Liturgical Cosmology: the Responsibilities of Man and Woman as Cosmic Priest
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Students and colleagues alike are sometimes amused, sometimes vexed, by my habit of constantly slapping the modifier "liturgical" in front of everything: "liturgical theology, liturgical asceticism, liturgical cosmology, liturgical anthropology, liturgical time," and so on and so forth. I can understand why this could be puzzling if one was operating with a thin definition of liturgy. With a thin definition that confines itself to rubric, ritual, and religious text, it would only sound like I was urging the improbable connection of sturdy theological questions to irrelevant processions with candles or the swinging of an incense pot.

But there is a thicker definition of liturgy available to us in the tradition, and it alters the effect the adjective has on the noun. I remember the contrast impinging on my consciousness when I was once asked whether I could teach a course on liturgical history. Just for a moment, my mind went in this direction: “Yes, I can. Liturgical history is an important topic; where shall we begin? I suppose with Abraham, then arrive at Moses’ encounter at the burning bush, and on to Israel’s kings and prophets, bringing us up to the birth of the Church. No, wait. Probably the covenant with Noah needs to be mentioned. No, wait. Liturgical history began with Adam and Eve, their cosmic priesthood, the forfeiture of their liturgical career in the fall, after which the long story of salvation history could be told of how man and woman are restored to their liturgical state by becoming apprentices to Christ, the premier liturgist, and led into the heavenly Jerusalem. That would be a liturgical history.” Then I realized they probably just wanted me to teach a “history of the liturgy.”
In a thin definition one looks at liturgy; in a thick definition one looks through liturgy at everything else.

In a parallel way, the idea of "liturgical anthropology" can be seen in a thick or thin sense. “Anthropos” is the Greek word for “man,” male and female, and anthropo-logy is the study of *anthropos*. An historical anthropology can be digging in the dirt for the debris of a past civilization; a social anthropology can examine how human beings behave in social groups by their consumption, kinship hierarchies, and power structures; and a linguistic anthropology can study the phenomenon of speech through semantics and perhaps take into account the speech event in which it occurs. Now, if a thin sense of liturgy was coupled with any of these, then "liturgical anthropology" would consist of uncovering ancient patterns of procession in the Holy Sepulchre, examining ritual behavior’s power to bond social units together, and considering the various speech events within a liturgical service, from doxology to epiclesis. Fascinating stuff.

But the Orthodox theologian, Fr Alexander Schmemann, seems to offer a different kind of liturgical anthropology when he says the purpose of man and woman is a liturgical purpose.

The unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to bless God for the food and life he receives from Him. He alone is to respond to God’s blessing with his blessing .... All rational, spiritual and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitutes his life. “*Homo sapiens,*” “*homo faber*” ... yes, but, first of all, “*homo adorans*.” The first, the basic definition of man is that he is the priest. ¹

Liturgical anthropology sees the cosmos as temple, and history as a stage for deification. And it sees the fall as the forfeiture of our liturgical career, one which has made the material world

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into sacramental shards that are no longer naturally recognizable to us without special revelation.

This liturgical anthropology is nested within a liturgical cosmology; the two go together, because of the special place *anthropos* plays in the world as simultaneously (a) priest under God and (b) ruler over creation. This liturgical cosmology emphasizes the solidarity between humankind and creation. Such theologians as Maximus the Confessor viewed humankind as a "little world" (a micro-cosmos) and the cosmos as an "enlarged humanity" (macro-anthropos).

*Anthropos* is called a microcosm because man and woman are a hybrid of matter and spirit. Microcosm does mean a fraction of the whole: a kitchen is not the microcosm of a house. Rather, it means that everything found in the larger order can be found in the smaller order: a dollhouse is a microcosm of a house. In men and women, everything that makes up the cosmos on its largest scale can be found on a smaller scale: I mean, matter and spirit. The reason *anthropos* – of all beings in the universe – is called microcosm is because the human being is equipped for both sense perception and intellectual vision. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus:

The great Architect of the universe conceived and produced a being endowed with both natures, the visible and the invisible: God created the human being, bringing its body forth from the pre-existing matter which he animated with his own Spirit ... [T]hus in some way a new universe was born, small and great at one and the same time. God set this ‘hybrid’ worshipper on earth to contemplate the visible world, and to be initiated into the invisible; to reign over earth’s creatures, and to obey orders from on high. He created a being at once earthly and heavenly, insecure and immortal, visible and invisible, halfway between greatness and nothingness, flesh and spirit at the same time ... an animal en route to another native land, and, most mysterious of all, made to resemble God by simple submission to the divine will.²

No other creature is enrolled as citizen in both realms. And this gives man and woman a particular responsibility, the responsibility which liturgical cosmology would see as relevant to the question of sustainability. *Anthropos* stands over creation and under God; he is a royal priest, ruling over matter but in obedience to the spiritual light of God. Had *anthropos* remained liturgical priest, man and woman would have mediated God’s descending blessings to matter, and have mediated the ascending glory of material creation into the celestial song of praise. Failing this royal priesthood wrongs nature and sins against God. The two are connected.

This means that finding the place of man and woman in the cosmos is crucial, and finding that place is a theological task. The economist, politician, or sociologist alone will not do it, because their discipline does not require taking the measure of earth against heaven’s horizon. The Lutheran theologian, Regin Prenter, names *anthropos’* place as being exactly under God, beside our neighbor, and over creation. Then the fall, he says, can be understood as the attempt to rise above our place: to stand beside God and over our neighbor; and with that hubris we have removed ourselves two steps from the creation that needs a human hand at the rudder.

Man and woman are created in the image of God, but the image must be true to its prototype. Gerhard von Rad’s commentary on Genesis expresses this thought building from the Hebrew word for “image.”

Selem means predominantly an actual plastic work, a duplicate, sometimes an idol; ... We learn from a number of ancient Oriental myths that a god makes a man (or a god) in his image. ... The Priestly account of man’s creation speaks less about the nature of God’s image than of its purpose. ... [which is] domination in the world, especially over the animals. ... The close relation of the term for God’s image with that for the commission to exercise dominion emerges quite clearly when we have understood
slem as a plastic image. Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to
dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they
don’t personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign
emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce
God’s claim to dominion over the earth. ³

There is nothing wrong with the idea that man and woman have dominion over the earth, so
long as God has dominion over them. The only way that dominion goes wrong is if the king is
not a priest. Besides ruling what is below, anthropos must serve what is above.

This sense of obligation is felt, if vaguely, by most people in the sustainability
movement. This will come as no surprise to us, since there is no contradiction between what
reason can know and what must be revealed; grace perfects nature. So we will not be surprised
that the sense of care for the earth is attached to a higher sense of obligation. But we will not
be surprised, either, if the secular mood fails to consistently apply this sense, or cannot refresh
the sense, or narrows the sense to make exceptions when convenient, and then, it needs the
protection of doctrine. Chesterton says that there are many secular, moral moods which we
may affirm, but adds that without theological grounding these are only held as prejudices.

“They have the prejudice; and long may they retain it! We have the principle, and they are
welcome to it when they want it.”⁴

G. K. Chesterton is particularly clear on this Thomistic point that grace perfects nature,
and since I’ve taken a vow to quote Chesterton once a week, to somebody, somewhere, I will
continue with him in closing. He says that "the modern world, with its modern movements, is
living on its Catholic capital. It is using, and using up, the truths that remain to it out of the old
treasury of Christendom; including, of course, many truths known to pagan antiquity by

³ Von Rad, Commentary on Genesis
crystallized in Christendom.”5 The truth in this point is that nature is not a goddess, she is, as St Francis of Assisi called her, our sister. Christianity can befriend nature truly, at last, as the pagan instinctively knew nature should be befriended, because the main point in Christianity is

“that Nature is not our mother: Nature is our sister. We can be proud of her beauty, since we have the same father; but she has no authority over us; we have to admire, but not to imitate. This gives to the typically Christian pleasure in this earth a strange touch of lightness that is almost frivolity. Nature was a solemn mother to the worshippers of Isis and Cybele. Nature was a solemn mother to Wordsworth or to Emerson. But Nature is not solemn to Francis of Assisi or to George Herbert. To Francis, Nature is a sister, and even a younger sister: a little, dancing sister, to be laughed at as well as loved.”6 Chesterton can therefore expect that in many cases the Christian and the unbeliever will overlap in their values. Ecology and sustainability, saving energy and stopping pollution will be such examples. And if the culture around us drops those values, then it will appear that the Christian continues to hold the truth blindly, but that will only be until the rest of the world opens its own eyes again.

It is the Christian church which continues to hold strongly, when the world for some reason has weakened on it, what many others hold at other times .... But anybody who holds it at all will hold it as a philosophy, not hung on one text but on a hundred truths.7

The question is whether sustainability will remain a mood, to pass out of fashion when it becomes inconvenient. What would pin it in place? What could maintain it in the face of difficulties which require disciplined heroism? Chesterton concludes that all our social sanities are the traditions of old Catholic dogmas.

Like many other Catholic dogmas, they are felt in some vague way even by heathens, so long as they are healthy heathens. But when it is a question of their not being merely felt but formulated, it will be found to be a formula of the Faith. ...8

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5 Ibid., 147.
6 Orthodoxy, p. 317.
Liturgy is a cosmological event, and it occurs in a cosmic temple. But to do the world as it was meant to be done, our hearts must be liberated from passions of avarice and envy. This work of grace is done by liturgical discipline (an asceticism begun in the baptismal font and fed at each eucharist and protected by the sacraments). And when liturgy is done in within the temple and on the eighth day, it is for the life of the world. Holy days appoint the calendar, and light from stained-glass windows bejewel the landscape in order to awaken in our hearts a hunger for Eden, for our true happiness. We were expelled because we violated the conditions of our residency, but even now there are holy things, and holy times, and holy places which speak to us of our origin and destiny. When holiness radiates its light, it speaks a prophetic voice to our conscience and we can place our dominion over the earth under the Kingdom of God. The supernatural is ingredient to the natural world, and if it is lacking, something goes strangely wrong. Chesterton said “Take away the Nicene Creed and similar things, and you do some strange wrong to the sellers of sausages. Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural.”

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