman model of power? How do the voices and experiences of women, different language groups, racial communities become manifest in worship so that its incarnational groundings are respected, explored and celebrated? How is the leadership of men more conducive to participation in the divine? Where does the exuberance of the Spirit find its place in our worship? Why are there so few musical forms in the liturgical books? If the Roman liturgy emerged out of a rich appropriation of pagan prayer forms, why do we think this creativity ought to remain frozen in the seventh century? Why do we imagine that the communion wafers have any relationship to bread? Why is the cup so guarded from the faithful? What are suitable cultural forms of leadership, and how are they able to be reflected in worship?

To date the reform of the liturgy has concentrated on what can be learnt from the riches of the Latin liturgy of the city of Rome. This learning has enabled a revision of prayers, a decluttering of unnecessary accretions, a greater appreciation of symbol and rite as engaging and transforming, and an opportunity to worship in the vernacular. Yet what remained unexplored is that the Roman rite itself emerged through a highly creative process that reassessed the Greek language liturgy of the earliest Christian communities in the city, reimagined the liturgy in the more vernacular Latin, and then set about worshipping and evangelising through that

medium. Our reform has accepted the riches of Rome, but not yet embraced the dynamic of cultural transformation that gave rise to those very riches.

Beyond the future as based in the past

To a degree the above reflections represent a sally forth into the future by revisiting the past. While much more could be said, there is also the question of the future marked by present advances unknown in earlier times.

The primary one is the death of the 'book' as we know it. Let me start with an example. As you read this, a library of 20,000 theological books is being transported from Sydney to Borneo. It will form the basis of a resource for a new Catholic Seminary and proposed Catholic University: we are mightily chuffed that our books and periodicals are going to such good use. However, on a larger frame, it is one more signal of the end of the book as such. It is not the end of reading, of writing, of scholarship or research. Rather the artifact we are so comfortable with and so comforted by has no longer the currency that it formerly had. Academic resources have moved online, and our students will now have access to tens of thousands more books and journal articles than previously. And yes, there is some grieving in this (and you may well be experiencing some shock yourself), however the technology has changed us, and there is no turning back.

Firstly, the new environment is a reminder that we thought the printing press and its mass product, the accessible book, were a permanent part of the cultural landscape. Now that that idea no longer holds, we can ask about how the artifact we call a book has shaped our liturgical imagination.

For technological, ecological, economic and practical reasons, the ongoing production of official liturgical books will be truncated and may cease entirely. We will access rituals online, using tablets, phones and unknown technologies. The scriptures will be proclaimed and the rites led from online versions. This will be a different experience, but as unusual it may be for Western communities, it may not be so different for worshippers in poor countries where technology is becoming available under different models of use and ownership.

There are at least three sets of implications. The first is around use and control. Once we enter the online environment, we enter a world of choice and self-authorising. We will be able to 'swipe left or right' around liturgical choices. There is a sense in which authorised rituals will no longer be such controlling texts. We will be able to access liturgical forms from other churches, some inimical to Catholic worship. We will save our 'favourites'. The members of the congregations will have their own devices on hand. This is only the beginning of the questions that will emerge.

The second implication is around our valorisation of 'liturgical books' in themselves. The revision of the liturgy has been built around the revision of the Roman Missal, its Lectionaries, the Book of the Gospel, the Ritual texts. This in turn was built upon the consequences of the somewhat accidental decision of the Council of Trent to allow the Roman curia to act as a control point for sanctioned liturgical texts, a role which was expanded to become the sole point of control. This was only possible because

of the technology that printed books. One of the many effects of a book is that it is able to 'capture' knowledge and 'present' it. Hymn books are a good example of this, as are books of blessings and sets of intercessions. Knowledge stored in the iCloud is no longer able to be 'captured' in the same way, nor accepted so passively. Soon the educated and uneducated faithful alike will have a different relationship to books and might not even own any. This is not quite the place to explore these shifts, nor to offer a stronger critique of the way that 'books' have defined Western civilisation and played their part in the colonisation of oral cultures. It is more than likely, however, that a text such as the Book of the Gospels, so prominent in rites of procession and proclamation, is fated to become another venerable piece of inherited tradition rather than a dynamic liturgical presence.

The third implication is around the way the baptised of the future will receive teaching and worship. As participants they will not necessarily be readers! They will be learners, however, taking in a vast array of facts, experiences, concepts, thought pieces and the like through multiple media. And they will come to expect a worship service that reflects and takes up multiple media. Children raised on iPhones and tablets already have a brain wiring slightly different to prior generations, and this is just the beginning of a new trajectory for brain development, just as the printing press was many generations back. These 'new' content receivers will also be active content creators. We will compile liturgical texts differently in the future, just as we have compiled them differently prior to the printing press and then through the printing press.

Drawing uncertain conclusions

The future will be different. The scholarship that underpinned the reforms of the liturgy allowed for a revised worship and a retrieval of the tradition. The stage is now set for a deeper dive into the tradition, and a reappropriation of the dynamics and creativity that gave rise to ancient liturgies and their forms. This dynamic involved history, context and 'voice', offering us a way to bring voice, culture and context to our worship.

This creativity and attention to culture comes at a junction in the development of humanity itself, and in particular our access to information and 'mastery' of knowledge as well as our 'mastery' by knowledge. The revolution we are part of is far broader than that brought in by the printing press, and we live between both worlds. That straddling of eras will pass soon enough, and The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy will be called upon to guide the Church into a different horizon. The future coming of the Lord will be him riding on the iCloud!