

CHAPTER 1

Learning God's Dance: Involvement

I danced in the morning
when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon
and the stars and the sun.
And I came down from heaven
and I danced on the earth.
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

Some fifty years ago Sydney Carter wrote the modern arrangement of an old Shaker hymn called "Lord of the Dance." It is unusual in that it pictures God as master of the cosmic dance of creation. The One who has danced in the moon and the stars and the sun was also born in Bethlehem so that he might dance on the earth. In his goodness he offers to let us share in his dance, and he will lead us all, wherever we might be.

The imagery here captures perfectly what true Christian life is all about: learning to dance to God's tune. Christian life is not doing our own thing, or dancing our own dance. Neither are we alone in the dance. It was first learned and danced to perfection by Jesus, who was one with God and in harmony with all of creation. Its varied steps are spelled out in the Scriptures. Even better, the essence of this melody is repeated for us over and over again in the Sunday liturgy. Eucharist is the

tune of the one who danced even on the Friday when the sun turned black as he hung on the cross. For he is the life that will never, never die. His greatest desire is to live again in us so that the dance may go on.

For years we tended to think of the sacraments as things, as means of grace. Each was thought of in terms of the special grace we received from it. Vatican II, however, has reminded us that the sacraments are liturgical actions, not things. Eucharist, for example, is an action of the church gathered together, not simply something done by the priest. If we ever thought of the sacraments as actions of the church previously, it was mainly because they were dispensed in and by the church. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us that the full and active participation of all the people is the aim to be considered before all else (no. 14).

As actions, it is helpful to think of the liturgy as a dance God invites us to join. We are affected to the extent that we join in. To speak of the liturgy as a dance is to recognize that it is God who pipes the tune, who sets the basic rhythms. For each of us the dance will be different, reflecting the differences in our bodies, our lives, our relationships. This can be a frightening thought for those who prefer clear-cut patterns, a uniform set of steps that all of us must dance.

However, there is really no fixed form we all must observe. We are not asked to mimic Jesus' steps, although we are to be inspired by his music. We need to let his music speak to us and inspire us to dance as Jesus did, filled with his own Spirit. The question is not what Jesus himself might dance were he alive today. We really don't know. Rather, we need to ask how we might be to people today what Jesus was to people in his own time. This is learning to dance to the same tune that Jesus did, a tune that comes from God. And though its basic rhythms are the same, the steps will differ depending on the circumstances of time and place in which we find ourselves.

In the modern world the main thing that will sustain us in life's dance is the liturgy. There, in a world where improvisation is a virtue, we can hear the rhythms that ought to control our lives. Without this, we will lose the beat, forget the melody, or mistake the rhythm. Only in the liturgy do all of life's rhythms come together. Without liturgy, we are left with little to fall back on.

Sacramentality

It is said that Catholics are a sacramental people. What does this really mean? Only that Catholics tend to stress and celebrate the sacraments more frequently than others? Certainly not. Sacramentality is a reality that affects the very way Catholics think. It also raises the question of how one celebrates the sacraments meaningfully. Is sharing in the church's sacraments something like getting a dividend on religious practice? Perhaps storing up merit in some supernatural bank account? Or is it really a special way of thinking—a whole way of life?

Unfortunately, most people continue to think of sacraments as something we receive rather than something we do. They can neglect the relationship that exists between the lives we lead and the sacraments we celebrate. For our lives surely have an effect on the sacraments. Consider the following three situations.

My secretary shared this story with me one Monday morning. Her husband had gone to a wedding the previous Saturday in a small town some thirty miles away. At the reception the bride took the glass of champagne from the best man and announced, "I want to make the toast." Raising her glass she continued, "To my husband on the first and last day of our marriage!" With that she threw the champagne in his face and walked majestically out of the hall.

As everyone stood with mouths agape, wondering what had happened, it was learned that the previous night the bride-to-be had discovered that her beloved had been unfaithful to her. Such was her anger that, rather than simply call off the wedding, she preferred to embarrass him in front of all his friends. Everyone agreed that she succeeded spectacularly.

Think back, however, to the hour before the reception, when all were gathered in church. There, within a beautiful liturgy, when the priest asked whether she took the person at her side as her husband and she answered yes—while all the while her heart was saying no, no, no!—what was actually being celebrated?

Or take the case of a person who comes to confession during Holy Week, not having confessed for a whole year. He mentions adultery. Actually, it turns out that he has a mistress. When I say, "I suppose you have been coming here year after year at this time to receive absolu-

tion. Then, after receiving communion on Easter you go right back to your mistress?” “That’s right,” he answers. If—despite there being no real sorrow or purpose of amendment—I go ahead and give absolution anyway, what actually would be celebrated?

Take a third case. We have a community that is divided, where there are factions, where the rich are not ashamed to ignore the poor. Yet they all gather to celebrate a magnificent Eucharist. The singing is perfect, the vestments superb, the presider inspired. What is really being celebrated?

We have an authoritative answer to this last case. It was given by St. Paul himself. He said something like, I don’t know what on earth you think you are celebrating, but it surely isn’t the Eucharist! (cf. 1 Cor 11:20). What was being celebrated in a case like this, we might add, was selfishness, division, and sin. That surely is not the Eucharist.

Sacraments and Reality

These examples are meant as graphic illustrations of the fact that there is nothing magic about the sacraments. They don’t work automatically, despite a lack of love or faith on our part. We can’t share in a sacrament and expect to be graced if our lives contradict the very meaning of the sacrament that we are celebrating. Some theologians speak of split-level Christianity, a situation where liturgical prayer has no seeming influence on values, ideals, or lifestyle. This is sham Christianity and results in sham sacraments. There is meant to be a close relationship between liturgy and life. We are expected to dance to God’s tune at all times.

In actuality, the relationship between the sacraments and life is a reciprocal one. In other words, sacraments influence our lives (perhaps less rather than more), and our lives influence our celebration of the sacraments (surely more rather than less). St. Paul gives us a frightening reminder that our lives can be such that they completely vitiate what we think we are celebrating. Sacraments are celebrations of the reality of our lives.

Though the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, are primarily worship, they are also expected to influence our practice and mold our thinking, to turn us into Christians in fact as well as in name. Celebration of Eucharist is meant to make us eucharistic in thought, word, and deed. The liturgy is an experience that demands a personal

involvement on our part, a response to the action of Christ. It is a font of formation in true Christian imagination. It helps us to think and act as Christians.

What is celebrated at the altar is meant to be paralleled in actual life. What we live out daily is what is brought to the altar to be transformed by God. But, as the eminent liturgist Robert Hovda wryly noted, just as we can't get blood out of a turnip, we can't expect to have warm, experiential liturgical celebrations with an unconcerned people, those who have no interest in the economic and political oppression and division that exists in our world. God will not dance to our tune.

A true Christian spirit is a eucharistic spirit. The Sunday liturgy and our efforts to discern the signs of our times provide the basic material with which Christian life is built. This implies some sort of organic unity in our lives, a wholeness, so that our daily existence can be shaped by our faith, especially by its liturgical expression. Eucharistic rhythms reveal the rhythms of Christian life.

Granted, this is easier said than done. It is not a simple thing to become versed in the language of our worship. Many liturgies suffer from symbolic minimalism and shoddy practice. Further, because we do not yet have a truly vernacular liturgy, the elements that go into making up our present rites do not always combine to engage our senses and imagination, indeed the whole of our being, as they should. Consequently, few develop a truly eucharistic spirituality.

The Catholic Imagination

A lot can still be happening on the subliminal level, however. As mentioned earlier, Catholics are said to be a sacramental people. Some feel we carry the sacramental principle to an extreme. Yet, there is such a thing as the Catholic imagination. We are prone to seeing created realities as being able to speak to us of God. We use bread and wine, people gathering for a common meal, oil and water, statues, and rosaries as ways of expressing our belief that God can and does touch the common clay of our daily lives to invest them with the presence of the divine.

This implies a unique way of looking at life and reality. We might note that there are two basic ways of looking at the world. We can see it as being either fundamentally good or as something basically evil.

Those who are more impressed by the injustice and the pain, the sin and the sorrow of life, are faced with a universe that seems essentially corrupt. They see the world as a somewhat God-forsaken place, antagonistic to true life in the Spirit. Redemption then becomes a problem. Seemingly, no matter what Jesus was able to accomplish personally, nothing has really changed for us. The world is still evil, we are still depraved, and the Holy Spirit has a mighty struggle to get us to cooperate with God's grace.

We might characterize this as the radical Protestant position. It expresses a strong realization of the reality of sin and its consequences, realities that mar the beauty of God's creation and render it a temptation on life's road. There are innumerable practical consequences of this attitude. Protestant churches, for example, in their emphasis on the word of God, tended to reject the material—what they called “the smells and bells of Catholicism.” They had no statues, and little ornamentation. In comparison to Catholic churches, theirs reflected a more sober austerity.

The Catholic instinct, however, is otherwise. The Catholic intuition is to take the creation stories of Genesis rather literally, not so much as an account of actual events, but in the realization that after each of the days of creation, God was able to look back with pride on his work and say that it was good. Everything in the world up to and including Adam's ability to look at the naked Eve and thank God that she was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh was, and is, good.

This complicates accounting for the evil that is also an obvious part of our world. But this is seen as the fault of humankind itself, not of the God who is present to his creatures and who reveals himself in and through the created world. All of creation can therefore still speak to us of God. Thus was St. Francis brought closer to God by Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The work of redemption wrought by Christ is, in the Catholic mind, something intrinsic. By making us his children, God has changed us, ennobled us, filled us with his Spirit.

This is why, for Catholics, the world can in a very real sense be a sacrament of God. It continues in so many ways to speak of God's goodness and love, as well as his compassion and concern for his creation. And so we are a sacramental people; we continue to use ornamentation, incense and holy water, vestments and ceremony, and to

have churches that are adorned with stained glass and images of the saints. As a people, we see ourselves as deprived rather than depraved, and we tend to focus more on community, are less individualistic in religious practice, and can enjoy the laughter and good red wine for which Hilaire Belloc praised God.

This sacramental sense is not always adverted to. But it is there nonetheless. If it were to become more conscious, however, perhaps we might find it easier to integrate our life and our worship. We could in this way develop a more holistic spirituality. It is the hope of this book that stressing and coming to appreciate the basic rhythms that characterize our ritual should enable us to dance better to these same rhythms. This means looking afresh at our lives and asking in what way they might more clearly reflect the underlying rhythms of the Eucharist.

The Rhythms of the Liturgy

The approach taken here may appear a bit simplistic to some. For the sake of the presentation we seemingly ignore or pass over the wealth of the entire liturgy to focus only on its component parts. This need not be the case. In speaking of the introductory rites in terms of the gathering rhythm, for example, we do not mean to imply that this community dimension is found or expressed nowhere else. Likewise, when stressing how God's word forms and challenges the people who hear it, there is no need to assume that this is limited only to the liturgy of the word. God's word is most active during the eucharistic prayer.

Our highlighting of the various parts of the rite are intended to isolate the basic rhythms that characterize them as well as the entire liturgy. It is hoped that this will enable us to get a better feel for the liturgy itself, for the recurring rhythms of the life it offers us. This will allow us to examine our relationships, our involvements, to see how they might more clearly attest to the underlying beat of our prayer and praise.

Thus, what we will be examining here goes beyond specific practices or programs of spirituality to focus on a way of thinking—a way of thinking that should inform our entire lives. Our various styles of life will continue to be different, just as the circumstances that surround us are different. Through it all, the Holy Spirit, who gives us many gifts, is thereby calling us to life and inviting us each to the dance.

The eucharistic celebration has five rhythms, each of which is intrinsic to the liturgy. The first is the *gathering* rhythm. Before anything begins, the liturgy is the story of God gathering people together from every race and nation. The Christian community is one where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, but where all are one in Christ Jesus. This community or social dimension is not only an aspect of our worship, it is a characteristic of Christianity itself. As Tertullian said almost two thousand years ago, *unus Christianus, nullus Christianus* (a solitary Christian is no Christian at all).

Then there is the *storytelling* rhythm. Someone once reduced the liturgical rhythms to four: gather the folks, tell the stories, share the food, send them home. This seems a bit reductionist. Yet there is no doubt that we are people of the story, not simply people who love to hear stories, but people whose whole self-understanding is based on the story of God's own self-revelation to us in the Scriptures. The Christian myth is basic to our appreciation of who we are and what God wants us to be.

The third rhythm is the *prophetic* one. Though some might prefer to see this as part of the storytelling rhythm, it seems preferable to highlight this aspect of God's word because it is too often neglected. God's word is not meant merely to inform or to console. It is meant to stir us to dance God's dance, not our own. An important element in the liturgy of the word is the ever-present challenge to get the world in which we live to dance God's dance as well. God never intended for us to be changed by the world in which we live, but rather to change that world so that people might dwell in a place stamped with more of the marks of the kingdom.

The fourth is the *nurturing* rhythm. We can well associate this especially with the communion rite. The one thing we should always remember here is that God feeds us only that we might have something with which to feed one another. The church itself is meant to be a nurturing community. In any community, where all are brothers and sisters, the needs of one are the concern of all.

The final and most neglected rhythm may well be the *missioning* rhythm. The proper function of our worship is to form our lives so that we might go forth and be witnesses in the world of God's action

in our lives. The entire church is missioned to bring the good news of Christ to the world. The image of the world that we get in the Book of Revelation is one where all of creation is dancing the cosmic dance of God. It is the task of Christians to help bring this about and to realize that the most important element of Christianity is not saving one's soul as much as finding our salvation by saving the souls of others, allowing God to use us to teach the world his dance.

It should be evident that we are not fostering a concrete way of life as much as a way of thinking and looking at life itself—learning the very dance of God. This will enable us to translate the values and ideals of Jesus concretely in different historical circumstances. The rhythms of Christ's dance embrace everything that we are and have. They indicate to us the concrete spirituality that should be ours in any given time and place. They make it possible for us, after the injunction of St. Paul, to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1–2).

According to Paul, this will occur only when we are no longer conformed to the spirit of this age, but have discerned what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. This will not happen all at once. If we pattern our life's journey after the liturgy of the church, however, we will become transformed slowly into the fullness of Christ and be enabled to offer perfect worship to God. This type of spiritual worship is possible only when we are dancing to the rhythms that the Spirit of God herself dances and hopes that each of us will follow.

Points for Reflection

1. What practical difference does it make to think of sacraments as actions, rather than things?
2. How does the reality of our lives affect the sacraments we celebrate? Can our celebration of the Eucharist ever be totally without effect? Why?
3. Give examples of sacramentality in your life. Can you give any examples of a typically "Catholic" sacramental view of the world?
4. How would you describe your understanding of the Mass now? What would you consider its key parts? Is your answer based on what you've been told, or on what you've experienced yourself?