

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LITURGY

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I would like first to thank Father John and Father Edward for inviting me to participate in your western-rite conference. I have good memories of my visit, several years ago, to your conference in Washington DC. I regret that my health constrains my travels these days, and so, though my spirit is willing, my flesh must remain behind here in New York.

But I very much wanted to support the work of your conference, so Father John and I agreed that I would write to you all on the topic he gave me: The Discipline of the Liturgy. This is that paper -- my Epistle to the Antiochians -- and it is meant to be pastoral rather than scholarly in its approach to that formidable-sounding topic: The Discipline of the Liturgy.

I call it formidable because that described my first reaction to it, though I agreed at once to do it. I have subsequently found, in mentioning it to others, that the topic seemed less than warm and inviting. And yet I trusted in Father John's wisdom in selecting the topic, and I am glad I did.

I believe it is that word "discipline" that is the culprit. In our day and age discipline often suggests either excessive control or excessive punishment. Its primary neutral use is in references to academic disciplines; no one finds that use formidable. But to discover how discipline relates to liturgy -- and indeed has a profound pastoral dimension -- we need to go back a bit to the early years of the church. I remember being told by my Latin professor in seminary that the Latin word for learning was *disciplina*. And remembering this led me to an interesting insight; namely, the profound difference between the knowledge that comes from education, and the very different knowledge that comes from *disciplina*. For example, in learning about Christianity, one can become a real student of Christianity. That is the end and purpose of such education. But discipline -- *disciplina* -- has a higher and greater aim: not to produce a student of Christianity, but a disciple of Christ. The purpose and end of discipline, in its proper sense, is to form disciples. And notice the difference here. One might be a student of Christianity; but we would never talk about a disciple of Christianity. One can only be the disciple *of a person*. The true purpose and end of the discipline of the liturgy is the Person of Christ himself.

The liturgy may well educate, but that is a by-product. The liturgy's primary goal is to draw us ever deeper into the mystery of Christ offering himself in an act of supreme love and inviting us into this flaming mystery. That is the true discipline of the liturgy -- to transform us in that blazing mystery into true disciples of Christ.

This connection between discipline, discipleship, and mystery was clearer in the ancient church, and has left its mark on the liturgies and rites we use today. Though the term *disciplina arcana* -- the discipline of the secret -- is late Latin, it was used to describe one of the culminating steps of becoming a disciple through catechesis and baptism in the early church. In this unfolding progress, various doctrines would be revealed and explained. But the final mysteries were withheld from the catechumen until the last moment. Previous to this moment, all the candidate would have been permitted to know of the Lord's Prayer was the opening two words. The prayer, being reserved only to full disciples, was recited secretly. Admission to this secret was one of the culminating steps of discipleship -- and so it became known as *disciplina arcana*. We see a remnant of this even today in the offices when, after the priest's intoning "Our Father", the prayer is continued silently until the end. Of course, the prayer itself is no longer a secret, but the church wishes to remind us that, as disciples, we are approaching a profound mystery, veiled from ordinary sight, and infused with awe and stupendous power.

And of course, similar to the discipline of the secret, and still very much a part of our western Mass, is the often overlooked division of the Mass into the Mass of the Catechumens and the Mass of the Faithful -- labels that clearly

indicate that the Mass of the Faithful (the Eucharist proper) was not to be seen by a catechumen until one had become a full disciple.

The Mass of the Faithful is the heart of the great mystery, yet how often do we breeze through it as if it were, at its heart, no different from the more didactic Mass of the Catechumens. Indeed, there is something to be learned in the Mass of the Faithful; but it is a learning that is a *disciplina* -- an entering not into knowledge about Christ, but true knowing of him as a Person, a learning that deepens one's discipleship, making us ever more truly his disciples, leading us ever more deeply into the mystery that is God's inner being and infinite love.

Mystery tends to make us uncomfortable, for it brings us into a presence and state of being where all our controls abandon us, leaving us disarmed and utterly vulnerable. All the petty defenses and fortifications we have built are stripped away. All our half-hearted and lukewarm attempts at virtue are seen for what they really are. And we know, with a terrible knowing, that we stand before God naked and empty-handed, stripped of any pretense or illusions of personal holiness or virtue. This would be a moment of utter and supreme despair if it were not for the fact that this moment also brings the disciple into the presence of unfathomable love and infinite mercy.

That is the knowledge -- the learning -- that *disciplina* seeks. It is a knowledge that cannot be explained or contained in words. Words can bring us only to the edge of mystery. Rituals and symbols too can assist us in the journey toward mystery; but they too bring us only to the edge of the mystery.

One of the occupational hazards of western-rite Orthodoxy is the sometimes inordinate effort it spends in discussing issues of rite, ceremony, and language. These are not unimportant, but they are not the Great Thing, the Mystery itself. And of course you can't discuss mystery; you can only encounter it and fall down in fear and love. So we chatter a lot about externals, but even a total and thorough expertise in matters liturgical does not necessarily bring us closer to the mystery.

Consider, if you will, a Chinese puzzle box. This is a small wooden box with highly intricate wood inlays on it. There is no obvious way to open the box, so one concentrates on carefully testing various inlays and panels. Some of them slide, some do not. Some will only slide if you have properly moved one or more panels in the right sequence. The object is, with much patience, to solve the puzzle and open the box. Box open, end of puzzle. If you like you can close up and start again, but the end will always be the same. This is the nature of a puzzle, and that can sometimes describe our approach to liturgy, and to the Mass. Fall into this frame of mind and you will tend to think of mystery (if you think of it at all) as just another puzzle, something that can finally be solved and conquered, or maybe just unintelligible and of no concern.

But consider now the same small wooden box, the same challenging procedure to open it. But now, when you open it and look inside, you find yourself gazing wide-eyed into a vast living galaxy of stars and planets. You solved the puzzle, but the real adventure -- the mystery -- has only just begun. And you are struck dumb and wordless at the vast mystery in your hand.

Need I point out the obvious parallel here to the consecrated bread and wine? This is true mystery, not an unintelligible puzzle, but an inexhaustibly intelligible reality. And it is the learning of this that is the purpose of the discipline of the liturgy. It is the knowing of this mystery that marks the true disciple of Christ.

While the mystery is itself ineffable, unconveyable by words and language, it is detectable by other means. Here the helpful insight comes from Rudolf Otto's phrase: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Where the mystery is present, it will be both fearful and attractive, terrifying yet alluring. To be consciously in the presence of mystery is to experience profound fear and profound love at the same moment. We see this throughout the Old Testament. We see it in the scene of our Lord's transfiguration. When the mystery of Christ shines forth, the disciples say,

“Lord, it is good for us to be here.” And then they fall to the ground in stunned silence, trembling at the vision. This is the knowledge, the learning, that is the end and goal of *disciplina*.

One of the loveliest and most moving narratives about mystery and worship can be found in -- of all places! -- Kenneth Grahame’s children’s classic *The Wind in the Willows*. Here animals encounter their god in the form of the great faun Pan. But every detail of the experience resonates with our human hearts when they come into the presence of mystery-- the mystery of the Person of Christ. Fear and trembling mingle with unutterable love as the little creatures fall down in worship.

The setting is a dewy English morning on a quiet river. Two characters, Rat and Mole -- endowed with speech and reason like us -- are searching for Baby Otter, who has wandered off and is lost and may have come to some harm. Into this search enters an unexpected element -- a music so beautiful it haunts them and draws them to an unfamiliar island. There they will find Baby Otter, who with them, in their simplicity and innocence, will come to the *disciplina of true worship and the mystery of holiness*.

‘It’s gone!’ sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. ‘So beautiful and strange and new. Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. No! There it is again!’ he cried, alert once more. Entranced, he was silent for a long space, spellbound.

‘Now it passes on and I begin to lose it,’ he said presently. ‘O Mole! the beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear, happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet! Row on, Mole, row! For the music and the call must be for us.’

The Mole, greatly wondering, obeyed. ‘I hear nothing myself,’ he said, ‘but the wind playing in the reeds and rushes and osiers.’

The Rat never answered, if indeed he heard. Rapt, transported, trembling, he was possessed in all his senses by this new divine thing that caught up his helpless soul and swung and dandled it, a powerless but happy infant in a strong sustaining grasp.

In silence Mole rowed steadily, and soon they came to a point where the river divided, a long backwater branching off to one side. With a slight movement of his head Rat, who had long dropped the rudder-lines, directed the rower to take the backwater. The creeping tide of light gained and gained, and now they could see the colour of the flowers that gemmed the water’s edge.

‘Clearer and nearer still,’ cried the Rat joyously. ‘Now you must surely hear it! Ah—at last—I see you do!’

Breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood. For a space they hung there, brushed by the purple loose-strife that fringed the bank; then the clear imperious summons that marched hand-in-hand with the intoxicating melody imposed its will on Mole, and mechanically he bent to his oars again. And the light grew steadily stronger, but no birds sang as they were wont to do at the approach of dawn; and but for the heavenly music all was marvellously still.

On either side of them, as they glided onwards, the rich meadow-grass seemed that morning of a freshness and a greenness unsurpassable. Never had they noticed the roses so vivid, the willow-herb so riotous, the meadow-sweet so odorous and pervading. Then the murmur of the approaching weir began to hold the air, and they felt a consciousness that they were nearing the end, whatever it might be, that surely awaited their expedition.

A wide half-circle of foam and glinting lights and shining shoulders of green water, the great weir closed the backwater from bank to bank, troubled all the quiet surface with twirling eddies and floating foam-streaks, and deadened all other sounds with its solemn and soothing rumble. In midmost of the stream, embraced in the weir's shimmering arm-spread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder. Reserved, shy, but full of significance, it hid whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it till the hour should come, and, with the hour, those who were called and chosen.

Slowly, but with no doubt or hesitation whatever, and in something of a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvellous green, set round with Nature's own orchard-trees—crab-apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

'This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,' whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. 'Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!'

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that, though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fullness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humourously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in entire peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!'

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

They have found not only Baby Otter -- utterly safe and asleep at their god's feet -- but also the learning that is the true disciplina, and it is an utterly appropriate response to the presence of God, full of awesome fear and unutterable love.

One can only wonder how often our own liturgies bring us to so hallowed a vision and so powerful a discipleship. The discipline of the liturgy is not primarily to instruct us about Christ -- though of course it can teach us many things. But the ultimate goal is to bring us into the burning presence of the Mystery -- the inexhaustible presence of Christ himself, truly alive and present at the heart of our liturgy. There he awaits our surrender to him, the laying

aside of all our petty defenses. There he awaits us, ready -- if we let him -- to break our hearts. "Thou delightest not in burnt-offerings...the sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit...a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise." Christ stands ready, at the heart of the liturgy, to change and transfigure us, to make us like himself. And that, surely, is the proper goal of anyone who seeks to be his true disciple.