LITURGY AND THE CHRISTIAN LANGUAGE

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"AN OLIVE IS NEVER JUST AN OLIVE," I said to myself, driving through the desert in Tunisia. I was fascinated by the number of olive trees with their gnarled trunks and twisted branches. An olive is not only the fruit of a tree. It is an epic. It contains within itself all that has gone before. The roots are sunk into the earth and also deep into history. These olive groves appear as the sole oasis in the desert where I had gone to retrace the steps of Tertullian and breathe the same air as Augustine of Hippo. Were they moved too, by the antiquity of these branches?

Sometimes we linger over the exotic in order to better appreciate what we see every day. Later, I find myself observing the vineyards extending over the rolling landscape in Burgundy. I repeat the same theme: a grape is not just a grape, wine not just a drink. It is a complex of meaning and history, of know-how and tradition. And again, later in the boulangerie, I discover that in France, bread is not just bread. It is baguette, flute, fiselle and pain.

There are certain things that can only be truly understood in the rich cultural context that gives birth to them.

In order to appreciate these things most fully, it is essential to "dwell" in the culture. You hold a bottle or a loaf in your hand and you begin to understand that there is more than meets the eye. This is nourishment and refreshment.

I see Madame Talbot coming from the bakery with her daily bread. I watch how she holds it, still warm in the paper wrapper, offering its yeasty aroma. I am reminded of the way old man Simeon in Saint Luke's Gospel held the Christ-child in his arms, blessing God, his heart full of joy.

And I ask myself, what would our experience of the sacred liturgy be like if we were able to embrace it as Simeon carried the Messiah? What if in every word, in every gesture we were able to touch the magnificent treasure that is presented to us? He is our Daily Bread!

Every culture has its own way of seeing things, of experiencing them, and of speaking about them.

The same is true for us Christians. Our Christian culture has its own symbols, its own language, its own lingo and vocabulary. The way Eskimos have many words to describe snow, the way the French have many names for bread, the way Italy feasts not just on pasta, but capellini and fusili and linguini, we have a language that captures in a word or a phrase the essence of what we believe: "The Body of Christ." "Amen." This Christian language with its word and symbols is our own heritage and it is present to us every time the Church prays.

For me, this is the fascinating thing about the liturgy. It is so rich. And at the same time, it should not be passed over as if it were already understood. Ritual offers its sweet fragrance every time.

When I think of Simeon in that precious moment, for which he faithfully waited his entire life, I cannot help but also think of the prophetess Anna, and her silent fidelity, witness to grace, praying in the shadows, persistent nonetheless. Their life-long pursuit, attention to the will of the God, filled with patience as well as hope and expectation, is the example for us all. This encounter is the crossroads of young and old, of innocent and learned, of a weary light dimming even as a new, more brilliant light emerges. And thinking of these two faithful souls, brings me to the prayer repeated night after night by the Church, the Nunc Dimittis, which makes these words, placed on the lips of the faithful, echo across the centuries: "Now, Master, you can dismiss you servant! My own eyes have seen your salvation." All of these things are woven together in that one instant of the liturgy.

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Every grandparent knows the experience of Simeon and Anna: you hold in your hands the future. But this precious child is not the future only. A baby is also the past.

Embrace the liturgy as Simeon the Christ-child. Hold Christ. Hold him in your heart, savoring all the meaning. Do not take him into yourself without bringing to mind all that this communion means. For us Catholics, bread is more than flour and water, wine is more than crushed grape.

What should be running through the mind of every Catholic during the liturgy? What does the Church want us to understand when we do certain things? What should we be thinking when we bow? On what should we reflect when the liturgy calls for silence? What connections are to be made between what we see and hear and say and do? The Church has its own culture which expresses itself in the liturgy. To be able to enter more deeply into the liturgy we must live in that Christian culture.