

INTRODUCTION

However it is variously named—Mass, Holy Communion, Holy Eucharist, Service of Word and Table, Divine Liturgy, Service for the Lord’s Day—the event occurring when Christians gather to hear and respond to the Word, to pray and share in the sacramental meal, and to be sent into the world for mission is a source of awe, wonder, joy, and even holy fear. Through my years of worshiping, leading liturgy, and studying liturgical experience, I have marveled more and more at the richness of liturgical worship as a divine-human phenomenon. Think of it: In the space of what typically occurs in an hour or so, there is so much to hear, say, see, touch, taste, and perhaps even smell. There is so much to think about, reflect on, remember, feel, and experience directly. There is so much to do. The full range of human experience is present. Think of all the words, the stories, and the narrative shape of what we do—the liturgy consists of language, of speech, of texts and symbols from beginning to end. We are encountered by the Word of God contained in and emanating from the Scriptures. We are grasped by the Word of God visibly, tangibly, in the sacraments as nontextual signs.

At the same time, what we do in liturgy is so ordinary and can be quite routine—so much so that we often take for granted our experiences of worship, commonly following, as it were, the script, seeing and experiencing only the tip of the iceberg of this profound event. Yet liturgical worship is about the extraordinary breaking into the ordinary, for through these means the power

of God in the Spirit forms us in faith, conforms us to the will of God and the mind of Christ, reforms us when we forget and go astray, and ultimately transforms us as new creations in Christ. It can seem like too much to take in.

How do we relate to and participate in this profound event, attending to it more deeply, going beyond the mechanics of “doing the liturgy”? How do we meaningfully contribute to the encounter, the dialogue, the holy conversation that is a constituent feature of liturgical participation, that we may know life-changing experiences? The answers to these questions have to do with addressing the spirituality of the liturgical experience. This is a book that links spirituality and worship, more particularly, that nurtures understandings of spirituality *for* worship, that our practices may evoke our sense of awe, peace, joy, and holy fear at being in the presence of God, aware of what the Spirit accomplishes through the means of grace.

In particular, my focus in this book is the spiritual power of language—the Spirit active in the words, stories, and shape of the liturgical drama—and how we can be more present to the Spirit’s work in the movements of the liturgy, thus contributing to the breadth and depth of our experiences, making the most of our engaging in holy conversation, sharing, too, in the Spirit’s work of formation. I offer a new approach to viewing and understanding the conversational trajectory of what we ordinarily do in Christian assembly, but an approach rooted in centuries-old spiritual practice. *Lectio divina*, often translated sacred or divine reading, is a simple and straightforward spiritual discipline that nurtures varied ways of being present to the Word of God according to basic movements of Christian spiritual life: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. While *lectio divina* emerged as a practice in monastic communities, it is not just a private discipline for monks, but has wide-ranging applicability in the Christian life, including liturgical participation.

Current liturgical scholarship and practice make much of the basic pattern for and shape of worship on the Lord’s Day, the *ordo* that has been handed down to us through the generations. In a simple and straightforward way of conceiving it, this pattern focuses on four segments:

- Gathering—“The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.”
- Word—“God speaks to us in Scripture reading, preaching, and song.”
- Meal—“God feeds us with the presence of Jesus Christ.”
- Sending—“God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.”¹

In order to enrich the understandings of the meanings and logic of this basic shape of liturgical worship, I offer the movements related to *lectio divina* as a new overlay, a complementary way of conceiving the *ordo*, with the humble

awareness that no single approach can begin to exhaust our comprehension of what occurs in the liturgy and what liturgy means. Mine is a contribution among many, but an important one in terms of nurturing deeper spiritual practice for worship, giving worshipers tools, both practical and perspectival, through which to engage in holy conversation as a feature of liturgical participation, thus deepening awareness of the Spirit's work in the means of grace and enriching and renewing the experience of worship.

Using *lectio divina* as an overlay to demarcate the rhythms of the liturgy, there are six movements:

- *praeparatio* or preparation—the Spirit calls us together and we prepare for holy encounter;
- *lectio* or reading—God speaks the Word as we hear and participate in the public reading of Scripture;
- *meditatio* or meditation—the Spirit leads us more deeply into understanding as we reflect on and discern meanings of the living Word for us in our day;
- *oratio* or prayer—the Spirit moves us to intercede for the world and to offer ourselves to each other and in service of the world's need;
- *contemplatio* or contemplation—Christ dwells with us bodily in the meal as we eat and drink the visible Word;
- *missio* or sending—the Spirit propels us into the world for the mission that we have discerned is ours to do in God's name.

This approach to understanding the *ordo* inspired by the movements of *lectio divina* takes seriously the role of each worshiper as a participant in the work of the Holy Spirit, deeply aware of the Spirit's activity in us. *Liturgy* is commonly understood as “the work of the people.” A Christian understanding of vocation affirms that each baptized member of the body of Christ shares in ministry, in the people's work. A principal focus for the work of liturgy to which we are all called is holy conversation, to respond to the Spirit's voice heard and active in the means of grace, to be present to God, well prepared for the holy encounter, obediently attending to the readings, actively engaged in meditation in response to the readings, prayerfully present, open to the contemplative encounter in the meal, and poised to leave the assembly with a specific sense of the missional work that we will do in the time following the sacred hour until we meet again.

Full participation enabled by applying the movements of *lectio divina* to liturgical worship is an antidote to the common lament about boredom in liturgical services. When liturgy is not reduced to a spectator sport, when

worshippers are given the tools through which to do the work of holy conversation in liturgy, when each worshiper is a liturgical minister, a sense of boredom, the fruit of passive disengagement, can dissipate. When people are engaged, time flies. Or, better, when the people of God are spiritually engaged, God's time breaks in upon us, the Spirit active in our responsive participation and speaking a living word to us.

People long for rich and deep spiritual experiences. Sadly, many seek those experiences apart from the principal gathering of Christians on the Lord's Day. Applying the sensibilities of *lectio divina* to our worship can make for greater depth and enthusiasm in Christian assembly—but enthusiasm not in terms of excitement, the default mode of our entertainment-oriented culture, nor in terms of vainglorious religious fervor. Rather, I speak of enthusiasm in terms of the Greek origins of the word: *entheos*, “inspired,” and *en theos*, “being in God.” Of course, our efforts cannot confect a greater quantity of spiritual presence and activity. God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is already fully present in Word and sacraments. We can, however, nurture a deeper awareness of divine presence in our midst, seeing below the tip of the iceberg, catching glimpses of the deeper things of God in, with, and under the means of grace operative in the liturgy as those gifts of grace embrace our lives. Liturgical participation that is of holy conversation in the spirit of *lectio divina* can nurture this awareness that the liturgy is already *enthused*, full of God's presence.

Worshipping in the manner and spirit of *lectio divina* can also enable us to become more present to ourselves, aware of what we bring to the encounter, what is on our minds and hearts, what is in our memories, what we hope for and desire. As Christ offers real presence to us in the meal, we are called to offer an authentic presence to God in our worship. When the real presence of Christ meets us in our authentic, open, nondefensive presence, transformative things can begin to happen as the story of God's salvation addresses us in the particularities of our stories and we cry out for that salvation, salve, spiritual balm touching us to heal us and make us whole. Holy conversation inspires us to offer all that we are to God throughout the movements of the liturgy, a living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, that God in Christ through the Spirit may claim us in the deep places and transform us into new creations.

Worship informed by *lectio divina* gives us a new relationship to language, fuller ways of being present to God's Word when we might otherwise feel overwhelmed by that Word. We live in a time when language is much abused—“talk is cheap”—and is too often abusive and manipulative. Through many and various technologies we are awash in words. “Too much information!”

is a cry of our age. Liturgical *lectio divina* invites us to slow down, to create open spaces to let the Word soak in, that we may dwell with it and really chew on its meanings for us, praying fervently in response to it, eating it and drinking it, and finally becoming that Word to be enacted in our mission in the world. This way of worshiping, of being with the Word, is admittedly inspired by and resonant with monastic routines unfamiliar to many. Yet in our busy, noisy, overstimulating mission field of the world, it is one of the church's high callings to give the gift of silence, of greater spaciousness to make room for contemplative encounters with the means of grace, so that the Spirit may most freely do the works of salvation to form us in faith.

Liturgical worship inspired by the movements of *lectio divina*, furthermore, holds promise to renew the worship life of the church and thus to renew the church for mission. Few topics are more important to the health, vitality, maturity, and faithfulness of the church and its mission than worship and its renewal. The Sunday assembly is the principal gathering of Christians, the main point of contact the baptized have with the church, the very embodiment of Christian community. Moreover, this weekly gathering is inevitably the focus for Christian formation in discipleship. Above all, it is the time when God in Christ is most intimately present to us, creating and nurturing faith through the Holy Spirit as that Spirit speaks to us through Word and sacraments. In short, the liturgical assembly carries enormous weight as it serves as the vessel for such profound gifts and opportunities. It is our high calling and privilege as the people of God to take seriously our stewardship of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1) in the assembly, that our worship may ever be renewed, that we may be formed, conformed to Christ, reformed, and transformed for the work God would have us do in the world.

The church has indeed seen significant worship renewal in the past generation. Liturgical-renewal movements in recent decades have in great measure returned the liturgy to the people, offering worship in the language of the people and encouraging their full participation. The reforms of Vatican II, influential well beyond the Roman Catholic Church, suggest a principal goal of liturgical reform, that the people of God would share in worship knowingly, actively, and fruitfully, and that worship should involve "full, conscious, and active participation."²

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of new worship books and hymnals in several Christian traditions. In addition to accommodating the recovery of such things as the centrality of baptism and weekly celebration of the Eucharist in the life of the church, the worship renewal of the past generation gave significantly more voice to the people of God, to worship leaders

beyond the ordained presiding minister, most notably in the persons of lay readers and assisting ministers and in the addition of various congregational responses, spoken and sung, in the liturgy. Congregations have done well in implementing these reforms. It is typical to hear many voices beyond that of the pastor or priest in congregations on Sunday mornings across the country today. But “doing the liturgy,” giving more people voice in worship services, is but one step, albeit a crucial one, along the way to fuller expressions of worship renewal. This book will explore the dynamics of such fuller dimensions of renewal, focusing not only on what we do in the liturgy, but on how, in what manner and spirit, we engage what we do in our liturgical assemblies toward nurturing full, conscious, active participation.

Viewing the shape of liturgical worship—the gathering, Word, meal, and sending—in the light of *lectio divina* involving preparatory activity, reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation, and the incarnation of this divine encounter for our mission will aid us greatly in making thoughtful response to various challenging questions concerning worship today:

- How do we best gather in preparation for literally meeting Christ in Word and sacraments?
- How do we make the most of listening to and fully engaging the various scriptural readings for the day?
- What is the hearer’s active role in listening to a sermon and other forms of proclamation?
- How can singing hymns and hearing music offered by others become a spiritual exercise, giving expression to a saying popularly associated with St. Augustine that “the one who sings prays twice”?
- How can we encourage people to pray the creed as praise and not just recite it?
- How do we, during the prayers of the people, pray closely to the Scriptures after they are read and meditated upon and as the Word gives focus and content to our prayers during the liturgy?
- What is going on in the minds, hearts, and experiences of worshipers as they encounter Christ’s real presence in the Holy Communion?
- What devotional or contemplative practices might we employ in the liturgy to nurture a deeper appreciation of Christ made known to us in the breaking of bread?
- How can we make more of the sending rites to give expression to the specific agendas for mission set by the particular liturgical and scriptural themes of the day?

- And through all of this, how can we instill in worshipers a sense that God’s Word in Scripture and visibly expressed in the sacraments is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow,” that “it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12)?

These are the kinds of questions I will endeavor to address in this exploration of spirituality for worship and in applying *lectio divina* to liturgical participation.

This book is *about* holy conversation, and quite importantly it is *itself* holy conversation, meditations on the principal gathering of Christians around Word and sacraments that will also evoke your own reflections about experiences of worship in the places where you worship. The story of this book is carried first as commentary on the event of Pentecost recorded in the book of Acts (part 1). This commentary gives occasion for me to offer understandings of spirituality for worship, centering on the dynamics of holy conversation and *lectio divina* as a way of organizing and giving trajectory to that conversation. The story continues (part 2) as meditations on a *Mass for the Day of Pentecost*, a specific liturgy encompassing all of the segments of a typical Lord’s Day liturgy, illustrating how the movements of *lectio divina* make sense of the particulars and of the whole of what we do when we worship. Liturgy does not exist in the abstract, but is always particular and contextualized—hence my inclusion of a particular order of service. Yet the meditations on the liturgy—giving expression to the kinds of reflections that make for holy conversation—will also serve to illustrate general principles of applying the sensibilities of *lectio divina* to liturgical participation.

Some further word about my method in reflecting on liturgy as holy conversation. *Lectio divina*—sacred *reading*—is primarily a text-oriented spiritual discipline, so my principal focus is on the texts, words, and narrative structure of the liturgy. That is to say, I give some attention to the nontextual aspects of liturgical worship, for example, the role of music and ceremonial movement and signs and symbols, but these explorations are in the service of the main focus on texts. Liturgical experience is a phenomenon that is just too rich and complex to be treated comprehensively in this volume of modest length. Consideration of the extratextual dimensions of liturgical practice and experience warrants the studied attention of additional volumes—perhaps a volume on *audio divina* (sacred listening in relation to music) and another on *video divina* (sacred viewing in relation to signs and symbols). Also, specific consideration in this volume is limited to the service on the Lord’s Day. It is important to say

that the general principles of holy conversation following the movements of *lectio divina* are applicable to other forms of worship such as daily prayer and other services of the Word.

In terms of my approach to meditative explorations of the features of liturgical worship, at times I call attention to the historical origins of aspects of the liturgy, revealing how our liturgical holy conversation echoes with that which has occurred through the centuries in the communion of the saints. I also on occasion explore word origins, striving to break through connotations and the humdrum of conventional meanings, reclaiming words for fresh meaning in our day, a living voice contributing to our spiritual and faith formation. I make extensive use of biblical material, including that voice in my holy conversation, illustrating the kind of biblical reminiscence—making connections among stories in the Bible—that is characteristic of meditation in *lectio divina*. Quite significantly, my meditations center on the meaning of segments of the liturgy in light of the movements of *lectio divina*—really the heart of this project in exploring spirituality for worship. Finally, my commentary is interspersed with personal anecdotes and some practical suggestions for how to do liturgy in ways that nurture deeper holy conversation.

I address my thoughts to you who have responsibilities for undertaking liturgical worship. You may be pastors, priests, and other ministers called to exercise public liturgical leadership. You may be musicians and other worship planners and leaders. You may be students of liturgy. But above all, I write to all worshipers who seek deep, profound, and authentic spiritual experiences when you worship. Whoever you are in relation to liturgy, I offer this book to you, that in the power of the Spirit, the dialogue that results from your reading of this work may contribute both to the renewal of your experiences of worship and to your formation in Christ—ultimately, that this offering may be in service of the Spirit's work in building up the body of Christ for its mission in the world.

This whole work and its approach imply a conversation with you. As you read my meditations, I encourage your own reflections as you read. Let my musings provoke and evoke your spiritual, liturgical, worshipful imaginations. Take your time as you read. Approach this work perhaps in sections as a devotional exercise over a period of weeks, for I seek to examine the linguistic fullness of liturgical worship as a divine-human phenomenon—reflection on the depth, breadth, and extent of this holy encounter calls for extended engagement lest you become overwhelmed by the sacred weight of the gifts known to us in the means of grace.

As a worshiper myself and as a leader of liturgy, I have often looked around during the sacred time of assembly, wondering about your experiences of worship. What in fact are your experiences? How are you being affected by the liturgy? Are you being changed? Are you experiencing the power of God in your life as you worship? I see you singing and praying and otherwise following along. These externals are visible to me. But what is happening at deeper levels in your mind as you engage the public expressions of liturgy? With such questions in mind, let our holy conversation begin.