A Response to Christopher Dustin's The Liturgy of Theory

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Professor Dustin's provocative and intellectually imaginative essay provides the material for a rich and wide-ranging discussion between him and me on a large number of issues. The space allotted makes that wide-ranging discussion impossible on this occasion, however; I will have to confine myself to raising a few methodological issues, and to setting before you the outlines of an alternative way of thinking about liturgy.

Professor Dustin wants to get us to think about liturgy, theory, and practice in a way different from how we customarily think about them. The way of thinking that he recommends was to be found, so he claims, among the ancient Greeks; hence he calls his way of presenting the alternative a "recalling."

I am dubious about some of the historical claims made and their methodological employment. As Professor Dustin realizes, and as he notes at one point, many of the etymologies that he cites are controversial, often driven by philosophical interests rather than emerging from the painstaking work of the lexicographer; and in any case, the etymology of a word may or may not linger in its later meaning. More generally, knowing the meaning of the words a person uses tells one little about his thought; how much of my thought could you infer merely from my vocabulary? The relevant issue for the interpreter is always what people actually said with their words. Words are in the service of acts of discourse.

On this matter there can be no doubt that some ancient Greeks did think and speak of theoria and teche along the lines that Professor Dustin sketches out. How many of them thought along these lines is a nice question; in fact, it's not clear that any single person thought all of these thoughts. Even if somebody did, that by itself is not a reason for you and me to think those thoughts after him; lots of thoughts of even the most admirable of the ancient Greeks are best forgotten.

For you and me, these methodological issues do not make much difference, however. Professor Dustin has given us the views of a philosopher of the early twenty-first century—namely, himself—on liturgy, theory, and practice. At some points those views recall what certain ancient Greeks said. It appears to me that Professor Dustin is taking for granted some roughly Heideggerian declinist narrative of Western culture, according to which it is important that certain anti-modern views be found among the ancient Greeks, and likewise important that we recover those views. But if it is indeed important for us to recover those views, it will have to be on account of their merits, not on account of their antiquity.

So to the point: Professor Dustin urges us to think of theory as that mode of contemplation which, rather than being disinterested and disengaged, is participatory in that it incorporates acknowledgement of the worth of what is contemplated; he urges us to think of liturgy as contemplation that is participatory in the same way; and he urges us to think of craft as a making visible, both in process and product, of what is worthy of such participatory contemplation. A truly admirable unity of thought!

I do not have time to say anything at all about Professor Dustin's account of theory and of craft, with much of which I agree; I can speak only of what he says about liturgy. And as to what he
says about liturgy I cannot, to my regret, directly engage his view; all I can do is present an alternative.

For me, the fundamental model for thinking about liturgy is not participatory contemplation of some pattern in the kosmos, nor participatory contemplation of some work of art displaying such a pattern; the fundamental model is that of engagement with a person. In the liturgy we, the people of God, are engaged with that creating, redeeming, and consummating person who is God—or more precisely, with the triune God who is three persons in one substance. My guess is that, at bottom, my reason for thinking of liturgy differently from how Professor Dustin thinks of it is that I think of God differently. The classical Greeks whom Professor Dustin cites all thought of the divine as impersonal.

When persons engage each other, they do not contemplate each other; though they look at each other, when that is possible, they do not contemplate each other. Contemplation of persons is for fashion and beauty shows, for performance dance, and the like. When persons engage each other, they talk to each other. Dialogue is the mark of the engagement of persons who are in full possession of their personhood.

So I think of liturgy as being, in good measure, not contemplation but dialogue. The people address God in confession, praise, thanksgiving, and intercession; and God addresses the people in welcome, benediction, absolution, Scripture, and sermon. I said, "in good measure." The sacraments, as I think of them, are not dialogue; though set in the context of dialogue, they are not themselves dialogue. In the mutual participation by God and God's people in the sacraments, God effects what God promises. In short, throughout the liturgy God's presence is not that of some object to be contemplated, but that of one who acts—sacramental acts, and acts of discourse.

I need scarcely mention that this way of thinking about liturgy also has its roots in antiquity. It is a different antiquity, however: the antiquity of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures rather than the antiquity of the classical Greeks. In the classical Greek philosophers the primary metaphors for our relation to the divine were visual. The reason is obvious: the divine had no capacity either for hearing or speaking. In Scripture, the primary metaphors are verbal and auditory. We speak to God and God speaks to us. When God speaks, we listen. We do not look, we do not contemplate; we listen.

The biblical writers were extremely chary of speaking of seeing and contemplating God; one cannot behold God's face and live, they said. What we contemplate is not God but God's works and God's Torah. As for God, we listen. And to listen is to do; hearing is doing. Liturgy is indeed practice; on this point I am in full agreement with Professor Dustin. But as I see it, liturgy is not our practice of contemplating God but God's and our joint practice of engaging each other in dialogue and sacramental action.

A word in closing about the word leitourgia. So far as I can make out, in classical Greek the word was used for a benefaction to the public by a private citizen. Sometimes the benefaction was, as Professor Dustin mentions, the financial support of a religious festival; but not always, and perhaps not usually. When a trireme was fitted out at private expense for the defense of the city, that was said to be a leitourgia. The public libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie across the United States in the early part of the twentieth century were liturgies on Carnegie's part.
The early Christian writers borrowed this word for the actions that took place in their assemblies. Numerous late twentieth century writers on liturgy, intent on promoting lay participation in the liturgy, have argued that our liturgies should be participatory because the early liturgies were participatory; they have based that contention, in good measure, on the claim that *leitourgia* means work of the people. So far as I can tell, *leitourgia* never meant that. It meant a work for the benefit of the people at private expense. Why then did the early Christian writers borrow the word? They don't say. But the most plausible speculation would seem to be that they saw what went on in their assemblies as a work, a deed, an action, rendered by someone to someone. Was it a deed rendered by us to God? Or by God to us? Or both?

Whatever their thought, my suggestion is that it is in fact a deed rendered by each to each. Liturgy is practice, participation, in the ways that Professor Dustin elucidates: practice that incorporates acknowledgement of worth. But in my view its *telos* is not contemplation by human persons of the divine, but dialogue and sacramental engagement among persons human and divine.

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