

# Liturgy – What does it mean.

The New Testament speaks of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, fulfilling the times of his priestly "service" in the temple. St. Luke uses the Greek word "leitourgeios" to describe this.

Our word "Liturgy" therefore means "service", in the sense of serving God with public communal worship. We might be tempted to think of liturgy simply meaning "ritual" or ceremony – while Liturgy certainly includes ritual it is something much deeper, it is more than just the communal expression of our personal feelings of devotion.

Liturgy is central to Christianity and is an integral part of our family relationship with God. The signs, symbols and sacred actions which form our public prayer and worship spring from the language and events of God's own self-revelation to us. Our liturgical celebrations arise directly out of the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ and are part of the very means by which we enter into the mystery.

At the heart of the Eucharistic Liturgy (the Mass) we join in the song of the angels: "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of your Glory" this hymn in praise of the Blessed Trinity helps us to grasp why God created anything at all.

So to adore, worship and serve God is never an individualistic activity. Every creature in its own way and in its own order gives glory God by its own existence. But all creation together forms a single cosmos to the Glory of God.

From the very beginning we have sought relationship with the divine, both within the individual heart and as a family seeking to live and grow together under a rule of spiritual wisdom. The human being is a religious animal.

The religion of Israel was centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. Here were held the great festivals which enacted and renewed the covenant between God and his chosen people.

Jesus The Christ, would gather a universal people, bring in a perfect worship, joining the people's praise with the eternal worship of the angelic choirs, and finally liberate humanity from the power of sin by engendering inner purity of mind and heart, instead of mere conformity to ritual law. He would bring about lasting peace and communion between heaven and earth.

When Jesus came He went to all the key feasts days in the temple and publicly claimed to be, in person, the fulfilment and real meaning of the liturgies which were being celebrated. During the New Year festival of lights he said: "I am the Light of the world".

In the middle of the feast of purification of the temple, when the altar and sanctuary were awash with water, he said: "if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink".

Around the Passover feast of unleavened bread one year he taught: "I am the Bread of Life". He even proclaimed that His own Body is the new temple, the holy of holies, where God dwells among men and we enter into communion with Him.

**Most** obviously in the case of the Eucharist, the whole of the Church's sacramental liturgy is marked by the Passover or "Paschal" Mystery of our Lord's death and resurrection.

This is the whole character of our belonging to God in Christ. This is the transformation that is being worked in us through the celebration of the sacraments. This is the shape and movement inherent in all liturgical celebration, as indeed in the whole of spiritual life.

We are enlightened by The Word of God, purified by the Grace of Christ, and brought into union with the Father in the Holy Spirit – from the joy of revelation, through the sorrow of redemption, to the glory of the Kingdom.

**This sacramental, paschal, Trinitarian liturgy of the Church is therefore more than mere expressive drama. It is the living out as well as the acting out of our relationship with Christ to the Father and of our mutual relationships and vocations to one another in His Holy Spirit.**

Liturgy is also a great rejoicing and celebration in the victory of Christ. Images of glory, hymns of praise, expressions of the power of grace, sincere and humble thanksgiving offered from lives redeemed and re-ordered again by Christ, are all found in the celebrations of the Church and can be enhanced by music, vestments, gestures and settings.

The Liturgy is the foretaste of heaven where the saints and angels gaze on Him and are suffused with blessedness, which is why the liturgy refers frequently to this great cloud of witnesses who form the heavenly court. It is natural then that our liturgy also contains the language of silence, deep moments of contemplation prayer, loving adoration and awe.

There is a certain room in all this for pastoral flexibility and local tradition too – always aimed at greater reverence, clearer faith and more authentic love, and always within the discipline of the Church. It should not be the stamping of a single human personality, either priestly or that of a semi-professional lay minister of the communal worship, nor the importing of the transient and the trendy simply for its own sake.

In the celebration of the Eucharist, the glorified Christ becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine in a way that is unique, a way that is uniquely suited to the Eucharist.

In the Church's traditional theological language, in the act of consecration during the Eucharist the "substance" of the bread and wine is changed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the "substance" of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

According to Catholic faith, we can speak of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist because this transubstantiation has occurred (cf. *Catechism*, no. 1376).

This is a great mystery of our faith—we can only know it from Christ's teaching given us in the Scriptures and in the Tradition of the Church.

Christ's presence in the Eucharist is unique in that, even though the consecrated bread and wine truly are in substance the Body and Blood of Christ, they have none of the accidents or characteristics of a human body, but only those of bread and wine.