Liberation Theology and the Task of Ministry: Worship (2 of 2)

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Catherine: The priestly role of the ministry is closely connected with worship and particularly with the leadership of worship. Scripture itself connects proper worship with the doing of justice in all of life. Scripture also bears witness to the fact that God's people often assume that attendance at public worship somehow pleases God and meets the requirements for a religious life. Hear the words of two prophets who make clear that worship in itself--without works of justice—is not at all pleasing to God:

> Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place. (Jeremiah 7:4-7)

And

> I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

These passages, and others like them, do not mean that worship is unimportant. Obviously, God has intended public worship, complete with hymns and prayers. Even the sacrifices in Israel were the requirement of God. These passages cannot be used to downgrade the significance of corporate worship. As we shall see, proper worship is a support for and the necessary corollary

of a life that seeks justice. But here the reverse proposition is stressed. Worship *cannot* be proper if it is not accompanied by a life that seeks justice.

Sometimes God's people act as though God thrived on flattery. God wants us to gather and offer praises. God desires us to sing hymns and pray for what is needed. Worship is our humoring of a God who likes to be made to feel important. Obviously that opinion is blasphemy. But worship that does not lead to and flow from the constant desire to do the will of God is exactly that. It is as though God could be bought off with some pretty words. But a person or a congregation that truly seeks to glorify God in all of their life will be drawn to worship in order to confess their shortcomings and seek assurance of forgiveness, to hear God's Word again and again, to receive the sacraments that confirm the Good News to us, to praise the God who has given us the call--again and again--to lives of holiness. Worship becomes central and authentic for those who seek justice. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." If we are *not* hungering and thirsting after righteousness, then worship may indeed leave us empty.

God is holy. God's people are to be holy. Holiness is there in worship, not because of architecture or music, incense or stained glass windows. Holiness is there in worship because of a people who seek to do justice and love mercy. Without this, all of the aesthetic beauty in the world leads not to holiness but to the same emptiness as the words, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

Worship makes us holy. But holiness makes our worship authentic. The two cannot be separated. The priestly tasks of the ministry are directly related to the prophetic. One without the other will, in the long run, be ineffective and hollow.

Justo: The center of Christian worship is in the sacraments, and therefore we should first focus our attention on those dimensions of the sacraments, which we have too often overlooked but which point to the demands and promises of God which we usually associate with the prophetic tradition. Unfortunately, in the midst of all our discussions as to the presence of Christ in the eucharist and the manner in which baptism ought to be administered, we have forgotten the radical significance of the sacraments.

To begin with, the very fact that we *have* sacraments, that we believe that this material bread, and this material wine, and this material water can convey the presence and the power of God says a great deal about the nature of the God whom we worship. Ours is not "spiritual" worship, in the sense that it leaves aside the material or the bodily. Ours is a worship which starts with the physical washing of the body, and culminates in eating and drinking. Such is the nature of our God. I do not know about the old saying that "cleanliness is next to godliness." But I do know that for people to have to live in filth is ungodly. And that the God whom we worship in eating and drinking is the God who created food and drink, the God who is concerned for the hungry and the thirsty, the God who demands that we feed the hungry and help the thirsty.

Unfortunately, the traditional handling of the theological locus "de sacramentis in genere" has included a great deal about the number of sacraments, about matter and form, about the requirements for their validity, and nothing about this basic fact that is perhaps the most startling in a world filled with spiritualizing religion: our God is a God who is pleased to be worshiped through the washing of baptism, and through the eating and drinking of Holy Communion. The very existence of sacraments ought to be a sign against any interpretation of Christianity in purely spiritual terms.

When it comes to the sacraments in particular, we see how closely they are connected to the entire prophetic tradition. Just as the prophetic tradition is based on the mighty acts of God, liberating the people from the bondage of Egypt, leading them through the desert, and leading them to a land of promise, so is baptism grounded on the same divine acts. From a very early time, the biblical texts read at baptism had to do with the passing through the waters of the Red Sea, the drinking from the rock in the desert, and the crossing of the river Jordan.

To be baptized is to be a part of this people whom God has freed from the bondage of Egypt. And, again, just as the water of baptism is not purely spiritual, this liberation is not purely spiritual or internal. We are a free people. Any oppression put on us is an act against the will of God, against our God-given nature. And, as Israel of old, we are a witnessing people, a people who are a sign, and therefore any oppression that we practice is a denial of our very being.

To be baptized is to be living as pilgrims in the desert, fed by the bounty of God. It is to be citizens of the Promised Land, also given by the bounty of God. But Israel knew that the desert and the rich land of Canaan both belonged to God. The land did not *belong* to Israel or to any particular Israelite. The land was God's. That was why it could not be sold in perpetuity. Israel, who had been a pilgrim in the desert, was still a pilgrim in Canaan. To be baptized means to be a pilgrim both in the desert and in the fertile land. It means that we recognize that the land that we till, no matter whether we hold title to it or not, is not ours. It is God's. It belongs to the God who shows special interest in the poor, and the widow, and the disinherited. Therefore, to be baptized means no longer to be able to claim the land, to claim the means of production, as our own. They are God's. And God is for the poor.

Also, in the case of communion too often we miss the radical overtones of its significance. To begin with, we set aside its eschatological nature. The most ancient eucharistic prayer that has been preserved celebrates the coming Kingdom of God, of which the bread which we now break and the wine which we drink are signs. In the early church, communion was not an occasion to mourn one's personal sins as Christians pondered the death of Christ. It was rather a celebration of the resurrection, and of the future which that resurrection promised. On every other day, Christians could bow or kneel in prayer. But on Sunday, the day of resurrection, the day of communion, one prayed standing, unbowed, looking God in the face. The victory of Christ that we celebrate in communion has not simply wiped away our sin. It has also made us co-heirs of the King. It has made us "priests and kings." To abase ourselves, to acquiesce to any

form of oppression, is to deny this central fact of the Gospel. This is part of the meaning of communion. Perhaps Calvin said it most clearly: In communion Christ is present, not so much because he comes to the table or to the congregation but because we are transported to the Kingdom. In communion we are taken to the very right hand of God.

Let us put it another way: Worship, and particularly the sacraments, are a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. It is not that we are about to bring in the Kingdom, as if it were up to us to determine the times and the seasons. It is rather that the Kingdom, in a mysterious and yet real way, comes to us. And it is by virtue of that foretaste that we are given the courage and the power to continue living in the present age as citizens of the age to come. Thanks to the sacraments we can be, we *are*, a prophetic people, a people announcing and marching to meet God's future.

If we really believe this, we shall start living now as those who look for the coming of God's Kingdom. If I told you that I expected to move to China next year, but you did not see me trying to learn Chinese, you probably would not be very convinced as to the firmness of my expectation. If I really believe that my future is in China, I better start learning Chinese. Otherwise, I shall be very uncomfortable in China. Likewise, if we really believe in the coming Kingdom of God, we better start getting ready for it. We better start learning "Kingdomese" and living according to Kingdomese culture and law. Otherwise, when the time comes, we shall be very uncomfortable!

This is part of what Christian life and worship are about. They are our exercises in Kingdomese.

This is why Jesus said: “If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to you brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:22). We usually interpret this to mean that we ought not to come to worship, and particularly to communion, with hate in our hearts. For that reason, when I was growing up I was told that, before I took communion, I should make sure that I held no grudges against anyone. But this misses the point entirely. The text does not say "if you have something against your brother." It says if "your brother has something against you." That makes things more difficult. It is not something that I can patch up in my heart two minutes before communion, in order to revive it again two minutes after the service. If my brother or my sister has something against me, in order to be reconciled I have to make amends; I have to practice justice. What Jesus in fact is saying is that before we offer our worship to God, and because of the God to whom we offer our worship, we must practice justice in our daily relations. In other words, to partake properly of these sacraments, which are foretastes of the Kingdom, we must practice Kingdomese in the manner in which we order our entire lives. The sacraments are prophetic signs. They are signs of the same divine justice that the prophets proclaimed and demanded of God's people. The pastor who understands this dimension in the sacraments will find no contradiction between the prophetic role and the priestly tasks.

Catherine: The pastor has a great deal of responsibility for the public prayers in the worship of the church. This can be both a creative and a sensitive area, however. For many centuries in the history of the church, the assumption was that Christians learned to pray through the public worship of the church, most especially through the monastic offices. Lay people might attend the services, or local congregations might have some forms of these prayer services in their own churches. The church taught us how to pray, and in the process taught us what were the proper things to pray for. This still was true in the Reformation period. The pastoral prayer was, in a sense, a model for prayer. We learned what adoration and confession sounded like. We learned what intercession meant.

But in the period after the Reformation, when Protestants took the phrase "the priesthood of all believers" to mean a radical individualism, prayer also came to have strong individualistic overtones. Of course we prayed for other people. But there was very much the feeling that no one--not even the church--should tell us what to pray for. If the prayers in the worship service ask for things we disagree with, we can readily tune them out. That is not our prayer. With the recent trends toward greater congregational participation, there is often clear resentment if written prayers, put in the bulletin to be read by all the congregation, include statements that some members find offensive or not what they would pray for. In no sense, for many people, is the public worship of the church the guide for private prayer. Rather, the reverse is true. Private prayer is the standard by which public prayer is judged.

What does this mean in a ministry that sees the issues of justice as critical in the life of prayer, that finds areas both in confession and intercession that are touched strongly by a present lack of justice? One hates to make prayer a battleground. At the same time, however, one hates to leave issues of justice aside in the midst of prayer. Part of what needs to be dealt with here are issues of strategy. But first, let us deal with some further issues regarding prayers of confession.

Many congregations avoid the issue of what sins are to be confessed by making a general statement as to human sinfulness and then leaving time for private confession. The problem is, however, that much of our sense of guilt is developed within the context of a sinful society. We feel guilty for what the society disapproves of. But we must remember that we live in a sinful society. A conscience formed by the standards of the culture can indeed feel guilty but not for the right things. The church needs to clarify what sin really is and lead people to see that some of the things a society makes them feel guilty for are not wrong. And other things the society approves are indeed sin. To leave everyone to their own sense of sin in the prayer of confession is, in fact, a way to bolster the mores of the society without any criticism. Many of our public prayers of confession simply acknowledge that we feel guilty and ask God to forgive us. That will not do.

Yet to go beyond this and mention specific sins is to court conflict. Without considerable education and re-education, many Christians will not see the issues. Is the public prayer of confession the place to do this re-education? It may well depend on the congregation. One of

the problems is the usual placement of the prayer of confession near the beginning of worship. It makes sense there. If we begin worship with the realization of the holiness of God, we are then driven to the awareness of our own unholiness. The whole congregation can agree that all are unholy. It is the specifics that cause the problems.

A far better place for the specifics may well be in a prayer of confession immediately following the sermon. If the preaching has been biblically based, and clearly so, a prayer can readily pick up on how this passage of God's Word challenges our usual assumptions about what is God's will. Confession can be made that is specific --indeed highly specific-- but limited to the issues that arise from that sermon on that particular text. The following week a different text would point to other sins that we usually ignore. If this is properly done, it can flow so clearly from the text that the congregation can see readily that their previous view of sin has been challenged, not by the preacher, but by the Scripture.

There is a second factor that must be kept in mind in regards to prayers of confession. Not all the members of the congregation are in the same situation. Care must be taken that the accurate description of the sins of some are not misunderstood as false indictments of others. For instance: Imagine the following three people: first, a man, who owns a citrus grove and who is aware of some of the issues of justice in regard to the migrants that he employs; secondly, his wife, who is seriously considering going back to school to begin a career in counseling. Her children are now in school, but still, it would mean great disruption for the family and might

easily cause some conflict; thirdly, a migrant worker, who has been approached by a representative of the United Farm Workers Organization. He is unsure whether or not to join. He has always been one to accept whatever comes and not challenge the authorities.

Let us further imagine the unlikely situation of these three in the same congregation, listening to a prayer of confession. The sins that are mentioned are selfishness and pride. What might the effect be, if these sins are not further nuanced? The grove owner might well feel convicted as the pastor intended. But the other two might well decide that the new paths on which they were thinking of venturing are instances of both selfishness and pride and return to their previous lives, feeling that they had done the Christian thing.

Even if the prayer of confession follows the sermon and is directly drawn from the biblical passage, this second issue must be taken into account. We must imagine our words heard by a wide variety of people and avoid misunderstandings. Nor need this take a great deal of time. It means balancing a statement about selfishness with another that says that some of us hide behind self*less*ness as a means of avoiding growth and responsibility. It is a matter of thinking through the issues and, quite pastorally, caring for the whole congregation in the prayers, taking into consideration where they are and the assumptions they bring to worship, assumptions that the Gospel itself challenges.

Justo: What all this means is that there is no such thing as a socio-politically irrelevant liturgy.

Some years ago, when I was a seminary student in Cuba, many in my generation, with the help of our professors, were trying to develop liturgical practices that would be, as we then thought, "more relevant to our situation." But after that time, liberation theology has shown that there is no such thing as a neutral liturgy. Every liturgy has a sociopolitical significance and relevance. It may be bad, or it may be good. But it will be relevant.

In order to show this, allow me to take two examples from Latin America, one centuries old, and Roman Catholic, and the other more recent, and Protestant.

When the first Catholic missionaries arrived in Latin America, they would have been the last to see that part of their mission was to subdue the nations and empires that the Spanish had conquered. As a matter of fact, many of them opposed the oppressive practices of the *conquistadores* and the settlers who came after them. The sermons of Las Casas, Montesinos, and Vieira remain to this day stirring examples of truly prophetic preaching. In some areas, the missionaries even armed the Indians in order to resist the encroachments of the Spanish and Portuguese who wished to take their land or to capture them as slaves. But, in spite of this, the liturgy that they practiced and promoted was in itself oppressive and contributed to the ultimate acceptance of European superiority on the part of the Indian. Imagine yourself an Indian. Your warriors have been defeated. Your rulers have been deposed. Your gods have been overthrown. All this has been done in the name of a God who must be infinitely more powerful than your ancient gods, for his followers have been endowed with the mighty power of horse,

gun, and steel. The conquest itself is sufficient reason for you to doubt the power of your gods and to try this new Christian God. But then you learn that this God is to be found above all in a rite that can only be performed by certain selected white men. You thought that Spanish or Portuguese were already sufficiently alien. But now you find that the worship of the Supreme God must take place in what appears to you a special and mysterious kind of Spanish or Portuguese. In any case, it is a language twice removed from your own. To gain access to God, you must go through His white representatives. The consequence of all this is that the more you move into the Christian faith, and the more you participate in the mass, the more you will become convinced that the Indian is inferior in the eyes of God, no matter what your preachers tell you. The ancient Indian civilizations were crushed by the horse, the sword, and the gun. But they were subdued by the liturgy.

At this point, it may be well to say in passing that part of the indigenous people's response was to develop their own para-liturgies. ("Superstitions," the Protestants called them, and in this they were joined for a while by post-Vatican II Catholics.) Many of these retained a great deal of the ancient Indian rites, with a greater or lesser portion of Catholicism. The Virgin of Guadalupe is an example. Theologically, there is little doubt that there is a great deal of heterodoxy in such practices. But, one can still ask: Which is less in error, the theologically correct liturgy that in practice denies the incarnation, or the theologically heterodox liturgy that affirms that God is indeed God with us?

My second example comes from the Protestant tradition in Latin America. Rubem Alves, known to many of you as the author of *A Theology of Human Hope*, has recently published in Portuguese a study of Brazilian Protestantism under the title of *Protestantismo e Repressao* (Protestantism and Repression). What Alves shows in that book is that Protestantism, which entered Brazil as a force for change and renewal, in more recent times has become a repressive force. In this too, the liturgy has played a significant role. The Protestant liturgy, in Brazil as in the rest of Latin America, tends to be adapted from American liturgies of a few decades ago. By their content as well as by their form, such liturgies tend to foster what many Latin Americans have come to call " Herodianism. The "Herodians" are those who think that the foreign power is indeed superior to the national culture and traditions and who then become agents of that power. They profit from this. But their motivation is not that simple. They are truly convinced that they are doing what is best for the nation. In the case of Latin American Protestants, their gratitude for the early missionaries is reinforced by an alien and alienating liturgy that convinces them that the best thing that could happen would be for their entire country to adopt the middle-class, North-American values embodied in that liturgy.

What does all this mean for ministry in the U.S., among people of the dominant culture? The specific implications are best left to those who are working in that situation. But at least one can say that no minister can avoid the socio-political issues by claiming that the priestly task is not political. There is no such thing as a non-political liturgy. The question is, what are we to do in

order to make sure that the politics, the economics, and the sociology of our liturgy agree with the polities, the economies, and the sociology of God?