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The Church and the Liturgy in the Contemporary World

In the contemporary world, when we talk about liturgy and people, we are faced with a potentially complex issue. Both the people and the liturgy, two essential subjects of this work, present a whole wealth of meanings that cannot be exhausted in a simple way. When we talk about liturgy, we should put questions about its theological content or about the various forms by which it is celebrated. Similarly, when we try to look at its participants, i.e. the people, we should scrutinize the diversity of their age, their mentality and their maturity of faith (or lack thereof). This paper is an attempt to indicate certain intuitions that will allow us to look at more specific points of contact between contemporary culture and the liturgy.

For this reason, this study will outline the cultural context in which modern people live. Following this line, we will also try to look at the inadequacy of certain pastoral forms that we can observe in regular pastoral activities. Such a perspective will allow us to highlight important features that belong to the nature of the liturgical celebration. Among them, we will list those points that correspond to the content, form and participants of the liturgy.

1. The liturgical question's cultural background

In order to understand and accurately portray the contemporary man, we need to look at some of his characteristics: we focus on autonomy and individuality¹. Man's freedom and dignity, as well as his rights and privileges, seem to be the main deter-

¹ Cf. Z. BOKSZAŃSKI, *Indywidualizm w późnej nowoczesności*, "Civitas Hominibus" 3 (2008), p. 53.

minants in the discussion about man in the era of postmodernism. The background of such attitudes is a “distrust of ideology and the vision of collective salvation², inherited from the totalitarianisms of the previous century. Of course, it is impossible to deny the good that brought out the subjectivity of the person. Nevertheless, it is necessary to complete this image with a claim accurately described by A. Renaut who states that in our culture the concept of the individual increasingly prevails over the concept of subject, dominating it more and more³. This shift of focus is expressed in the disappearance and disintegration of relationships that are appropriate for the subject, and more specifically for the person. It brought about a kind of atomization of society, in which increasingly there is no mention of “individualism” but of “individualisms”⁴.

On the canvas of such outlined transformations, the alienated “I” with its rights, guarantees, plans and ambitions is at the Centre of the mentality of modern man. Going further on this analysis, we can state that the main criterion by which life is ordered is self-realization⁵. It becomes a kind of secular equivalent of what theology calls “salvation”.

In such a constructed narrative in which the individual and his self-realization is the primary, if not the only, point of reference, a lifestyle is created in which man is subjected to the constant necessity of confirming himself by realizing his own goals and satisfying his own needs⁶. As a consequence, the dynamics of life are reduced to the logic of usability and profitability. At this stage, the individual’s life begins to be guided by the logic of the free market, which creates the attitude of consumerism⁷.

In such a culture, the aim of market activity and advertising is “to stimulate desire rather than to propose the means for satisfying needs”⁸. As one of the American researchers, J. Clammer, points out in this context, shopping may be considered as an “adventure, safari, carnival, and contains unexpected ‘risk’ in what you may

² D. MOTAK, *Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism*, “Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis” 21 (2009), p. 130.

³ Cf. A. RENAUT, *The Era of Individual. A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*, New Jersey 2014, p. 29–58.

⁴ Cf. Z. BOKSZAŃSKI, *Indywidualizm w późnej nowoczesności*, p. 57.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 63–67.

⁶ Cf. A. GIDDENS, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość*, Warszawa 2010, p. 17.

⁷ Cf. C. LASCH, *Bunt elit*, Kraków 1997, p. 104.

⁸ B.D. SPIKNS, *The Worship Mall. Contemporary responses to contemporary culture*, London 2010, p. XVI.

find and who you may meet. It's a kind of self-discovery"⁹. The author adds that shopping: "by its very nature it [shopping] possesses theatricality: one dresses up to go out and one shops to acquire the new persona, to modify the old one or to perfect the setting in which he is seen and known"¹⁰. To summarize this idea, we may say that shopping today is not so much about acquiring things, but rather more like buying a new identity¹¹.

Since consumption nowadays is becoming one of the basic dimensions of human life, it is not surprising that human relations are also being introduced and executed in such a logic. They are often sustained as long as they are profitable, as long as they provide gratification and fulfil the needs of their own "I". We can even talk about the de-personalizing of a human being who finds a place in the life of another person as long as the former is useful and allows himself or herself to be consumed. It also seems necessary to add that the logic of utility, which permeates the mentality and shapes the identity, works not only in potential "clients" who are looking for the right people to achieve their own goals. The influence of such mentality also affects people who, at the threshold of adult life, try to "enter the market" advertise, sell successfully not only their talents but also their own dreams and, what is more dramatic, often themselves. It is natural that this attitude penetrates human relationships with the spirit of competition and, sometimes, of hostility. In a world where the other person is more a competitor than a companion on life's path, a high price is to be paid. This is how we can see the increasingly frequent experience of alienation, which in the wake of this fearful loneliness, becomes one of the most important problems of the modern world.

The way out of the tension created by the lifestyle lived according to the free market's mentality seems to be a leisure time dedicated to fun. Nevertheless, as Ryszard Kantor notes: the time of play, by its nature a disinterested moment, in the area of consumerism is commercialized and introduced into the mentality described. He presented this phenomenon as follows:

the consumption nature of spending free time causes that the place of celebrating appears in the phenomenon of overload, and the community bonds are perpetuated thanks to consumption. In consumer societies, it comes down to playing at almost

⁹ J. CLAMMER, *Aesthetics of the Self: Shopping and social being in contemporary urban Japan*, in: R. SHIELDS (ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*, London 1992, p. 204.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

every step. Institutions are created with the aim of providing (selling) pleasure - hedonism of a consumer society, set for fun, appears¹².

Such pleasure and fun allow a person to distance oneself from professional activity, but it is not able to answer the question about the meaning of human existence.

In the context of contemporary culture described above, the diagnosis of the Italian researcher Borghi seems to be accurate and dramatic: he claims that “in a society whose structure is based on market mechanisms to satisfy human needs (...), God ceases to be needed. Today, human needs are quickly and more effectively satisfied by the world rather than by God. Consequently, he fell out of the market because he is no longer competitive”¹³. These words seem to indicate one of the important factors in the search for an answer to the question about the relationship of man to faith and, inevitably, his relationship to the liturgy in which and through which faith is celebrated.

2. What kind of liturgy do the people not need?

The mentality described above is not foreign to the pastoral activity of the Church. Describing the style that Church relations have adapted, the American scholar John Drane refers to the trend in sociological diagnoses, popular in the second half of the previous century, that spoke about the “Macdonaldisation” of American society¹⁴. The main features of this process, which can be found also in the life of the Church and in her pastoral practice, are efficiency, calculability, predictability and control¹⁵. In a similar way, pastoral activity often takes on a commercial style, using the above criteria. Through this action which often is full of zeal, there are created strategies that would allow the Church not only to enter the market of human needs, but also to achieve success measured by the number of people in pastoral groups or, simply, by those who participate in the liturgy. Following this logic, people responsible for pastoral work build marketing strategies, devise advertising slogans and create various new initiatives and religious happenings that

¹² R. KANTOR, *Spółczesność konsumpcji zabawy. Przypadek polski*, in: R. KANTOR, T. PAŁECCZY, M. BANASZKIEWICZ (ed.), *Wqz w raju. Zabawa w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym*, Kraków 2011, p. 36.

¹³ G. BORCHI, *Wiara w czasach Facebooka*, Częstochowa 2017, p. 99.

¹⁴ Cf. G. RITZER, *Macdonaldyzacja społeczeństwa*, Warszawa 2009.

¹⁵ Cf. J. DRANE, *The McDonaldization of the Church. Spirituality, creativity and the future of the Church*, London 2000, p. 28–33.

should attract the attention of potential customers. All these activities are carried out with the sole purpose of entering the market of human needs and, consequently, selling their own goods: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this context, however, a provocative question arises: “Who would stay in the church to which he or she came encouraged by the happening on the street, if something equally controversial was not happening in it? Would the liturgy, performed in the same way as in most churches, be attractive to a participant deceived by marketing tricks?”¹⁶ Following this train of thought, one can go even further and ask if the truth about God’s love has not been reduced to a commodity, the recipient of the Gospel to a potential client, and the so-called evangelizer to a salesman, whose measure of success and self-realization will be the number of people whom he has managed to convince to accept the ideas he presented.

Perhaps it is in this framework that there is a hint of the answer to the question about the decreasing number of people nowadays in the Church. Since the logic of a free market, its profitability and usefulness, is not able to lead a man to a fullness of life, and its fruits are disappointment and a constant search for new, stronger impressions, pastoral work following such principles must take into account the departure of religious “clients”. This does not mean, of course, that spirituality in man ceases to matter. As noted by Borghi, “the spiritual dimension is now accepted as possible and interesting”¹⁷ but this happens rather “out of the traditional paths that have shaped the search so far”¹⁸. Indeed, since the traditional path does not meet the expectations of the consumer, he has the right to seek them from alternative suppliers.

3. What kind of liturgy should the Church celebrate?

After saying the above, the question about what kind of liturgy the modern man needs is deliberately omitted. The point is to intentionally go beyond the logic of the need and its satisfaction, which this question would have supposed. On that basis, we can leave the logic of free market, commercialism and satisfying needs and enter into an alternative “space” of life. Indeed, in a world focused on profit and needs’ fulfilment, there exists an area associated with defeat,

¹⁶ M. DOBRZYŃSKI, P. RADZYŃSKI, *Sacrum profokowane – Mysterion vs. Happening. Koegzystencja religii i kultury masowej*, “Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana” 1 (2012), p. 200.

¹⁷ G. BORGI, *Wiara w czasach Facebooka*, p. 17. Cf. D. MOTAK, *Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism*, p. 129–130.

¹⁸ G. BORGI, *Wiara w czasach Facebooka*, p. 17.

with falling out of the mainstream, with bankruptcy. However, paradoxically, this space of loss is a place in which the free and unselfish presence of God can shine again, because he gives himself today beyond the “ordinary” world, outside the “market”. It is in this context that we will try to look first at the content of the celebration and then at its form.

3.1. The mystery of selflessness as the main content of a liturgical act

The Second Vatican Council’s teaching in the Constitution on the Liturgy recalls that Christ is always present in His Church, especially in liturgical celebrations (cf. SC 7). Therefore, the liturgy is not just “anything” nor is it just an object, because the liturgy itself is actually the presence of Someone. It is the presence of God, revealed in Jesus Christ and given to the Church in the mystery. Therefore, it seems necessary to discuss the content of the mystery which is realized through the rites and words in the liturgy (cf. SC 48).

In reference to the economic concepts mentioned above, we might say that in Jesus Christ God Himself appeared as uneconomic and unprofitable. The true mystery of Incarnation turned out to be a despoilment, a disgrace and a defeat (cf. Phil 2:5-11). During the temptation in the desert, Jesus did not allow the logic of success to seduce him (cf. Mt 4:1-11), and when the people wanted to proclaim him their king, He himself fell into a shadow (cf. John 6:15). Jesus did not heal in order to gain followers; indeed, many of them felt free to leave him. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews eventually says that “He, instead of the joy he was promised, suffered the cross, regardless of his shame” (Heb 12:2). God in Jesus Christ revealed His free, unselfish love for all people. He revealed the love that is ready to forgive and to lose in order to give; he manifested a love that is ready to be rejected, a love that does not impose itself on those to whom it is addressed. Throughout His life Jesus communicated to the world and revealed that God is the Father who takes care of all his children (cf. 5th Eucharistic Prayer).

God-revealed-in-Jesus-Christ is, therefore, the God who not only fell out of the competition, but also by His own nature, out of the market and this same God did something which was most unprofitable: He gave His life to the people out of selfless love for them. In this selfless and unprofitable gift of himself, He met the love of the Father who gave him new life (cf. Acts 2:24-28, Ps 16: 10-10). This victory of selfless love, this ultimate “Yes” for life is the content of the paschal mystery¹⁹, which is the content and heart of the whole liturgical act.

¹⁹ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Teologia liturgii*, Lublin 2012, p. 226.

Paradoxically, it is in this being “outside the system” that the whole provocative power of the Gospel lies. Accurately, Borghi notes that the post-modern man knows and intuitively senses that the logic of the market will never be able to offer free and limitless love in the way that God gives it. Market logic will not be able to do it, precisely because selflessness is excluded from economic rules; it is a strange concept in the world’s market. Love, however, is still the great absentee; it is a sought-after quality that still fascinates man and which man deeply desires in his heart²⁰.

At this point in time, the horizon for the first provocation is open: its content is faith in Jesus Christ, which is not understood as another item or commodity on the goods market, even if it were understood as a sublime and valuable product. Christian faith is a provocation that calls man to go beyond the market, to “entrust” his own life to Christ’s love, and according to Borghi, entrust “not to ‘save’ it at any price, even for the sake of eternal life”²¹. It means to entrust one’s own life in the selfless act of love. It is a defiance that puts man in the area between freedom and enslavement, between love and egocentrism, between the ability to be unselfish and the dictatorship of profits.

At this point, however, the question arises about the ability of man to receive and respond to the message of salvation. In this context, it seems important to claim that “the changed anthropological balance obliges us to recognize that the tangential point in which God can still ‘catch’ the modern man is not the head (intellect) but the body and heart”²². That is where a holistic experience and not only intellectual discourse can occur²³. It is at that point where it is possible to find the inner unity of the person. Thus, at the interface of the content of faith, which is considered as a challenge, and the form of its communication, which must engage the body and the heart, the horizon of a specific liturgical experience opens up. We will limit ourselves here to a few important features of the celebration, which will allow the Church to properly communicate with, arouse and invite modern society to go beyond the marketplace, to receive God’s love which is free and unchanging.

²⁰ Cf. G. BORGHİ, *Wiara w czasach Facebooka*, p. 100.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²³ Cf. D. MOTAK, *Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism*, p. 129.

3.2. Liturgical celebration as a way of expressing the mystery

The mystery of unselfish love which, by its intrinsic nature, is outside the logic of the marketplace, must be expressed in such a way that the form corresponds to the content. Thus, in the entire ritual act, we will try to highlight the characteristic features of the liturgy that can properly reflect what is actually celebrated.

One of the features of the rite which, in this context, takes on a big significance is its feature of uselessness²⁴. Indeed, the rite is an end in itself; it does not serve any particular need; it does not produce measurable effects. It may be that this characteristic of uselessness, more than the lack of attractiveness, is what seems to make the liturgy discredited by modern society. Ultimately, in a life in which sense is determined by profitability and usability, there is still space for unattractive activities such as work or a visit to a doctor. What distinguishes such acts from ritual activity is the fact that the aforementioned ones bring specific tangible results, whereas liturgical activity does not. Thus, we are faced with an activity that can, first and foremost, invite and dare a human being to enter into the space of uselessness (in the world's opinion), just like the act of faith itself. Participation in the liturgy raises the question of ability and readiness to escape from the dictatorship of success. It is a question about readiness to open up to the deeper meaning of human life which, in the Christian liturgy, is identified with the experience of the eternal love of God revealed in Christ.

Uselessness of rite, then, gives birth to the attitude of gratuitousness and unselfishness which are not some kind of abstract or theoretical elements. These virtues manifest themselves in a friendly and amiable desire of the community members to stay together, united and joyful in sharing their time and material goods with one another, such as a particular rite requires. In such an experience, sharing, therefore, has the supremacy over conquering, selflessness over usability and personal relationships over individual profit. A ritual event is not just a different form of expressing ordinary, consumer and profit-oriented human activity. On the contrary, celebration is a different kind of activity which cannot be reduced to the mentioned economical one.

The second feature that in a certain way results from the feature of uselessness is the feature of freedom. The only power of the liturgy's influence is its ability to trigger in people the questions about the deeper meaning of life, making sense of selflessness. It is not the task of the community celebrating the liturgy to declare,

²⁴ Cf. S. MAGGIANI, *Rito/Riti*, in: D. SARTORE, A.M. TRIACCA, C. CIBIEN, *Liturgia*, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, p. 1667.

argue or propose profitability or benefits. It is not the task of the community to persuade or even to force anyone to participate in a selfless act of worship. Hence, to allow a man the space of freedom in the hope that he himself dares to go beyond competitive consumerism is a feature of a celebration that corresponds to the nature of God's love. He, being the Creator of man, has given man the freedom to meet Him in a climate of love, not determined coercion. Such an internal agreement to participate in the rite in a free and selfless way is a necessary condition for the full experience of and participation in the liturgical event.

The third feature of the liturgical celebration which reveals its content is beauty and aesthetics. Beauty is understood here in a theological way. Christian rites are supposed to be those that "re-create, in a creative, active and poetic manner, embedded in history, telling the madness and beauty of love that God has loved for us by giving us his Son"²⁵. In this context, we may again return to the characteristics of unselfishness and uselessness which, in the context of beauty, are expressed in a readiness of wastefulness. The beauty of the liturgical celebration requires the courage to lose time for preparation and to waste money for liturgical vessels, garments, flowers and the decor of the temple. The beauty of the celebration also involves wasting time through the lack of rush in reciting prayers, making bodily gestures, and taking up time for singing the hymns.

The final characteristic of liturgical celebration, completing our discourse, is vitality. It is considered a fruit that is born when the liturgy is celebrated according to the manner mentioned in the paragraphs above. With the rite, in its quality of disinterestedness, freedom and beauty together becomes "a certain form that gives rise to feelings of agitation, spontaneity of the bodies, fantasy of the imagination, intuition of the mind, passion of feelings"²⁶. The vitality discussed here is hard to grasp intellectually, for it overtakes rational cognition and makes itself known in a particular liturgical experience. Human sensitivity is able to capture and accept it as a gift of life that takes place during the celebration. It is within this experience that the perspective of a new meaning opens up to man, which is not a narrative of success built by man, but a narrative about God's love for him.

²⁵ M. AROCENA, *Liturgia i postmodernizm w obliczu 50. rocznicy soboru watykańskiego II*, "Teologia i Człowiek" 18 (2011), p. 45.

²⁶ M. BALDACCI, *Il „rito” di Betania. Fenomenologia di un gesto (Gv 12,1-9)*, "Credere Oggi" 35 (2015) 4, p. 62.

4. Is this a liturgy for everyone?

In this context, the question arises as to whether such a celebration is for everyone. The answer goes beyond the logic of economics: such a liturgy will not attract everyone, but it is in this readiness to be rejected and ignored that it will be able to preserve its true identity: an identity that is able to express the mystery of a disinterested God who lives outside the market and who is not familiar with the logic of economics. This approach to the liturgy supposes the belief that God himself is Saviour, and He saves people; it supposes that the Church is His work and that the history of the world is His story of salvation. Only those who believe in love and who are ready to surrender to its beauty through their unselfish participation in the celebration will take part in such a liturgy. Perhaps, in this context, we can refer to the Constitution on the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in which the Council Fathers wrote: “before people can approach the liturgy, they must be called to faith and conversion” (SC 9). Indeed, a true liturgical experience can be given to those to whom faith is preached, who answer the message of God’s love and who are ready to turn away from the logic of economics to celebrate the free nature of God’s love.

In this framework, another issue opens up: testimony. In a world that is more open to experience than to intellectual discourse, it is the testimony that is the first factor that draws man, that raises questions within him and calls man to faith. It also gets its power from liturgy, which is the source that gives life (SC 10).

Liturgy, as space and time filled with the presence of God, has the ability to penetrate those who participate in it. By participating in the celebration, believers become genuine witnesses of God who, through their daily style of life, can provoke the question about the meaning of life for the world. Indeed, “in a world in which everyone lives in fear of falling out of the market, someone who remains outside the system is able to revive the question of meaning, dormant in contemporary culture”²⁷. Furthermore, since participation in the liturgy transforms man and makes him similar to a loving God, we reach the essential category of the testimony: love. Hence, the Christian testimony should be considered not so much as a particular activity but rather as a style of life in which Christians express their true identity. It consists in sharing and receiving love. This is how the mission of witnesses is born, which is only possible for those who have tasted the free love of God that has empowered them to get away from the market. Only a witness who joyfully experiences the selfless love of God “may question the fundamental dogma of the most

²⁷ G. BORGHI, *Wiara w czasach Facebooka*, p. 93.

damaging dimension of postmodernity: the assumption that it is impossible to live outside the market. In this way, the witness becomes someone who “awakens” the thirst for the fullness and meaning that the postmodern man also has in himself, but which almost never has the space to grow and develop freely”²⁸.

Conclusion

The thoughts presented in this paper do not provide a practical answer to the question of which form of liturgy is suitable for modern man. They are, instead, a provocation that addresses some of the determinants of contemporary culture and mentality and, at the same time, they attempt to portray some of the features that are characteristic of Christian revelation and, consequently, the liturgical celebration.

The free nature of God’s love is what can give respite to a man exhausted by the pursuit of success. And if there are those in the world who still have the strength to run, surrendering to the false promise of happiness from the consumption of goods, then the Church is not promoting the profitability of faith. Contrarily, the mission of the Church consists in revealing a disinterested love that would be able to provoke questions about the meaning of self-realization and success, as presented by postmodernist dogmas.

The entire liturgical celebration is part of the mission of the Church as it is a gathering of those who “know and believe in the love that God has for us” (1 John 4:16). Hence, I maintain that uselessness, freedom, beauty and vitality are those four dimensions of the liturgy that can provoke and awaken the human heart. The liturgical celebration, performed by the Christian communities, can lead contemporary people beyond the logic of economics, to a point where human beings will be able to discover with astonishment that in this dimension of life, it is not so much about losing than it is about receiving and gaining a new, deeper and fuller meaning of life.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Kościół i liturgia we współczesnym świecie

Abstrakt

Pytanie o kształt celebracji liturgicznej często powraca w dyskusji pastoralnej. Odpowiedzi jednak, które prowokuje, nie zawsze wynikają z refleksji, która uwzględniałaby zarówno kontekst kulturowy, jak i wymiar teologiczny liturgii.

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą takiego poszukiwania odpowiedzi na pytanie o liturgię we współczesnym świecie, które uwzględniałoby zarówno aktualną kulturę i właściwą mu mentalność, nie pomijając zarazem tego, co istotne dla celebrowanego misterium.

Wobec tego, w artykule zostaje zarysowana charakterystyka współczesnej epoki i jej wpływ na myślenie kościelne. Dopiero na tak zarysowanym tle przedstawione jest to, co wydaje się dzisiaj nieodzowne dla celebracji, a co wynika z samej jej treści teologicznej: bezinteresowność, wolność, piękno i witalność.

Słowa kluczowe: indywidualizm, konsumpcjonizm, liturgia, misterium paschalne, bezinteresowność, wolność, piękno, witalność.

Abstract

The question about the ideal shape of liturgical celebration often arises in pastoral discussions. However, the answers resulting from these discussions have been born, not always from reflections which considered both the cultural context and the theological dimension of liturgy.

This paper is an attempt to research possible answers to the question about what form of liturgy the Church should celebrate in the contemporary world, a form which would consider our present culture and its modern mentalities without omitting the crucial elements of the mystery being celebrated.

The discussions in this paper will describe the characteristics of recent times and their influence on ecclesial thought. Only on that landscape will be presented what factors seem to be necessary for today's liturgical celebrations and what characteristics are inherent in theological content: selflessness, freedom, beauty and vitality.

Keywords: individualism, consumerism, liturgy, paschal mystery, selflessness, freedom, beauty and vitality.

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