

Divine Worship and the Numinous*

By Peter Toon

There are various elements which go into the making of divine worship by an assembled congregation. Yet with these is needed "the sense of the Numinous."

The text used (the liturgy), the music, the symbolism and ceremonial, the deportment of the ministers and people and the general ethos all have a part, yet not an equal part, to play. Obviously some kinds of words, some kinds of music, some forms of symbolism and ceremonial, and some forms of address and deportment are more effective (for most people) than others in the lifting up the soul in adoration and praise, thanksgiving and petition, intercession and confession to the Father through the Son with the Holy Ghost. Yet other - related - words, music and symbolism seem to be more conducive when the aim is community-building or evangelizing or teaching the faith or providing Christian entertainment/recreation.

If the "worship service" is seen more as a time of fellowship (community-building and/or the affirmation of each self before God) or a time of teaching (instruction in aspects of how to be a Christian in modern society) or Christian entertainment (be it high brow or low brow to make people feel good about themselves) then the form of service, the music, the symbolism and ceremonial and the dress and deportment will not be the same as when the service is primarily intended as adoration of the supremely Adorable, Blessed and Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

The mind has to be enlightened, raw emotions purified, and the will rightly directed in order for there to be adoration of the Father of mercies, who is the Supreme Beauty and Glory. Only the presence and work of the Holy Ghost can guarantee this purifying, enlightening and guiding; but, how assembled Christians prepare and present themselves before the Divine Majesty has an important part to play. The Spirit waits to be welcomed by God's people to do his sanctifying work.

There will need to be present in this kind of service - whether in Latin or in English and whether in a University or a blue-collar parish - what has been called "a sense of the numinous." "Numinous" means "imbued with religious gravity" and thus points to the utter seriousness of the occasion and to the wholesome and wholehearted commitment and consecration of body and soul to the exercise of worship - of truly acknowledging the supreme worth of the Holy Trinity - and to the atmosphere created and the ethos realized.

So a form of words will be chosen which have a numinous quality to them, that are able to lift up the soul and make her strive for the highest; music will be used that ennobles the soul and gives her a sense of the transcendent dimension of Being; there will be moments

* *Numinous* = imbued with religious gravity; mystical, spiritual, supernatural

of quiet and stillness to recognize and feel/know the presence of the Lord; symbolism will be such as to turn the mind and heart away from material objects and the world of the senses towards Christ the exalted High Priest; bodily posture will be such as is compatible with the soul that is humble and reverent. And so on.

And in the main the words, music, signs, symbols, dress and deportment will be different from those generally used in secular living, although there will be obvious overlapping here and there. Happily the Church over the centuries has developed such means and they are there in her treasury of tradition to be adapted and utilized by people in the 21st century.

One of the amazing features of a service that aims to adore the Adorable, to contemplate the Glory of the Holy Trinity and to admire the Ultimate Beauty is that it does have all kinds of side-effects. Those who have adored are more likely to be those who want to be taught the Faith, to love their neighbors, to do good to those of the Household of Faith and to promote fellowship/community.

If you major on majors then as a by-product you often take care of minors!

If you major on minors then you never reach or attain the major!

And if you search for a liturgy to adore the Adorable then you find that your choice is very limited. Obviously the traditional Orthodox Liturgy of St Chrysostom has this potential and so does I think Matins, Evensong and Choral Holy Communion from the classic Book of Common Prayer.

If you want a Liturgy to be merely simple, intelligible, accessible, community- building , one that keeps you warm-hearted in the horizontal position and where the sense of the numinous is hard to come by then your choice is vast in the productions of the last forty or so years.

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