

Chapter Four

The Approach to Forms

We have seen that Christian worship is a recapitulation of the saving process, that it is an epiphany of the Church, and that it bears witness both to the end and the future of the world. The question which we must try to answer in this fourth chapter is whether the cult can realize all this according to its own interpretation, somewhat haphazardly, or whether it must, to do so, not only assume shape, but a certain shape. We shall speak in turn of the necessity and the limitations of liturgical forms, then of the different spheres in which liturgical expression has scope and, thirdly, of discipline and liberty in liturgical formulation. In addition, we shall note incidentally what one might call the reward of liturgical formulation, that is the relation between worship and culture.

1. Necessity and limitations of liturgical forms

If Christian worship recapitulates the history of salvation, it bears witness that Jesus Christ has reached and has saved the world, that there has been the event of the Nativity – and following the Passion and Resurrection – that there has been the event of the Ascension. In short, all is said in this. We must, however, explain and amplify it.

(a) We must first speak briefly of the *necessity of liturgical forms*. If we were to say that the cult needs forms only because it brings together a group of men, and that there is no communal life without form, and if we thus proposed to justify liturgical forms by sociological considerations, we should be falling far short of what needs to be said, firstly because in this case we should have to consider forms as a necessary evil, secondly because, to judge the forms of the

cult, we should have no other criterion but that of the best adaptation to liturgical needs: in short, forms would be optional and would not have resulted from obedience.

Now, this is not the case. In worship, the problem of forms is a fundamental problem, since the cult is a recapitulation of the saving process and, since that process culminates in the incarnation. Before being a movement which rises, Christianity is a movement which descends in order to enter, permeate and take shape in the world, and it is only afterwards, after the embodiment has been assumed, that in and with such embodiment the direction is reversed and it reascends. It is the same movement that we have noted in speaking of the diastole and systole; and the movement of Incarnation and of the assumption of the Incarnate basically shows that God does not wish to save souls only but men and the world. "He who has heard the message of the incarnation of the Word", says Asmussen, "can never again attempt to apprehend what is Christian in what is shapeless" and rebellious to form. Thus if liturgical form is necessary, it is because that reflects the process of incarnation.¹

Now the incarnation, like the Incarnate, is a disputed sign, a SEMEION ANTILEGOMENON (Luke 2: 34). It is an offence because it contradicts all man's natural thoughts and imaginations about God, spiritual as well as materialist. If forms are necessary, it is because God showed us at Christmas that He did not wish to stand aloof from the world and men, that on the contrary He wished to save them. And to save them, He has Himself taken a form, He has hidden Himself among us by becoming visible, audible and tangible in the form of a man. This must be grasped in order to realize that if liturgical form is necessary, and reflects the incarnation, that form will always be offensive. Those who have no faith, it will not enable to see what the Church is seeking to express, while those who have faith, it will constrain to continue trustful in faith, to pray rather than to expect to see as they will see when the Kingdom comes.

1. May we say that the Church shapes its cult as the Virgin Mary brought Jesus to birth? We shall try to answer this question in the chapter on the elements of the cult, in which we examine their structure.

But the incarnation is not just an offence: it is also an appeal addressed to all whom it reaches, that they will rediscover in and through it a hope and a future. Contrary to what has been so often said when people wish to excuse themselves for not being spiritual, God was not made man because that was for Him the least derogatory way of coming to visit us and the most appropriate to our earth-bound condition. (Docetism would have been much more adapted to our dreams and our desires, and to our sin-laden state, than the Christmas message.) He was incarnate in order to take back to Himself, to heal His creation and His creatures, to show His solidarity with the world and His love for the world, and to summon the world to find again its true orientation. Hence we may say that if forms are necessary, it is because at the Ascension God showed us that the world and men, His creation, had no need to renounce their carnal state in order to appear before Him; what they must renounce was their sin. To forsake or distrust liturgical forms is, then, to contest the very heart of the Christian faith: the visit of the Lord in Jesus of Nazareth and the salvation of the world by His cross, resurrection and ascension.

(b) But we must now add a few remarks about the limitations of liturgical forms. We have seen that, because of the incarnation, forms are not only legitimate, but necessary. "Thus the choice is never between forms and no forms, but always between good forms and bad forms" (W. D. Maxwell). But what are bad forms? Those which lack taste, style, coherence, intelligibility? Certainly these are included, since nothing is more beautiful than truth. But here this aesthetic criterion is not really appropriate. It is to a theological criterion that we must have recourse if we are to know within what limits liturgical formulation remains Christian, hence legitimate and necessary. There are here two rules which must govern our choice: the first more objective, the second more existential.

Firstly, liturgical forms are limited by the second commandment: "You shall not make yourself a graven image ...

nor bow down before it” (Exod. 20: 4).² This does not primarily and essentially mean that Christian worship must be radically removed from the worship of pagan gods – this may be taken for granted, at least it should be a matter of course, for it is the requirement of the first commandment – but it means rather that liturgical formulation must coincide with the limit of revelation itself. In fact what is forbidden by the second commandment is not the making of idols representing other gods, but the attempt to imagine the one true God instead of trusting to the image which He Himself gives of Himself. It is the desire to replace His revelation by human imagination. This does not mean that God is beyond all imagination: the prohibition of images is not a philosophical statement about the mode of the divine being (that is, that He should be understood as transcendent and spiritual); it intends to declare how He reveals Himself, and that He reveals Himself otherwise than through the images that men are pleased to make of Him. He reveals Himself – under the New Covenant, we may now say – in the image which He has given us of Himself in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Thus we see that what limits liturgical forms is also what makes them necessary: the incarnation of the eternal Son of God. To be authentic and legitimate, liturgical form must therefore correspond to what God has taught about Himself, His love and His appeal (as K. Barth would say about His exhortation and His claim) by sending His Son into the world and raising Him to the right hand of power after His struggle and victory. And it must be said that this restriction is no less binding for dogmatic, homilectic, and logical formulation than for visual forms. Given that the second commandment does not presuppose that God is unimaginable – which moreover would contradict scripture as a whole – *a priori* one does not run a less risk of infringing it in speech than in gestures or symbols.

Next, liturgical forms are limited by their inherent

2. Again, this commandment is not a divine rejection of liturgical formulation. Think of the precision with which God Himself gives exact instructions about the form of worship when He ordains worship in the sanctuary (Exod., Lev.) (or think of the serpent of brass).

justification; they cease to be valid as soon as they seek their meaning and their justification in themselves, as soon as they are no longer content to be an echo of the offence and the appeal of the incarnation and seek to become a continued incarnation, to be in themselves salvation rather than a means of transmitting a salvation accomplished once for all. That is to say, that the forms of the cult, important as they are, have neither value nor the meaning, neither the canonicity nor the bearing of the form which God took once for all in coming to dwell among us. They exceed their due limit as soon as they claim to have saving efficacy in themselves, as soon as they are placed not on the level which is appropriate to them, that of the *necessitas praecepti*, but on the level which is that of Christ, the *necessitas medii*. “The shape and the form of the Christian cult cannot possibly have the significance of the form taken by Jesus Christ. All that takes place in Christian worship refers to something other than itself, it refers to the Christ who has come in the flesh” (H. Asmussen). Thus then, both for the necessity and the limitations of Christian liturgical forms, we are driven back to Jesus Christ.

(c) Restricted as it is by the second commandment, liturgical form is necessary because it is God’s will not only to take back His creation into Himself, but also to transform creation. One might say that it is necessary not merely because of the first but because of the second creation. In fact the Holy Spirit who makes all things new, transforming whatever He touches (2 Cor. 3: 18; Rom. 12: 2), is not the instigator of chaos. He is the Spirit of peace (1 Cor. 14: 32f.) and order (1 Cor. 14:40). As P. Brunner admirably says: “When the powers of the world to come irrupt into this transitory life, the point of impact does not become a place of chaos and dissolution, but there takes place rather a new birth, a new creation, a new building-up, the incorporation of a new form ... The characteristic work of the Spirit lies in eschatological metamorphosis, the re-creation of our whole corporeal existence, as was done for Jesus Christ at His resurrection. The Spirit who works in the Church is the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:

11). Now this Spirit never by His work gives birth to a shapeless spirituality; rather His re-creative power aims at bringing to birth a pneumatic corporeality.” And it is this pneumatic corporeality which seeks and must find expression in the Christian cult.

Thus we see that the approach to forms is indispensable to Christian worship because this celebrates the Holy Trinity: the Father Creator who wills to bring back to Himself His creation, the Redeemer Son who fixes, limits and justifies liturgical formulation, and the sanctifying Holy Spirit who wills to transform the creation redeemed by Christ, bringing it from glory to glory until it becomes a new creation.

(d) Before enumerating the various domains in which the formulation of liturgical expression finds scope, it may be worth while to add a brief remark on the theological importance of form, not merely as regards liturgy but in dogmatics, ecclesiology, church law, etc. Why form? It is there to express and protect that which at the same time it supports and encloses. Thus dogma is both the expression and protection of truth. Thus the structure of the Church both expresses and safeguards the nature of the Church. Thus also the formulated liturgy is the expression and protection of the nature of Christian worship: it must convey the truth that the cult is a recapitulation of the saving process, the epiphany of the Church, and the end and the future of the world; but it must also protect the saving process so that it can become truly operative: it must protect the Church against possible deviations and temptations, so that it preserves its character as pure as possible: it must protect the limit imposed on the world by the cult, so that, for the world, it loses neither the severity of its judgment nor the allurements of its promise.

What we note here leads us to understand that liturgical formulation, because it must express as well as protect the nature of the cult, enjoys considerable freedom but has also precise norms which it may not transgress without compromising the nature of the cult. Here, too, we see how false it is to think that the forms of worship are, as people say with contempt, “only questions of form”. Certainly many formal liturgical questions are but “questions of form” and

do not involve a judgment on the faithfulness of the Church. But it is clear too that in such matters of form the faithfulness of the Church is at stake and much more often than is usually thought in our Church.

2. The domains of liturgical expression

The question to be examined here is as follows: in Christian worship God wishes to give Himself to us and to receive us. What spheres does God open up for the realization of this encounter? By what senses does He will to communicate with us in order to give us salvation, and from what spheres of human sensibility does He await, in response, our thanksgiving for what He has done for us in Jesus Christ?

To answer this question, the simplest thing is to consider the transformations which Christ effected in men, as described for us in the Gospels: Jesus opens the mind of those who are slow to understand (Luke 24: 25-27; 24: 45, cf. John 12: 16, etc.), He opens the ears of the deaf, the mouth of the dumb, the eyes of the blind; He also loosens the rigid limbs of the paralytics, and exercises His messianic ministry by touching men and allowing Himself to be touched by them.³ This list of aspects of human life which are being touched by salvation is at the same time a list of the domains in which worship finds expression. All these domains have not the same importance: a paralysed or a blind man can with less difficulty worship God than can a deaf or a dumb man or a man incapable of understanding. None the less, just as man would be impoverished if salvation did not affect his whole being, so the cult would be impoverished if it did not offer the whole man grace to express himself liturgically. Again, a blind, a deaf, a dumb, or a one-armed person can live, whereas a beheaded person cannot live. But, once more, the healing miracles recorded in the Gospels afford a promise that vast areas are open for Christian worship which we have no right to exclude from it, since the Gospels show that such areas of human life are also capable of sanctification.

3. Cf. Matt. 9: 18; 19: 15 par.; Luke 4:40; Matt. 8: 15; 9: 29; 20: 34; Mark 7: 33; 10: 13; Luke 7: 14; Matt. 9: 20ff. par.; 14: 36 par.; Mark 3: 10; Luke 6:19; 7: 39; 24: 39; John 20: 17; 27; 1 John 1: 1; etc.

The spheres of liturgical expression commanded or permitted, can, I think, be reduced to four chief ones: the logical, the acoustic, the visual and the kinetic.

(a) The *logical* domain is that of verbal expression which renders things intellectually comprehensible. It is the effort which gives to the vowels, by means of consonants, a structure and order which changes them from cries into words: then the effort of grasping the exact meaning of terms and their grammatical and syntactical connexion; then that of memorizing or fixing the preceding efforts and so of introducing logical formulation into a transmitted tradition, which is enriched or impoverished, which receives accretions or is cleansed, etc. This might be called “logolalia” – the speaking in words. This “logolalia” is essential not only for the proclamation of the Word of God (reading, preaching, absolution, benediction, etc.), but indispensable also for prayers, hymns, canticles, confessions, etc., for the understanding of the deep meaning of that encounter between God and the Church which is what worship is.⁴ A mode of worship in which “logolalia” is changed into cries might possibly allow one to surmise something of what is being celebrated (one may think of the very expressive vociferations of Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*, or of certain South American melodies), but a vehicle would be lacking, or rather there would be lacking a means (in the sense of “mediator”), which is essential to show that what is in question is an encounter between God and *man*.

This is the appropriate point at which to stop for a moment to consider the problem of glossolalia.⁵ Glossolalia is a kind of shout, song or groan, an eschatological frenzy or trance, which is at times manifested in the supreme moments of the spiritual life, at conversion, for example (cf. Acts 19: 6ff.; 10:46), because what it is desired to express, as at times in the crises of love, terror or sorrow escapes the control of consonants and becomes a cry, howl,

4. We discuss below the relation of *lex orandi-lex credendi* which here is only touched upon.

5. Xenoglossia, even ecstatic, which seems to have been the phenomenon of Pentecost (Acts 2: 4, 6, 11) is not to be quite simply identified with glossolalia, despite their kinship.

song, or incoherent stammering. Thus glossolalia is not necessarily a creation of the Holy Spirit, but a phenomenon of this world which the Holy Spirit can use to induce AGALLIASIS. It is a physical phenomenon which it is not difficult to produce by other means than the Holy Spirit: torture, caresses, terror, hatred, or the techniques used to induce personal or collective trance are perfectly capable of engendering glossolalia – that language which lies beyond ourselves.

Theologically there are three observations to be made at this point:

Firstly, it must be said that glossolalia is a challenge to the languages of this world, to their confusion, their mutual unintelligibility, their unfitness, because of their very number, to allow men to understand each other; it suggests the “diabolic” character of the languages of this world, which separate instead of uniting. Glossolalia is not then in itself opposed to “logolalia”, but rather to the exclusive use of Greek, Latin or French, etc. That is why it is not legitimate, in this present life, to choose any one language and to make it the privileged liturgical language. However, the challenge of glossolalia to human languages is not a means of miraculously overcoming the Babylonian confusion, since, as a rule,⁶ glossolalia itself needs to be translated (1 Cor. 12: 10; 14: 2, 9, 11, 13, 18ff., etc.).

Next, without in the least denying that glossolalia can be a charismatic gift (what St. Paul says about this in chs. 12 and 14 of 1 Cor. makes it impossible for us to deny this), we must realize that the apostle does not think glossolalia can suitably contribute to communal liturgy. It is in the realm of private piety that the NT regards glossolalia as valid, and it is interesting to note that while other Churches besides that of Corinth were familiar with speaking with tongues (Ephesus, Caesarea Philippi and Jerusalem) only Corinth wished to make it a normal element in worship. For St. Paul it was a morbid and dangerous tendency, because, if glossolalia can be a sign of divine blessing, it

6. Cf. the rather incoherent story of Acts 2 where it is uncertain whether we must opt for glossolalia (v. 12-13) or xenoglossia (v. 4, 11, v. 6 and 8).