

How Does the Liturgy Shape Our Lives?

Kristopher W. Seaman

Being the science fiction fan that I am, I finally had occasion to watch the blockbuster movie, *Avatar*. The main character, Jake Sully, who does not have use of his legs, entered a computer machine that allowed him to connect to an avatar. To the natives of the planet Pandora, the avatar looked like the indigenous peoples, the Na'vi. Jake Sully has to learn the culture of the Na'vi. Learning the language, the customs, and the rituals takes him an astonishing three months. For many of us, it probably would have taken much longer. In the attempts at colonizing Pandora, some humans side with the Na'vi. During the course of the movie, Jake becomes open to the possibility of learning the Na'vi culture that moves his heart to be empathetic to the Na'vi's plight.

Though liturgy is not science fiction, there is something that is quite similar by comparison, that in the action of liturgy, that is, in the participation in the liturgy, our hearts have to be open to being moved by the Holy Spirit present through the liturgical event. For instance, during the Liturgy of the Word, the scriptures are proclaimed. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is clear that these scriptural words become Christ the Word in our liturgical assemblies. Christ "is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (CSL, 7). It is Christ speaking to us, calling us to become better disciples, to become holy.

It is not only the scripture, but also other texts and rituals during liturgy that shape us: The Opening Prayers, or collects, the Eucharistic prayer, the music, the space, the environment, the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ, the blessed or consecrated oil, the baptismal water, and so forth. Words, music, space, and rituals not only educate or inform us, but, we believe, that Christ is active, is present, in the liturgical event and sacraments. In liturgy, not only are our minds shaped, but also our hearts and our feet in order to live what we pray in liturgy.

An example is the Eucharistic prayer. In the current translation of Eucharistic Prayer II, we pray twice for the Holy Spirit to transform something or someone(s).

Lord, you are holy indeed,
the fountain of all holiness.
Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy,
so that they may become for us
the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. . . .

May all of us who share in the body and bloody of Christ
be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.
(Sacramentary, 549-50)



Therefore, the Holy Spirit changes bread and wine and those who participate in Communion. The Eucharistic prayer proclaims that the Lord is holy and "the fountain of all holiness;" a marvelous image of God's overflowing love, goodness, and truth. God freely pours out holiness. In liturgy this holiness is offered to those who participate in order to grow in holiness to which the Triune God calls us. And if we are to become holy in faith, we, too, must become fountains that share compassion, goodness and truth in our daily lives. To paraphrase Saint Augustine: We are to become what we pray.

Jake Sully, in the movie *Avatar*, had a profound change. Faith in the God of Jesus Christ whom we worship, calls us to change our hearts. In liturgy, the Triune God calls us to holiness, strengthens our faith, nourishes us and sends us, hopefully, changed, in order to grow in communion, in unity, with one another and with God. This is most eloquently proclaimed at the first scrutiny for the elect on the Third Sunday of Lent: "Lord Jesus / . . . / [T]ouch their hearts with the power of the Holy Spirit, / that they may come to know the Father / in true faith, which expresses itself in love . . ." (RCIA, 154). The Triune God invites us to be shaped in and through liturgy. The texts, symbols, music, space, environment, and gestures communicate God's call to us to become what God intends: his holy people.

KRISTOPHER W. SEAMAN, MA, MAT, is the associate director of the Office for Divine Worship of the diocese of Gary, Indiana.