

# Liturgy for life: The political meaning of worship

by [William F. May](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

In exploring the minister's public obligations, it would seem sensible to bypass the activity of worship and concentrate on the minister's social service, on the grounds that the latter bears most directly on politics. Politics seems far removed from the liturgical. Politics defines the world of means subordinate to ends, of instrumental complexes, of conflict, disputation and strife. In contrast, worship refers to an action which is an end in itself; it offers, at best, some measure of respite from those political conflicts that threaten to tear a society apart.

Put even more forcefully, do we not run the risk of corrupting worship if we begin with the political implications of the liturgy? Men and women worship God because God is. They corrupt worship if they bend worship to some other goal: peace of mind, career advancement, family unity, better health, moral improvement or political cause. Some such secondary goods may follow from worship, but if these become the aim and purpose of worship, the worshiper instrumentalizes God to other ends, thus diminishing God to what God is not, the great slot machine in the sky. Joseph Pieper says: "To celebrate a festival means to do something which is in no way tied up to other goals; [it] has been removed from all 'so that' and 'in order to.' True festivity cannot be imagined as residing anywhere but in the realm of activity that is meaningful in itself" (*In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*).

While one corrupts worship if one reduces it to the "so that" and the "in order to" of politics (or to the goals of the marketplace or psychic health), secondary implications, including the political, do flow from worship. The Catholic moralist Dietrich von Hildebrand sketched in *Liturgy and Personality* a portrait of the liturgically formed person, the person who takes the liturgy seriously, who does not corrupt it for reasons of self-improvement, self-advancement or any other secondary gains, yet who reflects secondarily the shaping power of the liturgy on character. Similarly, one may ask what liturgically formed citizens might look like, that is, citizens who take seriously the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism and the

ordinary prayers of the church as an influence on their interactions in the polis, even though they do not exploit worship for political goals. (Protestants need to learn here from other faith traditions. Whereas the Protestant usually asks, “What is the scripturally formed person like?,” the Catholic (and Eastern Orthodox) believer asks, “What is the liturgically formed person like?”)

*The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.* In a pluralistic country, this sacrament cannot directly provide the basis for societal unity. To impose the sacrament on others would convert it into what it cannot be and still be itself: an intrusive creed that divides. But Christian congregations must take the eucharistic vision seriously in fulfilling their responsibilities as a public within a public at large.

This central act of Christian worship reenacts the meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his imminent and violent death. Even that meal in its human details did not offer a respite from the violence to follow. The disciples squabbled over which of them was the greatest; but Jesus undercut their game of king of the mountain by reversing the world’s understanding of royalty. “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them. . . . But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. . . . I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:24-27).

In the course of the meal, Jesus rebuked Judas, who would betray him, and Peter, who, despite his grandiloquent profession of loyalty, would deny him. Yet, at this same meal, Jesus took bread and wine and distributed them to his errant, defecting disciples. He would proceed thereafter to fulfill his own indefectible purpose—despite outright betrayal, the apathy of disciples in Gethsemane, the shiftiness of political leaders, the fickleness of crowds, and the violence and isolation of the death which he knew would follow. Subsequent generations of Christians, repeating his words, take bread and wine as their way of “making present” (*anamnesis*) his self-expending and nourishing love.

In its sheer violence, Jesus’ death resembles the liturgies of violence endlessly repeated in the modern media, but points in the opposite direction. It arouses awed love rather than fear, creates community rather than isolated onlookers; it invites people to join and share, not to watch alone at a distance through satellite TV. The reenactment of the Eucharist would reclaim the sorry past, but in mercy rather than vengeance; transform the future without deforming the present; and extend charity outward to the needy, the stranger and the enemy, while it presses judgment and

mercy inward to that dark corner where self-pity and malice fester. This event impels Christians both to come together and to go out to others in self-expending love.

Participation in this event is an end in itself; it transcends the political. But the “making present” of the Eucharist does not withdraw celebrants from the rough terrain of the political; it brings to the surface those conflicts with which the political order must cope. The sacrament acknowledges those threats to life to which the dark pessimism of Hobbes and the social contract theorists testified. However, it also states that the deepest taproot of community among us is not a *Summum Malum* that forces fearful, self-interested men and women into the social contract but a *Summum Bonum* that breaks and limits the hold of fear upon us and invites us into the covenant of undaunted, self-expending love.

In a sense, modern-day terrorism represents a liturgical reaction to the social-contract theory of the state. Terrorists intuit that the modern social contract relies heavily upon the power of fear to hold things together. But fearful self-interest that draws people together can quickly drive them apart. In wielding violence, terrorists trigger the disintegrative power of fearful self-interest. In receiving (and accepting into one’s own life) the Savior who lays down his life for others, the Eucharist offers the social order the leavening power of self-donative love.

The prominence of the terrorist’s cult of blood from the ’70s onward exposes at once the insatiable hunger of modern people for the liturgical and the deprivations of a politics that springs from a lack of liturgical substance. The ritual of terrorism parodies the sacrament of the Eucharist. Luther called the Christian sacrament the enacted word; the modern terrorist substitutes the propaganda of deed. The Christian rite remembers a figure who serves at once as high priest and sacrifice. The terrorist action distinguishes the high priest from his victims. However, if the terrorist holds his ground, he must be ready to die, if not for his victims, with them. His readiness to kill and die creates the power he exercises over the society that watches raptly on television.

Like the traditional act of worship, the terrorist’s attack goes beyond the ordinary limits of political means and ends. Politically, the deed often seems counterproductive, self-destructive and irrational. It doesn’t seem to make any sense as a means directed to an end. As John Hume, a Catholic member of Parliament, long ago complained about terrorism in Northern Ireland, “The Provos

bombed themselves to the conference table and they bombed themselves away again.” The action is ecstatic in the sense that it stands outside the causal nexus of means and ends; it juts out religiously as an end in itself. It does not look beyond itself to a further justification. Some terrorists express this ecstatic element mythically in their expectation that the martyr will be directly translated into heaven.

Terrorism offers a festival of death, a celebration that has its own priest and victims and that carries with it the risk that the priest himself will become a victim. Others concelebrate in this liturgical action through the medium of the media. Thus the media respond to the human thirst for ritual, the need for ecstasy, the desire to be lifted out of the daily round. Through violent death, their horror before it and their need to draw near it, the event relieves liturgically bereft men and women of that other death, boredom; and it momentarily strips the state, founded in self-interest, of its protective power.

*The Sacrament of Infant Baptism.* The folksy domestic sentiment with which we surround the sacrament of baptism obscures its daring as a public rite. This sacrament acknowledges, on principle, that the church welcomes the disconcertingly strange, the future in all its squirming uncertainty, into its life. The sacrament asks parents to relax their obsessive hold on their child. It invites those most inclined to deal myopically with the infant, most tempted to seek its good at the expense of others and to crush it to the bosom in apprehensive love, to hand over their child into the hands of another. Baptism asks parents to see their child at a disquieting, yet quieting, distance; that is, to accept it as a child of God. Taken seriously, the rite requires parents to prepare their child for something more than a domestic significance and to free the child for a public identity beyond their final reach and control.

*The Prayers of Invocation and Adoration.* These prayers at the outset of worship distinguish the Ruler of the Universe from those principalities and powers that normally lure the human heart and command allegiance. The prayers of adoration block idolatry; they leave no doubt as to the status of the government and, indeed, all political causes: humanly important, but not ultimate. The citizen cannot pray to an eternal God and take a temporary state too seriously. God has allowed the state for both the good that it can do and the evil that it can prevent, but, in the setting of adoration:

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales. . . . All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

Yet, this metaphysical/religious vision should not end in political detachment. As it strips political leaders and activists of vanity and illusion, it should also free them to wield power under God and in the service of God's creatures. The prayers of adoration help let the air out of inflationary political rhetoric; and thus they ought to reduce the violence and divisiveness which that rhetoric tends to inspire.

*Intercessory Prayer.* Usually these prayers, whether in worship or personal devotions, include petitions for four overlapping groups of people: intimates and friends, public authorities, enemies and the needy. At first glance, prayers for family and friends would seem to contradict the meaning of public life. They seem to presuppose a kind of deity of the hearth. They ask God to extend the parents' loving and partial hand. The suppliant asks God to treat those in the circle of intimacy preferentially, to act like a legislature that passes a private bill or like a president who occasionally suspends general laws to intervene in a special case.

The suppliant should pray for those she loves. But the Lord's Prayer qualifies such intercessions and subjects them to the Son's petition: "nevertheless not my will but thine be done." Intercession forces supplicants to take those nearest and dearest, the beleaguered objects of their worry, and to see them at a distance and in a strange light, and to recognize that their ultimate well-being does not depend upon their own efforts to contrive their good. Intercession, so understood, moves those one loves from a private closet into the open air; it ought to continue what baptism began as it releases those one loves into a more spacious life.

The church also offers intercessory prayers for public authorities, both ecclesiastical and political. At a minimum this particular prayer reminds worshipers that prayer cannot simply dwell on the turmoil of private life. The church's prayers and its actions must also extend to queens and presidents, bishops and vicars, deans and sheriffs, garbage collectors and safety inspectors, and all others who bear the burden of office. The petition for political leaders in one of the Protestant orders of worship reads: "Mighty God, Lord of the nations, govern those who govern us, your servant . . . President of the United States, and those who share the public trust in every land." Usually Christians who are Democrats—give or take a few scandals—pray that prayer more easily when a Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy,

Johnson, Carter or Clinton occupies the White House. Christians who are Republicans find it easier to utter the president's name when an Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan or Bush occupies the oval office. Praying ungrudgingly for Caesar depends a little on who wears Caesar's toga. What should we make of a prayer that asks people to bring one of those sulphurous political names to their lips? At a minimum, such a prayer calls for something other than scorn for political leaders.

Intercessory prayer has a further public significance: it invites Christians to pray for their competitors and enemies. Psychologically, competitors usually preoccupy the petitioner as much as do friends and family. The very existence of competitors threatens; they can become an obsession. Supposed or real, his enemies make every man his own Kremlinologist. He ponders their every move, believes them subtle and malignant; they crowd him; he wishes them dead. Intercessory prayer forces Christians to look at their enemies in a new light, releasing them from the grip of suspicion, hatred and revenge, and to pray for their well-being. This relocation of his enemies in the public space of intercessory prayer also acknowledges that no world and space exists wholly free of competitors. As Freud rightly taught, it takes only three parties—a man, a woman and a child—to create the conditions for enmity in the world, and the introduction of a fourth, as scripture tells us, raises Cain. As Martin Luther King Jr. taught, praying for one's enemies need not lead to a quiescent politics; such praying reminds us that one may contend sharply with the unjust enemy yet still leave him some room to turn around. (Martin Luther King Jr. insisted in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that nonviolent resistance should both begin and end with the effort to negotiate, a process which requires concession on both sides.)

Finally, intercessory prayer pulls back into public consciousness those people whom we ordinarily hide in the outer edge of the fire light—the lame, the halt, the blind, the sick, the poor and the captive. We fix focus on our friends and enemies; we hide the needy from sight. We bury them prematurely. We herd the sick, the deviant, the defective, the aged and the delinquent into isolated institutions and hire professionals to manage them, a strategy that frees the rest of us to attend to our own interests. Prison inmates become "forgotten men." When we ignore the needy and consign the inmate to oblivion, we shrink and depopulate the public realm. We reduce the number of those who can be seen and heard, can make their wants known, and can participate in public debate. Intercessory prayer for "all sorts and conditions" of men and women requires us to bring them from the margins back to

the center of our consciousness to attend to their well-being.

*The Prayers of Confession.* Their placement in the worship service before intercessory prayer offers a clue as to why we neglect the needy. Neglect does not usually spring from the fact that we are too smug, too complacent, or too engrossed in our own riches to bother with the bereft. If we examine our excuses for neglect, including our reasons for institutionalization, we discover not so much smugness but anxiety, not complacency but a sense of harassment, not riches but a feeling of bankruptcy. The question "What can I do?" often means, in despair, "I have nothing for the real needs of another because I cannot satisfy my own. How could I help him? Better to avoid him. To have to face him would be too depressing. He would remind me of my own emptiness."

Not all expediency in our treatment of the distressed derives from gross callousness; usually, we are simply too busy obscuring from view our own poverty. We consign to oblivion the maimed, the disfigured and the decrepit because we have already condemned to oblivion a portion of ourselves. To address them in their needs would require us to confess to God our own needs. But we do not want to accept the depths of our own neediness. The needy, hidden away, threaten us because of what we have already desperately hidden away from ourselves. For some such reason, we prefer, even at great expense, to have the needy hidden from sight. And what better way to cover them with shadows and to obscure our own neediness than to put them in the hands of professionals who know how to make a great show of strength, experience and competence in handling a given subdivision of the distressed? Thus we convert the exigent into occasions in and through which the community exhibits its precedence and power.

What have these strategies of neglect got to do with the prayers of confession? The French commentator Michel Foucault offers a clue. He observes in *Madness and Civilization* that medieval society, except for its treatment of lepers (and religious minorities), tended, less than ours, to incarcerate its own members for deviancy. But by the 17th and 18th centuries, society imprisoned the idle, the poor, the insane and the criminal without distinction in the former houses of leprosy. Foucault believes that the religious ritual of confession helped shape the medieval attitude toward deviancy. Prayers of confession openly acknowledge human imperfection; they thereby imply some confidence that we can meet evil in the open without its engulfing those who pray. But after the 17th century, Western society felt increasingly "ashamed in the presence of the inhuman." It assumed that one could

handle evil only by banishing it. An age that aspires to total autonomy finds it more difficult to acknowledge in the mainstream of its life the dependent, the defective and the irrational. They remind us of a negativity so threatening and absolute that the society can deal with them only by hiding from them, by putting them out of sight.

Confession, by inviting a person to acknowledge evil and fault in himself, allows him to see and address the distress of others. Confession makes intercession possible. The faith that shapes the Eucharist and its prayers of confession and intercession assumes that the negative is real but not ultimate. The quarrels and the defections of first generation disciples, the sins of disciples in our own generation, and the defects and delinquencies of the race at large are grave indeed but not so grave as to engulf us all.

*The Prayers of Thanksgiving* impel the church toward giving—toward its service function—but differently motivated than philanthropic giving. The ideal of philanthropy (which informs much of the giving of voluntary communities, conscientious professionals, and corporations with a conscience) commends a love of humankind that issues in concrete deeds of service to others. However, the ideal of philanthropy tends to divide the human race in two: relatively self-sufficient benefactors and needy beneficiaries. It presupposes a unilateral or one-way transfer from giver to receiver. This assumption of asymmetry dominates not only private charity, professional pro bono work and corporate philanthropy, but also the conventional self-interpretation of America as philanthropist among the nations and the American church as patron to the churches in the Third World.

This idealist's picture of a social world divided into givers and receivers, while morally superior to a callous neglect of the needy, overlooks the fact that the benefactor receives as well as gives. Scripture and the prayers of thanksgiving provide powerful warrants for giving but always within the setting of a primordial receiving. The scriptures of Israel urge the Jewish farmer, in harvesting, not to pick his crops too clean. He should leave some for the sojourner, for he was once a sojourner in Egypt. Thus God's own actions, his care for Israel while a stranger in Egypt, prompts and measures Israel's treatment of the stranger in its midst. The imperative to give rests upon the narrative account of a gift already received. Thus the moral/legal element in scripture (the *halacha*) rests upon a narrative base (the *agada*). Similarly, the New Testament reads, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us. . . . Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love



one another” (1 John 4:10,11). The imperative derives from the revelatory event of the divine love.

These passages push the believer toward a different notion of love from the philosopher’s principle of beneficence. Benevolence is self-derived. The rational principle of beneficence presupposes the structural relationship of benefactor to beneficiary, of giver to receiver. These sacred narratives reposition the benefactor; they open up a revelatory horizon against which the potential benefactor can discover herself to be a beneficiary. Her petty benefactions merely acknowledge love already received beyond her deserving.