



Vatican Diary

By **Loup Besmond de Senneville**

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Eucharistic foothills

A fresh look at liturgy as "source and summit" of the Christian life



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One of the catch-phrases of Catholic theology – cited in virtually every document from the Vatican – is that the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is "the source and summit" of the Christian life.

The origins of the phrase are complex, but it entered mainstream Catholic discourse with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) in this sentence:

Indeed, the liturgy is the summit (culmen) towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fountain (fons) from which all her power flows (SS,10).

That was in 1963 and it is now a piece of stock wisdom.

Like all such snippets of wisdom it is more often parroted than thought about. For most of the people who quote it, it is just another way of saying that "the Mass is what is most important or a striking metaphor to say that prayer is what must come first in the life of a Christian."

When read through the so-called "hermeneutic of continuity", it is simply a new formulation of the tag: "it's the Mass that matters".

But that reading fails to note that it is also far more than a restatement: it is a different theological vision that is based on a dynamic understanding of the life of the Church as the living, moving witness to the gospel in the world.

Two-way street or a round-about?

The image implies a series of stages that lead up to the summit.

Liturgy does not simply happen. We must prepare for it by a whole range of activities in every area of our lives.

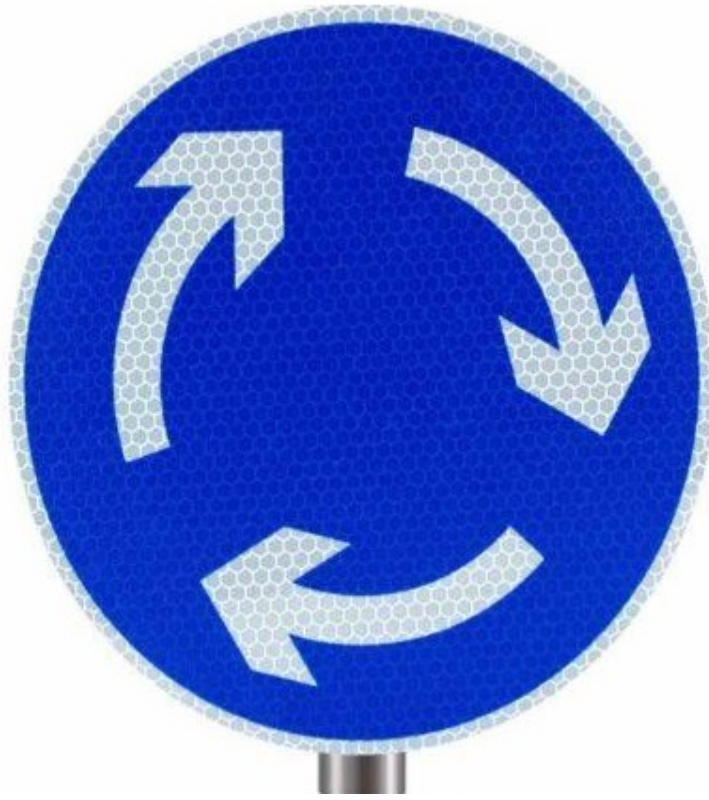
Likewise, liturgy is not something we leave after it is over to then get on with the rest of life. There is no simple division of Sunday/Monday, the religion bit in the church/the rest of life outside. There is no neat border separating the sacred and the profane.

If liturgy is real, it expresses what is happening in our lives before God in worship.

If liturgy is real, it expresses what is happening before God in worship in our lives.

The Eucharist – the highest expression of our worship – has to be seen not as an island, but a point along a road. There is a road of thankfulness and reconciliation leading up to it, and a road of generosity and thankfulness leading onwards in our lives.

Perhaps the image of a roundabout is better as a dynamic image of how liturgy relates to the rest of our lives.



Liturgy is a roundabout

All the roads of our lives –relationships, family, work, social engagement, politics, sport, entertainment.....should flow towards liturgical worship, as we express our lives in the presence of God.

From that expression, the roads flow outwards into those same areas of our lives, but, hopefully with a new vision and a new energy to bring them towards their finality in God.

It is the replacement of a static image of worship with this dynamic one, embracing the whole of life, that is the real achievement of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). It is also the reason why, in the face of push back, **Pope Francis has said** that there is no place for those who reject Vatican II.

When the pope met the grand imam

But if the Eucharist is the summit, what do some of the lower slopes look like?

Well, we have a good view of one of those slopes in a small event that took place when the **pope met the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar**, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyebin Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019 and they signed the Document on Human Fraternity.

At an earlier meeting in the Vatican on November 6, 2017, the two had lunch.

At the outset **Francis asked the grand imam to pray for humanity and peace**. Then the pope took a piece of bread, cut it in half and shared it with the sheikh. It was a real sharing of one

piece of bread, and a message to all of us about sharing and reconciliation.

Reconciliation in shared food at table with others is at the heart of our human experience. Reconciliation in shared food at table with others and with God is at the heart of our Eucharistic experience.

One does not get to the summit without traversing the lower slopes!

President-elect Biden at the foodbank

If the Eucharist is the fountain of Christian life, then what should blossom with the water flowing from that fountain?

On 18 January, just two days before his presidential inauguration, Joe Biden went and volunteered at a **foodbank**.

No doubt, he had much office work to do and many people to see, so it was a symbolic gesture analogous to that of the pope with the grand imam. But why use his time in this way?

If we have shared with one another in the Lord's banquet, then we must also be conscious of the needy. The Lord is generous with us and we express that in our generosity with others.

Biden's action put sharing our food – a fundamental and real image of all our resources – with the poor as close to the center of his presidency.

Service involves sharing.

Riches involve service.

Taking a turn at working in a foodbank is, within the Christian vision, not simply just a generous human action. It is a statement that all our riches are a gift. And God's gifts must be shared if we are to bear fruit.

Biden's action was full of Eucharistic significance.

At a Eucharist we become recipients of God's gifts.

At a foodbank we become distributors of God's gifts.

What we discover at a foodbank can enrich our liturgy.

What we discover at liturgy can stock and staff a foodbank.

Liturgy is the roundabout of our humanity.

Thomas O'Loughlin is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest book is

**Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians
(Liturgical Press, 2019).**