

What is *liturgy*?

Extract from Chapter 2 of Thomas Pott, Byzantine Liturgical Reform, p. 78-80

The liturgy of the Church is the locus where baptized humanity lives, celebrates, and expresses its faith in God, who granted it the gift of salvation in his Son Jesus Christ. Faith is understood here not just as the sum of the dogmas and teaching of the Church, but especially as the experience that flows from the unique and authentic loving encounter of each believer with God. The liturgy is the life, the celebration, and ecclesial expression of this faith not as the sum of the individual beliefs of all the faithful, but as the mystery of their unity in the mystical Body of Christ. Thus the liturgy, though it presupposes the personal faith of each believer, transcends it because of the fact that it is the place par excellence where the Church exercises its maternity; indeed, it is in the liturgy that the Church gives birth in the faith to the believer, that it nourishes him, teaches him, strengthens and leads him ultimately to the face-to-face encounter with God. The liturgy is therefore the common property of all the faithful – of those weak in the faith as well as those who are “strong,” of the lay people and the clergy, of children and adults – first of all because it represents the gift made by God to humanity.

In the liturgy, persons united in the Holy Spirit render thanks to God for the gift of salvation he has bestowed on them and they call it to remembrance. Equally, they give thanks because God allows them to stand in his presence to praise him and to supplicate him. Indeed, God, who recognizes the Body of his dead and resurrected Son in the community of believers, renews in them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and perfects their unity in the Body of Christ, who purifies them from sin, and who gives them the boldness (*παρρησίας*) to call God their Father. The liturgy is thus the place where God dwells among men (Rev 21:3) and where, already now, men are invited to the marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19:7).

This divine-human reality that is the liturgy, whose linchpin is the person of Jesus Christ, assumes its *form* in the Church in a fixed ensemble of gestures and symbolic representations that constitute a *rite*. The rite, far from being merely a kind of replaceable and negligible external expression of a higher reality, represents the incarnation of faith within the Christian community. It is the concrete way by which a converted people liturgically expresses their relationship to God. Each rite consists of meta-cultural elements whose meaning transcends any given culture and which are common to the entire Church, while other elements arise out of the cultural and historical situation of each people. When a people receives the faith, the liturgy is received and adopted according to a given form. With the rhythm of time and of the life of a new Christian community, the original form changes and the liturgy assumes an appearance ever more adapted to the individual identity of the community. It is not the faith or its content that is adapted, but its expression flowers to the extent that it becomes incarnate in and becomes the expression of the particular faith of the community. Ultimately, faith becomes identified with the rite which, in its own turn, represents the means par excellence through which the community lives, celebrates and expresses its relationship with God. This *formation* of the rite through the synergy of the faith and the identity of a people takes place primarily through the transmission of the faith from generation to generation. For faith is transmitted essentially through its lived and celebrated expression in a living contact with the mystery of Christ in the liturgy.