

What does the liturgy celebrate?

In the last *Liturgical Life* entry, we examined, in light of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the reasons why the Church worships. As the *Constitution* says repeatedly, “the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty” (n.33); the “sanctification of men in Christ” (n.10); and the building up of the faithful “into a holy temple of the Lord” (n.2). That the ultimate purpose of worship is for God’s glory may be a startling reminder. How often do we say or hear “I don’t get anything out of Mass” or judge the Mass on how well or poorly the homily “spoke to me”? The primary object of worship is not what *we gain* from it, but how well *we contribute* to it and its praise of God.

Why does the Second Vatican Council teach that the praise of God is the ultimate purpose of worship? From where does it determine this? The Council, with all of Tradition, finds this purpose and the ends that follow in the work of Jesus Christ himself. Recounting salvation history, the *Constitution* says “the wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God” (n.5). And how exactly did he do this? The *Constitution* continues, “He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious assumption” (*ibid.*).

The paschal mystery of Christ—his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension—is the work by which Jesus glorified his Father and brought salvation to the world, and it is this same work that Jesus has left a memorial of in the Eucharist and which the Church celebrates in the liturgy: Christ “continues his priestly work through the agency of the Church” (n.83); from apostolic times “the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery” (n.6).

The word “liturgy,” in fact, has the word “work” as one of its roots: *laos*, meaning people (from which the word “laity” comes) and *ergia*, meaning work (such as “ergonomic” office equipment that helps one work comfortably and proficiently). The “work,” or *ergia*, to which the liturgy refers and in which the Church participates is the work of Christ in the paschal mystery. In baptism, for example, we “are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ” (n.6). On Sundays the Church comes together to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Eucharist (nn.6, 106) “in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries...” (n.47). In addition to these sacraments, Christ “continues his priestly work through the Church” (n.83) by praying the Liturgy of the Hours. Funerals, according to the *Constitution*, were called upon to “express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death” (n.81). The entire year celebrates “the mysteries of Christian redemption, and above all the paschal mystery” (n. 107).

The liturgy, in summary, is a celebration of the work of Jesus’ paschal mystery—from his death on the cross to his ascension into heaven—whereby God the Father is perfectly glorified and mankind and all of creation are sanctified. The liturgy does not celebrate us, our community, our good deeds, our good music, or special occasions in our lives. Only if these are directed toward and share in Christ’s paschal mystery are they a worthy part of the liturgical celebration.

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