

A Remedy for Relativism: The Cosmic, Historical, and Eschatological Dimensions of the Liturgy according to the Theologian Joseph Ratzinger

GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT
*Duke University Divinity School
Durham, North Carolina*

IN HIS ADDRESS to the college of cardinals on the eve of his election as bishop of Rome, Joseph Ratzinger spoke critically of the contemporary “dictatorship of relativism.” Such relativism manifests itself not only in philosophy and in society but also in the arts. It runs counter to the Christian faith, for which truth, goodness, and beauty are permanently and universally grounded in the triune God who is the maker of all things and who has a final purpose for his human creatures. The relativist challenge summons Christians to a response that will ultimately benefit humankind. The answer may draw on resources that are intellectual and ethical but are also lodged in the liturgical tradition of the Church. Crucial to the theological vision of Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, are the cosmic, historical, and eschatological dimensions of Christian worship. These I will now explore as he sets them in relation to the crisis of late modernity.

As a theologian, Joseph Ratzinger often touched on liturgical matters in the course of more general reflections. More specifically, he devoted occasional thematic pieces to the liturgy, gathered especially in the collections *Das Fest des Glaubens* (1981) and *Ein neues Lied für den Herrn* (1995).¹

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Das Fest des Glaubens: Versuche zur Theologie des Gottesdienstes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1981), in English, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986); and *Ein neues Lied für den Herrn Christusglaube und Liturgie in der Gegenwart*

All these find some synthesis in Ratzinger's single most systematic work in this area, *Der Geist der Liturgie* (2000); and this book will therefore constitute my standard reference.² Its title—which is a reprise of the admired classic text by Romano Guardini, *Vom Geist der Liturgie* (1918)—may be taken as a hint that Cardinal Ratzinger judged the Catholic Church itself and its liturgical practice to be in need of a recovery of certain qualities, and even particular features, that had been lost to “the spirit of the age” in an over-hasty rush to reform on the alleged basis of the Second Vatican Council.³

The Crisis in Contemporary Culture

Not surprisingly—since treatment of the liturgy entails such things as iconography and service music—Ratzinger sometimes frames his analysis of modernity in terms of the arts. We shall look first at the visual arts and what Ratzinger calls today's “iconographic crisis of the West.”⁴ Then we shall hear the challenge posed to music by “the cultural revolution of recent decades.”⁵

Absurdity in Art

A theological foundation for his critical reading of contemporary art is borrowed by Joseph Ratzinger from the Orthodox thinker Paul Evdokimov: “The light of the first day and the light of the eighth day meet in the icon. Present already in the creation is the light that will shine in its full brightness on the eighth day in the Resurrection of the Lord and in

(Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1995), in English, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, trans. Martha M. Matesich (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Geist der Liturgie: Eine Einführung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2000), in English, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

³ In order to declare my own fundamental sympathy with the vision of Joseph Ratzinger, I hope I may be allowed to cite at the outset, without mentioning them again, some of my own writings at the intersection between systematic theology and liturgy: *Eucharist and Eschatology* (London: Epworth Press, 1971; 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); *For Our Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); *Worship with One Accord* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); “Babel, Barbary, and the Word Made Flesh: Liturgy and the Redemption of the World,” *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* 3 (1998): 5–14; “Christian Worship: Scriptural Basis and Theological Frame,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–31.

⁴ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

the new world, the light that enables us to see the splendor of God.”⁶ In the history of Christian art, right up to the end of the Romanesque period, “there is no *essential* difference between East and West with regard to the question of images. . . . It is always the risen Christ, even on the Cross, to whom the community looks as the true *Oriens*.”⁷ “With the emergence of Gothic,” however, “the depiction is no longer of the *Pantocrator*, the Lord of all, leading us into the eighth day. It has been superseded by the image of the crucified Lord in the agony of his passion and death.”⁸ Again Evdokimov is cited for the view that “the turn from Platonism to Aristotelianism during the thirteenth century” played a part in this shift:

Platonism sees sensible things as shadows of the eternal archetypes. In the sensible we can and should know the archetypes and rise up through the former to the latter. Aristotelianism rejects the doctrine of Ideas. The thing, composed of matter and form, exists in its own right. Through abstraction I discern the species to which it belongs. In place of seeing, by which the supersensible becomes visible in the sensible, comes abstraction. The relationship of the spiritual and the material has changed and with it man’s attitude to reality as it appears to him.⁹

Admittedly, late medieval art both drew upon and further nourished a popular devotion to the suffering of the incarnate God; and Ratzinger, in his reading of the historic West, does not wish either to forget “the glorious art of Gothic stained glass”:

The windows of the Gothic cathedrals keep out the garishness of the light outside, while concentrating that light and using it so that the whole history of God in relation to man, from creation to the Second Coming, shines through. The walls of the church, in interplay with the sun, become an image in their own right, the iconostasis of the West, lending the place a sense of the sacred that can touch the hearts even of agnostics.¹⁰

The Renaissance, however, “did something quite new. It ‘emancipated’ man”: “Now we see the development of the ‘aesthetic’ in the modern sense, the vision of a beauty that no longer points beyond itself but is content in the end with itself. . . . Man experiences himself in his autonomy, in all his

⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁷ Ibid., 124, 125, original emphasis.

⁸ Ibid., 125–26.

⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁰ Ibid., 128–29.

grandeur.”¹¹ The Baroque, inspired by the Council of Trent, prompted an “interior renewal . . . [in] seeing”: “The altarpiece is like a window through which the world of God comes out to us. The curtain of temporality is raised, and we are allowed a glimpse into the inner life of the world of God. This art is intended to insert us into the liturgy of heaven.”¹² This respite ended with “the Enlightenment [that] pushed faith into a kind of intellectual and even social ghetto. Contemporary culture turned away from the faith and trod another path, so that faith took flight in historicism, the copying of the past, or else attempted compromise or lost itself in resignation and cultural abstinence.”¹³

So, “today we are experiencing, not just a crisis of sacred art, but a crisis of art in general of unprecedented proportions,” and “the crisis of art for its part is a symptom of the crisis of man’s very existence”:

The immense growth in man’s mastery of the material world has left him blind to the questions of life’s meaning that transcend the material world. We might almost call it a blindness of the spirit. The questions of how we ought to live, how we can overcome death, whether existence has a purpose and what it is—to all these questions there is no longer a common answer. Positivism, formulated in the name of scientific seriousness, narrows the horizon to what is verifiable, to what can be proved by experiment; it renders the world opaque. . . . Art turns into experimenting with self-created worlds, empty “creativity,” which no longer perceives the *Creator Spiritus*, the Creator Spirit. It attempts to take his place, and yet, in doing so, it manages to produce only what is arbitrary and vacuous, bringing home to man the absurdity of his role as creator.¹⁴

Mayhem in Music

Ratzinger’s reading of the history of liturgical music, and of Western music more generally, runs parallel to his reading of iconography and the visual arts. In both East and West, vocal music rightly subserved the primordial and evangelical Word—until the point at which, in the West, “artistic freedom increasingly assert[ed] its rights, even in the liturgy”:

Music was no longer developing out of prayer, but, with the new demand for artistic autonomy, was heading away from the liturgy; it was becoming an end in itself, opening the door to new, very different ways

¹¹ Ibid., 129.

¹² Ibid., 130.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 130–31.

of feeling and of experiencing the world. Music was alienating the liturgy from its true nature.¹⁵

Trent intervened to “make it a norm that liturgical music should be at the service of the Word; . . . and the difference between secular and sacred music was clearly affirmed.”¹⁶ A high point was reached, in both the Catholic and Protestant worlds, with Bach, Haydn, and Mozart. But danger signs were already apparent:

Subjective experience and passion are still held in check by the order of the musical universe, reflecting as it does the order of the divine creation itself. But there is already the threat of invasion by the virtuoso mentality, the vanity of technique, which is no longer the servant of the whole but wants to push itself to the fore.¹⁷

Philosophically, the cosmic character of music was grounded in the Pythagorean theory—still held by St. Augustine—whereby the cosmos “was constructed mathematically, a great edifice of numbers,” and “beauty comes from meaningful inner order.” Still for Goethe, “the mathematical order of the planets and their revolutions contains a secret timbre, which is the primal form of music,” and “the music made by man must . . . be taken from the inner music and order of the universe.”¹⁸ Modern physics, from Kepler, Galileo, and Newton onward, retains a “mathematical interpretation of the universe, [which] has made possible the technological use of its powers”;¹⁹ but, among the philosophers, the nineteenth century moved away from “metaphysics” as “outdated”:

Hegel now tried to interpret music as just an expression of the subject and of subjectivity. But whereas Hegel still adhered to the fundamental idea of reason as the starting point and destination of the whole enterprise, a change of direction took place with Schopenhauer that was to have momentous consequences. For him, the world is no longer grounded in reason but in *Wille und Vorstellung*. The will precedes reason. And music is the primordial expression of being human as such, the pure expression of the will—anterior to reason—that creates the world.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid., 145–46.

¹⁶ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 152.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 154.

The result is the triumph of the “Dionysian” over the “Apollonian,”²¹ epitomized in “Rock”:

“Rock” . . . is the expression of elemental passions, and at rock festivals it assumes a cultic character, a form of worship, in fact, in opposition to Christian worship. People are, so to speak, released from themselves by the experience of being part of a crowd and by the emotional shock of rhythm, noise, and special lighting effects. However, in the ecstasy of having all their defenses torn down, the participants sink, as it were, beneath the elemental force of the universe.²²

In sum, we confront today an “anarchistic” theory and practice of “art,” which coincides philosophically with “deconstructionism.” Optimistically considered, the very “dissolution of the subject” might help contemporary people to “overcome the unbounded inflation of subjectivity.”²³ But in the face of contemporary culture, so analyzed in terms of the arts, a more active requirement is surely made of Christians, if people are to be led again to recognize that “a relationship with the Logos, who was at the beginning, brings salvation to the subject, that is, to the person, . . . and puts us into a true relationship of communion that is ultimately grounded in Trinitarian love.”²⁴ One urgent need is to “identify the principles of an art ordered to divine worship.”²⁵ Logically, the prior and fundamental task is to understand and practice worship as the focal point and effective enactment of the entire nature, calling, and destiny of humankind and the world in which we are set. That is precisely how the theologian Joseph Ratzinger in his writings interprets, expounds, and promotes the rites and signs of the Christian liturgy in terms of what he calls a “symbolic theology.”²⁶

The Three Dimensions of Christian Worship

Ratzinger takes the framework for his theology of worship from the structure of the Bible and its overarching narrative; and within that general frame he interprets and expounds particular scriptural events, episodes, sayings, and gestures that bear a more or less direct reference to the liturgy, bringing out always their correspondence to the overall and

²¹ Ibid., 150.

²² Ibid., 148. For more on music, see Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith*, 97–126 (“On the Theological Basis of Church Music”); and idem, *A New Song for the Lord*, chs. 6–8 (pp. 94–146).

²³ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 155.

²⁴ Ibid., 155.

²⁵ Ibid., 131.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 60–61.

recurrent pattern. That pattern has three dimensions: the cosmic, the historical, and the eschatological. The themes of creation, redemption, and consummation are constantly interwoven. According to St. Irenaeus, “the glory of God is man alive, and the life of man is the vision of God”;²⁷ and “cult,” says Joseph Ratzinger, “exists in order to communicate this vision and to give life in such a way that glory is given to God.”²⁸ In the midst of the world, humankind is made in the image of God, and (to borrow a formulation from a different part of the Christian Tradition, the *Westminster Catechism* of the Reformed family) “man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”²⁹ The course of human history is both conducted and corrected by the triune God, the crucial and decisive event being the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Son. The story stretches from Adam through Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the Exodus, Joshua and David, the Promised Land, the Exile, and the Return, to Jesus, born of Mary, crucified, risen, and again awaited. Foreshadowed by the Old Testament, the Church of the New fits in the overlap of “image” and “reality,” where the End is anticipated but still “through a glass darkly.” Against any overly realized eschatology, Ratzinger points to the sufferings and pain, and indeed the sin, guilt, and futility, in the world of the “not yet.” But hope is in place, since the “new world” has begun with the Resurrection of Christ while the promise of God’s finally being “all in all” is secure.

Our author fixes on two major signs with liturgical (and intrinsically Christological) reference that bring the three dimensions—cosmic, historical, eschatological—comprehensively together: the sun and the Cross. In each case, the range is both temporal and spatial.

The Sun

Ratzinger makes much of orientation as the traditional Christian direction of prayer. A biblical basis is found in Psalm 19:6–7, where “the sun comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber. . . . Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them.” Christians interpret this psalm of “creation” and “law” in terms of “Christ, who is the living Word, the eternal Logos, and thus the true light of history, who came forth in Bethlehem from the bridal chamber of the Virgin Mother and now pours out his light on all the world.”³⁰ Moreover, the Christ

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4.20.7, quoted in Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 18.

²⁸ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 18.

²⁹ From the opening exchange of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly (1647–48).

³⁰ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 68.

who “rose” in his Resurrection will also return “from the east” (cf. Mt 24:27–31). Thus, liturgically:

The fact that we find Christ in the symbol of the rising sun is the indication of a Christology defined eschatologically. Praying toward the east means going to meet the coming Christ. The liturgy, turned toward the east, effects entry, so to speak, into the procession of history toward the future, the New Heaven and the New Earth, which we encounter in Christ. It is a prayer of hope of the pilgrim as he walks in the direction shown us by the life, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ.³¹

In fact, orientation in prayer signifies that “cosmos and saving history belong together”: “The cosmos is praying with us. It, too, is waiting for redemption. It is precisely this cosmic dimension that is essential to Christian liturgy. It is never performed solely in the self-made world of man. It is always a cosmic liturgy.”³²

Practically, Cardinal Ratzinger deeply regretted the post-Vatican II move to the priest’s celebrating the liturgy *versus populum*, attributing the priest’s westward *volte-face* to the misunderstood consequence of an accident of terrain in the Roman basilica of St. Peter’s.³³ He appealed to the liturgical historians Joseph Jungmann, Cyrille Vogel, and Louis Bouyer for the view that the important thing, traditionally and theologically, was that the priest and the entire congregation be “facing in the same direction, knowing that together they were in a procession toward the Lord. They did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim people of God they set off for the *Oriens*, for the Christ who comes to meet us.”³⁴

As history and the cosmos cohere in Christ, so do time and space intertwine in the Christian calendar, where once again the sun serves to symbolize Christ through temporal rhythms just as it did in spatial direction. The Gospel accounts insist on “the first day of the week” as the day when the Lord’s Resurrection was discovered;³⁵ Justin Martyr might have been quoted for the weekly Eucharistic assembly as occurring on “the day called after the sun, because it is the first day, the day on which God transformed darkness and matter, and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.”³⁶ Then, too, Sunday is the “third

³¹ Ibid., 69.

³² Ibid., 70.

³³ Ibid., 76f.

³⁴ Ibid., 80.

³⁵ Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2, 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1.

³⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67.

day" (cf. 1 Cor 15:4), when "seen from the Cross"; Ratzinger notes that "in the Old Testament the third day was regarded as the day of theophany, the day when God entered into the world after the time of expectation."³⁷ Finally, Sunday, in relation to the whole preceding week, is the "eighth day"³⁸ and thus, according to the patristic designation, the "new time that has dawned with the Resurrection," "looking toward the final consummation."³⁹ Sunday thus embodies "a unique synthesis of the remembrance of history, the recalling of creation, and the theology of hope." It is "the day on which the Lord comes among his own and invites them into his 'liturgy,' into his glorification of God, and communicates himself to them."⁴⁰

In the annual rhythm, cosmos and history have their most charged encounter at Easter, "the Christian Passover," where lunar calculations—with the moon a "symbol of transitoriness"⁴¹—also play a part. At the Exodus from Egypt, Israel began "its own journey in history as the People of God."⁴² Christ defined his paschal death—which would have "a significance for history, for mankind, for the world"⁴³—as his "hour."⁴⁴ The theologian Ratzinger cites Pope Gregory the Great as pointing out that "according to the Bible, Easter should fall in the first month, . . . the time when the sun is passing through the first part of the Zodiac—the sign of Aries [the Ram]": "The constellation in the heavens seemed to speak, in advance and for all time, of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29)."⁴⁵ At Easter, "transitoriness is taken up into what never passes away. Death becomes resurrection and passes into eternal life".⁴⁶ "The 'hour' of Jesus makes its appearance, again and again, within the unity of cosmic and historical time. Through the feast we enter into the rhythm of creation and into God's plan for human history."⁴⁷

In connection with Christmas also, the other focal point of the calendar (for Christians confess the one Christ inseparably as the Incarnate Son

³⁷ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 96.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 95. Chapter 4 of Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*, is devoted to "the meaning of Sunday for Christian prayer and life" and includes a current reflection on "weekend culture and the Christian Sunday."

⁴¹ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 101.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

and Redeemer), factors to do with solstice and equinox played their part in fixing the festal celebration (scholars differ over the details). St. Jerome is cited for a Christmas sermon: "Even creation approves our preaching. The universe itself bears witness to the truth of our words. Up to this day the dark days increase, but from this day the darkness decreases. . . . The light advances, while the night retreats."⁴⁸ The corresponding date of the Annunciation—March 25—matches an ancient reckoning of the day of creation. In these ways,

the cosmic serves the historical. Only in history is the cosmos given its center and goal. To believe in the Incarnation means to be bound to Christianity's origins, their particularity, and, in human terms, their contingency. Here is the guarantee that we are not chasing myths; that God really has acted in our history and taken our time into his hands. Only over the bridge of this "once for all" [*ephapax/semel*] can we come into the "forever" [*aiônios/semper*] of God's mercy.⁴⁹

Seasonally, the world's spring and autumn are connected by Christ. St. John's Gospel and the Epistle to the Hebrews interpret Christ's "hour" not only with a reference to Passover (spring) but also in light of the Day of Atonement (autumn): "The autumn of declining time becomes a new beginning, while the spring, as the time of the Lord's death, now points to the end of time, to the autumn of the world, in which, according to the Fathers, Christ came among us."⁵⁰ The lectionary readings concerning "the sowing of the seed"—"which is [also] a metaphor for the spreading of the Gospel"—can be accommodated in both spring and autumn, for "in both seasons the mystery of hope is at work and reaches its proper depth in the waning year, which leads beyond decline to a new beginning":

It would be a great work of inculturation to develop this approach and to bring it into the common consciousness of Christians in the two hemispheres, southern and northern. The South could help the North to discover a new breadth and depth in the mystery, thus enabling us all to draw afresh on its richness.⁵¹

With regard to the solar and related symbolism thus recalled by Ratzinger, it must be admitted, sociologically, that it is difficult in late

⁴⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 104; cf. 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁵¹ Ibid., 105.

modernity to feel with quite the same force as earlier generations the impact of the sun and the seasons. Technology brings us indoor living, artificial lighting, year-round provision of an entire range of foods. But amid this redeployment of space we are still dependent on the created “cosmos” in many ways, as ecological concerns about global warming and the depletion of earthly resources demonstrate; we have an inheritance from the past and a responsibility for the future. Moreover, the passage of time remains an ineluctable experience for every human being, and “history” is no less real for having assumed geopolitical proportions. The universal frame is still there that allows and requires these matters to be considered in a consistent, coherent way; and the Christian liturgy provides a place and an occasion for such attention and an inspiration and guide for appropriate living.

The Cross

“The most basic Christian gesture in prayer,” says Joseph Ratzinger, “is and always will be the sign of the Cross”:

It is a way of confessing Christ crucified with one’s very body, in accordance with the programmatic words of St. Paul . . . [1 Corinthians 1:23f.; 2:2]. To seal oneself with the sign of the Cross is a visible and public Yes to him who suffered for us; to him who in the body has made God’s love visible, even to the utmost; to the God who reigns not by destruction but by the humility of suffering and love, which is stronger than all the power of the world and wiser than all the calculating intelligence of men.⁵²

A recurrent picture in Ratzinger’s writings is that of the pierced heart of Christ on the Cross (cf. Jn 19:34–37). From the opened side flow with the water and the blood, according to a patristic interpretation, the constitutive sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.⁵³ The image of the wounded Christ stays to the end, for “they shall look on him whom they pierced” (Rev 1:7). “And I,” said Jesus, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32). Ratzinger cites Lactantius from the fourth century: “In his Passion God spread out his arms and thus embraced the globe as a sign that a future people, from the rising of the sun to its setting, would gather under his wings.”⁵⁴ A Methodist may think of Charles Wesley’s words:

⁵² Ibid., 177.

⁵³ Cf., for example, *ibid.*, 84 and 222.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 182–83.

The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.⁵⁵

The cosmic scope of the Cross is already found in St. Irenaeus, “the real founder of systematic theology, in its Catholic form,” who in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* echoes St. Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 3:18ff. The crucified Christ is

the very Word of Almighty God, who penetrates our universe by an invisible presence. And for this reason he embraces the whole world, its breadth and length, its height and depth, for through the Word of God all things are guided into order. And the Son of God is crucified in them, since, in the form of the Cross, he is imprinted upon all things.⁵⁶

St. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology*, found a “prophecy of the Cross” already in Plato’s “idea of a cross inscribed upon the cosmos,”⁵⁷ as Ratzinger explains:

Plato took this from the Pythagorean tradition, which in its turn had a connection with the traditions of the ancient East. First, there is an astronomical statement about the two great movements of the stars with which ancient astronomy was familiar: the ecliptic (the great circle in the heavens along which the sun appears to run its course) and the orbit of the earth. These two intersect and form together the Greek letter *Chi*, which is written in the form of a cross (like an X). . . . Plato, again following more ancient traditions, connected this with the image of the deity.⁵⁸

Our author recalls also the idea from Indian religions of “the cross-shaped tree of the world that holds everything together.”⁵⁹ From all these signs he concludes that “the cosmos speaks to us of the Cross, and the Cross solves for us the enigma of the cosmos. . . . When we open our eyes, we can read the message of Christ in the language of the universe, and conversely, Christ grants us understanding of the message of creation.”⁶⁰

In late modernity, the natural sciences offer us speculative accounts of beginnings and endings—and of apparently universal structures at the macroscopic and microscopic levels—that seem to be grounded in obser-

⁵⁵ From the hymn “Jesus! the Name High over All” by Charles Wesley.

⁵⁶ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 182.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 180; cf. *Timaeus*, 34ab and 36bc.

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 180–81.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 182.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 181.

ventions and calculations not available hitherto. But our common human questions of direction and purpose, of suffering and moral evil, remain. Here certainly are *pistes de recherche* for theologians to pursue in company with interested natural scientists if, with the aid of the Christian liturgy, we are to find (as Joseph Ratzinger does) the sacrificial love of God inscribed in the universe and offering us the way of salvation. It must and may be hoped that poets, musicians, and visual artists, working within the semantic context set by the faith, teaching, and liturgy of the Church, will find timely ways to embody valid new insights so as to grip the minds and imaginations of the contemporary communities at worship.

Matter and Spirit

Our location in the universe, our temporal existence as embodied creatures, our calling to an eternal destiny with the transcendent God: All these things raise questions about matter and spirit, which find the offer of an answer in a Christian liturgy that bears cosmic, historical, and eschatological dimensions.

Joseph Ratzinger's fundamental understanding of worship is that of *logikê latreia*—the “reasonable service” of God.⁶¹ In the light of Christ, the notion found in Romans 12:1 achieves two things: First, it resolves the Old Testament paradox epitomized in Psalm 51:15–19, with its tension between animal sacrifices at the temple-altar and the spiritual sacrifice of heart and lips;⁶² and second, it borrows from the Greek mind “the idea of a mystical union with the Logos, the very meaning of all things,”⁶³ while yet avoiding the Hellenistic temptation that “allows the body to fall into insubstantiality.”⁶⁴ On those terms, “spiritual worship”—a Christologically grounded “worship in spirit and in truth”⁶⁵—became “the Christian response to the cultic crisis of the whole ancient world.”⁶⁶ It continues to offer a means to contain and counter the disorder of relativism at all levels:

The sacrifice is the “word,” the word of prayer, which goes up from man to God, embodying the whole of man's existence and enabling him to become “word” (*logos*) in himself. It is man, conforming himself to *logos* and becoming *logos* through faith, who is the true sacrifice, the true glory of God in the world. . . .

⁶¹ Cf. especially *ibid.*, 45–50.

⁶² Cf. also Ps 50:12–15.

⁶³ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 46.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁵ Jn 4:23; cf. 7:39; 14:6.

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 45–46.

The idea of the sacrifice of the *logos* becomes a full reality only in the *Logos incarnatus*, the Word who is made flesh and draws “all flesh” into the glorification of God. When that happens, the Logos is more than just the “meaning” behind and above things. Now he himself has entered into flesh, has become bodily. He takes up into himself our sufferings and hopes, all the yearning of creation, and bears it to God. The two themes that Psalm 51 (50) could not reconcile, the two themes that throughout the Old Testament keep running toward one another but do not meet, now really converge. Now “word” is no longer just the representation of something else, of what is bodily. In Jesus’ self-surrender on the Cross, the Word is united with the entire reality of human life and suffering. There is no longer an *Ersatz* cult. Now the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus takes us up and leads us into that likeness with God, that transformation into love, which is the only true adoration. In virtue of Jesus’ Cross and Resurrection, the Eucharist is the meeting point of all lines that lead from the Old Covenant, indeed from the whole of man’s religious history. Here at last is right worship, ever longed for and yet surpassing our powers: adoration “in spirit and truth.”⁶⁷

The mention of the Eucharist suffices to hint at the sacraments proper, which will figure in our discussion later, but first we shall look more generally at “the psychosomatic unity of man,” which “express[es] itself in the bodily gesture” as “the bearer of spiritual meaning” in worship.⁶⁸ Ratzinger devotes the final section of *The Spirit of the Liturgy* to “the body and the liturgy”; and there he writes in his most catechetical style, occasionally anecdotal, sometimes autobiographical, and here and there (it

⁶⁷ Ibid., 46, 47; cf. 57, 61. One may just wonder whether, in insisting so strongly and persuasively on Christian worship as what the Roman canon calls *oblatio rationabilis*, Joseph Ratzinger has been led to underplay, both historically and theologically, the “meal” character of the rite that Protestants have ecumenically learned to call “the Eucharist” but which they have more customarily designated “the Lord’s Supper.” It is surely well within scriptural and traditional bounds to understand (“dogmatic content”) and practice (“liturgical form”) the sacrament as importantly—albeit not exclusively—a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb (cf., for example, Mt 26:29; Rev 19:7–9). Again, the present sacramental anticipation of the *communio* to be lived and enjoyed in the pax of the City of God provides a context in and from which to begin the overcoming of—this time—*social relativism*. Ratzinger’s brief (and, to my mind, unnecessary) critical remark on the “meal” question in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 78ff., derives from his much fuller arguments in favor of *eucharistia* as the governing category of the rite in “Form and Content in the Eucharistic Celebration,” in *The Feast of Faith*, 33–60 (“Gestalt und Gehalt der eucharistischen Feier,” in *Das Fest des Glaubens*, 31–54).

⁶⁸ Cf. Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 190.

will be thought today) even mildly idiosyncratic.⁶⁹ Among liturgical postures and gestures, it is kneeling and bowing which receive most attention from our author. The key passage from Scripture is “the great hymn of Christ in Philippians 2:6–11”:⁷⁰

All bend the knee before Jesus, the One who descended, and bow to him precisely as the true God above all gods. . . . The Christian liturgy is a cosmic liturgy precisely because it bends the knee before the crucified and exalted Lord. Here is the center of authentic culture—the culture of truth. The humble gesture by which we fall at the feet of the Lord inserts us into the true path of the life of the cosmos.⁷¹

The *supplices*—our being “bowed low”—is the bodily expression, so to speak, of what the Bible calls humility (cf., “he humbled himself,” Phil 2:8). . . . Humility is the ontologically appropriate attitude, the state that corresponds to the truth about man, and as such it becomes a fundamental attitude of Christian existence. St. Augustine constructed his whole Christology, indeed I would say his entire apologetics for Christianity, upon the concept of *humilitas*. He took up the teaching of the ancients, of the Greek and Roman world, that *hybris*—self-glorifying pride—is the real sin of all sins, as we see in exemplary form in the fall of Adam. Arrogance, the ontological lie by which man makes himself God, is overcome by the humility of God, who makes Himself the slave, who bows down before us. The man who wants to come close to God . . . must likewise learn to bend, for God Himself has bent down. In the gesture of humble love, in the washing of feet, in which He kneels at our feet—that is where we find Him.⁷²

Our author is well aware that learning again to kneel and to bow will not come easily to “modern man.”⁷³ Even post-Vatican II liturgists may have undervalued such “a physical reminder of the spiritual attitude essential to faith.”⁷⁴

“In our times,” observes Ratzinger, “in a variety of forms, the fascination of Gnosticism is at work.”⁷⁵ Attitudes toward the human body are tell-tale in this respect. If I may just this once quote myself:

⁶⁹ See, for example, *ibid.*, 214–16, in favor of an occasional quasi-silent recitation of the canon of the Mass.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 205–6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, cf. 194, 206.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

The transformation of our senses by the Word of God takes on a particular poignancy in our contemporary North American and West European culture. We live in a very sensate and sensualist society. We are in some ways absorbed in our senses, a people defined by materialism and sexuality. Yet in other ways we are curiously detached from our bodies, as though we were not really affected by what happens to us in our bodies or what we do in them. The contradiction between indulging our senses and disowning our bodies is only an apparent one. If our bodies are not us, then we are not responsible in and for them; and that irresponsibility may assume the character of license or, indeed, of withdrawal. The same phenomenon occurred in the Gnosticism of the second century. Saint Irenaeus countered its threat to Christianity by retelling the authentic biblical tale of the divine Word's history ad extra as the single sweep of universal creation, the making of humankind, the incarnation in Jesus the Christ, the constitution of the Church, the institution and practice of the sacraments, and the awaited resurrection of the body.⁷⁶

"The body," says Ratzinger, "must be trained . . . for the resurrection."⁷⁷ "Laid hold of by the Logos and for the Logos in our very bodies," we meanwhile learn to cooperate with the will and action of God: "The true liturgical action is the deed of God, and for that very reason the liturgy of faith always reaches beyond the cultic act into everyday life, which must itself become 'liturgical,' a service for the transformation of the world."⁷⁸ It is noteworthy that twentieth-century Orthodox theologians took to speaking of "the liturgy after the Liturgy."

For human beings, as corporeal creatures, the body is the point of contact with the rest of material creation. We apply matter to ourselves, we take it into ourselves, we work outwardly upon it. Matter is neither to be absolutized nor to be despised. In conjunction with the words of the Word, material elements—which "the Lord himself chose"—serve as sacramental signs: water, (olive) oil, (wheaten) bread, and wine:

Whereas water is the common element of life for the whole earth and is therefore suitable in all places as a door of entry to communion with Christ, in the case of the three other elements we are dealing with the typical gifts of Mediterranean culture. We encounter this triad in explicit association in the glorious psalm of creation, Psalm 104, where the Psalmist thanks God for giving man the food of the earth and "wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation*, 18. The first five chapters of that book are devoted—indulging in a pun—to "The Senses of the Word."

⁷⁷ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 176.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

to strengthen man's heart" (v. 15). These three elements of Mediterranean life express the goodness of creation, in which we receive the goodness of the Creator Himself. And now they become the gift of an even higher goodness, a goodness that makes our face shine anew in likeness to the "anointed" God, to his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, a goodness that changes the bread and wine of the earth into the Body and Blood of the Redeemer, so that, through the Son made man, we may have communion with the triune God Himself.⁷⁹

Thus both universality and particularity are respected—"geographically," culturally. "In the interplay of culture and history," however, "history has priority":

The elements become sacraments through connection with the unique history of God in relation to man in Jesus Christ. . . . Outwardly, that history may seem fortuitous, but it is the form of history willed by God, and for us it is the trustworthy trace that he has imprinted on the earth, the guarantee that we are not thinking up things for ourselves but are truly touched by God and come into touch with Him. Precisely through what is particular and once-for-all, the here and now, we emerge from the "ever and never" vagueness of mythology. It is with this particular face, with this particular human form, that Christ comes to us, and precisely thus does he make us brethren beyond all boundaries.⁸⁰

That brings us to the personal and social constitution of humanity, which we may follow out first in the structures of the world and then in the structures of the Church. Once more we see how these are envisaged by Joseph Ratzinger in terms of liturgy.

A Social Covenant

In retelling the story of the Exodus,⁸¹ Ratzinger insists that Israel's deliverance from Egypt was for the sake of worship, in order to "serve God."⁸² In "the wilderness of Sinai" (Ex 19:1), Israel "discovers the kind of sacrifice God wants."⁸³ From the mountaintop, God speaks and makes his will known to the people in the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex 20:1–17) and, through the mediation of Moses, makes a covenant with them (cf. Ex 1)—"a covenant concretized in a minutely regulated form of worship"; "cult, liturgy in the proper sense, is part of this worship, but so too is life according to the will of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 223.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 15–23.

⁸² So, Ex 7:16; 8:1, 25–27; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 24–26.

⁸³ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 17.

God.”⁸⁴ This service of God was to be maintained in the land across the Jordan first promised to Abraham, for the land will be given to the people as “a place for the worship of the true God,” “the place where God reigns,” “the realm of obedience, where God’s will is done and the right kind of human existence developed.”⁸⁵

Ratzinger draws broad conclusions from the covenant ordered on Sinai. “Law and ethics do not hold together when they are not anchored in the liturgical center and inspired by it”:⁸⁶

On Sinai the people receive not only instructions about worship, but also an all-embracing rule of law and life. Only thus can it become a people. A people without a common rule of law cannot live. It destroys itself in anarchy, which is a parody of freedom, its exaltation to the point of abolition. When every man lives without law, every man lives without freedom. . . . In the ordering of the covenant on Sinai, the three aspects of worship, law, and ethics are inseparably interwoven. . . . When morality and law do not originate in a God-ward perspective, they degrade man, because they rob him of his highest measure and his highest capacity, deprive him of any vision of the infinite and eternal. This seeming liberation subjects him to the dictatorship of the ruling majority, to shifting human standards, which inevitable end up doing him violence.⁸⁷

In “the modern age,” says Ratzinger, we witness “the total secularization of the law and the exclusion of any God-ward perspective from the fashioning of the law.”⁸⁸ On the ethical front, Ratzinger, in another context,⁸⁹ recalls Goethe’s Faustian recasting of the Johannine “In the beginning was the Word” to “In the beginning was the Deed”:

In our own times this continues in the attempt to replace “orthodoxy” by “orthopraxy”—there is no common faith any more (because truth is unattainable), only common praxis. By contrast, for Christian faith, as Guardini shows so penetratingly in his masterly early work, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, *logos* has precedence over *ethos*. When this is reversed, Christianity is turned upside down.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 18–19.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 154–55.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 155.

It seems that “Christendom” needs to hear (again) the warning contained in the story of the golden calf (Ex 32):

The cult conducted by the high priest Aaron is not meant to serve any of the false gods of the heathen. The apostasy is more subtle. . . . And yet it is a falling away from the worship of God to idolatry. This apostasy, which outwardly is scarcely perceptible, has two causes. First, there is a violation of the prohibition of images. The people cannot cope with the invisible, remote, and mysterious God. They want to bring Him down into their own world, into what they can see and understand. Worship is no longer going up to God, but drawing God down into one’s own world. He must be there when He is needed, and He must be the kind of God that is needed. Man is using God, and in reality, even if it is not outwardly discernible, he is placing himself above God. . . . [Second,] the worship of the golden calf is a self-generated cult. When Moses stays away for too long, and God Himself becomes inaccessible, the people just fetch Him back. Worship becomes a feast that the community gives itself, a festival of self-affirmation. Instead of being worship of God, it becomes a circle closed in on itself: eating, drinking, and making merry. The dance around the golden calf is an image of this self-seeking worship. It is a kind of banal self-gratification. . . . Ultimately, it is no longer concerned with God but with giving oneself a nice little alternative world, manufactured from one’s own resources. Then liturgy really does become pointless, just fooling around. Or still worse it becomes an apostasy from the living God, an apostasy in sacral disguise. All that is left in the end is frustration, a feeling of emptiness. There is no experience of that liberation which always takes place when man encounters the living God.⁹¹

This is the background against which to see Cardinal Ratzinger’s insistence on the “givenness” of instituted and traditional rites in face of the “creativity” (or, more sharply, the “*Beliebigkeit*”) of some sophisticated contemporary pastors and congregations.⁹² Churches are summoned to permanent vigilance concerning what is required of them by the divine covenant that makes them—and their liturgical assemblies—the place in which, under God, persons and societies are shaped for life in this world and beyond.

The Ecclesial Community

The contemporary search for personal and social “identity”—often individualistically and divisively conducted—is offered an available response in

⁹¹ Ibid., 22–23.

⁹² Cf., for example, *ibid.*, 80 and 159–70.

baptism as insertion into the paschal mystery of Christ and membership of his Body, the Church. Joseph Ratzinger brings these things together thus:

In the light of Easter, Christians see themselves as people who truly *live*. They have found their way out of an existence that is more death than life. They have discovered real life: "And this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn 17:3). Deliverance from death is at the same time deliverance from the captivity of individualism, from the prison of self, from the incapacity to love and make a gift of oneself. Thus Easter becomes the great feast of Baptism, in which man, as it were, enacts the passage through the Red Sea, emerges from his own existence into communion with Christ and so into communion with all who belong to Christ. Resurrection builds communion. It creates the new People of God. The grain of wheat that dies all alone does not remain alone but brings much fruit with it. The risen Lord does not remain alone. He draws all mankind to himself and so creates a new universal communion of men.⁹³

A Protestant Christian may express gratitude for two liturgical gifts in particular from Catholicism over the last sixty years: first, the revitalization of the Paschal Vigil, begun already under Pius XII, with its rehearsal of the biblical story of salvation, and as an occasion for baptisms and baptismal renewals; and then the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults, created after Vatican II, which has contributed to a recovery of catechesis, whether initial or remedial, in an era of needed reevangelization. It may be significant that these two features largely escaped strictures from Cardinal Ratzinger in his concerns over some developments in recent Catholic practice. One might just regret that he did not actively welcome the ecumenical scope of the Easter Vigil and a strengthened initiatory practice, for his commitment to the cause of authentic Christian and ecclesial unity in the truth of the Gospel is not in doubt.

Meanwhile, here is a pastoral word that all Christians may hear from the theologian who is now bishop of Rome:

When we make the sign of the Cross, we accept our Baptism anew; Christ from the Cross draws us, so to speak, to himself (cf. Jn 13:32) and thus into communion with the living God. For Baptism and the sign of the Cross, which is a kind of summing up and re-acceptance of Baptism, are above all a divine event: the Holy Spirit leads us to Christ, and Christ opens the door to the Father. God is no longer the "unknown god"; He has a name. We are allowed to call upon Him, and He calls us.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 178.

Or again, concerning the adoption of the *orans* posture in prayer, “one of the primal gestures of man in calling upon God and found in virtually every part of the religious world”:

By extending our arms, we resolve to pray with the Crucified, to unite ourselves to his “mind” (Phil 2:5). In the arms of Christ, stretched on the Cross, Christians see a twofold meaning. In his case, too, this gesture is the radical form of worship, the unity of his human will with the will of the Father, but at the same time these arms are open toward us—they are the wide embrace by which Christ wants to draw us to himself (Jn 12:32). Worship of God and love of neighbor—the content of the chief commandment, which sums up the law and the prophets—coincide in this gesture. To open oneself to God, to surrender oneself completely to Him, is at the same time—the two things cannot be separated—to devote oneself to one’s neighbor. This combining of the two directions of love in the gesture of Christ on the Cross reveals, in a bodily and visible way, the new depth of Christian prayer and thus expresses the inner law of our own prayer.⁹⁵

Finally, the ecclesial and human community, we are not surprised to read, has for Ratzinger not only a synchronic but also a diachronic—and ultimately eschatological—range. Gathered in the Holy Spirit (though, with the notable exception of the chapter on “Music and Liturgy,” *epiclesis* is more an implicit than an explicit category in Ratzinger’s writing—despite the title of our principal book!), the liturgical assembly embodies and enacts the *anamnesis* of Christ, which has past, present, and future reference. Ratzinger speaks often of “the communion of the saints.” Of icons, he writes that “the images of biblical history have pride of place in sacred art, but the latter also includes the history of the saints, which is an unfolding of the history of Jesus Christ, the fruit born throughout history by the dead grain of wheat.”⁹⁶ Or of the Eucharist: “Eucharistic person-alism is a drive toward union, the overcoming of the barriers between God and man, between ‘I’ and ‘thou’ in the new ‘we’ of the communion of the saints. . . . Only the true Body in the Sacrament can build up the true Body of the new City of God.”⁹⁷

Recalling his own priestly and episcopal ordinations, and the singing of the Litany of the Saints by the whole congregation, Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

The fact that the praying Church was calling upon all the saints, that the prayer of the Church really was enveloping and embracing me, was

⁹⁵ Ibid., 203–4.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 87–88.

a wonderful consolation. In my incapacity, which had to be expressed in the bodily gesture of prostration, this prayer, this presence of all the saints, of the living and the dead, was a wonderful strength—it was the only thing that could, as it were, lift me up. Only the presence of the saints with me made possible the path that lay before me.⁹⁸

And his own unforeseen election to the chair of Peter gives a special poignancy to what he wrote, in historical and theological vein, about the location of that chair in the basilica of the Vatican:

In St. Peter's, during the pontificate of St. Gregory the Great (590–604), the altar was moved nearer to the bishop's chair, probably for the simple reason that he was supposed to stand as much as possible above the tomb of St. Peter. This was an outward and visible expression of the truth that we celebrate the Sacrifice of the Lord in the communion of saints, a communion spanning all times and ages. The custom of erecting an altar above the tombs of the martyrs probably goes back a long way and is an outcome of the same motivation. Throughout history the martyrs continue Christ's self-oblation; they are like the Church's living altar, made not of stones but of men, who have become members of the Body of Christ and thus express a new kind of cultus: sacrifice is humanity become love with Christ.⁹⁹

Ratzinger cites St. Augustine for the view that “the true ‘sacrifice’ is the *civitas Dei*, that is, love-transformed mankind, the divinization of creation, and the surrender of all things to God: God all in all (1 Cor 15:28). That is the purpose of the world. That is the essence of sacrifice and worship.”¹⁰⁰ We come thus to a final reading of the liturgy in the three dimensions of cosmos, history, and consummation.

A Universal Prospect

History is conceived by Joseph Ratzinger as the cosmic story of created humankind *en marche* toward the City of God and the New World that has already dawned in Christ. Within the great “arc from *exitus* to *reditus*,”¹⁰¹ the “great historical process by which the world moves toward the fulfillment of God being ‘all in all,’ ”¹⁰² the smaller units “carry within themselves the great rhythm of the whole, give it concrete forms that are

⁹⁸ Ibid., 188.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰² Ibid., 59.

ever new, and so provide it with the force of its movement.”¹⁰³ These include “the lives of the different cultures and communities of human history, in which the drama of beginning, development, and end is played out.”¹⁰⁴ Given “the Christ-event and the growth of the Church out of all the nations,”¹⁰⁵

Christian liturgy is a liturgy of promise fulfilled, of a quest, the religious quest of human history, reaching its goal. But it remains a liturgy of hope. It, too, bears within it the mark of impermanence. The new Temple, not made by human hands, does exist, but it is also still under construction. The great gesture of embrace emanating from the Crucified has not yet reached its goal; it has only just begun. Christian liturgy is liturgy on the way, a liturgy of pilgrimage toward the transfiguration of the world, which will only take place when God is “all in all.”¹⁰⁶

In this universal historical context a recurrent liturgical trope of Ratzinger’s is “the procession of the nations.”¹⁰⁷ The feast of the Epiphany celebrates, among other things, the arrival of the Magi as “the beginning of the Church of the Gentiles, the procession of the nations to the God of Israel (cf. Is 60)”:

The narrative of the adoration of the Magi became important for Christian thought, because it shows the inner connection between the wisdom of the nations and the Word of promise in Scripture; because it shows how the language of the cosmos and the truth-seeking thought of man lead to Christ. The mysterious star could become the symbol for these connections and once again emphasize that the language of the cosmos and the language of the human heart trace their descent from the Word of the Father, who in Bethlehem came forth from the silence of God and assembled the fragments of our human knowledge into a complete whole.¹⁰⁸

How, in this (liturgical) light, are we to distinguish between legitimate diversity, problematic pluralism, and the castigated “relativism” in matters of religion and culture? It is clear that the test must be Christological (and, derivatively, ecclesial); and that is precisely what we find stated in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* emanating from the Congregation for the Doctrine of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, *ibid.*, 76, 110.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 110.

the Faith in the year 2000 while Cardinal Ratzinger was its prefect: "On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the [Catholic] Church." While "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy" in non-Christian religions (no. 2, citing Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, no. 2), *Dominus Iesus* declares that "the Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure*," so as to lose "the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ":

The roots of these problems are to be found in certain presuppositions of both a philosophical nature and theological nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth. Some of these can be mentioned: the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian Revelation; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others; the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the subjectivism which, by regarding reason as the only source of knowledge, becomes incapable of raising "its gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being" [John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 5]; the difficulty in understanding and accepting the presence of definitive and eschatological events in history; the metaphysical emptying of the historical Incarnation of the Eternal Logos, reduced to a mere appearing of God in history; the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection, or compatibility with Christian truth; finally, the tendency to read and to interpret Sacred Scripture outside the Tradition and magisterium of the Church.¹⁰⁹

Our question in this essay has to be: How is all that to be properly dealt with, and countered, in the realm of liturgy—and, through liturgy, in the realm of an entire culture? How are Christian worship—and the entire faith—to cope with a culture and its intellectual, social, and religious components? How, at our particular time and place, are the distinctions to be drawn between diversity-in-unity and an ideologically affirmed pluralism that amounts to relativism? The theologian Joseph Ratzinger stated some principles, and gave some examples, of his own discernment in the book to which we have been devoting our principal attention. In principle, he detects an early Christian realization that "the paths of religious history converged on Christ, . . . that philosophy and religion gave faith the images and concepts in which alone it could understand itself."¹¹⁰ Yet

¹⁰⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, no. 4.

¹¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 183.

he is very suspicious of what recent and contemporary liturgists have meant by “inculturation”;¹¹¹ and he proposes an alternative:

The first and most fundamental way in which inculturation takes place is the unfolding [*Entfaltung*] of a Christian culture in all its different dimensions: a culture of cooperation, of social concern, of respect for the poor, of the overcoming of class differences, of care for the suffering and dying; a culture that educates mind and heart in proper cooperation; a political culture and a culture of law; a culture of dialogue, of reverence for life, and so on. This kind of authentic inculturation of Christianity then creates culture in the stricter sense of the word, that is, it leads to artistic work that interprets the world anew in the light of God.¹¹²

“In the religious sphere,” says Ratzinger, “culture manifests itself above all in the growth of authentic popular piety.”¹¹³ He instances devotion to the Passion of Christ among suffering peoples, and “Marian devotion, in which the whole mystery of the Incarnation, the tenderness of God, the participation of man in God’s own nature, and the nature of God’s saving action are experienced at a profound level.”¹¹⁴ And thence into liturgy:

Popular piety is the soil without which the liturgy cannot thrive. . . . One must love it, purifying and guiding it where necessary, but always accepting it with great reverence, even when it seems alien or alienating, as the dedicated sanctuary of faith in the hearts of the people. . . . Tried and tested elements of popular piety may pass over, then, into liturgical celebration, without officious and hasty fabrication, by a patient process of lengthy growth.¹¹⁵

Two further remarks are in order here. First, our author himself recognizes that it was freely composed poetry and music that “provided the point of entry for Gnosticism, that deadly temptation which began to subvert Christianity from within”—and conciliar control (as in the fourth-century “Canons of Laodicea”) was needed to “save the identity of biblical faith”; so that in fact “the very rejection of false inculturation opened up the cultural breadth of Christianity for the future.”¹¹⁶ And second, the mention of “purifying,” “guiding,” “trying,” and “testing” in the previous passage confirms the need for magisterial control (as Pope

¹¹¹ Cf., for example, *ibid.*, 200ff.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144–45.

Pius XII stated in his encyclical of 1947, *Mediator Dei*, in a neat twist on a familiar dictum: *ut lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi*).

Since religion, in one shape or form, seems always to be woven into culture, the question of “religious pluralism” must always arise in the presentation of the Gospel and in the regulation of Christian worship. According to Joseph Ratzinger, “one of the great realities in the history of religion” is that “man is always looking for the right way of honoring God, for a form of prayer and common worship that pleases God and is appropriate to his nature.”¹¹⁷ From the revelation communicated in Christ certain criteria must be brought to bear. In the context of our current discussion, two detailed applications made by the theologian Ratzinger are of some significance. First, he notes that “the lotus position of Indian religiosity, which is regarded as the proper posture for meditation,” is “again being practiced, in different ways, by some Christians.” He does not “want absolutely to rule out” its use for Christians, recognizing that “the Christian tradition is also familiar with the God who is more interior to us than we are to ourselves”; yet “the sitting position of oriental meditation” has no proper place in the liturgy of the Church:¹¹⁸

With all of today’s empiricism and pragmatism, with its loss of soul, we have good reason to learn again from Asia. But however open Christian faith may be, must be, to the wisdom of Asia, the difference between the personal and the a-personal understandings of God remains. We must, therefore, conclude that kneeling and standing are, in a unique and irreplaceable way, the Christian posture of prayer—the Christian’s orientation of himself toward the face of God, toward the face of Jesus Christ, in seeing whom we are able to see the Father.¹¹⁹

The second application concerns dance. “Dancing,” Ratzinger judges, “is not a form of expression for the Christian liturgy.” It was, in fact, rejected by the Church when, around the third century, “certain Gnostic-Docetic circles [attempted] to introduce it into the liturgy” in place of “the liturgy of the Cross, because, after all, the Cross was only an appearance.”¹²⁰ More generally, “the cultic dances of the different religions have different purposes—incantation, imitative magic, mystical ecstasy—none of which is compatible with the essential purpose of the liturgy of the ‘reasonable sacrifice.’”¹²¹ The “dancing pantomimes” currently fashionable in “creative

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 159.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 197.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 198.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

liturgy” are a far cry from what occurs in “the [traditional] Ethiopian rite or the Zairean form of the Roman liturgy [officially since 1988]” as “a rhythmically ordered procession very in keeping with the dignity of the occasion, . . . provid[ing] an inner discipline and order for the various stages of the liturgy, bestowing on them beauty and, above all, making them worthy of God.”¹²² That last remark about beauty and worth is a reminder, too, that authentic cultural achievements in the broader sense—“whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious” (Phil 4:8)—may find a proper place among “the glory and the honor of the nations” that will in the end adorn the City of God (cf. Rev 21:22–27).

Conclusion

To adapt H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic *Christ and Culture* (1951): Instead of taking his five “typical” attitudes as fixed and divergent stances historically manifested by different Christian believers toward all human culture as such, it may be appropriate to see them as indicating the possibility of, and need for, a discriminating attention on the part of all Christians toward every human culture whatever the time and place. Whereas a particular cultural configuration may appear as predominantly positive or negative in relation to the saving purposes of God, it is likely that most cultures will contain some elements to be affirmed; some to be negated, resisted, and even fought; some to be purified and elevated; some to be held provisionally in tension; and some susceptible to a radical and profound transformation toward God’s kingdom. The liturgy can function not only to sift but also to inspire a surrounding public culture.

As a theologian, Joseph Ratzinger has argued that the Church’s liturgy—as divinely instituted and responsibly celebrated—has the potential to operate in those ways toward a contemporary culture that is marked by a false and debilitating relativism at the intellectual, social, moral, and religious levels. His argument has been conducted with intelligence, learning, and art. Now, as Pope Benedict XVI, he is in a position as never before to use pastoral and magisterial powers of persuasion. His skills as a preacher and his grace as a presiding priest—both evident to many millions at the funeral of Pope John Paul II and at his own installation Mass—are cause for hope. My use of the word “remedy” in the title of this essay would be quite contrary to Joseph Ratzinger’s character if it were taken to imply merely a “quick fix” that would leave people unchanged. He rightly understands himself at the service of a liturgy that, by serving God, will work for the redemption and transformation of humankind toward its true nature, calling, and destiny. **NV**

¹²² Ibid., 198–99; cf. 169f.