

Worship as Play and Participation: Voicing the Praise of Creation

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You are about to embark on the most useless discussion there is—the discussion of Christian worship.

Aristotle claimed that the supremely important activities are the most useless, because they exist precisely for their own sake and not for a greater external end. The worship of God is the most useless and supremely important thing we can do. And, therefore, studying Christian worship is a most critical educational endeavor.



Adoration is an intimate mouth-to-mouth relationship.

The mission of IWS is to form servant leaders in Christian worship renewal. What is Christian worship renewal? I submit to you that it is a call to right worship—“orthodoxy”—“right doxology”—“right *doxa*”—“right glory.” It is a call to right “worship,” right “adoration.” Adoration comes from the Latin word *adoratio*, which comes from two words, *ad ora*, which means “to the mouth of,” or “mouth to mouth.” Adoration is an intimate mouth-to-mouth relationship, which is the essence of right worship. The Song of Songs begins, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” The Great Tradition interpreted this as the song of the soul singing to God for union. Union with God through Jesus Christ is the aspiration of right worship. Celebrating the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ in the posture of adoration is the proper aim of right worship. Right worship leads to the rightly ordered or integrated life, the rightly ordered family, church, city, country, culture, even the rightly ordered cosmos. *If you want a primary key to reading the entire biblical narrative, this is it—God is calling his creation to right worship (over and over again).* God ultimately wants his people to worship him aright, not because he needs our praise, but because in that great act we become rightly aligned to God through Jesus Christ, the primary worshipper.

Worship, particularly the liturgy, gives an appropriate “orthodox” structure to our relationship with the Great I Am, who wants to enflame us with his love and his passion to set things right. When things are set right, the created order is re-Edenized, brought back to its original intent and order in the Garden of Eden.

Fellowship, word, table, mission, all elements of right worship, serve that end—the reconciliation, or Edenization, of the created order.

Liturgy is the participation of the people of God in the work of God.

What is liturgy? Liturgy is the anglicized version of the Greek word *leitourgia*, which is a public work or service, commonly referred to as “the work of the people.” In the Great Tradition, liturgy is the participation of the people of God in the work of God. Through the liturgy, Christ our redeemer and high priest continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through the Church. Through the liturgy, the three offices of Christ the Head are manifested in and through the Mystical Body of Christ: the priestly office, kingly office and prophetic office. The liturgy is priestly in its offering of Eucharist for the life of the world, kingly in inspiring concrete acts of charity, and prophetic in the proclamation and embodiment of the apostolic Gospel.

One of the seminal ideas from scripture and the Church Fathers is that humans were created to offer right praise to God. The Garden of Eden was centered on right praise, and Adam and Eve were tasked to multiply and be fruitful, Edenizing the whole world. What happened? Sin interrupted the project. In response, God chose Israel, called them to right worship centered on the tabernacle first, then the temple, and gave them the task to Israelize creation. But, it did not reach fulfillment—sin again entered the project. However, Israel was promised a Messiah who would fulfill that call. He would gather the tribes and cleanse the temple, restoring the right worship of Yahweh. Of course, this is accomplished by God himself in the incarnation, God in Christ taking on flesh in order to perfect the praise of the entire created order—in essence, Christifying the world.

God’s people are called to Edenize, to Israelize, to Christify, the entire created order.

We have the great privilege of engaging the world, telling the world its true story, and bringing it to the right worship of the only God who is ultimately true, good and beautiful. God wants right worship so we can be rightly ordered and sent on mission. This is why the focus on right worship is at the very core of the Christian faith, and this is why the study of worship is of supreme importance! The Bible is God’s story of how he chooses and shapes a people with his heart and mind to praise him aright, to reverse that process of dis-integration, to re-integrate, to re-order our lives around Christ, and to go out on mission to participate in the reconciliation of creation. The content and structure of our worship simply

summarizes the Biblical narrative in which God's people are called to Edenize, to Israelize, to Christify, the entire created order.

So what is right worship? It is participation in the story of God's saving work in Jesus the Christ. It is the submission of humankind to God, to be cleansed, forgiven, changed into his likeness revealed in Christ through his word and table, and then sent into the world in mission with fire to love the world to the God who is perfect love, perfect truth, goodness and beauty.

Worship as play—it has no purpose, but is full of profound meaning.

Back to the uselessness of worship. In his great book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, twentieth century theologian Romano Guardini equated worship, or, in his writing, the liturgy, with play. Play? Guardini wrote this about the liturgy, “[In the liturgy] man, with the aid of grace, is given the opportunity of realizing his fundamental essence, of really becoming that which according to his divine destiny he should be and longs to be, a child of God. . . . It speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures, it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life. . . . It is in the highest sense the life of a child in which everything is picture, melody and song.”¹ Beauty, art and liturgy go hand-in-hand.

Guardini goes on to write, “[The liturgy] has one thing in common with the play of a child and the life of art—it has no purpose, but is full of profound meaning. It is not work, but play. To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God's sight—not to create but to exist—such is the essence of the liturgy.”²

We tend to think of play as trivial and work as serious. But really it is the exact opposite: play is serious stuff, more serious than work. Why? Work is something we do for the sake of something else, for a higher purpose. It is subordinate to an end beyond itself. But play—play is something we do for no purpose outside itself. It is done entirely for its own sake. It is higher, more beautiful and more precious than work. And the play of worship is what we will do for eternity. Heaven is a place of utter uselessness, but utter beingness, where we find our true identity as human beings. Note—we are not human doings, but human beings. Worship brings us into that place of “being” in the truest sense, in our original intention as created in the image of God, who is the essence of “to be” itself.

“The true object of all human life is play” (G. K. Chesterton).

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This year I have been reflecting on the topic of re-enchanting the Gospel with objective beauty. Here is a striking example of God's utter playfulness. In his delightful fourth chapter from *Orthodoxy*, "The Ethics of Elfland," G.K. Chesterton wrote,

The sun rises every morning. . . . Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.³

These words may seem fanciful, but the sensibility is correct. Whenever I play with my grandson, I really get this! This world and all that is in it, including humankind, are a generous, even lavish overflow of the love of God. The only reasonable response to the extravagant love of God poured out toward us is worship. Worship is Eucharistic, which means it is a giant "Thank you!" to God. Giving thanks to God is the natural, joyful, even spontaneous response of the recipient of God's abundant, effervescent grace and mercy manifested in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the core of Christian worship is giving thanks, or in Greek, *eucharisteo*. In fact, we give thanks on behalf of all creation. What do I mean?

Leading the Praise of Creation

In worship, we have the great privilege of leading the praise of all of creation. In the very beginning, Genesis 1 and 2, God brings forth creation in that beautiful poetic text. First, God created the heavens and the earth. Then we hear, "Let there be light, and there was light." Then the seas and the dry land, vegetation, plants yielding seeds, and trees. Then the sun and the moon to rule the day and night. Then the living creatures, fish of the sea, birds of the air, livestock and creatures that creep on the ground. It is like a stately liturgical procession of elements coming forth from God. It is like a spiritual parade. Who comes at the end of a

parade? Think of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Santa Claus is at the end, the most important person in the parade! Now think of a liturgical procession, if you have ever seen one. Who is at the end? The celebrant, the person whose job it is to lead the praise of everyone gathered.

So it is in the liturgical procession in Genesis. Who is at the end of the procession? The celebrant, who leads the praise of the entire created order that has gone before. The apex of creation is humankind, uniquely created in the image of God, the celebrants of this great liturgical procession of creation. God has given humankind the great privilege of being the priests of creation. We do that in the liturgy, or worship, famously called the source and summit of the entire Christian life.

In this orderly, liturgical procession, we understand the *telos* of the created order—to worship the Creator. Who comes at the end of the great procession of creation? The ones who will lead the praise--human beings. Our whole purpose is to lead creation in the great chorus of praise to the Creator God. In that act of adoration, we realize our deepest identity, who we are ultimately meant to be. That is the biblical vision of the rightly ordered life, a life oriented around right worship.

Humankind is meant to worship God and draw all of creation into that worship. Worship is the moment when we are most ourselves, because we have gathered in adoration, giving highest praise to God on behalf of all creation, for the life of the world. This is the cosmic emphasis of worship.

In his great book *For the Life of the World*, Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote (read this gender neutral),

The first, the basic definition of man is that he is the priest. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the “matter,” the material of one all-embracing Eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.⁴

As priests of the created order, our priestly role is to give voice to the voiceless creation, to offer total praise, total Eucharist, thanksgiving to Almighty God.

Participation in the Gospel

I have described liturgy as the participation of the people of God in the work of God. A few months ago I preached in a chapel service at a Christian university

where the theme for the year is: “Because of Your Participation in the Gospel” (from Phil. 1:5). I was assigned the difficult passage of 1 Cor. 10:14-22. The chapels had focused on the various uses of the word *koinonia* throughout the New Testament in an attempt to understand what it means to participate in the gospel. The danger here is reducing the understanding of *koinonia* to simply Christian fellowship, or just hanging out with Christian friends. The New Testament usage of *koinonia* is much more substantial and purposeful, referring to such applications as communion with the Triune God, our participation in the sufferings of Christ and our partaking of the beatific vision. *Koinonia*, or participation with God, is at the very center of the Christian life as we are transformed into Christ-likeness (or as St. Peter wrote, we become partakers of the divine nature). Furthermore, our *koinonia* is made manifest in our gatherings with the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). Within those gatherings of worship we mysteriously participate in and partake of the body and blood of Jesus.

But what is participation? According to Webster, it means “to participate, or take part in something.” Well that is helpful, isn’t it? In business, it means to invest financially as an owner in a company, enterprise or some financial venture. In politics, it means to get involved with the governmental or electoral process, usually as a volunteer. In philosophy, participation is the inverse of inherence. An attribute inheres in a substance, but the substance participates in the attribute. So, the image of God inheres in us, and we are invited to, therefore, participate in God. It is one of the great mysteries of God—He creates us in his image but gives us the dignity of freedom to participate in that life through Jesus Christ—or not to. The reality is, we do both.

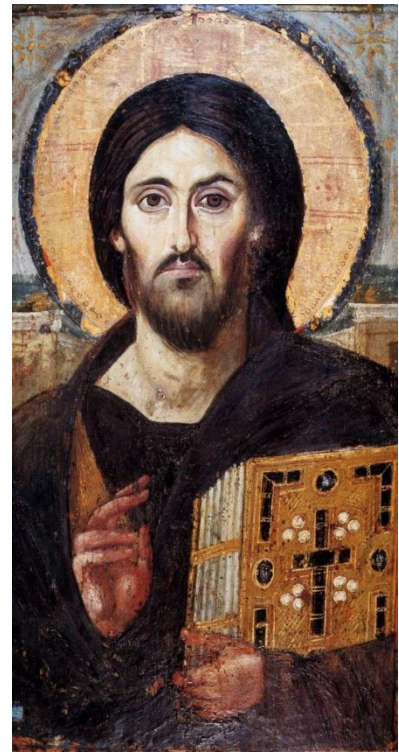
How do we participate or take part in God? It seems to me that there are varying levels of participation in the life of the Triune God in the created order around us. The beauty of mountains or plains or rivers or oceans participates in the beauty of the Creator. Living things, plants and animals, also participate in God in their own mysterious and even glorious way. My cat actually reveals God to me sometimes in her playfulness, mysteriousness, and even resourcefulness. (And she brings me little gifts, like dead lizards.) But humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation, made in the image of God, uniquely created with a heart that is restless until it rests in God, as St. Augustine wrote. So, we can see varying levels of participation in the life of the Triune God.

But how do we, made in God’s image, increase or intensify our participation in the life of the Triune God? First, let me again lay a bit of theological foundation for

this idea of participation. We live in a world created freely by God from nothing! (*Creatio ex nihilo*.) (This is not Stephen Hawking nothing, but an ontological nothing.) In the prologue to the Gospel of John we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (NIV). God created everything that is *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Therefore, everything that is, both in this world and in every universe or multiverse that exists, animate and inanimate, naturally occurring and man-made, is necessarily insinuated with the Creator.

But, he is also *other than* everything that exists. Everything that exists, exists because of God and finds its being in God. And, God is present to his creation, sustaining it and eternally continuing to create. Therefore, everything that exists participates in some way with God and the continuous creative process. That is a participatory, sacramental worldview, or more accurately, a participatory, sacramental metaphysic. The word “sacramental” means that God mysteriously participates in his created order as the created order mysteriously participates in God’s loving continuous creation.

To restate, there are differing degrees of participation. Let me give a few examples. Is Jesus Christ fully God and fully man? Yes! But is he a mediation of the full glory of God? Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus is the refulgence, or brightness of God’s glory and the express image of His person (a line that is repeated in the early liturgy of St. Basil the Great). In Christ, the unapproachable light of Divinity is approachable in the Incarnate Son. He is the perfect and eternal icon of the Father. Colossians 2:9 reads, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (or, mediated). Colossians 1:15 states, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” So, Christ is the mediation of the unapproachable light of God, but yet fully divine—not subordinate to the Father.



What are the primary sacraments, or icons of Christ? First, the Church is the mystical Body of Christ, the continuing incarnation of Christ in the world. Next, the scriptures are also the icon of Christ, who is the Living Word of God himself.

The next level of participation brings us to 1 Cor. 10—the participation of bread and wine in the reality of the body and blood of Christ. I will come back to that. In a wider, very true sense, all of creation participates in the divine life, since the entire created order contains the DNA, if you will, of the Creator. Everything that is finds its being in God, comes from God, and ultimately returns to God in worship. Everything.

Back to 1 Cor. 10:16-17. In his Sermon 227, St. Augustine wrote this referring to receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in bread and wine at Eucharist, “*If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle [Paul] says, We, being many, are one loaf, one body.*” (from 1 Cor. 10:17).” Hans Boersma explains the radicality of that statement: In partaking of the Eucharist, “you become the body of Christ; you become what you eat.”⁵ That is exactly how Alexander Schmemmann begins his great book, *For the Life of the World*: “You are what you eat.” As we partake of the Eucharistic bread, the Body of Christ broken for the life of the world, we become the ecclesial bread, the Church, the mystical Body of Christ broken for the life of the world. Through the Eucharist, Christ, the Living Word, constitutes the Church, sends the Church on mission, and then the Church regathers to celebrate the Eucharist, which again constitutes the Church!

In the passage above, St. Augustine referred to 1 Cor. 10:16-17: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.”

The Eucharist makes the Church and sends it on mission to be Christ to the world.

Notice—the word “body” occurs twice in this passage. The first time, it refers to the eucharistic body. (“Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” This refers to Jesus’ words, “This is my body,” spoken over the bread at the Last Supper.) The second time, it refers to the ecclesial body. (“Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body.” This refers to the Church.) Of the three bodies of Christ frequently referred to in the Great Tradition (the historical physical body, the Eucharistic body, and the ecclesial body), St. Paul takes the last two and places them right beside each other; he links them together. He maintains that when, by faith, we partake in the one eucharistic body (the bread), the Spirit makes us one ecclesial body (the Church). St. Augustine wrote that we become what we have received. The Eucharist makes the Church and sends it on mission to be Christ to the world. This *koinonia*, or participation, is a means of grace that

allows the created order, and particularly humankind, to reach its appointed end: eternal participation, eternal feasting, in the divine life itself through Jesus Christ.

Back to the question at hand—how do we increase or intensify our participation in the life of the Triune God? Fall in love with God by being a regular, even weekly communicant, or recipient of Christ’s body and blood in bread and wine. As you participate, you become. By the Holy Spirit and in the womb of the Mystical Body, you become Christ-like, you become Christ’s body to the world, you become Christ to the world, Christifying the cosmos.

Welcome to this most useless, but supremely important task—the study and discussion of Christian worship. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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¹ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (www.aeternapress.com, Aeterna Press, 2015), 38-39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), p. 91-92.

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1973), 15.

⁵ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 113-114.