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## Aidan Kavanagh: Liturgy as *Theologia Prima*

Aidan Kavanagh is the scholar who has most persuasively articulated the influential idea that the liturgy is the primary theology of the Church, the primary enactment of the Church's faith. He has done so with a unique and memorable voice. It is a voice at once urbane yet alive to common speech, erudite yet deeply respectful of "Mrs. Murphy," elegant yet clear, Roman Catholic yet ecumenically engaged, faithful yet richly academic, humble—dutiful, even—yet imperious and epigrammatic. You will recognize that voice in the passage below.

Kavanagh is a native of Texas, with both Baptist and Episcopal background, who became a Roman Catholic and a Benedictine monk of St. Meinrad's Archabbey in Indiana. He was educated at St. Meinrad's and at the University of Ottawa, and he received his doctorate from the University of Trier in 1963, with a dissertation reflective of his past and future ecumenical engagements: "The Concept of Eucharistic Memorial in the Canon Revisions of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury." He became the first professor in the graduate program in liturgical studies at Notre Dame University in 1966, and he left a profound imprint upon that program, shaping its enduring interest in both ritual studies and liturgical theology as well as liturgical history. In 1974 he became professor in the Yale Divinity School, where he exercised a similar influence in the ongoing development of the Institute of Sacred Music and where he entered into the rich dialogue of Yale University. In 1976 the first Berakah Award of the North American Academy of Liturgy was presented to him. At the occasion of that presentation he responded with an exquisitely crafted confession of the failings and unbegun work of liturgists, himself preeminently

included. After all of this extensive work, it was only in 1978 that he began to publish his primary, book-length contributions to liturgical theology. He continues his contributions to this day, now as a respected professor emeritus at Yale University.

Kavanagh's major contributions to liturgical theology include his accent on *theologia prima*, his lifelong interest in conversion, initiation, and the *change* effected in liturgy, and his critical interactions with *ritual anthropology*. The discussion of all three of these crucial themes in liturgical scholarship will, at some point, always need to be traced to Aidan Kavanagh. While all three themes are pungently expressed in the excerpt included here, they may also be explored in greater detail in *The Shape of Baptism* (1978), *Elements of Rite* (1982), and *On Liturgical Theology* (1984). The same themes also animate his important 1983 response to a report on the work-in-progress of Geoffrey Wainwright.

Readers should be urged not to be so enchanted by the elegance of Kavanagh's voice nor so offended by his apodictic style as to fail to grasp the content. All of the churches are rightly called to canonical and eschatological responsibility in the Presence of the One who is saving the world. If, in Kavanagh's work, the readers do not find the secondary role of the liturgical theologian—the one who “reports the liturgy”—clearly enough distinguished from the awesome importance of liturgy itself or do not find enough realism about the actual changes that liturgy effects, then they should recall the critical humility of the 1976 Berakah laureate. This is a man at work on questions that matter. The style is only a slightly veiled self-protection before the vertiginous Presence. And the principal convert is the author himself.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

*The Shape of Baptism*. New York: Pueblo, 1978; *Elements of Rite*. New York: Pueblo, 1982; *On Liturgical Theology*. New York: Pueblo, 1984; “Liturgical Business Unfinished and Unbegun,” *Worship* 50 (1976) 354–64 (Berakah response); “Response: Primary Theology and Liturgical Act,” *Worship* 57 (1983) 321–24 (Response to Wainwright); VanderWilt, Jeffrey, “Aidan Kavanagh, O.S.B.: An Annotated Bibliography.” *Rule of Prayer, Rule of Faith: Essays in Honor of Aidan Kavanagh*, Ed. N. Mitchell and J. Baldovin. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996, 343–51.

## On Liturgical Theology<sup>1</sup>

### LITURGY, CANONICITY, AND ESCHATOLOGY

No liturgical theology can afford to ignore the basic facts that the "social occasion" which is a liturgical act is occasional, formal, unifying, and about survival. These basic facts help to throw some light not only on the liturgy's deep structures, but on the underlying congruity between the several disciplines embraced by the study of liturgy, including the discipline of liturgical theology.

That a "social occasion" is occasional, for example, suggests that liturgy is festive. It is a very special event no matter how often or how seldom it happens. Liturgy's festivity involves it necessarily in the details of time and season, details which require calculations and calendars. These are what the discipline of heortology, the study of feasts and seasons, deals with.<sup>2</sup>

That a "social occasion" is formal means that liturgy has a certain order of procedure about it. It is this specific order which distinguishes Christian baptism from all other forms of human bathing, which marks off Christian Eucharist from all other forms of human dining. Its order gives specific form to liturgical structure and differentiates Christian liturgical behavior from all other similar forms of human ritual behavior, while the same order relates liturgical behavior to all

<sup>1</sup>Excerpted from Aidan Kavanagh, ch. 7, "Liturgy, Canonicity, and Eschatology," and ch. 8, "Liturgy and Normality," *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, A Pueblo Book, 1984). Reprinted by permission.

<sup>2</sup>See Thomas J. Talley, "A Christian Heortology," *The Times of Celebration*, Concilium Series 142 (New York, 1981) 14-21.

those other forms as well.<sup>3</sup> Studying the origins, growth, and comparison of liturgical orders, and analyzing their individual structures, is the main burden of *historical studies* of the liturgy.<sup>4</sup> These are concerned primarily with *what* will be the subject of subsequent investigations into the *why* of liturgical growth and the *how* of liturgical modulation in a given era, including one's own.

That a "social occasion" is repetitious and rhythmic suggests that liturgy is necessarily enmeshed in space and time. Worship in Spirit and in truth is never abstract, nor does it happen on some noetic level which is undifferentiated like a Cartesian grid.<sup>5</sup> Liturgy happens only in the rough-and-tumble landscape of spaces and times which people discover and quarry for meaning in their lives. This is an *artistic* enterprise. Liturgical repetition is thus a knowledgeable accomplishment, and its organization into definite rhythms of sounds, sights, gestures, and even smells is an act of human artistry—no more nor less so than building a house, composing a concerto, laying out a town, or playing cello. Therefore the student of liturgy must know not only heortology and history but the spatial, sonic, visual, and kinetic arts of ceremonial choreography as well. A liturgical scholar who is illiterate in the several human arts can never know his or her subject adequately. To this extent, such a one will inevitably report the liturgy to secondary theologians in a manner more or less warped.

That a "social occasion" is repetitious and rhythmic means also that liturgy is *unifying*, for repetition and rhythm have this effect upon human assemblies for worse or better. The unity which repetition and rhythm produce in social gatherings is so power-laden as to be a matter of concern. It can be so powerful as to drive a mob to violence under the orchestration of a demagogue. It may attain monstrous proportions, as at a Nazi *Parteitag* in Nuremberg. But *koinonia*, the unity of the churches of God, may be its result as well. To assure the latter and rule out the former is the main reason why Christian

<sup>3</sup>See Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Portland, Me., 1966), for doctrinal reflections on liturgical order.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (New York, 1950) 2 vols.; A. Stenzel, *Die Taufe: eine genetische Erklärung der Tauf liturgie* (Innsbruck, 1958); Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church* (London, 1981); Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (London, 1982).

<sup>5</sup>See Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore, *Body, Memory, Architecture* (New Haven, 1977) 23–24, 73–74.

*orthodoxia* has always been canonical, which means that it is governed by rule or *kanon*. The liturgy's canonicity goes beyond the rules of formality and aesthetics. Nor is there only a single rule or canon governing liturgy. There are several canons, all of which compen-  
trate and interact to assure, insofar as canons may, that the liturgy of Christians does not drift into delusion and fantasy but remains worship in Spirit and in truth. Each of the several canons is the result of innumerable complex transactions carried on within the worshiping assembly itself over considerable periods of time.

First, there is the *canon of holy Scripture*. This canon governs what the assembly deems appropriate that it should read and hear as it stands before God in worship. It is this special existential stance with respect to the divine Presence which constrains the assembly's choice to those written works which bespeak authentically that Presence to save in the world. For this reason, the canon of holy Scripture embraces written works not for their literary merit nor on the basis of the piety of their authors, but on the grounds of their being "of God" rather than just "about God." It is only with great caution that the liturgy makes use of any other written compositions in its order of service, and even then it is the close proximity of these written works to the canonical Scriptures which recommends them far more than their stylistic quality or the interest of their contents. Of all the canons which affect liturgical worship, it is the canon of holy Scripture which keeps the assembly locked into the fundamental relationship that gives it its unique character among all other human gatherings, namely its relationship to the presence in its midst of the living God.

Second, there is the *canon of baptismal faith* summed up in the several trinitarian creeds.<sup>6</sup> The earliest of these grew out of the three questions put to candidates for baptism as they stood naked in the font concerning their faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The creeds thus distill the substance of revealed gospel into baptismal form precisely at the instant when membership is consummated in the corporate person of him whose gospel it is. Next to the canon of holy Scripture, the credal canon of baptismal faith keeps the assembly's worship firmly rooted in relationship to a divine Presence which is not only vertiginous but communitarian and personal. The creed affirms the assembly's awareness that the living God before whom it

<sup>6</sup>See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, 1950).

stands in worship is a community of Persons which wills to manifest itself in the world through a community of human persons wholly devoted to the world's restoration in its trinitarian Source. The canon of baptismal faith thus constrains the assembly to worship in such a way that its apostolate in the world as icon of the Holy Trinity and agent under God of the world's communion with its Source is rendered accessible to those of good will. The canon checks any temptation the assembly may be under to withdraw into itself and to worship with self-complacency. The canon of baptismal faith cautions ministers not to regard the assembly of the baptized as a clergy support group. It cautions the assembly never to forget that it is nothing less than a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people who exist to declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called it out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9).

Third, there is the *canon of eucharistic faith* which is carried in the assembly's repertoire of eucharistic prayers or "canons of the Mass." These prayers distill the substance of revealed Gospel and its baptismal creeds into strictly eucharistical forms of thanksgiving and petition within the corporate person of him whose Gospel is in motion for the life of the world. As the trinitarian questions generate the creed in baptism, so eucharistic prayers generate a eucharistical "creed" appropriate to the Banquet of the Lamb. For this reason, the eucharistic prayer must be taken as seriously in its own context as the creed must be taken in baptism, and as holy Scripture must be taken in the general life of the Church.

Fourth, there is that body of *canonical laws* which regulate the daily living and the due processes of assemblies of Christians in conformity with the foregoing canons of Scripture, creed, and prayer. Canonical laws, which are often denigrated as being unimportant, attempt to render the other three canons specific in the small details of faithful daily life. When canonical laws are overlooked too long, the other three canons are likely to drift away from a church's consciousness and to be honored only in the breach. When this happens, such a church will invariably discover its apostolate to be compromised, its faith dubious, its worship more concerned with current events than with the presence of the living God, and its efforts bent more to maintaining its own coherence than to restoring the unity of the world to God in Christ.

Finally, that a "social occasion" is about survival suggests that liturgy has an *eschatological dimension* throughout, even when its sur-

face structures may seem to be concerned overtly with a historical commemoration (such as the day of Jesus' death) or a current event. But liturgy's deep structures always betray the continuing awareness of the faithful that the One in whose presence they stand is beyond time and time's end no less than time's beginning, Alpha and Omega. Thus even when the liturgy of Christians deals with time, as it inevitably must, it does so not in the short term but *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, eschatologically.<sup>7</sup>

The liturgy is thus festive, ordered, and accomplished through a variety of artistic media. It is possible, even appropriate, that the disciplines of heortology, ritual history, and the study of the several liturgical arts be carried on according to methodologies which are not themselves theological. It does not seem possible, however, to deal with liturgy's canonical aspect, or with the eschatological dimension one meets within its deep structures, without entering into strictly theological discourse. For liturgical canonicity and eschatology are functions of that theological awareness which is native to the liturgical assembly itself. Liturgical canonicity and eschatology are, moreover, primary symptoms of that change, already mentioned, which occurs in the assembly of faithful people as they encounter the divine Presence in their act of liturgical worship. When Christians adjust to the change in them which God causes regularly in their liturgical worship, the adjustment is normally reflective and critical in terms of the four canons governing their corporate life *in the present*, and also in terms of their ultimate survival *in an eschatological future* which is already being worked out in them by God's grace and their own cooperation with that grace by faith and works. This is what it means to say that the liturgical act of Christians is not merely a mine from which scholars may dig material for second-order theological constructions. Nor is the liturgy just a dictionary from which the learned derive terms with which to write second-order theological treatises. Rather, the liturgy of faithful Christians is the primary theological act of the Church itself, and the ways in which this primary theological act carries on its own proper discourse are couched in terms of canonicity of content and structure, and in terms of eschatological survival.

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When one comes to describe a liturgical theology, as distinct from a systematic theology of the liturgy, the description might be

<sup>7</sup>See Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, 1945).

something like this. A liturgical theology is doxological due to the liturgy's festal quality. It is historical due to the liturgy's formal and ordered qualities. It requires critique of the sonic, visual, spatial, and kinetic arts due to the liturgy's immersion in space and time. It involves disciplined reflection on the present and actual state of life in the faithful assembly due to the liturgy's quality of canonicity—which means that a liturgical theology is inherently pastoral. And it involves no less disciplined reflection on the assembly's future discharge of its obligations in service as a corporate ministry of reconciliation according to grace and promise due to the liturgy's eschatological quality—which implies an ecclesiology no less ministerial than it is eschatological and pneumatic. The canonical "now" and the eschatological "future" frame *orthodoxia* as a life of sustained "right worship" in truth and in a Spirit who is not only consolation but promise as well.

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This chapter has attempted to specify further the taxonomy of liturgy itself by calling attention to those qualities it seems to possess in common with any social occasion in which a mutuality of presences is involved. Because every social occasion is unifying and about survival, the social occasion called liturgy appears on its own evidence to be canonical and eschatological. These two qualities, which root liturgy in the present no less than in the long-term future, are those which particularly affect how primary theology is carried on by those who, beyond ordinary human efforts, live a life of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic "right worship" both inside and outside assemblies of faith. The canonical and eschatological qualities of Christian liturgy are, moreover, the ones which give specifically Christian stamp to the liturgy's being also festive, ordered, and critical as regards the various arts it uses.

On this basis, the chapter claimed that the true primary theologian in the Church is the liturgical assembly in each and every one of its members; that this primary theology is festive, ordered, steeped in the arts, canonical, and eschatological; that this primary theology discourse is what produces the body of basic faith perceptions upon which secondary theology is nurtured in its normal and healthy state. In this view, *lex supplicandi* and *lex credendi* are not detachable or opposable laws but subtly correlative, the first founding the second, the second affecting (although not founding) the first. Each law

functions in concert with the other within the discourse of primary theology. This means that *lex credendi* is at root not merely something which is done exclusively by secondary theologians in their studies, as opposed to *lex supplicandi* done by nontheologians indulging in religious worship elsewhere. On the contrary, *lex credendi* is constantly being worked out, sustained, and established as the faithful in assembly are constantly working out, sustaining, and establishing their *lex supplicandi* from one festive, ordered, aesthetic, canonical, and eschatological liturgical act to the next under grace. *Lex credendi* is always in reality joined to *lex supplicandi* by an active verb as object is joined to subject, and the resulting affirmation says something central about primary theology and the relation of secondary theology to it. *Lex supplicandi legem statuat credendi* thus says something about the deepest structure and purpose of Christian worship. It also suggests a method of analytical procedure which the secondary theologian ignores to the Church's peril. For the liturgy of the faithful Christians is the primary theological act of the Church itself, and the ways in which this act carries on its proper discourse are above all canonical in structure and content, and eschatological in intent.

#### LITURGY AND NORMALITY

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[P]art of our difficulty in grasping liturgy as a constitutive and foundational enterprise as distinct from its being little more than ceremonied adiaphora, may lie in our tendency to make secondary theology primary and primary theology secondary.

It now seems appropriate to close off this taxonomy of liturgy by pointing out in specific what liturgy and, by implication, liturgical theology are not. Such a series of negations may bring us close to what is positively normal in each.

Due to its festive nature, for example, liturgy is not ordinary, utilitarian, or for something.<sup>8</sup> Christians do not engage in liturgical worship to get grace or inspiration, to indulge in creativity, to become educated in matters ecclesiastical. Nor do they elaborate rite as a style of life to house nostalgia, to provide rest, to proffer moral uplift, or to supply aesthetic experience. While any or all of these results may accrue to an individual or an assembly as by-products of the

<sup>8</sup>See Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity* (New York, 1965).

liturgical engagement, they constitute neither in whole nor in part the engagement's motive. The feast remains its own end. The business Christians transact in liturgy is festal business because, simply, Christ has conquered death by his death. Liturgical theology is therefore a festal endeavor, a doxological rather than any other sort of enterprise. And it is this in a way and to a degree that systematic theology, for all its other virtues, is not.

Due to its ordered character, liturgy is no more informal than any other human "social occasion" is without form. The history of Christian worship reveals an evolution of forms and formality to the detriment of makeshift, the idiosyncratic, and the aggressively enthusiastic. As the latter three characteristics turn up, they tend to be resisted by the assembly as a whole and then to be suppressed in one way or another by the assembly's ministers. A case in point may be seen in 1 Corinthians 11-14 where St. Paul cautions a particular church concerning eucharistic disorder which rends the assembly, charismatic enthusiasms which polarize the assembly, and the public behavior of certain women which causes uneasiness in Paul both as a traditional Jew and as an apostle sent to preach the gospel in as high a degree of its integrity as God's grace and his own weakness would allow. But his chastisement of the church in Corinth for liturgical disorder is for all, male and female alike. These four chapters are the first lecture in Christian history on the abuse of liturgical order. Liturgical theology is always in search of form and evangelical order.

Due to its incarnation, so to speak, in space and time, something which requires an artistic coping with creation in all its aspects, liturgy is not unworldly in that it cares nothing for the demands of matter, space, sound, and movement. Carelessness concerning these things does not produce spontaneity but confusion and anomie, an assembly intolerant of repetition, arhythmic, incoherent, bereft of form, and dissolute. Liturgical theology thus takes the arts very seriously indeed, being not merely appreciative of them, but critical of them all as they are pressed into the service of assemblies of faith.

Due to its canonical form and content, liturgy is not a battlefield of confrontation and divisiveness. The faithful do not assemble to engage in ideological combat with each other or to be rent asunder by competing special interest groups. Rather, they assemble under grace and according to the canons of Scripture and creed, prayer and common laws, in order to secure their unity in lived faith transmitted

from generation to generation for the life of the world. Liturgical theology's main tools in trade are therefore the canon of Scripture, the canon of the baptismal creeds, the canon of eucharistic prayers, and the canonical laws of community life. The liturgical theologian sees the liturgy as the ritual of a Word made flesh for the life of the world, as a ministry of reconciliation between God and all persons and things in Christ. This is worship in Spirit and in truth.

Finally, due to its eschatological intent, liturgy is about nothing less than ultimate, rather than immediate, survival. It is about life forever by grace and promise. Liturgy regards anything less as a trap and a delusion hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like the Sabbath, liturgy is for us rather than we for it. But also like the Sabbath, liturgy is for us in that it summons us by revealed Good News home to a Presence, to a life even now of communion in that Presence. To commune with that Presence is to be in at the end and at the center where the world is whole, fresh and always issuing new from the Father's hand through Christ in the Spirit. Unlike those who believe that Jesus came once long ago and will come again in a future more or less remote, liturgy moves within the abiding Presence of God in Christ, the uncreated creating Word, who fills the whole of time past, present and to come. Liturgical theology leans far into this eschatological wind, finding there as nowhere else not only grace's motive but its promise of judgment as well. This stance makes the liturgical theologian, like any other orthodox Christian, an unusually wary person who carries on his or her craft with great circumspection in a workshop through which cosmic storms thunder but the candle flame burns without a flicker. Like standing at a pole where everything one can see on all sides lies in only one direction, when standing here everything one can see comes already magnetized with infinity and there are no horizons beyond which one cannot see. It is an odd place filled with clouds of witnesses past, present, and to come who are very odd indeed. The liturgy happens in this odd place, and it is where the liturgical theologian works.

This is so because this is where Christian *orthodoxia* takes its normal stance and elaborates the normal way in which it looks upon all that swirls around it. Its stance and regard are highly judgmental because of its awareness of the proximity of the Presence in which it stands. The Presence is no less transcendental for its immanence in the faithful community and in all other things under heaven. The Presence is source of all that is, the first principle of the community

and of all else. Because first principles can be known but not demonstrated according to the rules of human logic,<sup>9</sup> Christian *orthodoxia* knows its first principle only by faith, and the divine Presence thus known is radical in the extreme in what it requires of those who gather in such faith.

<sup>9</sup>Pace Arvind Sharma, "Playing Hardball in Religious Studies," *The Council on the Study of Religion Bulletin* 15 (February, 1984) 1, 3-4, who seems to confuse first principles such as the existence of Tao or God with matters of a different order, such as the sufficiency of ethics and the fact of whether God actually spoke to Mohammed. While one can never demonstrate a first principle, not everything which cannot be demonstrated is a first principle.