

One writer has suggested that western civilization lives in a kind of “cognitive apartheid,” a state in which thought and action are not equal partners, but where reason, control, and thinking rule over sensate bodily experience.¹ Our culture’s mind over body split also affects the way we celebrate liturgy in the Western church. At worship we risk lapsing into a spiritual apartheid, where thinking about God is considered a higher form of prayer than participating fully in the gestures and symbols of ritual prayer.

Where spiritual apartheid rules, ritual symbols and actions lose their power. They become aesthetic decoration, useful props for conveying themes, but ultimately quite docile. When we ignore symbols as the embodiment of prayer, we tend to diminish their full expression. We use little wafers for bread, restrict who gets to drink from the ritual cup, and quickly wipe water and oil off newly initiated bodies so it doesn’t make a mess. Unfortunately, such minimalistic practices create a split between the human body and consciousness, and inhibit the power of liturgy to transform individuals and whole communities.

Now, one would expect Christianity, especially with its belief in the Incarnation, to be a prophetic voice denouncing cognitive or spiritual apartheid. Followers of the Incarnate God should esteem every form of service to the body and human wholeness. And the liturgical community, as an embodiment of the Mystical Body of Christ, should be at the forefront, its ritual life a witness to the truth that permeates all levels of our being.

The Imagination

To regain our wholeness at prayer and in life we need a good imagination. I think of the imagination as an interactive process between bodily senses and human consciousness. The senses receive visual, aural, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory data. For example, we see a crimson sunset, hear a lonesome train whistle, taste the sweetness of a kiss, touch a weathered hand, smell the aroma of coffee. The imagination can remember, absorb, focus, and amplify these experiences in consciousness. A healthy imagination welcomes all sensory experience, lingers with it, and freely lets sensations elicit in consciousness responses such as awe, wonder, fear, gratitude, sorrow, longing, discernment, and love.

Two movements

The imagination has two movements.² First, when the body receives sensory data the mind begins the process of interpretation. For example, when you smell smoke, you make associations with past experiences to identify its source and determine whether there is danger. Similarly, when you read the word ‘horse’ your imagination connects shapes, colours, smells, and sounds to turn the associated sense experiences into a recognizable whole.

This first movement of the imagination has a clear implication for liturgy, namely that our ritual symbols must be recognizable sensory data. Quite simply bread and wine must appear as natural

food, water should be flowing and substantial, oil must be sufficient for anointing, vigils take place at night, music is in tune, words in the vernacular, and so on. The religious imagination needs fully expressed symbols to do its work.

The imagination also has a second movement. *Liturgy Digest* summarizes American philosopher Philip Wheelwright description of four ways of imaginative communication.³ Wheelwright uses poetry as a reference, but his insights apply to all metaphoric communication, including liturgy.

Universal to Particular

First, poetry suggests what is *universal* in meaning by using what is *particular* in experience. For example: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." From the particular images of 'shepherd' and 'Lord' the mind moves to wonder, contemplation, appreciation, understanding, discernment, and love for oneself and the one about whom the poet writes. It is *only* in and through the images that the person who prays the psalm begins to appropriate the meaning of providence, detachment, and so on in his or her life.

The movement from the particular to the universal in liturgical prayer requires that we express clearly the ritual's particular elements. Liturgy is not abstract thinking about God. It is concrete gathering, listening, reading, eating, immersing, anointing, singing, and so on. We need to prepare and perform these symbolic actions with great attention to the quality of readings, the appearance of bread and wine, the sound of voices, and so on. These are the particulars, and it is in and through these images that we approach the universal mystery of God in Christ Jesus.

Seeing Afresh

Second, the imagination makes it possible to see images afresh by taking them out of their familiar context. For example, when Isaiah presents the child playing over the asp's hole, and the wolf and lamb living together, he radically upsets our usual perception of these creatures' relationships. Such a disturbance of familiarity, however, becomes the impetus of transformation.

Liturgy's images also upend familiar expectations. A piece of bread, a cup of wine - the body and blood of Christ!? Or the cross, an instrument of death and sacrifice - a sign of blessing!? These are radical images. They are confusing or absurd if we take them literally. Yet, it is symbols' ambiguity and absurdity that give them the power to hold us for a moment in time, a moment in which consciousness might yield new mysteries, new ways of being with one another in the world.

Artful Arrangement

Third, poets do not merely collect the raw data of sensory experience; they arrange it. Consider Isaiah's juxtaposition of military and agricultural implements: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" (Is 2:4). A skillful poet can use diverse and even

irreconcilable images to prod readers to new awareness, insight, and action.

When we prepare for liturgy, we do more than get out the mass kit and turn on the lights. We skilfully arrange symbols and gestures in a ritual order marked by timing, balance, rhythm, and cadence. We accompany processions with song, balance proclamations with responses, prepare the table for gestures of partaking, set light against darkness, contrast sound with silence. When we prepare and celebrate liturgy we should think of ourselves as skilful poets, not merely stringing together different parts, but participating in a work of art.

The Sensuous World

Fourth, imagination gives human consciousness the ability to “grasp realities of ultimate significance precisely (and only) ‘by opening our eyes and ears and hearts to the sensuous living world’” (p. 69). For example: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” (Is 25:6).

While liturgy’s texts are rich with metaphor, its symbols and gestures equally engage our imaginations with their sensuous qualities. Music, food, movement, stories, fire, water -- these delightful elements of liturgy have great power to draw us into the paschal movements of God at prayer and in life.

It is, perhaps, this sensuous quality of liturgy that some persons yearn for when they lament a loss of mystery in contemporary worship. They grieve for the silence, the sounds of chant and bells, the smell of incense. However, if a community's ritual has become sterile, one cannot blame the Second Vatican Council for its symbolic paucity. We don't need to restore the Tridentine liturgy to regain the sense of awe in liturgy. We do need to renew Roman Catholic liturgy as an act that is beautiful, sensuous, awesome, and alive with transformative power in its simplicity. And to do so we must overcome our lack of imagination, that culprit who enslaves us in a kind of spiritual apartheid, tempting us to consider it better to think about God than to dance and sing and eat with the Holy One.

1. Liturgy Digest Vol. 4 No. 1, 1997. Notre Dame Centre for Pastoral Liturgy, p 48.

2. *Ibid.* p. 66.

3. *Ibid.* pp. 66-69.