Judaism and Catholic Prayer

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If the dictum lex orandi, lex credendi (the Church’s prayer is the Church’s belief) is true, then clearly the impact of Judaism on Catholic liturgy has been substantive. A new world opened up for Catholics regarding Judaism after Vatican II.

They suddenly found themselves invited to synagogue services and introduced to the “model seder” at Passover as a way to better understand the Catholic liturgy — particularly the Eucharist. Rabbis were invited to lecture on Judaism in high school, college, and seminary theology classes. Catholics discovered their elder brothers and sisters in the faith. There was an excitement about meeting “our long lost relatives.”

First, I would like to share a personal experience which illustrates how Judaism can impact an understanding of liturgy. Then I will discuss the key question for reflection: “Why were the Jewish roots of the Christian liturgy neglected for so many years?” To arrive at some conclusion it is necessary to discuss briefly how the liturgy evolved in the Catholic Church in the West in modern times and mention some of the major figures involved in the liturgical renewal. We would be remiss if we did not also reflect on the impact of anti-Judaism on the Christian liturgy over the years. The Holocaust and the growth in biblical studies in the twentieth century contributed to the watershed document of Vatican II—the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Was the “new liturgy”—the result of that document—influenced by a new understanding of Judaism? I will conclude by offering some illustrations from my personal experience as to how a new understanding of Judaism can open up fresh insights into the liturgy in the twenty-first century.

Preaching in the Synagogue

I can still recall a hot, dry, Friday evening in August 1970 in Phoenix, Arizona, when I stood nervously in the hallway adjacent to the sanctuary at Temple Beth Israel. Having recently been appointed executive director of the North Phoenix Corporate Ministry—a cluster of four Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and two synagogues (one Conservative and one Reform) in Arizona—I was invited to preach the sermon at the Friday evening Sabbath service at one of “our synagogues.”

Not only had I never preached in a synagogue, I had never attended a service on Shabbat. I had toured synagogues with groups of students, attended a “model” Passover Seder, enjoyed meals in the homes of Jewish friends, was involved in social justice projects and theological dialogues with rabbis, but Shabbat services were new to me. Garbed in a yellow sleeveless dress with a white Peter Pan collar and wearing my “nun pin,” I was oblivious to the fact that in some synagogues long sleeves are the order of the day and married women cover their heads. (With the rabbis in their black robes, I may have looked less out of place in my long black habit of a few years before.) Suddenly a dear, elderly rabbi approached me with a smile. He told me that the last time he was in Israel he had gone to the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus had preached – and he wanted me to know how happy they were to have me with them! With a sigh of relief I processed with them into the sanctuary.

With that Shabbat service my spirituality changed forever. As I sat on the *bimah* (the dais in the pulpit area near the Ark) listening to the cantor chant in Hebrew and the rabbi read from the Torah

scroll, I realized for the first time that this was how Jesus would have prayed to his Father—this was how he worshipped as a young man! With that Shabbat Service, I knew there was no way to understand Christianity unless I could somehow “get inside” of Judaism—because Jesus was a Jew. Liturgy and spirituality for him were rooted and grounded in the synagogue, and it would be impossible to try to understand his encounter with God apart from it. The beauty of this ancient tradition of prayer gave me a new appreciation of God’s love for the Jewish people. It was a pivotal moment in my life.

Over the years I have preached sermons in other synagogues, attended Shabbat services regularly, celebrated Rosh Hashanah, fasted and prayed all day on Yom Kippur, danced under the stars on Sukkot, and celebrated other Jewish holydays and holidays. I traveled to Israel with the Conservative rabbi, his family and people from “my two synagogues.” There were Friday night Shabbat dinners in Jewish homes, Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrations, attending a *bris* (circumcision), or a funeral—I was able to be a part of the life cycle and liturgical celebrations. I have gone to camp with Jewish high school kids where I learned prayers in Hebrew, dialogued about our traditions, and was introduced to Israeli dancing! In Phoenix I was either “the Temple nun” or “the synagogue Sister” depending on whether I was in the Reform or the Conservative congregation! I loved these “grass roots experiences.” There is no substitute for the experiential in interfaith relations. Even more—there is no substitute for prayer together if we are to understand one another.

In subsequent years I have studied intensely the history of Jewish-Christian relations, have published a book (Athans 1991), and written articles on theological roots of anti-Semitism. I have developed ways in which Jews and Christians can dialogue and even pray together. In 1992 I taught for a semester in Israel. Each of these experiences has enhanced my prayer and my understanding.

But the pivotal event will always be that August night in Phoenix in 1970. My approach to God was deeply enriched by that experience of prayer in the synagogue. My heart found a way to connect with Jesus and his prayer life in a way that has impacted my spirituality to this day. It also enabled me to grow in a deep love and appreciation for the Jewish people and their on-going covenant with God. It was in reflecting on my interfaith experiences that that key question emerged: “Why were the Jewish roots of the Catholic liturgy neglected for so many years?”

The Catholic Liturgy Since the Renaissance

The liturgy in the immediate pre-Vatican II era was based on a medieval model. It was considered enlightened that we were learning Gregorian chant and worshipping in Gothic structures. We set aside some of the Baroque excesses that had dominated the liturgy in the Renaissance era and after. Louis Bouyer describes how the Baroque liturgy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had taken on the pageant of courtly life of the period—a court ceremonial for a heavenly King influenced by Renaissance neo-paganism. He states: “So the faithful of the same period sought to find a religious equivalent of the Opera in the liturgy. Churches came to resemble theatres in plan and decoration” (Bouyer 1955, 7). The chief focus of the liturgy for many people was no longer the Mass but Solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament with polyphonic music and pageantry, often pervaded by a sentimental piety. It was also, in part, a reaction to the austere liturgies of some Protestant groups.

The French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, influenced by the Enlightenment, sent nuns and priests to the guillotine, confiscated church property, and attempted to destroy the Catholic culture of Europe. Napoleon, whose ascendancy followed, tried to use the church as the “glue” for his empire, but with his demise in 1815, Catholics yearned for “the good olde days.” They were happy to see the pope back on his throne with church authority solidly in place. The Romantic era of the nineteenth century exuded a growing ultramontanism that idealized the Middle Ages.

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A major liturgical figure in the nineteenth century was Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805–1875), who reestablished the monastery at Solesmes in France in 1833. His goal was to “purify” monastic liturgy and to restore Gregorian chant and all things Gothic. Although this was an improvement over the Baroque, Guéranger continued to focus not on the Eucharist as a whole, but on the Divine Presence of Jesus. Hence, no one received communion at the community Mass at Solesmes. Lay brothers were not present. Solemn Benediction became the focal point for community worship (Bouyer 1955, 12–13). Although Guéranger was responsible for many of the achievements in the contemporary liturgical movement, he believed that authentic liturgy meant a return to medievalism.

It was with Lambert Beaudoin (1873–1960), that the liturgical movement blossomed at the Benedictine Abbey of Mont-César in Louvain, Belgium. Beaudoin realized that “the liturgy itself, properly understood, is the fundamental catechesis of Christian doctrine . . . and is meant to be the well-spring of spiritual vitality and to provide the framework for Christian living, not only for individuals . . . but for the whole Christian people in the Church” (Bouyer 1955, 59–60).

The Liturgical Movement came to life in the United States particularly with Virgil Michel, O.S.B., in Collegeville, Minnesota, who had studied both in Belgium and in Rome under Beaudoin. With colleagues such as Martin Hellriegel, William Busch, Gerard Ellard, S.J., and others the movement took on new life. The first Liturgical Day was held at St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota on July 25, 1929. The journal *Orate Fratres* (now titled *Worship*), was published, and important European works were translated and published by the Liturgical Press at Collegeville. A return to the Patristic sources and an emphasis on the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ allowed for enhanced participation of the laity and the linkage of liturgy and social justice.

While this return to the Patristic sources was an important advance, Bouyer expressed concern. He questioned whether some of his contemporaries were merely taking the Patristic period “. . . as Dom Guéranger and his school took the Middle Ages, fancifully exalting it as a kind of canonical age which is to be reproduced and set in the midst of contemporary life by means of the reconstructions of a false archeology?” (Bouyer 1955, 20).

The Impact of Anti-Judaism

One of the negative by-products of returning to earlier periods for an understanding of the liturgy is that it can also unearth the residue of the earlier anti-Judaism prominent in those eras. The long history of anti-Judaism in Christianity did not allow many Christians to look kindly on Jews or their prayer life. In the Patristic era supersessionism reared its head in the writings of Melito of Sardis, Justin Martyr, and Marcion’s effort to dispense with the Hebrew Scriptures from the canonical writings. John Chrysostom, in his vehemently anti-Judaic writings as exemplified in the *Adversos Judaeos* sermons in the fourth century, denigrated the synagogue as “a theatre . . . a brothel . . . a den of thieves and a hiding place of wild animals . . . the home of demons . . . a house of idolatry. . . .” (as quoted in Athans, in Shermis and Zannoni 1991). Ambrose defended the burning of a synagogue by a mob in Callinicum in Asia Minor in 386 C.E. When the Emperor Theodosius wanted to assist in rebuilding it, Ambrose threatened him with excommunication if he would do so.

The pogroms of the medieval period against the Jews, especially in the Rhineland during the Crusades, myths about ritual murder and well-poison trials, as well as anti-Judaic degrees especially from the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils kept the Jews in their ghettos relegated to an inferior status. Joshua Trachtenberg’s book *The Devil and the Jews* caused me to ask if the baptismal rite in the Middle Ages in which Christians renounced “Satan and all his works and all his pomps” did not imply that because Jews were not baptized they were therefore inhabited by Satan? The art work of the Middle Ages depicting Jews with horns and pitch forks seems to substantiate that, as do the sculptures of *ecclesia* (church) and *synagogua* (synagogue)—feminine figures on the facades of churches and cathedrals in which the synagogue is clearly blind-folded

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and rejected. Even the illiterate in that era were taught about the rejection of the Jews and the charge of “deicide.” It was unlikely that Christians would look to the Jewish liturgy for inspiration when they were exalting the patristic era or the medieval period.

The Criterion of Dissimilarity

Advances in Catholic scripture scholarship were frozen in the early twentieth century and Catholic scripture scholars were “driven underground” with the Modernism crisis and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907). Protestant scholars, however, worked avidly in the area of scripture. Unfortunately, one tool of their interpretation was the “criterion of dissimilarity.” As late as 1967, Norman Perrin popularized Bultmann’s contention that whatever Jesus had in common with the Judaism of his day should be eliminated because it was not distinctive of Jesus (Perrin, 43). A preoccupation with this “uniqueness” caused many scholars to remove Jesus from the context of his own life as a devout and observant Jew (Charlesworth, 5–6).

Discovering Jewish Roots

The Jewish roots of the Christian liturgy began to be researched seriously in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1893 the Jewish scholar Kaufmann Kohler published an article titled “Ueber die Ursprünge und Grundformen der synagogalen Liturgie” (About the Origins and Basic Forms of Synagogal Liturgy) (Kohler, 441–451; 489–497). He called attention to Christian interpolations added to Jewish prayers in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, books 7 and 8, which dealt with liturgical material derived from Jewish blessings (Ryan, 10). In 1905, Edmund von der Goltz compared the Jewish table prayers with the prayers in the *Didache*, in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, book 8, and in the older Greek *anaphoras* (eucharistic prayers).

One of the prolific writers was German lay liturgist Anton Baumstark. In 1923, he wrote “Das Erbe der Synagoge” (The Heritage of the Synagogue) (12–21). He insisted that the synagogue be taken into consideration for an understanding of Christian worship. W.O.E. Oesterley’s volume *The Jewish Background of the Christian Liturgy* (1925) was widely read. Frank Gavin’s study *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (1928, reprinted in 1969) discussed the *berakah* (Hebrew blessing) as a source of the eucharistic prayer (59–98), The discovery of the ruins of both a synagogue and a house-church at Dura-Europos during excavations in modern Syria in 1932 brought excitement and perspective from archeologists to the study of both Jewish and Christian liturgy (Chiat and Mauck, 73–75).

The People of God

From the late nineteenth century to Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943), the emphasis in ecclesiology had been on the theology of the Mystical Body of Christ. The French Dominican theologian Yves Congar claims that while it is impossible to pinpoint the origin of the idea, it was between the years 1937–1942 that the idea of the church as the “People of God” was firmly established in Catholic theology. Theologians rediscovered the continuity of the church with Israel. Emphasis on the historical dimension and the salvific institution of revelation culminated also in the rediscovery of eschatology (Congar, 14). Rediscovering the concept of the People of God—which became the title of chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium*—broadened the vision and offered a new perspective on the church in Vatican II.

Impact of the Holocaust

Jesuit Joseph Jungmann’s volume *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origin and Development*, written in the midst of World War II and available in English in 1950, introduced many students in Europe and America to the history of the Eucharist beginning with the Jewish roots of liturgy in the primitive church. With the horror of the *Shoah* (Holocaust) many Christians in Europe and the

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United States examined their consciences. A key question became: “If Christians had really been Christian over the centuries, would the Holocaust have occurred?” A deeper understanding of the tragedy of the Jewish people allowed for an appreciation of Jewish life and worship. Canadian theologian Gregory Baum stated in a lecture to the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1986: “It could be argued, I think, that the Church’s recognition of the spiritual status of the Jewish religion is the most dramatic example of doctrinal turn-around in the age-old *magisterium ordinarium*” (Baum, 87).

New Biblical Understandings

Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) allowed for a more liberal approach for Catholic biblical scholars. Indirectly this had an impact on scholars of the liturgy. Dom Gregory Dix stated in 1949 in his monumental work *The Shape of the Liturgy*: “Our understanding of our forms of worship underwent a radical transformation some forty years ago when it finally occurred to someone that *Jesus was a Jew*” (as quoted by Talley, emphasis mine).

An exciting development in the post-World War II period was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves at Qumran in 1947. It became the catalyst in the fertile field of biblical studies. The scrolls provided extraordinary information about Jewish life and thought at the time Christianity was born. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars began working together.

A New Liturgical Awakening

In that same year, Pius XII issued his encyclical on the liturgy, *Mediator Dei*. Although always cautionary, Pius allowed for progress and toleration and underlined the link between liturgy and pastoral concerns. The reform of the Easter Vigil and of Holy Week (1951–1955), the permission for evening Mass, and the new laws for the communion fast (1957) opened new vistas. “These changes and the attitudes behind them also set the stage for the momentous changes that were to follow” (McKenna, 924).

Perhaps no author contributed as much to the study of the Jewish roots of the Catholic liturgy in the immediate pre-Vatican II period than the French Oratorian, Louis Bouyer. His volume *Liturgical Piety* (1955) included two very important chapters: “From the Jewish Qahal [Assembly] to the Christian Ecclesia” and “The Eucharistic Celebration: From the Jewish to the Christian.” In his monumental book *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer* (French 1966; English 1968), the first one hundred pages are an invaluable exposition of Jewish and Christian liturgy especially in terms of the relationship of the *berakah* to the early Eucharistic prayers. Although groundbreaking work has been done in recent years which sheds new light on the development of Jewish and Christian liturgy and leads to new interpretations, the substantial contribution of Bouyer and others in this period was pivotal (see Bradshaw and Hoffman; Kee and Cohick; Fine).

The labors of the liturgical movement bore fruit in the promulgation of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)* in 1963 (see especially no. 50). On January 25, 1964, Paul VI issued the *motu proprio Sacram Liturgiam*, which established a special commission later known as “The Consilium for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” whose principal task will be to see to the proper implementation of the constitution (see the account in Marini). If some thought that updating of the “old liturgy” might entail only ceremonial changes, they could not have been more wrong. It was in the Consilium that the studies on the Jewish roots of the Christian liturgy had their impact.

Prayer in Practice

In conclusion, I would like to offer a few personal experiences describing how I believe Jewish

influences can enhance our understanding of the Catholic Eucharistic liturgy. In grade school I attended Mass almost every day. I especially loved the Offertory prayers of the “old Mass” and committed them to memory. I can still say them by heart: “Receive, O Holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host which I, Thy unworthy servant, offer unto Thee. . . .” Years later when I attended the “new Mass” for the first time, I was distraught to hear the “new prayers” and had nostalgia for the old. In the meantime, however, because of my involvement with Jewish families, I had learned the Jewish table blessings: *Baruch atah Adonai, eloheynu melech ha-olam, hamotsi lechem min ha-aretz* (Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has given us the bread of the earth). One day at Eucharist when I heard the priest say, ”Blessed are You, Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given, and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life”—a light dawned! I knew that I had heard those prayers before! Suddenly I realized that they were basically the ancient Hebrew table blessings! And why would they be the most appropriate prayers to include in the Eucharist at that point? Because they were very likely the prayers that Jesus might have said when he sat down to have a meal with his friends. To this day when the priest is praying the English version, I am saying them in Hebrew in my head and in my heart. But how many Catholics had that explained to them when the changes came?

As a child I also learned that in Communion we received Jesus “body, blood, soul and divinity.” I always wondered if that included the gall bladder and toe nails! It sounded cannibalistic to me. To become aware of the more holistic Hebrew understanding of “body” and “blood” when studying the Hebrew Scriptures was enlightening. “Body,” I learned, represented *the whole person*; “blood” represented *life*! Now I hear Jesus saying in the words of the priest: “This is my whole *person* for you!” and “This is my whole *life* for you!” I feel free from the old dualism and grateful for the new insights gleaned from the Hebrew Scriptures—the only Scriptures Jesus ever knew.

I had learned about the Hebrew concept of *zikaron* (in Greek, *anamnesis*; in English, *memorial*). It was not, however, until I celebrated Passover with a Jewish family that I came to really understand *zikaron*. In the *Haggadah* (Passover ritual) we prayed: “We were slaves in Egypt—but now we are free!” Not our *ancestors* were slaves, and *they* became free, and now we celebrate that. It was “*We* were slaves in Egypt – but now *we* are free!” *Zikaron*, in some mysterious way, describes how—in the doing of the ritual—the past becomes present in our lives. That is also what happens in the Eucharist. We are saying in the context of the paschal mystery: “*We were slaves to sin – but now we are free!*” In the ritual of the Eucharist, the past indeed becomes present in our lives.

There is so much more that knowing our Jewish roots can open up for us, but for now, let us all say another word we share together: *Amen!*

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