

*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi:*

**The Communion of Faith in the Life of the Church**

A particular event stands out in my mind suggesting how rich the deposit of faith which the Catholic Church possesses is, meriting the respect even of those who do not profess the fullness of the faith. It occurred at a meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association in August 1985; the context was the opening comments of the association's new president, Dr. Paul Achtemeier, the first non-Catholic to hold this office. The comment does not appear in the published text of his talk, but it impressed me deeply. Dr. Achtemeier spoke about the abiding value of the Catholic Church's deposit of faith and tradition in that it provides necessary boundaries and guidelines for interpreting the texts of Sacred Scripture. Without these boundaries, external as it were to the texts themselves, the texts of Sacred Scripture might be read in ways that divide people in their basic beliefs as members of a worshipping community in which the Scriptures are proclaimed and interpreted. Dr. Achtemeier was not suggesting that observing these boundaries means that there is only one way of correctly interpreting a particular text. But rather, the ways in which the basic meaning of a sacred text can be enriched within the deposit of faith that the Church holds from its earliest times are plentiful. It was a dramatic moment in which a member of another Christian denomination reminded a group of Catholic biblical scholars of the vibrancy of the Catholic Church's longstanding tradition, a tradition by which guidelines are established and inspiration provided for the interpretation of the Scriptures by the faithful and their pastors.

My recollection of this event may serve as a way for us to consider our topic of a particular teaching in the Catholic Church, the origins of which can be traced to the fifth century. This teaching is embodied in the Latin expression *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Consideration of the origin and development of the phrase itself will help us to appreciate the growth and progress of its meaning. The phrase expresses the idea that those texts we recite when we "pray" are fundamental expressions of our "faith" and "beliefs." These words are not merely convenient modes of advancing the liturgical action, placed by the Church in the liturgy to give form to our immediate intentions of worship. They do of

course achieve that purpose, but their meaning extends far beyond their immediate use. These words are taken from and express the faith of the Church; when they are prayed, they become formative, instructive, and foundational for our life of faith. The words we hear and speak when we pray in the liturgy also have the effect of forming our belief, enabling us to understand better the faith that Christ gives us through the Church. Recited again and again, these words obtain both place and meaning in the mind and the heart of the believer.

The oft-cited source of this expression is Prosper of Aquitaine (390-455), a disciple of the great St. Augustine of Hippo.<sup>1</sup> Prosper wrote, *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (the law of prayer corroborates/authenticates/establishes the law of belief). Though Prosper's words articulate this idea succinctly and clearly, scholars assert that the meaning was understood by earlier theologians, including Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen, Cyprian, Jerome and Augustine. We see this exemplified in the catechetical teaching of these earlier theologians on the rites of the liturgy and their biblical texts. These Church Fathers explained and interpreted the texts of the liturgy and sacraments, noting the importance of a clear understanding of the words for the spiritual well-being of those who participate in the liturgy. Thus we see in these catecheses how the early Church considered the liturgy, in both its texts and its rituals, as a way of placing before the faithful the essentials of belief that pertain to membership in the Christian body of the Church. Monsignor Irwin makes an important point in describing the meaning of *lex* in this particular context. Our present understanding of *lex* is often limited simply to "law"; but here it includes the foundations, principles, origins, and sources upon which belief is constructed, and thus comes to have significant impact on the life of the person of faith.<sup>2</sup> The celebration of the liturgy was the place where faith was both enacted and taught, given to the participants and kept alive for them. We tend to think of "law" as a code of conduct calling for strict observance and enforcement, relating to the legal and law enforcement professions. But *lex* in this context is more fully understood as that which makes it possible for someone to be drawn into a state of thinking and acting that carries with it a character of mystery, an unfolding of the depth of meaning and understanding, a spring of inspiration. Formation of the heart and mind takes place in the experience and prayer of the liturgy. Our engagement in worship brings us into dialogue with God; it

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<sup>1</sup> To a large extent, the historical material related to this topic is found in a fuller and more complete expression in two fine books by Monsignor Kevin Irwin of The Catholic University of America: *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology – Revised Edition* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2018) 8-17; *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (New York: Paulist Press) 170-199.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin, *Sacraments*, 170.

establishes and affirms a true relationship with Christ; in the liturgical assembly, we are joined together as members of the Body of Christ in the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Conscious and active participation in the liturgy profoundly forms us in faith by the grace of the risen Christ.

On the basis of this understanding, we can see why the Church has been so very careful and prudent through the centuries in the choices of its texts for the liturgy. We hear of the various Missals, sacramentaries and lectionaries that developed through time. The Church responded to the needs of the times, always keeping at the forefront the tradition and faith which the earliest texts of the Christian preserved and taught. The renewal of the Second Vatican Council sought to retain this same spirit in its document on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In the opening paragraphs of SC, the text reiterates the idea that "in faithful obedience to the tradition [...] [the rites] may be given new vigor to meet the circumstances and needs of modern times."<sup>4</sup> Thus the Church continues to form the hearts of believers through the celebration of its rituals, sacraments, and liturgical actions. Changes in such matters, it must be understood, are not arbitrary, but rather founded on both faith and tradition, respectful of the liturgy's mystery, and advantageous for the people of a particular time in history.<sup>5</sup> We know that both faith and tradition continue to develop and grow through time. So we must recognize that what is passed down through the ages to us is not merely a set of laws, but a living tradition, continuous through the centuries, always reforming itself in and from the faith it professes. This is how we can understand *lex orandi, lex credendi* as being an essential element always underlying the renewal and the celebration of the liturgy.

To make this understanding of *lex orandi, lex credendi* both practical and applicable to the work of catechists and teachers, we would like to divide this presentation now into three sections: first, a consideration of the ritual of Baptism; second, a look at the structure of the Eucharistic Prayer; and third, an emphasis of where *lex orandi, lex credendi* leads in the lives of the Church's members. These three topics are not intended to be either exhaustive of what can be said about each of them, or comprehensive of other areas of importance for understanding *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Rather, these three points will offer a way to consider the vast arena of the Church's liturgical life which continues to form and

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<sup>3</sup> Rick Hilgartner, "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: The Word of God in the celebration of the Sacraments." *Catechetical Sunday, September 20, 2009* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009)

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<sup>4</sup> SC, par. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1125.

evangelize its members in ways that speak with clarity and influence for the growth of faith in the lives of those who make up the Church, the Body of Christ.

## 1. Baptism

We cannot stress enough how the rituals within the liturgy are connected to the understanding of *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The actions, the rituals, and the symbolic gestures are all crucial elements of the "prayer" that goes on in the sacramental rites. Too often, we think of prayer simply in terms of "words," forgetting or failing to see how the many gestures present in the rites are essential to community prayer. Such gestures and symbols are especially strong in the celebration of Baptism, particularly in its reformed rituals.

At the close of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (28:19-20a). These commands of Jesus make it clear that baptism serves to make new disciples who will carry forth both Christ's commands and the gift of God's salvation; and this is to be accomplished in a straightforward manner – by the invocation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This very formula of invoking the three members of the Holy Trinity becomes an essential element of the rite. By means of the ritual prayer the baptized person now carries within them the divine presence; we believe that by this means God dwells within this person in the living presence of the Holy Spirit. The prayer, invoking the three persons of the Trinity, instills belief in the Godhead who calls this individual to make a conscious decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The ritual action of meeting the one to be baptized at the door of the Church embodies not only entrance into a building meant for prayer and worship, but more especially it symbolizes entrance into a believing community, the members of which gather in this sacred place. Throughout the course of the Church's history, back even to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, we see how God has brought salvation and deliverance to people of faith within the context of *community*. The exodus from Egypt, the return of the Hebrew people from Babylon, the command of Jesus to make disciples throughout the world – all of these narratives speak of God's plan of salvation offered for and within the community, within the Church. Thus the ritual action instructs us that this ceremony constitutes a person's incorporation into a body of believers who will support, encourage, and enliven faith in the newly baptized.

Three symbols stand out in the ritual celebration of a Baptism: light, water and oil. When a candle is lit from the paschal candle and given to the candidate – or in the case of infant baptism, to the parents or sponsors of the one being baptized – here the faith of the parents is highlighted. Whoever receives the candle is obliged to pass on the light of faith, to keep this "light of faith" burning brightly. Taking the light from the paschal candle symbolizes how the light of faith draws both the parent (or the sponsor) and the one being baptized into the paschal mystery of Christ. Christian life itself is built upon this understanding that we are sharers in the paschal character of Christ's life. Through our sharing in the paschal mystery, through our death to self, we will walk the path to eternal life. This prayerful gesture implants and fosters in us the belief that our lives have been claimed by Christ; our suffering, like Christ's, is redemptive. This experience entails, we know, a life-long unfolding of the mystery of Christ in each baptized person.

Anthropologists remind us that water is a symbol of both life and of death. In the sacrament of Baptism, immersion in water signifies death to sin and rising to new life. St. Paul affirms that "We were buried with [Christ] into his death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). The water here represents a tomb, like the one in which Jesus lay after his death; but rising from the waters symbolizes exit from the tomb, coming out into new life in imitation of Christ's resurrection. Likewise, we recognize that water is a basic symbol of life, and the Church thus uses water to remind us of what we believe Baptism to be for the Christian: the way to life through the paschal mystery. On a profound level, water is an essential element of life; without it, we die. The ritual finally reminds us that water is a cleansing and purifying element in our everyday world. The waters of Baptism cleanse us of sin and thus make us true children of God.

Lastly, the use of oil has long been recognized as a sign of strengthening. Athletes were anointed with oil before entering into competition, warriors before entering into battle. In the sacrament of Baptism, the anointing of the one being baptized is not merely a symbolic action, but a true strengthening of the individual for the challenges to be faced in Christian life. The oil symbolizes the strength needed for combat against the "lures and empty promises" employed by the forces of the devil. In combination, all of these meanings, present in the words and actions of the ritual, foster in the believers the understanding that Baptism incorporates a person into the life of Jesus Christ and inaugurates the Christian life. These symbols and rituals give the sacrament its paschal character; they teach and form us in the belief of God's salvific presence and action in our life, and of our need to respond in faith to what is offered us.

## 2. The Eucharistic Celebration

In our consideration of Baptism, we focused on the ritual actions and symbols which, as gestures accompanied by prayers, foster our belief that the newly baptized has been incorporated into the paschal life of Christ and established in the community of the faithful. In considering the Eucharist, we will focus specifically on the Eucharistic Prayer, beginning with the Preface and concluding with the Great Amen.

Eucharistic Prayer II is a brief text dating back to the time of Hippolytus (170-235). It contains the essential elements of the *Prex Eucharistica*, presenting in broad strokes the mystery of salvation as celebrated in the Mass. The opening words of the Preface, repeated often among the various other Prefaces, touch on the heart of what the Eucharistic Prayer, and the whole of Eucharist, bespeaks: thanksgiving. "It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere *to give you thanks, Father most holy, through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, your Word through whom you made all things, whom you sent as our Savior and Redeemer, incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin.*" In this text we encounter the chief elements of our belief as Catholic Christians: The three Persons of the Trinity; the creation of the world by the Word (as expound in the Gospel of John); the mystery of the Incarnation, God's taking on of human flesh; and the birth of Jesus Christ of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. We find there also the principal formulary of Christian prayer: to the Father, through Christ. The hearing of these words again and again instills within us an enduring sense of the great mystery of salvation into which we are incorporated as Christians as we participate in this great act of the Church's thanksgiving to God for the gift of our redemption.

The text moves on to address the mystery of redemption through Jesus Christ in a variety of ways, all of which touch on the fulfilling of the divine will and thus gaining for the Father a holy people. The next elements of the text evoke the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, expressing the ancient tradition of what constitutes the paschal mystery. There is indeed some danger that our appreciation may be dulled simply from hearing the text so frequently; and yet it unfolds the tremendous fact of our salvation and redemption through Christ. But there also lies its importance: the Preface serves to open each Eucharistic prayer with this essential expression of what we are doing – giving profound thanks for the astonishing gift of our redemption.

In the Scriptures, the word "holy" refers to that which is entirely other, what is in a sense other-worldly, something or someone with the status of being set apart. In the prophet Isaiah's experience of God in the temple, the seraphim call out, "holy, holy, holy."

The triple repetition emulates the Hebrew mode of expressing the superlative. Thus in the hymn after the Preface we become aware of and give expression to our affirmation of God's greatness, manifest in the gift of redemption celebrated in these mysteries. Following the hymn, the text of the Eucharistic prayer again iterates this triple "holy," drawing us into the divine action of the all-Holy One who sends the Holy Spirit to re-make the simple gifts of bread and wine as the Body and Blood of the risen Christ, the life-giving presence of our Redeemer. We are further impressed in the words of the rite with the importance of the term "holy": "You are indeed *Holy*, O Lord, the fount of all *holiness*. Make *holy*, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending your Spirit upon them." The text goes on to specify, "so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." The prayer that the priest proclaims expresses for us that supremely important object of faith: the gift of the Body and Blood of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, as food for a pilgrim people. Our belief in this mystery of transformative grace is clearly demonstrated in the emphatic dual expression of its holiness – the hymn and the words that follow. Here *lex orandi, lex credendi* is of utmost importance, underlying and supporting the very heartbeat of the reciprocal nature of the Eucharist. We give thanks again and again because of God's abundant outpouring of salvific gifts, most profoundly represented in the offering to us of His Son in the Eucharist.

The prayer/invocation of the Spirit upon these gifts also brings forward another mystery of our belief: this same Holy Spirit that transforms the gifts also continues to bring about the transformation of our lives, represented in our simple offering of bread and wine. By our Baptism, the Holy Spirit resides within us, prompting us in the ways of God's commands and the precepts of the Gospel. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we enter into a world that is infinitely more expansive and capacious than the world contained by our earthly existence. Heaven itself comes to us in the Eucharist by the invocation of the Holy Spirit: we are drawn into the realm of grace, and this experience calls forth and forms in us the belief that here, in these sacred mysteries, heaven and earth are joined. We participate on earth in something that is heavenly, otherworldly; and all this comes to pass as God's gracious gift to us.

At the moment of consecration, the words of institution, which explicitly recall the events of the Last Supper, tell us of God's gift – my Body which will be given up for you. We also hear in these words what the effects are that come about through the self-offering of Jesus Christ – the forgiveness of our sins. The saving death of Christ has sealed an eternal covenant with God, once and for all, for the reconciliation of heaven and earth. These words, taken from the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, become important for understanding how reconciliation takes place through the celebration of the Eucharistic

mysteries. It is not understood to be a substitution for the sacrament of Reconciliation, yet the Council of Trent reminds us that the Eucharist itself is a sacrament of reconciliation. We are cleansed and purified by the saving words and action of the Mass, and our very faith in the efficacy of what we do is strengthened. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* describes the cycle by which we are continually drawn ever more deeply into the meaning of the sacrament we celebrate.

Present in all the Eucharist Prayers is the "remembrance" (*anamnesis*). These words recall the death and resurrection (and often the ascension) of Christ as our means of fulfilling Christ's command to "do this in memory of me." This short prayer bears a special nuance as remembrance, carrying the believer into the "final time" or eschatological age: as we await the final coming of Christ, we have come into that sacred time in which we profess the belief that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. By remembrance of this key event in salvation history, believers enter into the paschal mystery, realizing that in following Christ, one's life becomes, like Christ's own life, an oblation, an offering, a surrendering of one's will to the Father.

The rite soon brings us to the "intercessions" which remember the earthly Church and its leaders, and those who have passed beyond earthly existence through the portals of death. The *lex orandi, lex credendi* here is linked to the words of the Nicene Creed that affirm belief in eternal life ("the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come). Intercessory prayer, an element of great antiquity in Judeo-Christian tradition, has a place of significance in the Eucharistic prayer and thus takes on an important role in the life of every believer.

The Eucharistic Prayer concludes with the great doxology: the entire prayer, from beginning to end, is addressed to the Father and made by the Church through the intercession of the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. *Through, with, and in* Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, we offer glory and honor to the Father, the Source of all blessing. The importance of the form we give to our intercession – *through, with, and in* Christ – might be more clearly expressed in English. We pray, "through him, with him, and in him," and people sometimes ask, "who is the 'him' in this doxology?" The Italian of the missal is much more straightforward: *per Cristo, con Cristo, e in Cristo*. This great doxology acknowledges in a prayer of praise the Triune God; it calls forth an affirmation of belief in the great concluding "amen," which thus merits our full-throated assent.

So much more could be said about the instances of *lex orandi, lex credendi* that are present in the Eucharistic celebration. We have simply highlighted here some elements of



the Eucharistic Prayer that give shape to the profound experience of prayer and belief walking hand-in-hand.

### 3. Lex Vivendi

In the celebration of the Eucharist, the prayer we recite and hear proclaimed leads to belief in the God who, having saved us, calls us to follow his Son by imitation of the Son's words and deeds as presented in the Gospel. At the end of the Eucharist, we are commanded to go forth in the *Ite missa est*, to live what we have professed, to witness to our beliefs, and to express the discipleship first given in Baptism and renewed in each Eucharistic celebration. In the context of discussing *lex orandi, lex credendi*, it is essential that we not forget that the process leads to what we might call *lex vivendi* – living out the faith that we have both heard proclaimed and professed ourselves. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI articulates the essential links between the celebration of the Eucharist and the living witness expected of the faithful. "The Eucharist, as a mystery to be 'lived,' meets each of us as we are, and makes our concrete existence the place where we experience daily the radical newness of the Christian life. The eucharistic sacrifice nourishes and increases within us all that we have already received at Baptism, with its call to holiness, and this must be clearly evident from the way individual Christians live their lives."<sup>6</sup> There can be no divide between the way we believe and the way we live. This is evident in Jesus' condemnation of the leaders of his time who do not do what they profess (Matt 23:1-12; Mk 12:38-39; Lk 11:37-52).

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of consistency between prayer and worship united to a spirit of loving care and service to others. He writes, "Prayer is most precious, for it nourishes a daily commitment to love. Our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously, and allow God's gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters."<sup>7</sup> Both prayer and worship bring about results which build up the kingdom of God, increase moral sensitivity to the needs of others, and make us ready to serve wherever need arises, regardless of who those in need may be. The rituals and symbols, the prayers and invocations of sacramental encounter continually call the Christian to go beyond what is expected, to assist others with the love and compassion of

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis* (Roma: Editrice Vaticana, 2007) par. 79.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate* (Roma: Editrice Vaticana, 2018) par. 104.

Christ. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* has an essential counterpart in *lex vivendi*: our prayer and belief possesses give physical form to what we profess.

#### **4. Conclusion**

So much more might be said of how important a role *lex orandi, lex credendi* plays in the rich traditions of the Church's prayer, its life of faith, and its lived witness to the teaching of the Gospel. The sacraments, the liturgy of the hours, the recitation and praying of Psalms – all the Church's many rituals – all these are occasions for growth in a knowledge of what we as Catholic Christians believe, and as a result of that belief, must do. All these experiences of prayer and ritual invite us to grow in faith. And faith that is truly alive gives witness to its meaning and power in lives lived as ambassadors of Christ's Gospel, building up the Church, evangelizing by deeds and words, and demonstrating the love which distinguishes us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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