LESSONS FROM THE SHOAH: IMPLICATIONS FOR LITURGICAL TEACHING AND PRACTICE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Presenting Catholic liturgical life as a dynamic and comprehensive life-long process of learning, this essay addresses the unique liturgical opportunities Catholic schools have to express the Church’s theology, to catechize, to shape and nurture spiritualties, and to help effect moral and ethical transformation. It highlights six lessons humanity as learned from the Holocaust, including references to the dramatic ecclesial and theological post-Holocaust changes initiated by Nostra Aetate. It considers their implications for Christian liturgy and begins to explore the various challenges and opportunities this presents for effective liturgical education and practice in Catholic schools today.

Introduction

During his visit to Jerusalem in the year 2000, the late Pope John Paul II spoke of the Shoah as “the Calvary of the 20th century.” The magnitude of the Holocaust, the depths of its horror, and the failure of Christianity and humanity in face of it, challenge numerous dimensions of our Christian experience. This essay takes a brief look at some of these challenges and begins to address the need for Christians to more effectively incorporate these concerns when they gather as a community for liturgical prayer.

We know that this tragic failure of humanity, which ruptured the very soul of Christianity, compelled the Roman Catholic Church to respond to this tragedy at Vatican Council II through its 1965 declaration Nostra Aetate. The new teachings concerning Jews and Judaism, begun in this document, have been considerably developed and expanded in the decades following its promulgation. At a Washington, DC conference marking the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate Cardinal Walter Kasper referred to this declaration as revolutionary. Speaking as President of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Kasper declared that “the development in Jewish-Christian relations over the past forty years is among the most astonishing and most gratifying developments of the 20th century.” He went on to say, even more emphatically, that we are only “at the beginning of the beginning” of this effort — that so much more work is still needed to spell out and to live in a manner true to the many implications of these new teachings. (Kasper, 2005) In June of that same year the newly-elected Pope Benedict
XVI addressed the profound implications of the Shoah, saying that “remembrance of the past remains...a moral imperative and a source of purification in our efforts to pray and work for reconciliation, justice, respect for human dignity, and for that peace which is ultimately a gift of the Lord himself. Of its very nature this imperative must include a continued reflection on the profound historical, moral and theological questions presented by the Shoah.” (Benedict XVI, 2005)

What are some of these profound questions and challenges raised by the Shoah? How do they speak to Roman Catholic liturgical practice and, more specifically, to the liturgical experience in our Catholic schools? Why, in the context of Holocaust education, include a focus on Liturgy and insist that our schools need to scrutinize, with new understanding and insight, their liturgical practice and teaching?

Roman Catholic Christians are often quite unaware of the many times and significant ways liturgy is an integral part of their personal and collective faith experience. They frequently underestimate, as well, the role liturgy plays in the education — the total shaping, formation and transformation — of the child, the adolescent and the young adult. Too often, in the minds of educators, there is a disconnect between their efforts in the classroom and the times when they gather with their students for the liturgical and paraliturgical experiences which are such a privileged component of the Catholic school experience.

It is when it gathers together liturgically that the school community is most uniquely itself. Here educators and students express their collective and personal identity as Christian most clearly and profoundly before God and the world. Whether they realize it or not, it is here that they declare together: who they are, what they believe, to what they commit themselves and their lives. How they sing the songs and tell the stories of the central mysteries of their faith, catechizes, informs and expresses their theology and spirituality, and shapes their moral and ethical views and understandings compelling them to action. When the school community celebrates liturgy, this living ritual is directed first and foremost toward the experience and sanctification of God — to adore, worship, thank and praise. Yet, while engaged in this powerful ritual, the various facets of their personal and collective Christian identity are being shaped and expressed — not through speculative abstraction or didactics — but by gesturing together, to God and the world, through communal symbol, ritual and cultic acts. Their deepest understandings, beliefs and commitments are expressed ritually and symbolically, in a manner which reaches not only the intellect, but also the psyche and the soul. It penetrates subtly and it deeply transforms. Therefore, given the grave moral imperative of the lessons humanity is learning from the Holocaust, a Catholic school’s
interdisciplinary effort in Holocaust education would be remiss if it did not include its liturgist and its liturgy teachers in this team effort.

**Six Lessons from the Shoah**

With this understanding as a backdrop, this essay now briefly considers six lessons from the Shoah. While doing so it invites the reader to consider what impact each could, and perhaps should, have on various liturgical symbolic and ritual expressions in the Catholic faith community. In a church seriously committed to integrating these lessons or challenges into its liturgical expression, what shape might its symbols, rituals and collective actions take?

- **Lesson One: The Need for a More Comprehensive Understanding of Our Universe of Moral Obligation**

  All too aware that humanity and Christianity failed badly in their moral obligation to the victims of the Holocaust, we are challenged to ask: To and for whom does the Christian community have a moral obligation? What does this imply about the individual Christian’s personal moral obligation? To whom and how far does it extend?

  We need only look to the words and witness of the late Pope John Paul II to help us understand this. Following his own personal experience of the Shoah and his witness of antisemitism in action, he consistently warned against the violation of human dignity and the inalienable human rights which derive from it — for everyone. The dignity of persons does not depend on their origin, their culture, their religion or gender. It is due to them as human beings having been conferred on each one at birth. Many ‘righteous gentiles’ who risked the lives of themselves and their families to rescue Jews had an innate understanding of this universal nature of their moral obligation. “I was simply doing what I had to do,” was their way of expressing that it extended beyond race, beyond national boundaries, beyond ethnicity, beyond religion.

  How well is the Catholic Christian community incorporating the comprehensive nature of its moral obligation in its liturgical expressions? Not merely as vague, pious aspirations, but in a manner which concretely acknowledges the current challenges in its local, national, and international context — be it local prejudice and violence, the lack of adequate housing and medical care for many citizens of their country, or the plight of all the victims in the Iraq war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? How might this sense of moral obligation be more effectively expressed ritually and symbolically? What could this imply for the liturgical life within a school?
Lesson Two: The Need to Understand and Embrace Our Call to Responsible Co-Creatorship

A question frequently raised in the aftermath of the Shoah is: Where was God? Why was God silent? How could God allow this to happen? The theodicy question has taken many shapes and forms. But don’t we have to turn that question around and face ourselves with it? Shouldn’t the real question be: Where was humanity? Where were we? Where are we today as thousands continue to die through genocide as, for example, in Darfur?

The person who, in my estimation, has attempted to address this theodicy question most effectively and at greatest length is the Holocaust scholar and moral theologian, John Pawlikowski. In his post-Holocaust dialogue with other scholars on this matter, he presents the concept of a self-limiting and vulnerable God — a God who is becoming increasingly dependent on a human community which is increasingly being entrusted with co-creational responsibility and power. He speaks of a God who compels rather than a God who commands — a God who wants to trust and become utterly dependent upon a maturing human community in the process of creational salvation. During the Shoah, where was this human responsibility and power? Pawlikowski holds that “[t]he Holocaust and...succeeding genocides have taught us that God will not, perhaps even cannot, effect the full redemption of that part of divine power he has graciously shared with humankind unless human beings assume their appointed role as co-creators.” He insists, however, that this conviction must be held with an equally strong caution — a caution which recalls the Nazi assumption of power in their attempt to create the übermensch!

Pawlikowski cautions:

The assertion of co-creatorship must be done in the context of a newly heightened sense of humility, a clear recognition that any measure of co-creatorship that we enjoy is not self-generative but a gift of God, coupled with a forthright recognition of the other side of this power: the destructive tendencies that surfaced so prominently during the Nazi era...Without this sense of dependence, the potential for goodness and love inherent in the new consciousness will become a reality that is one long nightmare of hate and destruction. (Pawlikowski, 171-175)

How can these dual dimensions of our call to responsible co-creatorship be effectively conveyed through our liturgical symbols and rituals? How can we celebrate, symbolize and ritualize this co-creating power which the compelling God wants to entrust to us, while also conveying the caution about how this power can be, has been, and is being abused?

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1 This evokes the Jewish kabalistic concept of tsim tsum. In Jewish mystical thought God withdraws partially from the created world. This partial withdrawing and letting go of control allows humans the space and freedom to act.
Lesson Three: The Need for an Ethics of Biblical Interpretation

Following the promulgation of Nostra Aetate in 1965, Catholic leadership has expressed the need for ongoing vigilance regarding a supersessionist interpretation of Scripture, and a subtle or overt anti-Judaism and antisemitism in our preaching, prayer and use of Scripture in our liturgies. This vigilance needs to continue if we are serious about remembering the effects of Christianity’s ‘teaching of contempt’. But recently Catholic Christianity has been called even further by the work being done by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. It is important that their work — especially their most recent statement — be studied and applied in our Catholic schools. One might ask how many principals, religion teachers and liturgists have, or have even heard of the Commission’s 2001 publication, The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible!

While he was still Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict wrote the Preface to this work. He remarked: “In its work the Biblical Commission could not ignore the contemporary context, where the shock of the Shoah has put the whole question under a new light.” Observing that a new respect needs to emerge, he drew attention to the document’s declaration “that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scripture from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion” (§ 22). He went on to say that [the document] adds that Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practiced for more than two thousand years…” He concluded that “this analysis will prove useful for…the interior formation of Christian consciousness.” (PBC, Preface)

Pope Benedict’s words convey an increasing emphasis on the importance of a Christian exposure to Jewish biblical interpretation. What should this mean for the teaching of Scripture and the use of Scripture liturgically in our schools, especially in our High Schools? Are our teachers (much less our students) even aware that the Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures is different than the Christian interpretation? That the order and arrangement of the Books of the Tanakh is quite different than the arrangement in the Christian Old Testament, and that there is a reason underlying this order and arrangement? What implications might this have for the religion curriculum in our High Schools and, by extension, for the liturgies in our schools? Might a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of this be attained if a rabbi or Jewish scholar were to occasionally address a class or provide reflections on the Scripture reading during a liturgy?
Lesson Four: The Need to Understand the Power of Symbolism and its Effective Use in Public Ritual

People and societies need symbols and rituals. The overwhelming public interest and appreciation of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics and other major sports events is an example of the power of ritual and symbolism in action!

Any student of the Third Reich is aware of the Nazi use of symbolism and public ritual and its effectiveness in the implementation of their systematic plan of action. Their public liturgies were an essential part of their ability to forge social cohesion, determine public values, and then ensure impassioned commitment and support. An alienated and frustrated Weimar Germany could not have been as effectively revitalized as it was merely through rational ideologies. The presentation of these ideologies through new symbols and ritualization released, to an enormous extent, the vitalistic energies of the people. Unfortunately these energies were released in a destructive rather than a constructive manner.

In his essay “Liturgy and the Holocaust” Pawlikowski draws attention to Western society’s gradual separation of vitalistic energy from religion. He expresses concern about the degree to which this is happening and the danger of this growing one-dimensionality. He stresses the need for a new moral sensitivity — the kind of sensitivity engendered by a symbolic encounter with a loving God. He insists that the “ritual containment” of the power inherent in worship can set out a new overarching moral framework for a society which presently lacks the public bonding needed to effectively embrace and realize its co-creational responsibilities. For this vitalization to happen we need new symbols or a creative rebirthing of some of our old symbols to give effective impassioned expression to our encounter with a loving God — an impassioned expression which leads to decision and action! The awareness that much of the energy empowering current religious fanaticism is generated through religious symbolism and ritual — albeit through their abuse — raises, even more urgently, the need for symbols of transcendence which can help release the vitalistic energies of communities which seek effective and constructive moral commitment.

To what degree do current Catholic liturgical symbols and rituals impassion the Catholic Christian personally and communally? If our liturgical communal celebrations send us forth energized with a deepened motivation to bring the co-creating power entrusted to us by a self-

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2 Vitalistic: The theory or doctrine that life processes arise from or contain a nonmaterial vital principal and cannot be explained entirely as physical and chemical phenomena. The life principle within us which gives rise to life energy, passion and creativity.
limiting God to the “open wounds” in our world today, why is this the case? If they don’t, what may be missing in our liturgical expressions?

Lesson Five: The Need to Avoid Inappropriate Martial Symbolism and Expressions of Triumphalism and Power

In the shadow of the history of Jewish suffering it is imperative that Christian liturgical martial Imagery and triumphalist liturgical language and imagery about Jesus, God and the church be carefully critiqued. Further development of this observation will benefit from a brief preliminary consideration of three related factors — three current realities which provide a backdrop highlighting its imperative nature and urgency. These are: the dark alliance between religion and violence; the encounter with pluralism; and an ecclesial turn from triumphalism to compassion.

The Dark Alliance Between Religion and Violence: The extent to which this dangerous dark alliance underlies the current escalation of religious extremism and the continuing appeal and potential for using religion to incite war is manifested by the recent profusion of serious academic publications which attempt to address various dimensions of this phenomenon. Examples include: The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism (Schwartz), Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence (Juergensmeyer), Revelation, the Religions and Violence (Lefebure), Religion, and Violence and Peace (Ehrenkranz and Coppola), In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century (Bartov and Mack), and When Religion Becomes Evil (Kimball). This alliance is evident not merely in the very overt global rise of religious terrorism, but also in the more subtle, often undeclared reliance on religion to provide political identities and give license to vengeful ideologies. The ability of religion to demand passionate and exclusive allegiance, and to forge collective identities over against the other demands serious attention to current national conflicts, ethnic divisions, and racial hatreds.

The Encounter with Pluralism: The church today is part of a religiously and culturally diverse global community, which differs radically from the more circumscribed experience of previous centuries when faiths were ritualized in smaller worlds with shared visions and common values. At Vatican Council II the church anticipated this increasing encounter with pluralism in such documents as Nostra Aetate (Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberty), and Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). The fact that this ‘new world’ is
becoming increasingly polycentric in its horizons of interpretation compels the church to find new ways to present anew the telling of the Christian story. While remaining faithfully rooted in the past, it must transcend the past and include the ‘other’ in the telling of this story in a manner which values without marginalizing or denigrating. In facing this challenge it can look to the example of the late Pope John Paul II and recall the two occasions, in 1986 and 2002, when he called the heads of the great world religions to gather in Assisi to pray together, each according to their own creed. This example of spiritual courage conveyed implicit respect for each religion and a message that religion must never be used to incite division, hatred and violence.

An Ecclesial Turn from Triumphalism to Compassion: Though the 21st century Roman Catholic Church is still significantly encumbered by its centuries-long history of triumphalism, it has also been receiving — from within — very concrete calls to transform its triumphalist attitude to one of compassion. This transformation will be facilitated and realized in direct proportion to the degree to which today’s faithful acknowledge and engage these ‘calls to transformation.’ A case in point is the person and life of Pope John XXIII. In the space of the very few years during which the world knew him, Pope John left a profound, indelible mark on the pages of history: an unmistakable and vivid rejection of triumphalism. A second case in point is the year 2000 and Pope John Paul II’s Jubilee Year call for a “purification of memory” in the Church — a call to which he immediately responded with his Lenten prayer for forgiveness at the foot of the Cross. Never in the history of humanity has the leader of the church so publicly and comprehensively acknowledged the sins of its past and its need for expiation and forgiveness. His very demeanor at the Western Wall in Jerusalem — when he placed in the crevice of the wall the prayer asking forgiveness from the “people of the Covenant” — declared a turning point in the Church: a turn away from a stance of power and triumphalism to a humble following of the Gospel call to compassion, reconciliation, justice and peace.

While these three realities help highlight the need to avoid inappropriate liturgical martial symbolisms and expressions of triumphalism and power, post-Holocaust Christological reflection, informed by a God participating in human suffering and depending on the human community for co-creation, adds a further dimension to this need for transformation. Our liturgical expressions must recognize vulnerability as a mark of ‘godliness.’ This modified perception of an omnipotent God applies also to God incarnate. In the shadow of the Holocaust Jesus the Christ is more appropriately perceived through imagery of vulnerability and compassion, than through symbols of triumph and power. One need only turn to the Gospels to find this modified depiction affirmed repeatedly by Jesus’ life and teaching. In relation to this,
theologians such as Georgetown University’s Peter Phan increasingly emphasize the need to recognize the degree to which words and symbols are embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts. (Phan, 134) Words and images of war, conquest of the other (Onward Christian Soldiers immediately comes to mind!), and the continued use of such words as ‘unique’ and ‘absolute’ in relation to Jesus as savior should throw us back on ourselves with the questions: To what extent do these words and images connote to others an attitude of arrogance and exclusiveness? Are they congruent with a Christian message of humble service and compassionate love? What new liturgical symbols, rituals, prayers and lyrics are needed to help effect this transformed Christian self-understanding?

- Lesson Six: The Need to Mourn, Grieve and Lament

As indicated above in Lesson Two, the experience of the Shoah has presented humanity with new inscrutable questions of theodicy and the mystery of human suffering. The observations of theologians and spiritual masters on these immense questions vary. There is, however, considerable consensus about the need for sacred rituals which help to appropriately release our reaction to suffering — which enable us to mourn, to express grief, and to lament in a faith context. To simply console or silence those who are suffering by providing conceptual solutions is a dangerous option. Referring to the need for healing and controlling emotions in times of mass human destruction, John Pawlikowski observes: “Uncontrolled vitalistic energies in such settings can easily lead to further death and destruction through retaliation.” The overwhelming American popular insistence on retaining the death penalty clearly supports this observation. When people have had someone near and dear to them cruelly murdered, it is the norm rather than the exception for them to insist that they will have closure only if the murderer is put to death. And frequently this also includes the desire on the part of those paralyzed by grief to actually witness the death of the perpetrator! This is a vivid exemplification of uncontrolled vitalistic energies seeking release through retaliation. A striking contrast to this is the response of the Amish community to the abuse and murder of the little Amish girls in a rural Pennsylvania schoolhouse in 2006. Instead of insisting on violent retaliation to this atrocious violence, the Amish community reached out to and even supported financially the widow of the perpetrator. One could not help but be aware of the many spontaneous expressions of appreciative surprise and relief by the American public who appeared to be yearning, probably quite unconsciously, for a human response of compassion rather than retaliation. Though few details were available, other than the fact that they burned down the schoolhouse, the scene of the crime, various symbolic faith rituals in the Amish community must have helped provide the release of grief which prevented the need
to retaliate. This helps to illustrate what Pawlikowski means when he goes on to say: “Yet the pain of the experience must be released. Lament can play a crucial role in releasing, yet containing such energies.” (Pawlikowski, 175)

Johann Baptist Metz speaks of the spirituality of suffering unto God. His words bring to mind passages in the Psalter when he insists that our suffering and the suffering of others should turn us toward God — not with pietistic slogans, but by crying out, complaining, calling God to account, and expecting a response. He says that this suffering unto God “exposes us to the full force of suffering in history but does so in the light of the good news of a God who has promised to hear and respond compassionately to the cries of those who suffer — that bursts our theological systems and ignites our questions anew, but now directed most primordially toward God, in the language of prayer.” It is this “poverty of spirit” which empowers the suffering worshipper with apocalyptic hope and expectation. (Ashley, 126-128)

To what extent do our Catholic liturgical experiences associated with death or with violence or mass suffering, enable and permit mourners to really lament and express their grief? Do our liturgical environments, symbolisms, rituals and hymns allow and enable ourselves and each other, in a controlled manner, to truly cry out, complain and call God to account? What symbolisms, imageries, ritualized words and actions may we need to help us to mourn, grieve and lament in the manner depicted by Job, Lamentations and the Psalms?

Maximizing the Liturgical Potential of a Post-Shoah Catholic School

These lessons from the Shoah need to be understood and effectively expressed in the church today, not only for adults but also, and perhaps especially for the new generation of Catholic Christians grappling with theological and ethical complexities in our postmodern context. The generation of young people in our schools today will be future leaders in their parish communities, some hopefully as informed liturgists. These learnings from the dark history of the Shoah need to nuance and be expressed through their theology, their spiritualities, and their moral/ethical understandings and commitments. It is particularly within and through the church’s liturgical life that this dynamic, multidimensional transformation will happen collectively.

The life of a school community, through its explicit and implicit curriculum, provides numerous occasions for liturgical exploration and creativity. In a school there is greater freedom and more opportunities than on the parish level for a class or the entire student body to shape its own paraliturgical services or celebrations. To ensure that this liturgical exploration and creativity
be done in an informed and responsible manner, it is imperative that a school’s religion curriculum provide substantive teaching about symbol and ritual. It is equally important that this be rooted in a sound understanding and appreciation of the history of Christian liturgy. Since this involves insight into and an appreciation of Christianity’s developing understanding and use of symbolism and ritual, the involvement of the school’s art department is essential. Given the role catechesis, spirituality, ethics and faith formation play in Catholic education, the Arts must be a key component in the curriculum. How unfortunate, therefore, that this discipline is usually the first one cut when our schools face financial difficulty or crisis! A letter to artists from Pope John Paul II in 1999 eloquently expresses the role and need for creative and courageous artistic imaginations in the vitalistic liturgical expression of our Christian belief and commitment. Today his message applies also to the need to creatively discern how the foundational Christian story needs to be recast in light of humanity’s post-Šoah learnings. This papal letter to artists reads in part:

Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation — as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor, and so on — feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbor and of humanity as a whole... There is therefore an ethic, even a “spirituality” of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people... This prime epiphany of “God who is Mystery” is both an encouragement and a challenge to Christians, also at the level of artistic creativity. From it has come a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of the Incarnation... Every genuine artistic intuition goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality’s surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery. This intuition itself springs from the depths of the human soul, where the desire to give meaning to one’s own life is joined by the fleeting vision of beauty and of the mysterious unity of things... Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. (John Paul II, § 3,4,5,6)

More than a century earlier another man had a similar innate understanding of the role artists play in the interpretation and expression of the mystery of our faith. John Henry Newman, in his various essays on the idea of the university, insisted that “the eye of the soul [must] be formed in us.” He was aware that before faith is credible to reason, it must be credible to the imagination. His many sermons and writings emphasized that faith begins, not in the word and concept, but in the image and symbol.

I reach back to these words of Pope John Paul II and John Henry Newman out of my conviction about the role Catholic liturgy can and must play if we want the lessons humanity is learning from the Šoah to deeply and effectively transform our Christian
understandings, affections and actions. The 21st century Church has had several decades to learn from its post-Vatican II efforts for liturgical change. It has had the opportunity to learn from what was done well, and what was perhaps done too rapidly, without sufficient attention being given to ‘that which is remembered’ (i.e., to remain rooted in the best of its tradition) and to express, with quality, that which needs to be new. It has had the opportunity to learn how to distinguish between what is merely an ideology of creativity, mirroring a consumer culture’s taste for the novel, and what is a mature social process of change through which individual creative acts are responsibly integrated into the public tradition of worship. (Gelineau, 10-18; Collins, 19-26) And it is now our responsibility to pass this learning on to the next generation of Christians through our schools.

References


Benedict XVI. Address to Delegates of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (June 9, 2005).


