

Joyful Liturgies? Why?

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We humans, do we even need to say it, are passionate animals! We have our loves and our hates, our up days and down days, and the times where we just want to sit quietly and be left alone. Moreover, these emotional swings are not simply mood swings or based on how we feel when we get up in the morning. There are times of genuine rejoicing – both for us as individuals and members of families, and for us as members of larger groups. Likewise, there are hard times, sad times, lonely times, and even dangerous times. And then there are all the times when we ‘just are’: neither good nor bad, neither particularly joyful nor sad, and we just keep moving on. It is as people, individually and as members of communities, with all the changes in what is going on around and in our lives that we gather to worship God and to thank him as our Father in heaven. So how do these ups and downs in our circumstances affect us as we gather for liturgy?

A simple answer is to see the liturgy as one more service we consume. On this reckoning we should have unmitigated joy at weddings. A similar joy is when a new child is welcomed among us – and most Christians have traditionally celebrated births by a baptism. Then we could have sympathetic sorrow and mourning at funerals; and with darkened tones we could express our solidarity with those suffering after a disaster – and ‘mourning with those who mourn’ is very important. Following this approach, a wedding – always the paradigm for human rejoicing as we see in Mt 9:15 – should provide us with lots of opportunities to express high spirits: it should be an occasion for fun. Indeed, this is a formula used by those who want god-free secular ceremonies to satisfy the human need to ritualise our experience: it is always good to have an opportunity to ventilate and express how we feel deep down.

But the Christian approach is far more complex. At a wedding we introduce a dark note when we speak about ‘until death’ separates the couple. Conversely, at a funeral we speak of death being ‘swallowed up in victory,’ of life being ‘changed not ended,’ and, with joy, of the angels leading the dead person into paradise. Indeed, the most emotionally charged liturgical moment in the year – on the Friday recalling the crucifixion – we see that

afternoon liturgy not as a stand-alone gathering but as one scene in a three-act drama. It begins with the joy of Holy Thursday evening and ends the exultation of the Easter Vigil – so to be present at the Good Friday liturgy without the other two gatherings, in effect, misses the whole point. It is Good Friday in a series of three rejoicings – and on that afternoon it is the rejoicing in the victory of the Cross over death. That emotionally most charged day is not one of dark mourning, nor do we rejoice in suffering, but we are rejoicing because we do not believe that suffering, death, and decay have the last word. No matter when we gather to worship there is a note of joy in our gathering, and the question now becomes: why strike this joyful note even in the face of suffering?

One famous answer to this question is based in thought of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72). This takes this line: we humans cannot cope with the harsh facts of our universe, the painful reality that all ends in failure and decay, and so we make continued existence bearable to ourselves by projecting a story of the kind of world we wish for. The note of joy is a necessary deceit: if we did not put the futility and darkness of existence out of our minds we would either go insane or abandon all effort. So just as the medic know that telling a sick person that ‘you’re improving’ can bring about an improvement in the patient’s health, so telling ourselves a joyful story acts as a pep-talk and gives us energy to face tomorrow. This theme was famously taken up by Karl Marx (1818-83), a disciple of Feuerbach, when he described religion as ‘the opium of the people’: religion, and the joy it makes us think about, acts like a painkiller – opium was one of the most effective analgesics in the nineteenth century – amidst the life’s pain. So is our joy in liturgy a fraud?

Joy as a profession of faith

The joyfulness inherent within Christian liturgy is a primary expression of faith: the Christ has conquered, our redemption is ‘close at hand’ and the cry ‘*maranatha*’ – come Lord Jesus – is not only one of the oldest cries of our gatherings (1 Cor 16:22; Didache 10; and Apoc 22:20) but sets the whole tone of our liturgy. When asked about “professions of faith” in the liturgy we usually think of reciting the creed, or perhaps the occasional renewal of baptismal promises. Indeed, the whole idea of professing faith tends to bring to mind an exam with questions

and answers. We get images in our heads of a string of questions like ‘do you believe this?’ and ‘do you believe that?’ and a quiz-like encounter as to whether if you believe X, then you must believe Y, or can you just believe X and avoid believing in Y! But this entire formalized approach to *questions about believing* only makes sense if we already actually believe that the loving Father’s purposes are going to be brought to joyful conclusion. Our joyfulness, even in times of suffering, is the expression of this faith – which may or may not be formalised in creeds and questions and catechisms. Joy is at core of our vision.

So when we gather – for instance at a funeral – the sadness of our loss as the small group who grieve the death of a loved one has to find support and understanding from the larger community. Death is death and loss is loss and tears are real: Jesus wept at the death of his friend (Jn 11:35). But within that larger gathering we hear another theme that must stand alongside our mourning: ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ (1 Cor 15:26). It was to capture this two-sided aspect of how we face the future that led to many of the changes in the liturgy in the 1970s. Until then the standard colour of vestments at a funeral was black (in European culture the colour of death and mourning). This was replaced by white – the colour of joy and resurrection – or purple as the colour of sadness but without the note of dark finality expressed by black. Likewise, the coffin used to be surrounded by four or six candles in brown (unbleached wax) – another sign of mourning. Now at head of the coffin stands the great symbol of Easter: the Paschal Candle. That candle – linked to Easter, baptism, and beginnings - is there because for all our grief, we confess that we continue our journey through death to new life.

The funeral is but the most explicit case of something that is true of every liturgy: our individual sadness and loneliness needs to encounter our community faith. The gathered community is sacrament through which the joy of the risen Lord encounters us.

Joyfulness as a mark of the Church

Eating together is both a marker of our joy and contributes to it. Can you imagine a wedding without a feast? Can you imagine sharing a meal with friends which did not produce some laughter? The early Christians saw their eating and drinking together as joyful occasions, foretastes of the final banquet.

Indeed, they imagined their Christian life together as a feast. This theme of joy and festival they saw as setting them apart from others: the Lord had come among them, the Lord had shown them a Way, the Lord, risen from the dead, and was present at their meals.

Over the centuries this sense of the joyful presence of the Lord when Christians gathered was often lost from sight. In its place came gatherings that focussed on sinfulness and unworthiness, the Lord's presence in the community was reduced to concerns over presence as a commodity, and there was a general fear that expressions of joyfulness were frivolous or encouraged buffoonery! Religion, and worship, was a serious business – and it could all be wrapped up and defined in fixed boundaries. In this careful packaging joy, that spark that sets an occasion alive, was often the first casualty.

One of the challenges of Vatican II – and by its nature a challenge that could not be put into a set of rules or promulgated as a text – was to find way of acting so that liturgy is not just performing a routine, even one divinely authorized, but an activity of those who rejoice in their new life in Christ which expresses this spark of the unexpected, this joyfulness of those who somehow grasp the reality of being loved by God, this sense of belonging within the People of God, this spark of joy. But how do we move from perfunctory routine to this new joyful openness. This is the challenge that faces every group that sits down to think about liturgy.

There are no prescriptions – one cannot produce a formula that will produce joyfulness – but one can remove many obstacles. Here are just a couple of examples. First, we tend to confuse the sacred with the solemn and so we become so formal in our ways of celebrating that we exclude our spontaneity. Likewise, we tend to cut corners in any repeated activity – less is done (e.g. communion from the tabernacle), fewer people are involved (e.g. same people do the tasks each week), and we repeat ourselves (e.g. same stock phrases in introductions and prayers) – and this gives the impression that we are just going through the motions: another job! Whenever we are joyful we are fully engaged here and now! Likewise, we often slip into an approach to worship akin to someone filling an order: so many prayers, delivered as per instructions. But if we behaved like this on any joyful occasion in

the rest of our lives (birthday, anniversaries, special occasions) we would soon be told the extent of our failure!

But perhaps most importantly, we have all become so familiar with what we do week in and week out that we grow bored to tears – the very opposite of joy. This is the challenge of liturgy that we Catholics have yet to address.

Worship must witness to the living God

It is always instructive to see the ways that people (both those who call themselves believers and those who reject belief) refer to the idea of ‘God.’ The good people are the bores, what is nice is what is naughty! An advert selling chocolate announces that it is so tempting it is sinful – yes, it is a joke, but a joke that only works if we have a vision of God as wanting us to be miserable. How often have I heard reference to God as ‘the man upstairs’? The ‘man upstairs’ (an image from a two-tier world of masters / servants) is watching you: and you reasonably the ask what is the minimum you ‘can get away with.’ The image of the ‘man upstairs’ is incompatible with our belief that God is love – and it is that love we celebrate when we gather. An earthquake kills thousands and we refer to it as ‘an act of God’ and now the notion of ‘God’ equals the extent of our ignorance of plate tectonics. Indeed, for most people (believers and unbelievers) ‘God’ is a mean, old bully, and, indeed, a ‘kill joy.’

If we do anything in the liturgy that promotes, reinforces, or acquiesces in this false notion of God we become traitors to faith.

Writing to the Romans, Paul trotted out a little well-turned list of attitudes that he wanted to animate their gathering. It was clearly a list that he had memorised – and wanted others to memorise – and that he had used on many occasions. I think of it as a kind of ancient liturgical catechism – and it is significant the place of joy, rejoicing, and the spreading of joy has within it. Here it is:

- Rejoice in your hope;
- Be patient in tribulation;
- Be constant in prayer;
- Contribute to the needs of the saints;
- Practice hospitality;
- Bless those who persecute you;
- Bless and do not curse them;

Rejoice with those who rejoice;
Weep with those who weep;
Live in harmony with one another;
Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
Never be conceited;
Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is
noble in the sight of all; [and]
If possible, so far as you can, live peaceably with all (Rom
12:12-8).

Joy is not icing on the liturgical cake: it should be its abiding
flavour.