

2016

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This article was originally published as:

Pang, L. (2016). Spiritual growth through authentic worship. *Compass: A review of Topical Theology*, 50 (3), 4-6.

Original article available here:

<http://compassreview.org/spring16/3.pdf>

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SPIRITUAL GROWTH THROUGH AUTHENTIC WORSHIP

LAWRENCE PANG

Frequent sharing of the Eucharist guarantees God's grace for us.¹ While this slogan which appears at a recent First Holy Communion for children has merit, it calls for deeper reflection. The truth is that years of mechanistic responses at Mass can set in place a spiritual lethargy that drains an enthusiasm to link the Eucharist to life in the real world.

Of particular interest for his paper is the Sign of Peace and Presentation of Gifts. In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI notes the great value of the Sign of Peace especially in a world fraught with fear and conflict. However, he urges restraint in the liturgical exchange of peace lest it becomes a 'certain distraction.'¹ To that end he has asked 'the competent curial offices to study the possibility of moving the sign of peace to another place, such as before the presentation of gifts to the altar.'²

The proposal to link the two activities is noteworthy in view of their potential to promote spiritual growth and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:23-24, which the Pope cites. This short paper ponders on the reapplication of Amos 5:21-24 by Jesus in Matthew 5:23-24. It closes with a reflection on Karl Rahner's insight on the inseparable bond between our liturgical life and life in the real world.

Amos 5:21-24

The prophet Amos ministered to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE). Under

Jeroboam's rule, Israel enjoyed relative political peace and, as a result, prosperity came for many in the nation.³ Instead of improving conditions and relations in the relatively homogenous economic structure, it gave rise to sharp distinctions of wealth and privilege. A stark contrast between the luxury of the rich and misery of the poor emerged and the poor became a target for legal and economic exploitation (Amos 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-12; 8:4-6)⁴. Meanwhile, religion flourished. People thronged the shrines at festival time (Amos 4:4-5; 5:5-6) to offer elaborate sacrifices to God (Amos 5:21-24).⁵ The prophecy of Hosea, who was a contemporary of Amos, affirms the state of affair in the north. His criticism verifies that Israel's economy was prosperous, but it had led to apostasy (Hos 2:8-13; 8:4b; cf. Amos 5:10-17) and moral decadence (Hos 4:2).

As spokesperson for God, Amos berated the Israelites for practicing a form of religion that ignored and condoned the apparent social injustice. He seized their attention with a stinging introductory rebuke: 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies' (Amos 5:21).⁶ He followed with further caustic condemnations (Amos 5:22-24)⁷:

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, *I will not* accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals *I will not* look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of

your harps.

But *let* justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The use of strong Hebrew terms in verses 22 to 24—the negative ‘I will not’ and the imperative and jussive verbs “take” and ‘let’—reflects God’s utter disappointment and resentment with the people’s offerings. Yet, God’s demand for justice and righteousness seems radical. It seems to suggest that the Israelites can gain righteousness for themselves through acts of justice in the social realm. The rejection of their festivals and liturgies (Amos 5:21), sacrifices (Amos 5:22), songs and music (Amos 5:23) indicates that these are not sufficient in themselves to maintain right relation with God. Moral conduct, according to Amos 5:24, is integral to their relation with God. Without it, there *is* no relation.⁸ Amos’ audience does not seem to have thought that right relation with God depended on anything other than sacrifice.

The idea that worship also entails just deeds and attitude appears foreign to them. Sacrifice was the means to preserve or reestablish their righteousness before God.¹⁰ Amos’ demand was so radical and his prophecy of doom was so startling that Amaziah, the priest of the Bethel sanctuary, insisted he returns to Judah and ‘never again prophesy at Bethel’ (Amos 7:10-13). In Amaziah’s view, Amos’ demand was heretical.

So when you are offering your gift at the altar,
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
leave your gift there before the altar and go;
first be reconciled to your brother and sister,
then come and offer your gift.

The Greek imperative verb ‘leave’ in verse 24 further reinforces the prerequisite of right conduct before worship. According to Jesus, a gift is unacceptable so long as *salôm* ‘peace’ is lacking between the worshipper and a member or members of the community.¹⁴ In other words, ‘peace’ is not simply the lack of personal turmoil, but the absence of social



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Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus echoed Amos’ imperative for justice before worship many centuries later. Firmly rooted in the Jewish scriptures, Jesus reapplied Amos’ words concerning worship and life in the real world to the people of his time (Mt 5:23-24).¹¹

His action in the Jerusalem temple (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-18; Lk 19:45-46; Jn 2:14-17) was also considered so disruptive and unorthodox that the chief priests and scribes plotted his death (Mk 11:18). They heard that he had lambasted the moneychangers and those selling doves for turning the temple into a ‘den of robbers.’ Yet, the business transactions were essential for fulfilling the divine commands for sacrifices (*e.g.* Lev 1:14; 14:30) to restore relationship with God. Nonetheless, Jesus was enraged at the corrupt practices and profiteering in the temple precinct.¹² His hostility towards their blatant

harmony as a result of one’s action or inaction. Thus, worship life cannot be partitioned from life in the real world as if the latter has no bearing on the former.

Karl Rahner

Karl Rahner has shed important light on this

issue: ‘The human community's ongoing communion and cooperation with God in history is *the* liturgy, the primary and original liturgy.’¹⁵ It lies within the history of the world.¹⁶ He calls this liturgy the liturgy of the world and urges Catholics to think of it as an inseparable part of their liturgical life:

When we think of liturgy, we should think first and foremost of the liturgy of the world. Worship is not primarily what happens when we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist; it is primarily what happens when we cooperated together with God in history. Liturgy is not originally the praise we give to God when we pray; it is what happens when we freely immerse ourselves in the abiding, absolute mystery during the great and small moments of life.¹⁷

Having said that, the liturgy of the world does not diminish the liturgy of the Church because the two liturgies are intimately related.

According to Rahner, ‘The liturgy of the Church is one way in which the liturgy of the world is revealed and celebrated.’¹⁸ The liturgy of the Church is a public proclamation of cooperation with God *in* history—through the liturgy of the world. The two liturgies merge as one event regardless of where one is located—in the world or in the Church. ‘Worship, then, is not fundamentally something we need to make extra time for in our daily schedules. We should, on the contrary, allow all the activities we are already involved in to be transformed into implicit acts of worship.’¹⁹ As these occur more regularly, our liturgical life becomes more authentic. Incorporating both horizon and vertical dimensions, we grow in confidence knowing that God will be delighted as we gather to celebrate the Eucharist (*contra*. Amos 5:21-24; Mt 5:23-24).

NOTES

1. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Vatican Website, 24 June, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/document/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html, para. 49.
2. Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, para. 49.
3. James Luther Mays, *Amos* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 2.
4. Mays, *Amos*, 3.
5. Mays, *Amos*, 3.
6. All translations are taken from the NRSV; Amos 5:21-24 was probably delivered at the Bethel shrine. James Limburg, *Hosea--Micah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 104.
7. Emphases in italics mine.
8. John Barton, *The Theology of the Book of Amos* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 68.
9. Barton, *Book of Amos*, 67.
10. John D.W. Watts, ‘Elements of Old Testament Worship,’ 26, no. 3 (1958).
11. Mt 5:23-24 belongs to the first of five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. It is

significant that Jesus' demand for authentic worship is only found in Matthew, which has often been considered as the teaching gospel. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 9.

12. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Dallas: Word, 1998), 601.

13. Emphasis in italics mine.

14. The Hebrew word *shalom* “\`peace”\` derives from *saalem*, which means ‘completion and fulfillment—of entering into a state of wholeness and unity, a restored relationship. G. Lloyd Carr, Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 930-931.

15. Michael Shelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 93.

16. Shelley, *Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*, 93.

17. Shelley, *Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*, 93-94.

18. Shelley, *Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*, 94.

19. Shelley, *Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*, 101.