



The Liturgical Theology of Aidan Kavanagh

An essay by

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1 - Introduction

Kavanagh says that the Church in her liturgies should always strive for a celebration of a life of 'right worship' which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This '*is a life whose enactment is festive, ordered, aesthetic, canonical, eschatological and normal.*'¹

This essay, presents an explanation and critical evaluation of liturgical theology in the writings of Fr. Aidan Kavanagh OSB (1929-2006). He was a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, renowned author of liturgical texts, and most famous as the leading figure of the appropriation of the Second Vatican Council's liturgical reform in the United States. Kavanagh was a Professor of Liturgy in Meinrad School of Theology, Notre Dame and Yale where he remained until his retirement.² His three primary books on Liturgy are his seminal work, *On Liturgical Theology*,³ his guidebook, *Elements of Rite*⁴ and *The Shape of Baptism*.⁵

Firstly, I will examine Kavanagh's formulations of liturgical theology.

Secondly, the emphasis of Liturgy for Kavanagh will be outlined. The end-view of a Liturgical celebration as per Kavanagh's perspective will be assessed.

Thirdly, in *Theology through Liturgy: The Rite Stuff*, we will express Kavanagh's theological, anthropological and linguistically understanding of theology.

Finally, we will examine Kavanagh's understands of liturgy, it is a growing and changing context for the primordial experience of God's presence in us and revelation to us.

2 – Kavanagh's Method and Formulations of Liturgical Theology

In *Elements of Rite*, Kavanagh takes us through a thorough analysis on best liturgical practice. He identifies all the aspects, be they material (like the placement of chairs in churches) or characteristics of the presider (he should never be worried when celebrating a liturgy for instance), that are inappropriate, incompatible or un-edifying for a sincere, solemn, simple liturgy to be celebrated with dignity, meaning and comprehensibility.

All this requires diligence, right disposition, proper preparation and a sense of detachment; for the liturgical celebration of Mass is fundamentally orientated to a supreme

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: the Hale memorial lectures at Seabury-Western theological Seminary, 1981*, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), p. 175-176.

² http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/liturgylibrary/50AnnivCSL/Liturgical_Pioneer_Handouts/Aidan_Kavanagh.pdf (Accessed 20.11.2014)

³ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: the Hale memorial lectures at Seabury-Western theological Seminary, 1981*, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984).

⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A handbook of liturgical style*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982).

supernatural purpose: namely to primarily; give praise, honour and glory to God; to secondly; allow us to plead for the reparation of our sins; and to thirdly; help spiritually strengthen, save and sanctify us.

Marmion says that the Holy Sacrifice (of the Mass) is a source of confidence and pardon,⁶ and nourishment for us. It is a true sacrifice, the same as the Sacrifice of Calvary, which it reproduces and continues and the fruit of which it applies.⁷ In many ways, Marmion and Kavanagh are similar in terms of the theological significance of our encounter with Christ in a liturgy.

Kavanagh specifies no no's – like overhead projectors or any audio-visual aids, esp. moving pictures⁸ during liturgical ceremonies, 'missalettes' should not be on the sanctuary⁹, and emphasises and advocates proper architectural design that is conducive to prayer¹⁰, for example, no carpets in churches!¹¹, furniture should be kept to a minimum; decorations should be proportional to the space and the ceremony. These are things I find myself strongly agreeing with, and are indicative of the high regard Kavanagh held for liturgy and for its theological impact at a personal level for the individual partaking in a liturgy.

3 – *The Emphasis of Liturgy for Kavanagh*

A liturgy is a service to God and offered to humanity. A liturgy via its Rites is an articulation of our tradition and theology. We can sometimes approach this beautiful tradition with biases. Kavanagh outlined his biases, or better put his liturgical background as coming from:

“...a deeply sacramental tradition of orthodox, which means first ‘right worship’ and only secondly doctrinal accuracy. This is very radical. It implies that worship conceived broadly is what gives rise to theological reflection, rather than the other way around.”¹²

Orthodoxy is right worship first and doctrine second. Kavanagh was a liturgical scholar. He was more at home in the iconic East than in the pictorial west: as pictures are all about meaning, while icons are all about being.¹³

⁵ Aidan Kavanagh, *The shape of baptism: the rite of Christian initiation*, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978).

⁶ Bl. Columba Marmion, *Christ, the Life of the Soul*, trans. Alan Bancroft, originally published in 1917 as *Le Christ, Vie de l'âme*, (Herfordshire: Gracewing, 2005), p. 343.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁸ Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite*, p. 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite*, p. 21.

¹² Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Kavanagh contrasts eastern with western celebrations. In the west, congregations are passive, seated in pews with texts before them; while in the east, there is more open movement, sense experience, contemplation and individual initiative.¹⁴ One can argue, we are deprived the richness of a full, conscious and actively engaging liturgy in the west.

4- Theology through Liturgy: The Rite Stuff

Not every prayer is liturgical, but rite includes prayer without being reducible to this form of discourse alone. Rite means more than liturgical customs. It could be called a whole style of Christian life, which is to be found in the myriad particularities of worship, in canonical law, in ascetical and monastic structures, in evangelical and catechetical endeavours, and in particular ways of theological reflection.¹⁵

Kavanagh understands liturgy as an experience of being brought ‘to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God.’¹⁶ He observes that: ‘what results in the first instance from (liturgical) experience is deep change in the very lives of those who participate in the liturgical act. And deep change will affect their next liturgical act, however slightly.’ Kavanagh does not what the nature of this deep change might be. But, change builds upon change. ‘This adjustment causes the next liturgical act to be in some degree different from its predecessor because those who do the next act have been unalterably changed.’ The liturgical rites evolve gradually in response to this ever-changing experience. ‘It is the *adjustment* that is theological in all this.’¹⁷

Kavanagh argues that:

Theology at its genesis is communitarian, even proletarian; that it is aboriginally liturgical in context, partly conscious and partly unconscious; that it stems from an experience of near chaos; that it is long term and dialectical; and that its agents are more likely to be chairwomen and shopkeepers than pontiffs and professors.¹⁸

Kavanagh writes that: “My thesis is that although the liturgy does indeed ‘teach,’ it teaches as any other ritual does – experientially, non-discursively, richly, ambiguously, and elementally.”¹⁹ This is Key to understanding Kavanagh’s conception of the role of liturgy.

Kavanagh grounds his perspectives in a phenomenology of ritual that is based on the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss,²⁰ by referring to Lévi-Strauss’ theory of language.²¹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 74.

¹⁷ http://ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_lexorandi.pdf (Accessed 23.11.2014): p. 16.

¹⁸ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 74-75.

¹⁹ Aidan Kavanagh, ‘*Teaching through the Liturgy*,’ in *Notre Dame Journal of Education* 5 (1973), p. 35-49.

Kavanagh suggests that when exploring a liturgy different from one's previous experience, one must 'learn new vocabulary, alien grammar, different syntax.'²²

To be clear: Kavanagh is not interested in the meaning of linguistics in liturgy, but his focus is on the structure of a liturgy. Citing the doctrinal control in the liturgical conformity that developed following the Council of Trent, Kavanagh is insistent that the structure of a liturgy is timeless and thus transcends the context where that liturgy is celebrated / offered. He sums it up when he says that when doctrine controls the liturgy, it does violence to the underlying structure.²³

This unwarranted separation between doctrine and liturgy allows 'second order' doctrinal language to take priority over first order liturgical language. Then the liturgy is associated with the aesthetic and educational functions of theology, i.e. the liturgy is reduced to and is controlled by doxological *envoi*. To Kavanagh this is nonsense.²⁴

Liturgy, for Kavanagh is an insight into the revelation of God in a way that is privileged and unique. Liturgy is an experience that stands apart from the Tradition. For Kavanagh, liturgy is the source from which theology draws. Kavanagh understands the liturgy to be a growing and changing context for the primordial experience of God's presence in us and revelation to us.²⁵

Kavanagh warns us that theological reflection is dead without the living experience of God's presence.²⁶

²⁰ For more on this, refer to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, (New York; Anchor Books, 1967).

²¹ http://ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_lexorandi.pdf (Accessed 23.11.2014), p. 17.

²² Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, p. 80.

²³ http://ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_lexorandi.pdf (Accessed 23.11.2014), p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

5 - Conclusion: *The Service of the Liturgy for Theology*

The liturgy serves as both a reflection of theology, and as a norm for theological articulation. Correctly understood, liturgical theology is part of the theological articulation of the faith. This distinguishes it from liturgical studies, which is a descriptive study. The ancient adage ‘Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi’²⁷ is a central focus of the consideration of the relationship between liturgical theology and dogmatic theology. How the adage has been understood and applied will give insight into the contemporary relationship between liturgy and theology.²⁸

Kavanagh, apart from having a great sense of humour²⁹, makes an important point when he insisted that every religious experience changes us, and that we bring about that change – which he calls an adjustment – to our subsequent religious experiences, theological reflections and ministry.³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁷ This phrase in Latin literally means the law of prayer (‘the way we worship’) is the law of belief (‘what we believe’). This is often expanded as: ‘Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi’ which translates as: ‘As we Worship, so we Believe, so we live.’ Source: <http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=39029> (Accessed 23.11.2014)

²⁸ http://ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_lexorandi.pdf (Accessed 23.11.2014), p. 1-2.

²⁹ In 1994, as he prepared to retire, Kavanagh wrote of what he had himself learned: “The World is not without its follies, some of them lethal; academics are not immaculately conceived; religiosity is a form of immaturity that is rarely innocent; do not argue in footnotes; dress for dinner; use adjectives only as a last resort; don’t take theology too seriously; listen *hard* to Mrs. Murphy; bean sprouts and tofu are overrated; respect authority and keep your vows; things you can afford are usually not worth it; tradition and language don’t mean much unless you master them; grow up; love God, honour the Church, suffer bishops; stay off television; read the *New York Times* only for its comics . . . do something politically incorrect every day to stay in shape for the *Eschaton*.” [\(https://catholicsensibility.wordpress.com/2007/02/10/rememering-aidan-kavanagh/](https://catholicsensibility.wordpress.com/2007/02/10/rememering-aidan-kavanagh/) (Accessed 20.11.2014)

³⁰ http://ecumenism.net/archive/jesson_lexorandi.pdf (Accessed 23.11.2014), p. 20.

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