

Lecture: Liturgy and Culture

Liturgy and Culture

“Meaningful” Worship in Diverse Cultural Contexts

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Our lecture this morning is entitled “Liturgy and Culture: ‘Meaningful’ Worship in Diverse Cultural Contexts.” This lecture seeks to establish how liturgical expression and symbolism in worship can remain meaningful to Christian worshippers in various cultural settings. It is my proposition that Christian worship becomes meaningful in context when the liturgy utilizes local cultures as guided by the Christian worldview, which is formed and informed by the biblical metanarrative that binds all Christians together as a community of faith.

We will begin by looking at worship as a meaningful event before proceeding to consider meaningful worship in context. In this discussion, I have relied

heavily on my Ph.D. dissertation presented to Concordia Seminary (St. Louis, Missouri) in 2014 and which I found to be very relevant to the theme of this conference. The dissertation is entitled: *Worshipping meaningfully: The Complementary Dynamics of Liturgy and Theology in Worship*.

Worship as a Meaningful Event

In our daily life we are always faced with the task of establishing meaning from various events and communication media. On this basis, Stanley Fish concludes that the ability to interpret is constitutive of being human and thus is not acquired,¹ a view shared by Margaret Mary Kelleher who points out

that “human living is no less than a struggle for meaning.”² Meaning is therefore a central and defining question³ not only in matters religious but also in the daily life of man. This is why hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, has become a popular subject today because its core aim is to establish meaning,⁴ and its relevance now extends to liturgical symbolism and theological language. In relation to this, Anthony Thiselton notes that “if doctrine may be perceived even in part as narrative or drama, the immediate relevance of hermeneutics becomes almost evident.”⁵ Since Christian worship involves both liturgy or ritual actions and theological statements which are expected to be meaningful to the members of the assembly, it necessarily involves interpretation of acts, signs, and language.

The current debate on the issue of interpretation in relation to meaning has raised a number of questions including the question of context and the concept of “interpretive community.” As David Ford notes, “meaning is closely bound up with changing contexts.”⁶ For worship to be meaningful to people, it must take into account the context of the worshippers among whom liturgy and theology take place. Closely related to the question of context is the concept of “interpretive community,” popularized by Stanley Fish, according to which texts and symbolic acts can only have meaning within a given framework of assumptions and beliefs as held by a particular interpretive community.⁷ In this regard, James Voelze (my former Professor at St. Louis) concludes that “only believers can truly interpret the sacred books.”⁸ Voelze here applies the concept of interpretive community to the Church, with the understanding that believers in Christ constitute a single interpretive community of faith.

For a better understanding of meaning in worship, we may here refer to Ninian Smart, a renowned Scottish writer on religious studies. In his book, *Religious Experience of Mankind*, Smart outlines the basic dimensions of religious experience⁹ and delineates how meaning plays out in worship. Smart directly or indirectly points to two aspects of meaning in worship, namely, *experiential meaning* and *conceptual meaning*. Experiential meaning refers to the value of the relational experience of the God-man encounter, which comprises both *beneficium* (the blessings of God received in worship) and *sacrificium* (the response

of man to the blessings), while conceptual meaning refers to the intellectual grasp of the content of the Christian faith, *fides quae*, as lived and expressed in worship. This conceptual meaning falls under the doctrinal dimension of religion in Smart’s categories. Smart states that “doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity, and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolic language of religious faith.”¹⁰

Meaningful Worship in Context

In his book *Worship: Progress and Tradition*, Anscar J. Chupungco¹¹ describes the post-Tridentine liturgical experience in the Roman Catholic Church in this manner:

The liturgical reform after the Council of Trent succeeded in instilling the ideal of uniformity in worship. It made absolutely no difference whether the liturgical assembly was composed of tribal communities that inhabited the mountains of Asia and Africa or of the august college of cardinals assisting a papal Mass in the splendor of St. Peter’s basilica. Everywhere, the liturgy not only spoke the same language, it also sang the same music.¹²

These words sound complimentary, appreciating the monolithic church with liturgical uniformity achieved by the Council of Trent. However, a closer look reveals that the sentiment is more sarcastic than it is complimentary, at least as far as liturgical experience is concerned. As will be shown shortly, Chupungco is actually advocating for a contextualized worship as opposed to strict liturgical uniformity at the expense of meaning in worship. Today there is even more clamor for liturgical contextualization across denominational divides with meaning in worship as the chief driving force. It is expected that Christian worship remains experientially and conceptually meaningful in various contexts of human society. Although context in this regard could be viewed in two dimensions, namely, socio-cultural context and historical context, we will concentrate mainly on the former.

Liturgy and Context

In considering meaningful worship in various socio-cultural contexts, let us begin with Liturgy

and culture. In his book, *Cultural Adaptation of the Liturgy*, Chupungco says that the question of liturgical adaptation “has been brought to the limelight in modern times because of Vatican II’s renewed sense of pluralism within the Church and respect for people’s culture.”¹³ Such a sense of pluralism is evidenced in Article 37 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), which criticizes rigid uniformity and provides for reasonable diversity in worship.¹⁴ Chupungco therefore says that “local churches must begin where Vatican II left off” and that, “because of the fluidity of cultural expressions and the growing needs of the local churches, adaptation will always be on the agenda of liturgical renewal.”¹⁵

Chupungco here gives two grounds for cultural adaptation, namely, cultural fluidity and local needs. Patrick Chukwudezie Chibuko, an African theologian, seems to be in agreement as he recognizes that there is need for liturgies to be embedded in the local cultures. Chibuko notes that it is not in vain to seek these cultural alternatives,¹⁶ and he gives a dual-faceted rationale for liturgical inculturation in Africa. First, since “Africans have welcomed the message” of the Gospel, “this message of love and peace needs now to become incarnated in the hearts, huts and hovels of the people.”¹⁷ Second, that “times even for the church, have changed,” and thus, “after the Council the experience of local churches in the area of inculturation, especially in the mission, has instilled into consciousness that church unity does not have to be anchored exclusively on the uniform observance of the liturgical rites.”¹⁸

The article from CSL cited above gives the purpose of liturgical contextualization and pluralism as the need to “respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples.” This reasoning is sensible especially to people in the third world countries who have felt that their cultures were discounted or regarded as primitive and barbaric. As a result, unfortunately, contextualization has sometimes taken a nationalistic dimension as some local churches strive to purge their worship of any perceived foreign elements that are considered an extension of colonialism or even cultural imperialism. In Africa, for example, there has been a growing concern that the liturgies in use in the mainstream churches are almost purely western in origin and expression, with little connection to the local cultures. This simply means that the said foreign

liturgical signs do not mean much to worshippers in the local cultures, making worship less meaningful to the local assemblies.

Although respect for people’s cultures and ways of life as described above is truly desirable, there seems to be more to the call for contextualization of worship than mere respect for cultures. In his critique of the Tridentine liturgical uniformity, Chupungco says that such uniformity was not without its ills or price, and the price is that “all too often the liturgy did not nourish fully the spiritual life of the local congregation.”¹⁹ And if one were to ask why the liturgy could not nourish the local congregations spiritually, Chupungco would answer: “How could it, when its language had been dead for centuries, its rites and symbols were medieval, and its distinctive music, which was the Gregorian chant, belonged to another time and people?”²⁰ The main issue here seems to be the question of meaning in worship, as Chupungco suggests that the Tridentine liturgy did not mean much to people worshipping in different contexts. This is more vivid in his article, “Two Methods of Liturgical Inculturation,” where he says:

Inculturation properly understood and rightly executed should lead the assembly to a more profound appreciation of Christ’s mystery made present in the celebration by the dynamic mediation of cultural signs and symbols. Inculturation, in other words, should aim to deepen the spiritual life of the assembly through a fuller experience of Christ who reveals himself in the people’s language, rites, and symbols. If inculturation does not do this it remains a futile exercise.²¹

The need to have meaning in the essentials of the liturgy communicated to the people in their own context is therefore a significant factor in the push for liturgical inculturation. For in order for the liturgy to effectively communicate meaning to the assembly it must be relevant to the context of the people. Cultural elements like language, symbols, signs and gestures are vital carriers of meaning which can be utilized to make worship meaningful to people in their own contexts. In order for the local assembly to appreciate the liturgy and participate in it meaningfully, they must be able to conceive of the elements therein and how such elements fit together. In this regard, liturgy clad in completely

foreign attire might not mean much to worshippers in the local assembly.²²

The Role of Doctrine in the Contextualization of Worship

As we saw earlier, Chupungco criticized the Tridentine liturgical tradition for strict uniformity and insensitivity to intelligibility in local cultures. This is because many people could not understand Latin, the language of the liturgy in the Western tradition. In this connection a significant question has been raised, namely whether the divine acts of the liturgy can remain efficacious in the event that the liturgical language is unintelligible to the worshippers. Can worshippers still receive God's gifts and blessings in the liturgy and in worship despite the unintelligibility of the language and the liturgical actions? In other words, can worship be experientially meaningful to the worshippers despite their conceptual handicap? Leslie W. Brown²³ (a former Archbishop of Uganda and Rwanda) would answer in the affirmative as can be seen in his description of liturgical experience in the Middle Ages. He writes:

Throughout the centuries, then, from the fourth century until to-day, the Christian liturgy has been celebrated in a language no layman knew, with most solemn ceremonies conducted behind a curtain, out of sight of the congregation, with no reading of the Scriptures in vernacular. It can hardly be said that liturgy was relevant, it was certainly not intelligible. Yet God used it to symbolize and express the mystery of our redemption, and a living tradition of Christian faith and morals was maintained and passed on.²⁴

In what sounds like a kind of *ex opere operato* theory,²⁵ Brown here argues for the irony of efficacy of the liturgical celebration despite the apparent unintelligibility of its language.²⁶ If Brown is right, and I think he is, it means that the people worshipping in such a condition still encounter God and thus experience God's blessings and the gift of life in Christ offered in the celebration of the liturgy. The implication here is that the essentials of the liturgy carry meaning which must remain intact regardless of the context in which the liturgy is celebrated. Any worship that is worth the name Christian will bear

essentials derived from the narrative that binds all Christians together as a single community of faith despite cultural diversity. Chupungco rightly says that "inculturation is a means of transmitting unaltered to the people of today the original intent or meaning of the liturgy" and that "it does not create new liturgies²⁷ in the sense of producing a content other than the one handed down officially by the church."²⁸ Cyprian C.U Anyamwu²⁹ shares this view and says that "the liturgy has its true and authentic spirit" which "should not be tampered with by any reform efforts."³⁰ He further points out that "considerations are always to be given to the faith or good of the whole community" and that "this is a fair manner of admitting and respecting the weight of plurality of cultures within the universal fold."³¹ This would mean that inculturation, properly understood, aims to enhance the appropriation of the core liturgical meaning for all Christians the world over.

Although there is a possibility of creating new rituals in different localities with the potential of generating new meanings, such meanings must remain in tandem with the overarching horizon—the world of meanings—of the Christian community embodied in the biblical narrative. This seems to be what Anyamwu means when he says, "So long as the Paschal Mystery remains the same forever, and the plurality of human backgrounds is unavoidable, the fact of seeking better ways of communicating more meaningfully and precisely has to be reckoned with. It is a need that has to be satisfied."³² This means that liturgy in context will seek to make the liturgical celebration and the meaning therein intelligible to the people in their own context. In the same vein of thought, Brown says, "The core of Christian worship is thus something given, unchanging and unchangeable, relevant for all people and all times and in all places. But the manner in which this central directive truth is presented must be relevant and intelligible to men in every age and in every place."³³ There is a core of meaning within the liturgy that has to be inculturated.

This unity of meaning in the liturgical essentials despite cultural diversity is captured in the Nairobi Statement of the Lutheran World Federation of 1996 on "Worship and Culture." The statement describes Christian worship in its relation to culture in four ways: First, worship is said to be "transcultural," which means that "the fundamental shape of the

principal Sunday act of Christian worship is shared across cultures³⁴ as the liturgy aims to communicate the Gospel of Christ which remains the same regardless of the locality or cultural milieu where it is celebrated. Second, worship is said to be “contextual.” Here it is noted that “a given culture’s values and patterns, insofar as they are consonant with the values of the gospel, as described in point one above, can be used to express the meaning and purpose of Christian worship.”³⁵ Third, Christian worship is “counter-cultural,” meaning that Christian worship also “involves transformation of cultures”³⁶ in light of an overarching meaning against which all other meanings generated through local cultural elements would be gauged. Fourth, Christian worship is “cross-cultural,” meaning that Christians can share certain elements of worship, like hymns, across cultural boundaries because all cultures ultimately can be in service to the one language of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, within the larger community of faith.

The understanding of the universal or catholic church as a community brings with it the notion of “myth” or narrative. Every community is put together by some kind of “myth” or narrative and the tradition of how that narrative has been lived out and how it has shaped the life of the entire community. This means that the Church of Christ in the world, as a community, has a universal myth or narrative which forms and informs its own horizon even as it takes shape in local cultures. This universal myth has a universal meaning for all Christians which must be fostered and reflected whenever and wherever the Church gathers throughout the world. This means that the process of liturgical adaptation must balance the local and the universal natures of Christian liturgy so that the overarching meaning in liturgy is neither lost nor communicated unintelligibly to the people. The tension of universality and locality must be kept in Christian worship, if worship is to be meaningful, that is, *authentically* Christian and *genuinely* local. Overemphasis on the universal meaning would universalize the liturgy till it is no longer local, and thus less meaningful to the local assembly; overemphasis on the local meaning, on the other hand, would localize the worship till it is no longer catholic but sectarian.

At this point we should be able to realize that reference to a metanarrative of the worldwide Christian community points to the role and

significance of doctrine in the whole process of liturgical inculturation. It was already said above that Christian worship may incorporate cultural values, in so far as such values are consonant with the values of the Gospel. In a sense, this is a way of invoking some standard or standardized authority to gauge the product of inculturation. According to Chupungco, “the liturgy is not an independent unit of ecclesial life. The faith celebrated in the liturgy is the same faith formulated by theology.”³⁷ This would mean that liturgy in context must remain meaningful both to the local assembly and to the larger Christian community in terms of its liturgical celebration and doctrinal or theological content. The transcultural meaning which makes liturgy universally Christian despite the locality of its celebration is doctrinal in nature. This calls for a balance between liturgy and doctrine and a relationship of complementarity and mutual critique between the two.

One of the areas in which the principle of balanced contextualization is often neglected or overlooked is hymnody, despite its power to convey meaning in worship. In Africa, for example, there has been an outcry that hymns used in worship in the mainstream churches are too Western to appeal to local people. Anyamwu acknowledges the success of liturgical inculturation among the Igbo people of Nigeria saying that “the use of the Igbo tunes and rhythms has a deep theological meaning” and that “it speaks directly to the soul.”³⁸ It is very true that most, if not all, Africans have a great penchant for fast rhythms, accompanied with passionate dances. Most are also fond of drums as an accompaniment for the songs. Singing in such a manner appeals to people’s emotions and makes the moment great and lively.³⁹ In this regard, Western rhythms and melodies can be considered dull and boring—one could even say less meaningful. However, meaningful worship is much more than emotionally-appealing rhythms and melodies. A song will have “a deep theological meaning” that “speaks directly to the soul” if it has sound doctrinal content. That is, a song that combines a great tune or rhythm with a rich doctrinal content would communicate more powerfully and effectively to worshippers. In this respect, one can say that an African tune with sound doctrinal content surely would be more meaningful to the African people because it would offer the Christian truth in a familiar rhythm.

On this note, Byang Kato writes:

Contextualization can take place in liturgy, dress, language, church service, and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth. Musical instruments such as organ and piano can be replaced or supplemented with such indigenous and easily acquired instruments as drums, cymbals, and comstalk instruments. It must be borne in mind, of course, that the sound of music must not drown the message.⁴⁰

In respect of this, there is need for reasonable dialogue and mutual critique between liturgy and doctrine so that while liturgy incarnates in the people's culture, the content of worship remains consistent with the church's doctrine and the overall Christian narrative. In that way, the African song that "speaks directly to the soul" will do so within the grammar of Christian language. A meaningful worship is therefore one which makes sense and communicates to the people in their own culture but always in light of the Christian narrative, the mystery of salvation as it unfolds in the divine revelation.

Summary

In summary, it can be said that liturgical inculturation is a noble cause inasmuch as it aims at making Christian worship meaningful to the people in their own local and temporal contexts. A meaningful worship is that in which Christ's gift of life and salvation is offered to the sinful man in a clear and intelligible language so that the people experience this gift in an understandable way. This happens when the gospel takes root in different cultures and the liturgy is adapted to the context of the people, both in space and in time. In such adaptation the form of the liturgy would be adjusted to fit every context. In so doing, however, care must be taken so that the liturgy remains Christian in its core meaning and purpose and continues to bear the marks of catholicity of the church of Christ. To attain such balance, inculturation must take seriously the complementary dynamics between liturgy and doctrine so that celebration of the liturgy in different cultures is done within the framework of the Christian language anchored in the biblical narrative.

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Kisumu, Kenya

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- 1 Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Critical Inquiry* 2 no. 3 (Spring 1976), 484.
 - 2 Margaret Mary Kelleher, "Liturgy: An Act of Ecclesial Meaning," *Worship* 59 no. 6 (November, 1985), 483.
 - 3 Dennis Ford, *The Search for Meaning: A Short History*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), viii. 2
 - 4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xii.
 - 5 Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2007), 65.
 - 6 David F. Ford and Rachel Muers eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*. 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 5.
 - 7 Fish, 485.
 - 8 James Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1995), 12.
 - 9 Smart is significant here because the aspects of religious experience he outlines are basic to any religious group or community of faith and are thus true also to Christianity in one way or another. The seven dimensions include the Ritual, the Mythological, the Doctrinal, the Sociological, the Ethical, the Experiential, and the Material dimension. These dimensions of religion are experienced in Christianity in one way or another.
 - 10 Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 8.
 - 11 A Philippine Benedictine monk and a scholar of liturgics
 - 12 Anscar J. Chupungco, *Worship: Progress and Tradition*. (Beltsville, MD: The Pastoral Press, 1995), 157.
 - 13 Anscar J. Chupungco, *Cultural Adaptation of the Liturgy*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 3.
 - 14 Second Vatican Council. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1963), 25.
 - 15 Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgies of the Future: The Process and Method of Inculturation*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 7.
 - 16 Patrick Chukwudezie Chibuko, *Paschal Mystery of Christ*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 76.
 - 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 Chupungco, *Worship: Progress and Tradition*, 158.
 - 20 Ibid., 157.
 - 21 Anscar Chupungco, "Two Methods of Liturgical Inculturation," in *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, ed. S. Anita Stauffer (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 77.

- 22 It is to be noted that in the interest of the catholicity of the church, some elements of the liturgy will always be shared across cultural divides.
- 23 Rev. Brown was a British missionary who became the Archbishop of Uganda and Rwanda Anglican Church in the early twentieth-century.
- 24 L. W. Brown, *Relevant Liturgy: Zabriskie Lectures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 25.
- 25 The theory of *ex opere operato* was one of the chief bones of contention between Rome and the Reformers. It was taught in the Roman Catholic theology that the sacraments worked or conferred grace to the celebrants by the mere performance of the sacrament even without faith from the recipient. The main intention of the theory was to defend the in-built efficacy of the sacraments as opposed to the twin theory, *ex opere operantis*, which presupposes a subjective factor or right disposition, like having faith, for the reception of the benefits of the sacraments. See AP XIII 18ff.
- 26 This question is mentioned in passing in article XXIV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (AP) in an apparent reference to the Roman Mass. It reads: "The opponents include a long harangue about the use of Latin in the Mass, in which they childishly quibble about how it benefits hearers who are ignorant of the church's faith to hear a Mass that they do not understand. Apparently they imagine that the mere act of hearing itself is a useful act of worship even where there is no understanding. . . . No one has ever written or suggested that people benefit from the mere act of hearing lessons that they do not understand or that they benefit from ceremonies not because they teach or admonish by simply *ex opere operato*, that is, by the mere act of doing or observing. Away with such Pharisaic ideas!"
- 27 Chupungco's view here reflects the Roman Catholic context in which there is an official and canonical Liturgy.
- 28 Chupungco, *Worship: Progress and Tradition*, 169.
- 29 Cyprian Chima Uzima Anyamwu, *The Rites of Initiation in Christian Liturgy and in Igbo Traditional Society*. European University Studies (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004)
- 30 Anyamwu, *The Rites of Initiation*, 15
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Brown, *Relevant Liturgy*, 5.
- 34 Anita Stauffer, ed. *Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, 24.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., 27.
- 37 Chupungco, *Cultural Adaptation of Liturgy*, 79.
- 38 Anyamwu, *The Rites of Initiation*, 17.
- 39 Western missionaries to Africa have been criticized for discouraging the traditional African way of singing and the use of traditional instruments in the church. Restoration of the African singing is thus one of the objectives of the African theology.
- 40 Byang H. Kato, *Biblical Christianity*. (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 24.

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