

Should the Liturgy be Heavenly?

There is a famous story about how Prince Vladimir of Kiev (956-1015) chose the religion that he and his kingdom would follow. He sent some of his trusted subjects into the surrounding areas to examine the religious celebrations found there. After having witnessed a liturgy at the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople (now present-day Istanbul), the Prince's explorers returned to him and relayed the following: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty."

Ask yourself: were you in heaven last Sunday morning, or...somewhere in southwest Wisconsin (as heavenly as it is!)?

Although Prince Vladimir's servants were reporting on a liturgy of the East, the teaching of the Roman Church has always been that in the celebration of the liturgy, heaven and earth are united. This teaching is repeated in the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.

"In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army" (n. 8). "Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven" (n. 83). Those who participate in the prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours are said to be "standing before God's throne" (n.85). The arts that are used in liturgical celebrations are also to be heavenly, "signs and symbols of the supernatural world" (n. 122).

But why the emphasis on the heavenly? Doesn't all this emphasis on the other-worldly distract us from our Christian duties here on earth?

That the liturgy is directed heavenward is not a matter of taste or preference but a matter of fact. And if this fact—the earth uniting with heaven in the celebration of the liturgy—seems to have distracted some from their Christian duty to the world, it is a result of an incomplete understanding of the liturgy. The liturgy, as the *Catechism* teaches, is our participation in the work of Christ (n. 1066). And even though we share in Christ's most perfect work in the Mass, we are also called to share in his work by bringing his word and loving service to the world. So necessary is this task that the entire Mass takes its name from the dismissal into the world—*Ite, Missa est*.

It is also necessary to bear in mind the liturgy's heavenly reality because it is into the "new heaven and new earth" that we and our world are to be conformed: heaven is our goal. The liturgy, and heaven with it, is not to be reformed according to *this* world; on the contrary, we are to be reformed, by the liturgy, according to Christ reigning in heaven. The inculturation which the liturgy intends is the transformation of the present world into the culture of heaven. The "direction" of inculturation, then, is not primarily from the heavenly liturgy into the worldly culture but of the earthly culture into the heavenly. This, at least, seems to be the desire of the Council Fathers: "elements from the traditions and culture of individual peoples might appropriately be admitted *into* divine worship" (CSL, n. 40, emphasis added; see also n. 37).

There is a country song that goes something like, "Lord, I want to go to heaven, but I don't want to go tonight." That's OK: just be sure to go there on Sunday morning.