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Liturgy as a Mirror and Answer to Collective Fears

(14th – 16th c.)

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At the time of the Great Schism, the Avignon Pope Clement VII promoted the mass *Salva nos fac* to prompt a reunification of Western Christianity. The terrible fear of a disintegration of the ecclesial body prompted powerful responses, i.e., liturgical ones. By expressing the collective fear in the ordinary mode of relation between humanity and the divinity, the Pope hoped to thwart the threat and restore confidence in the Church. The strategy seemed to seduce a lot of bishops and chapters, since such masses are widespread in the liturgical books of the 14th-16th centuries.

As late as the mid-1500's, liturgy is still thought to be a most efficient way to fight or ward off what terrifies the Christian community.

In most cases when a liturgical response is called in, "liturgy" means "votive mass", that is, a celebration ordered for certain grave occasions. It is then an addition to the ordinary set of prayers, chants and lectures constituting the main core of the eucharistic cult.

Votive masses are our main concern here, but I shall also refer occasionally to the office of Hours since it also contains elements relative to the soothing of collective fears.

This contribution wishes to study how liturgy can both reflect the collective fears of Christianity and appease it. I do not pretend here to do an exhaustive examination of the relationships between anxiety, or fear, and the organized cult of western Christianity. Rather, I hope to present an overview of the motivations and mechanisms fostering the recourse to liturgy in time of fear. The period under scrutiny is from the 14th to the 16th century, allowing an examination of both manuscripts and printed liturgical books. I will also focus on Catholic liturgy, for the sake of clarity, although the topic could easily be extended to liturgies of the Reformation.

Using samples as methodology, I will first give examples of the fears prompting a liturgical response and the reasons for it. In this section, I shall also discuss the efficiency of liturgy and the goal for using it, that is, preserving the organic body of the Church.

A second point of this contribution will examine issues summoned by the universal or the more localized practice of liturgy against collective fears. The evolution of the liturgical forms will also be taken into consideration.

I. WHICH FEARS PROMPTED A LITURGICAL RESPONSE AND WHY ?

A. What are the threats concerned ?

Basically every aspects of human life can become a subject of a liturgical celebration, even the more mundane. It is not uncommon in the 14th-16th century to find masses to make it rain (*pro pluvia postulanda*) or to obtain a « serene air » (*pro aeris serenitate*), that is, to quench a storm, such as in the 1534 missal from Avranches, in Normandy.

However, some fears expressed by the liturgical forms of the votive masses were far from trivial. They wish to adress very potent threats ; dangers that threaten the body and the soul of the individual, but also those of the whole society. Three of those threats in particular generated both individual and collective fears, for they touched the uttermost disruption : severing the link between humanity and the divine. The Black Plague, the « Pagans » - which are to understand mainly in our period as the Ottomans – and the Great Schism all poses threats against the invididuals and against the whole society, or at least, the whole community of the Church.

The production of a specific liturgy is a constant feature of our period. In 1309, pope Clement V (1305–1314) adapts the very old *Missa contra paganos* to a new situation : the « widening seizures of the Holy Land by the impious hands of pagans » (his words, here quoted after Cecilia Gaposshkin). A few decades later, in 1348, pope Clement VI (1342-1352) is confronted by the upsurge of the Black Plague and reacts, among other decisions, in promulgating the *Recordare domine* mass. When the Avignon pope Clement VII (1378-1394) has to find a way to solve the problem of the Great Schism, he turns himself to liturgy and promotes the mass *Salva nos fac*. Later on, the Council of Basel foster the celebration of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary in 1441 in order to end the division inside the Church. Finally, when pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) autorizes again this celebration in 1475, one of his goals is to fight spiritually against the Ottomans.

What is the content of those specific masses or offices ? To take that example only, the reason for celebrating the mass against the Plague (*Recordare domine*) is the fear of God's anger. The *Introït* song and the lecture of the Old testament both refers to 2 Kings 24 :15-25, in which David chooses a three-day plague as a punishment for his disobedience against God. The collect prayer reflects the hope of the Christians that God's ultimate wish is not to exterminate all of them, but that many sinners convert themselves. Thus it asks that the Lord carry away the wip of his anger.

The second part of the mass has a less terrified overtone : the gradual and the alleluia verse express confidence in God's curing power and in its goodness. The New Testament lecture tells about how Christ cured the sick after he leaved the synagoga (Luc. 4 :38-44). The communion song mentions it as well. The offertory and the *secreta* prayer both mention the necessity of a sacrifice to obtain God's grace and help during a plague.

This formulary is a good example of the motivations for instituting a mass specifically destined to stop the epidemy of Black Death. Fear of God's punishment and confidence in its

ability to stop it and cure its effects are the two main themes of this celebration. It is a way to cope with the fear.

B. The justification of the use of liturgy

Why liturgy ? Why is it deemed necessary to add specific celebrations to address those issues ? The reactions of individuals when confronted to a major cause of fear vary a lot. It has been shown by previous research that the reactions can range from flight to a rapid surge of nuptiality or sexuality ; it can be a hunt of scapegoats deemed responsible for the threat, or a resort to violent ascetism being caused by God's will to punish unrepentent sinners. Recent research on the topic of the Black Death has shown the importance of what we would call non-conventional countermeasure to fight the Plague. Christopher Macklin and Remy Chiu for example have emphasized how music was used in such a context. Liturgy is one of the main tools available against collective fears. Its official character is a way to institutionalise the various reactions of the individuals and to channel them toward an acceptable behaviour. When fear disorganizes social structures, the spiritual recourse is considered quite efficient.

Just as Arne Ohrvik said yesterday about the Black Books, the typical words expressing negative emotions are rarely found expressively in the texts. Occasionnaly though, it happens.

We can see it, for example, in the deliberations of the 43rd session of the Council of Basel, concerning the Feast of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, the motivations for promoting it are exposed. Although the Council acknowledges that many liturgical celebrations of Mary already exists, it explains that considering the « abundant major calamities and anguishes of the world » (*dietim maioribus mundi calamitatibus et angustiis*), it is urgent to ask for her help. A similar formula is repeated a few lines later : the Council, taking into account the pains and anguishes of the *Christianitas* (*christininitas in laboribus et angustiis constituta cernatur*) that brought wars and divisions everywhere in humankind, decides the universal celebration of the Visitation. It explicitly says that the ultimate goal of this recourse to the Virgin is to make her convince Christ to bring back the peace and unity that the many sins of mankind broke. Thus, a spiritual impairment can be fixed by a spiritual mean. Liturgy is the ordinary mode of communication with God. Therefore, when an earthly event such as a war causes a disruption of this communication, it is important to repair it.

Another example : in the lessons for the office of the Visitation composed by the english cardinal Adam Easton at the end of the 1380s and used in Sweden, the second lesson asks that the Virgin become « quickly the advocate » (*promptissima advocata*) of Christians and that she be the « one who repairs the ways » to God (*viatorum reparatrix*).

In the bull *Pia mater ecclesia* of the Avignon pope Clement VI instituting the *Salva nos fac* mass to solve the problem of the Schism, we read that the « odious schism » causes an « ineffable suffering of the world buried in anguish and bitterness ». The pope then justify the necessary recourse to liturgy : « considering that the believers wait and hope for a solution less from a human mean than from a humble and confident prayer », this mass must be sung

every Thursday of each month. According to Clement VI, the Christians expect a spiritual response to the Schism.

If nothing is done to reestablish the spiritual link with the divine, a harsh punishment await the whole society. Many scriptural examples warns the sinners of the fate they encour : in Exodus 32:9-10, « “I HAVE SEEN THESE PEOPLE,” THE LORD SAID TO MOSES, “AND THEY ARE A STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE. NOW LEAVE ME ALONE SO THAT MY ANGER MAY BURN AGAINST THEM AND THAT I MAY DESTROY THEM » ; or in Deuteronomy 6:15-16 : « ... HIS [GOD’S] ANGER WILL BURN AGAINST YOU, AND HE WILL DESTROY YOU FROM THE FACE OF THE LAND. DO NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST... ».

On the contrary, those who repent and change their ways bring mercy on them, such as in Jonah 3:9-10 : « AND GOD SAW THEIR WORKS, THAT THEY WERE TURNED FROM THEIR EVIL WAY, AND GOD HAD MERCY ON THEM ». In this perspective, the atonement of individual sins and the collective penitence of the Christian society is then an absolute emergency.

Among the measures taken to avoid a frightening fate, ecclesiastical authorities can ask for an effort on private penance of individual sinners. However, many sinners resent a collective spiritual retribution when they personally don’t feel responsible for. This may explain why, for example, the archbishop of York William Zouche, orders in 1348 that processions and prayers are to be said everywhere in England so

« that he, the kind and merciful Almighty God, should turn away his anger and remove the pestilence and drive away the infection from the people... ».

Processions are indubitably collective ; acting to fix a collective problem.

In 1375, Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, also requests penitential processions and prayers :

« Would that those who profess themselves zealous for peace, who give their attention to the mortality, pestilence or epidemic now reigning in England... could be persuaded to pour out unceasing prayers to the most high for the cessation of this pestilence or epidemic and for the tranquillity of peace, and to entreat mercy of him with a humble heart. For prayer is an immediate defence, an immolation of the enemy, a solace to angels and a pleasing sacrifice to God, and assiduous appeals for mercy made by a just man very often carry great power ».

As Jean Delumeau pointed out, when confronted by a scourge of divine origin, individual procedures of penitence were insufficient. A whole town or country was guilty ; the need for public acts of penitence and collective entreaties was strong. Liturgy, in this regard, adds up to the individual prayers and penitence and embodies the collective penitence. After all, everyone was concerned by a major crisis.

The efficiency of liturgy is deemed real. God is both the origin and cure of a disaster ; adressing adequate prayers or demands to it is of primary importance. There is a performative dimension in liturgy which makes it efficient for those who prescribe and for those who use it. The enunciation of better times in a liturgical celebration has a programmatic character. The Old Testament reading for the mass of the Visitation in the Swedish dioceses of Linköping

and Åbo (Turku) is ECCE ISTE VENIT SALIENS (Cant. 2:8). It is the lecture prescribed by the mass for the Visitation of the Roman pope Urban VI. The core of this reading is constituted by a verse (Cant. 2:11-12) : « FOR BEHOLD, THE WINTER IS PAST, THE RAIN IS OVER AND GONE, THE FLOWERS APPEAR ON THE EARTH, THE TIME OF SINGING HAS COME ». The time of hardships has disappeared ; here comes the time of renewal. The declaration is apotropaic in character and illustrates well the performative dimension of liturgy.

The ultimate goal of those liturgical measures is to preserve the organic body of the Church. The fear of a disintegration of the Corpus Ecclesiae is potent enough that the different popes, councils or individual prelates produce masses and offices specifically aimed at preventing it. In the bull *Pia mater ecclesia* instituting the mass *Salva nos fac*, the pope explains that the Schism tears away « Christ's unsewn shirt ». In the fifth lesson of Sixtus IV officium for the Visitation of the Virgin, we read that, while the Church was threatened by a terrible schism which had « broken down the members of Christ », the feast had not been universally accepted.

The bull of the same pope promulgating the feast, *Praeclara meritorum insignia*, explicitly says that the Church of God is a body in immediate danger of division (*scissura*), that the Christian people in assembly, which have for a long time suffer, forms the members of this body.

The usefulness and efficiency of liturgy against collective fears can be justified by the issues at stake.

II. SPACE AND TIME PERSPECTIVES IN THE USE OF LITURGY AGAINST COLLECTIVE FEARS

A. Universal and local perspectives

So far, we have seen examples of both universal (popes and councils) and local (York and Canterbury) decisions to use liturgy against collective fears. But liturgy was hardly unified, or even homogenic, in the 14th-16th century. How are the universal decisions received locally ?

An example of an effective promulgation is the *Recordare* mass against the Plague. It is almost always introduced in the books by a rubric explaining its origin and the objectives of celebrating it :

« Mass to ask to be spared from the Plague, insituted and established by pope Clement the 6th, with the collegium of cardinals, year of the Lord 1348. The pope conceded to all who hear or say this mass 260 days of indulgence. All of those who hear the aforementioned mass must carry a lighted candel for 5 consecutive days and they could not be stricken by sudden death. This is certain and approved in Avignon and the region of Avignon ».

The mass *Recordare* is almost omnipresent. For example, at the scale of one ecclesiastical Province such as Rouen (Normandy), a sampling on 18 missals printed for the 7 normand dioceses between 1488 and 1548 shows that at least 9 books contains the mass. This strong presence is an indicator of the success of the liturgical prescription as well as of the permanence of the fear generated by the Plague.

However, the existence of an official celebration doesn't mean that it will be the only one favored locally. When the fear is particularly strong, we observe a tendency to pile up several formularies with the same object. For example, in a missal for the normand diocese of Bayeux (1503), five votive masses aim at ward off the Plague : the *Recordare* mass, a mass to Saint Sebastian, to St Roch, and also to St Antony of Padua and to the Five Wounds. In a printed missal for another normand diocese, Avranches (1534), two formularies are *contra pestem* : the *Recordare* mass and the *Salus populi ego* mass, whose rubric says it is useful « *pro quacumque tribulatione* » and has been used at several occasions against the Plague. The superfluous character of those votive masses is hardly a unique case. One mass only is considered insufficient when a major collective fear is concerned.

To sum up, a collective fear can be the object of a (would be) universal decision, but the local reception can be unequivocal as well as an adaptation to the specific needs of a community. No homogenous pattern can be observe in such respect.

B. Temporary and Cyclical perspectives

Why some threats [prompt] the production of a full mass, while others are merely treated by processions and calls to individual penance ?

I argue that if a threat is perceived as a one-time event, of exceptional nature, the liturgical and spiritual measures prescribed are public processions and private penance. If, on the contrary, the threat establishes itself in time, or reappears on a regular basis, then a full specific votive mass is more likely to be written and prescribed.

There is a constant actualisation of liturgy. For example, between the printed missals for Sées of 1488 and the one of 1548, the *missa pro pace* has become a *missa pro bello contra paganos* (here, the Protestants). The fear doesn't need to have the same object, what is important is how to soothe it down with liturgy.

We have seen that the mass *ad tollendum schisma, Salva nos fac*, has quickly spread in France. This mass not only has spread rapidly ; it also *stays* on the books, even when the problem it is deemed to solve no longer exists. The votive mass *Salva nos fac* largely exceeds the immediate object of the Schism. More than a century after the end of the Great Schism, the printed missal for Avranches, in Normandy (1534), still contains a set of prayers relatives to the *Salva nos fac* mass against the schism. One of the possible explanation for the continuous presence of prayers against the Schism is the permanence of fear about a resurgence of the division of the Church.

In the printed missal for the Swedish diocese of Uppsala of 1513, several new masses are added since the last edition of a local missal, in 1484. It includes a *missa pro pace* ; one *contra paganos* ; one *pro mortalitate et pestilentia avertenda*, among others. This is one more example of the actualization of liturgical books, but it also shows the prophylactic properties of liturgy. The rubric « *pro mortalitate et pestilentia avertenda* » indicates that eventhough no immediate plague threatens Sweden, a mass *contra pestem* can be celebrated as a prevention.

Once the masses are written in liturgical books, they can stay for a long time, especially if the threat is cyclical. A festive missal of 1620 intitulated « Missel pour le temps de pestilence » contains the mass *Recordare*, a « mass against present death, a mass for the Five Wounds, for St Roch, Sebastian, Adrian and Antony ». This show that the 1348 mass prescribed by pope Clement, for the immediate needs of quelling the Plague, has become a permanent spiritual tool against an the multiple resurgences of the Plague.

Finally, to conclude, we have seen that the fears prompting a liturgical reaction are the ones that comes with a threat against both the individuals and the collective. The issue at stake is to preserve the Ecclesial body and the link with God. Liturgy is used because it is thought to be the most efficient response to the threat, as well as being a potent mean of soothing a collective fear. Although the prescription of liturgy at a universal level is sometimes effective, there is a local adaptation that can either reduce or expand its reception. Finally, the apotropaïc, or prophylactic, character of liturgy has been shown in regard to the regularity of the occurrences of a threat and the fear it carries.