



Other News & Events

From the

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Liturgy: The ritual of letting God find you: Why go to church? For believers in traditional worship, there's more to it than entertaining sermons, hip music and fevered emotion.

Greek Orthodox priest Father Panayiotis Papageorgiou faced a challenging task: convincing two dozen young Protestant students at Calgary's Nazarene University College of the importance of worshipping God by means of fixed, 2,000-year-old ritualistic prayers.

In an age that scorns formality and praises spontaneity (no matter how banal), the regalia of ancient worship -- elaborate vestments, carved altars, flickering candles, rhythmic chanting, cloying incense and tinkling bells -- may seem bizarrely old-fashioned.

Yet, the Orthodox churches and small but vibrant communities within the Catholic and Anglican communions are committed to preserving their ancient worship. And they are convinced that when electric guitars, PowerPoint hymns and waving arms have gone the way of bell-bottom pants and tie-dyed T-shirts, their chants and incense smoke will still be rising up to God in heaven.

"In Greek, liturgos -- liturgy -- originally means a public work or a work of the people," Papageorgiou said in an interview.

"Our work (of all human beings) is the worship of God, and we (Orthodox) want to do that right, without going off into tangents, without deviating from our purpose. The liturgy we use is safe, going back to the early second century; it is a sure framework for our common worship."

Papageorgiou visited Calgary from his home in Cyprus in January, invited by Nazarene's Christian spirituality professor, Charles Nienkirchen. The priest led an intensive, five-day course called Divine Liturgy as the Expression of a Worship-Centred Life.

"The whole purpose of the life of prayer is our sanctification," said Papageorgiou, who studied theology in the United States but now pastors an Orthodox parish in Cyprus, where he lives with his wife and two children.

"Man was created in the image of God, and we're perfected by the grace of God. But as St. John Chrysostom said, God will do nothing unless we allow him. Sanctification requires our co-operation, our synergeia. It is in the liturgy, our worship, that we co-operate with God in our sanctification."

The Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican masses have always included some or all these ancient prayers (using their Latin names), chanted in order: some psalms, perhaps a formal Confiteor (I Confess), a repetitive Kyrie Eleison (Lord Have Mercy), the Gloria (Glory to God), followed -- on a fixed yearly calendar -- by more psalms, an Old Testament reading, an Epistle and a Gospel text. Then one of the ancient creeds is said, closing the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist, following next, begins with the Sanctus (Holy, Holy Holy), followed by a fixed Eucharist prayer and consecration of the sacrifice, then the Pater Noster (Our Father), the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) and more psalms.

With the possible exception of the sermon or homily, there is little room for "creativity" in traditional worship. Any spontaneous emotions are contained quietly in the pews.

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Nazarene student Byron Sawatzky, 22, who attended Papageorgiou's course, said that, far from being boring, the ritualism of ancient worship seems to be capable of overcoming a deep division in Protestant worship.

"Protestant worship seems to focus on one extreme or the other," said Sawatzky, a Church of Christ member.

"You either have the intellectualism of the conservative evangelicals or the emotionalism of the charismatics.

"But the only thing that's important is unity with God" -- something requiring a transformation of the human soul -- "and for thousands of years, these (rituals) have been achieving that transformation."

Sawatzky, who has attended some services at Blessed Peter the Aleut Orthodox parish in Marda Loop, admits it can be difficult for post-moderns to focus on ritual prayers. But "to do it is a huge release of the self, a huge submission of our wills" to God, he said.

"For western (Protestants), it seems that it's all vocal prayer: 'I feel this;' 'I want this;' 'Help me, God, in this.' But the old Christian prayer has an aspect of meditation, centring the heart, quieting the mind," Sawatzky said.

"How can you hear God when you're filled with supercharged emotions, when your mind is noisy, when so much of yourself is screaming out?"

This problem is especially acute in charismatic worship, Sawatzky said, where "escalating emotional experiences become the expectation. And if those overpowering emotions aren't there and outwardly expressed -- the so-called gifts of the Spirit, like speaking in tongues, then they assume that there's something wrong. So it's all about them, and it's not about God."

Sawatzky said the habits of ritual are what are needed to shape the habits of human character. But he acknowledged that evangelical Protestants are skeptical, even suspicious, of the whole notion of ritual.

"Evangelicals are fearful of becoming cultists," the young student said. "We're afraid that ritual and repetitive prayer is some sort of magic."

Yet, the emphasis on spontaneous prayer assumes that who we are before God is whatever we're feeling at that particular moment. And that's wrong, he insisted. Human beings, made in the image of God, are as hard to understand as God. It takes a lifetime to know what we need, he said, and the ancient prayers can draw us to what we're supposed to be.

"Repetitive prayers aren't magic formulas; they're how we need to learn to speak to God," Sawatzky said.

"God will hear us no matter how we speak to Him. The issue is, what are we supposed to be saying? Evangelical churches are focusing on numbers, so we're glossing up our services for the unchurched, focusing on technology and entertainment. We may get them into the church, but for what purpose?"

"When do we begin to seek a genuine worship and union with God?"

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Liturgy, continued . . . →

A week after the Greek priest Papageorgiou left Calgary, the city was visited by Roman Catholic priest Father Chad Ripperger, a professor of liturgy at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary near Lincoln, Neb. That seminary is the North American centre for Catholicism's youngest priestly order, the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter, dedicated to the revival of the ancient Latin mass.

While more modern Catholic orders have gone into nosedives, since 1988 the Fraternity has grown to 115 priests and 120 seminarians in two seminaries and 70 parishes in Europe, North America, Africa and Australia. Its seminaries must turn away far more applicants than they can accept.

Ripperger was in Calgary speaking to the Traditional Latin Mass Community at St. Anthony's Catholic Parish in Windsor Park. In five years, that congregation has grown from a few dozen to well over 200, including a number of large, young families. Ripperger spoke to the Calgary traditionalists on the topic of the supernatural graces in the liturgy.

"The first thing we must realize is that liturgy is not about us," Ripperger said in an interview.

"It's about worshipping God in the order of charity: loving God first and then loving our neighbour for the sake of God. Even though we're sanctified by partaking in the liturgy, it's still about God, because even our sanctification is only for the sake of his glory."

Ripperger argued that the different ancient liturgies of the mass all mirror -- or are mirrored by -- the worship of God depicted in the mystical vision of St. John in his Revelation. The apostle's opening criticism of the "seven churches" corresponds to the Confiteor and Kyrie Eleison; the vision of the Book of Life matches the mass' biblical readings; and the mystical Marriage Feast of the Lamb represents the Eucharist prayer or Lord's Supper. The apostle was given his vision on the Lord's Day, when he was "in the spirit" -- that is, saying mass.

So, the purpose of the ancient liturgies is to rehearse on Earth the worship of the heavenly host in heaven, as seen in the biblical Revelation: tier upon countless tier of saints and angels, beholding God in bliss and responding to his glory by chanting in perfect unison, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lamb."

Ripperger rejected the notion that "seekers" in this post-modern culture need more "seeker-friendly" worship services, less obscure and less formal than the ancient liturgies.

"When the ritual is done properly, people can see that there's something sacred there," he said.

"It may not happen at first, but many people have told me that, after two or three masses, they get the feeling that it somehow fits, that something in themselves resonates to it.

"You do have to start where people are at. But there's a natural inclination in people to render God his due. And in the end, what God is really due from us is the sacrifice of our wills. Conforming our worship to the ancient ritual, with practice, becomes the most perfect possible surrender of our will."

Prof. Charles Nienkirchen said there's a growing interest among some evangelical denominations in the whole issue of formal, traditional liturgy. He cited a January 2001 article in the American evangelical weekly Christianity Today, describing how evangelicals are growing "tired of ad hoc worship" and "learning the ancient rhythms of prayer," in the magazine's words.

"In the free churches -- and I come from a free church -- there's always a feeling that you're chasing God, like you're trying to find a way to make him listen to you," Nienkirchen said.

"In liturgical worship, there's a sense you're allowing God to come to you.

"The function of liturgy is to deliver us from the burden of our feelings, the subjectivity that so enslaves people in their personal attempts to worship."

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Liturgy, continued . . . →

In the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions, however, the whole notion of liturgy is bound up in their sense of the sacramental, rituals such as baptism and especially the Holy Eucharist that are believed to bring sanctifying grace. At the sacramental extreme, the liturgical traditions assert the Lord's Supper really is the body and blood of Jesus Christ (appealing to John 6:32-35), a notion that modern evangelicalism has rejected in favour of emphasizing the transformative effect of sacred scripture.

And yet, there are some evangelical traditions that aren't at all hostile to the notion of the sacramental, Nienkirchen suggested.

"While Baptists would call rituals like baptism and the Lord's Supper mere ordinances, Protestants like the High Methodists have no trouble with the idea of the sacramental," he said.

"We believe that baptism, infant baptism, and the Lord's supper, prayer and fasting are sacramental. John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) called the spiritual disciplines or works of piety, like baptism, the processes by which we receive the grace of God and are transformed by it."

Nienkirchen suggested there's an inner connection between liturgical prayer, the rituals of the sacraments and the emphasis on sanctification. This is all distinct from an evangelical emphasis on spontaneous worship, reading scripture and justification.

From a sacramental perspective, baptism "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" is a ritual that, done correctly and devoutly, brings divine grace and transforms the life of a person. From an evangelical perspective, it's just a physical sign of obedience to a mental assertion of faith.

"The liturgical (on the side of the receiver) and the sacramental (on the side of the giver) is our way of receiving the grace of God without having to go chase it," Nienkirchen said.

Rev. Ed Marcusse of the conservative Bethel United Reformed Church south of Canada Olympic Park said it's a mistake to think of the Reformers as instituting free-form worship.

"It was the radical Anabaptists who threw out everything that smelled of Rome, so much so that they even rejected the Trinity. Since then, the Mennonites and their other grandchildren have come back to Christian truth," Marcusse said.

"The Reformers tried to take a more middle ground. We rejected the seven sacraments of Rome, but we (traditional Calvinists and Lutherans) kept two, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

"We don't think of worship as sacramental, still, because worship isn't going to save you."

Faith alone justifies and saves a sinner, Marcusse said. But that doesn't mean there's no place for worship and sanctification.

"The more liberal (Calvinist and Lutheran) churches are now going for the free-form sermon -- if there's time for a sermon, they might try to slip one in. But the Reformers kept the liturgy. In our church, you always know what's going to come next," he said.

"Worship doesn't save us, but it is part of our sanctification, part of the Godly walk. That's the way we honour the Lord, and we give him the whole Sabbath -- that's why we have morning and evening services."

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Liturgy, continued . . . →

Calgarian Fr. Bob Greene, a traditional 1549 "Prayer Book" Anglican (or "Anglo-Catholic") said there's a connection between the use of a ritual liturgy, the belief that some rituals are sacraments (sources of divine grace), and the emphasis on personal sanctification. That connection is the "incarnation" itself, the Christian belief that God, the creator of the universe, became a flesh-and-blood man, Jesus of Nazareth.

God's making himself a real man, a physical person, was a glorification of the human body and material things, Greene said. It means the body is not optional. It means prayer must involve not only words and music, but "gymnastics" or rituals such as kneeling. It means God can use material things such as the water of baptism to offer grace to people -- sacraments. And it means faith can't be only a mere mental decision, but must include the effort to sanctifying lives -- and bodies -- by learning virtue.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," Greene quoted the start of the Gospel of John.

"And we believe" -- as a continuation of the incarnation of God -- "that the bread and wine of the Eucharist really becomes our lord's body and blood.

"As the great Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, of all the religions, Christianity is the most materialistic" -- so much so that traditionalists believe God offers his material body for human consumption in the sacrament of the mass.

Greene quotes the ancient Latin tag, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, loosely translated, "As you pray, so will you believe." Because traditionalists continually re-enact the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ in their liturgies, they've never lost the impulse first to praise and glorify God.

Since "some of the Reformers" removed that incarnational element from their worship, he said, Jesus Christ has tended to become simply a good friend granting favours, rather than a continual, living sacrifice in the worship of the church itself.

"Worship isn't entertainment. It's a sacrifice. It's the offering of all our own souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice unto the Lord. And the church is not a navel-gazing community. It's the body of Christ," the priest said.

Greene said human beings always resort to ritual when they celebrate important feasts such as birthdays and weddings -- "We get the elaborate cakes and we sing the same songs." How much more, then, that the designers of the liturgies of the early church should have "embellished and adorned" the greatest feast in human experience.

Greene acknowledges that ritual can become "merely habitual," but "so can kissing your wife goodbye every morning." The solution to a merely habitual kiss is not to stop kissing her altogether, or kiss her only when "you feel like it," but rather "to put your heart into it" daily.

The Anglican scoffs at the idea that the ancient worship can become out of date, because, he said, "It's beyond date. It's transcendent, outside of time. It's timeless."

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