

Liturgical Year in Religious Communities

Introduction

Liturgical Year is the commemoration of the mystery of *Išo Mšiha*, in the span of one year, and therefore it is of immense help for enabling the believers to participate in the mystery of *Išo Mšiha*. It is the yearly plan of the Church, arranged in different seasons, as a help for her children, in their heavenward journey.¹ The living up of the mysteries of *Išo Mšiha* is the practical aspect of the liturgical year.² A fruitful participation in it contributes to the growth of the spiritual life of the believers. It is all the more true about the religious whose entire life is committed to the participation in the mystery of *Išo Mšiha*.

Syro-Malabar Church is a Church which is flourished with her sons and daughters of consecrated life. They are doing active services within India and abroad. Fostering of their ecclesial and liturgical life is the duty of their Mother Church. At the same time flourishing and flowering of the ecclesial as well as liturgical tradition of the Mother Church is the duty of each and every religious.

In this context I would like to present some practical suggestions for the ideal celebration of the liturgical year in the religious communities, which help them to nourish their spiritual life and promote the liturgical and ecclesial tradition of their Mother Church.

1. Secular Calendar and the Liturgical Calendar

In our natural life everything is measured and repeated in the course of a year. When the secular calendar presents the history of the world through days and dates, the liturgical calendar presents the mystery of salvation accomplished by the work of the Holy Trinity in the course of history. Because of this even if the liturgical calendar flows along with the secular calendar, to a certain extent it is different and transcendent.³

2. History of Salvation

The history of salvation, for the Eastern Churches, is manifested through the inter-related celebration of six events, namely, the Nativity-Epiphany, Resurrection, Pentecost,

¹ J.MOOLAN, *Liturgical Year Syro-Malabar Church* (Vadavathoor, 2013) 16. Hereafter, Moolan, *Liturgical Year*.

² MOOLAN, *Liturgical Year*, 17.

³ V.PATHIKULANGARA, *Divine Praises and Liturgical Year* (Kottayam, 2000) 107. Hereafter, PATHIKULANGARA, *Divine Praises*.

Transfiguration, Exaltation of the Cross and the Parousia.⁴ It is on this foundation the liturgical year of the Eastern Churches is formulated.

3. Liturgical Year

The mystery of salvation, accomplished by the Father, in *Išo Mšiha*, with the work of the Holy Spirit, is wholly and fully re-enacted in every Eucharistic Sacrifice celebrated in the community of the faithful. Every community when it takes part in this most sublime and divine action has to experience its own salvation through the salvific acts of *Išo Mšiha*. But due to our human limitations, we are unable to grasp and realize the fullness of the grace of the mystery of salvation in one action.⁵ So each Individual Church has made some definitive arrangements for the re-enactment of the salvific actions accomplished in history. The basic structure of this arrangement is the Liturgical Year – a celebration of the whole salvation history within the limit of a year.⁶

4. Religious Life

From the first centuries, the Holy Spirit has stirred up, side by side with the heroic confession of the martyrs, the wonderful strength of disciples and virgins, of hermits and anchorites. Religious life already existed in germ, and progressively it felt the growing need of developing and of taking on different forms of community or solitary life, in order to respond to the pressing invitation of Christ: "There is no one who has left house, wife, brothers, parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not be given repayment many times over in this present time, and, in the world to come, eternal life."⁷

According to *Pawlos Sliha*, the followers of *Išo Mšiha*, take up the responsibility of cosmic transformation, not by conforming themselves to the patterns of this world, but by transcending them. This is a call to present one's bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God. He counts it as a spiritual worship. The cosmic transformation is the result of the renewal of one's mind to prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12,1-2). Although it is a challenge to all *Mesihites* (Christians), the religious traditions have taken this challenge in a radical manner.

At the heart of the religious discipline are the sanctification of time and the renewal of the inner man by unceasing prayer.⁸ Religious life cannot be sustained without a deep life of prayer,

⁴ PATHIKULANGARA, *Divine Praises*, 130.

⁵ C. VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Minnesota, 1959) 95-96.

⁶ P.YOUSIF, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality: Liturgical, Ecclesial and Theological Dimensions," in A.Thottakkara, ed., "*East Syrian Spirituality*," (Banglore, 1990) 5-6. Hereafter, YOUSIF, An Introduction.

⁷ PAUL VI, *On the Renewal of the Religious Life according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council* (1971)

⁸ V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Church in India* (Kottayam, 1986) 63. Hereafter, PATHIKULANGARA, *Church*.

individual, communal, and liturgical.⁹ Christian prayer depends on our continually looking to Christ, talking with him, being silent with him, listening to him, doing and suffering with him¹⁰. It is in concentrating upon God, encounter him as a living person,¹¹ in the person of *Išo Mšiha* in prayer that this renewal or transformation of both the individual and the community come into its fulfillment.¹²

5. Practical Suggestions for better celebration of the Liturgical Year in Religious Communities

We can say that religious life stands as a “*Quddasa*”, a “sacrament”, a “sign” a “paradigm”, a “symbol of the heavenly kingdom”, a “transfiguration”¹³. This is so because this state manifests in a special way the transcendence of the kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things, bringing home to all men the immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sovereignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit which works so marvelously in the Church (L.G.44). This role of the religious is in the Church and with the Church because religious life is a gift of God which the Church has received from her Lord (L.G.43).

5.1. Structure of the Church

The ancients readily compared the monastic life with that of the angels, it was, among other reasons, because the angels are the "liturgists" of God. The liturgy, where earth is united with heaven, and which therefore provides a kind of foretaste of the celestial liturgy.¹⁴ Palli (Church) is for the celebration of the liturgy. It is the place and privileged means for celebrating, in the name of the Church, in adoration, joy, and thanksgiving, the work of salvation wrought by Christ, a memory of which is periodically offered to us in the unfolding of the liturgical year (Cf. L.G. 48, 50; S.C. 5,8,9,10).¹⁵ Without the adequate structure, how one can celebrate the divine mysteries represented in signs and symbols in the Church? So the structure of the churches of religious communities must be in accordance with the tradition of the Mother Church. This will help the religious to live and experience the mystery of salvation celebrated in the liturgical year through signs and symbols.

⁹ SACRED CONGREGATION for RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate* (Vatican, 1983) No.28. Hereafter SACRED CONGREGATION, *Essential Elements*.

¹⁰ J. RATZINGER, *The Feast of Faith* (San Francisco, 1986) 28. Hereafter RATZINGER, *The Feast of Faith*.

¹¹ RATZINGER, *The Feast of Faith*, 28.

¹² PATHIKULANGARA, *Church*, 63.

¹³ V. PATHIKULANGARA, "Monasticism," *Christian Orient* 3.3(1982) 101-103.

¹⁴ CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Directives of Formation in Religious Institutes*, 77. Hereafter CONGREGATION, *Directives*.

¹⁵ CONGREGATION, *Directives*, 77.

5.2. Study and Meditation on Liturgical Texts and Liturgical Seasons

Regular reading of and meditation on liturgical texts and liturgical seasons will immensely help the religious in their spiritual journey. We read in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II: "The, Church therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration"(SC 48). Daily self evaluation of one's liturgical life also will help one to foster one's ecclesial and liturgical spirituality.

5.3. Holy Qurbana

Holy Qurbana is the commemoration of the whole history of salvation, namely, the Incarnation, its background of Old Testament history, private and public life of *Išo Mšiha*, his passion, death, burial, resurrection, gift of the Holy Spirit, reconciliation of mankind with God and final union with him.¹⁶ "The commitment to take part daily in the Eucharistic Sacrifice will help religious to renew their self-offering to the Lord every day. Gathered in the Lord's name, religious communities have the Eucharist as their natural center. Devout participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, "the source and apex of all Christian life" (LG 11), is the irreplaceable center and animating force of the contemplative dimension of every religious community (cf. PC 6; ET 47-48).¹⁷

In Syro-Malabar tradition the structure of the Church -*Bet-Qudsa* with *Madbha* (Altar) and *Bet-Gazza*, *Qestroma*, *Haikala* with *Bema*, Baptistry, and Sacristy¹⁸ are essential for the experiential celebration of Holy Qurbana. Paten and Chalice, *Soseppa*, Lectionaries, (*Evangelion*, *Engarta*, *Qeriane*) *Taksa d'Qudasa*, *Censer*¹⁹ etc are also essential for the Holy Qurbana. The Church here stands as the symbol of earth as well as heaven where God revealed Himself through his salvific acts. Therefore in a church without its basic structure and liturgical celebration without its essential elements, we cannot celebrate the liturgy in its fullness.²⁰ So every religious community is obliged to observe the norms of our liturgical tradition for better liturgical experience.

5.4. Liturgy of the Hours(Divine Office)

"The divine office, because it is the public prayer of the Church, is a source of piety and nourishment for personal prayer" (SC 90). It is "designed to sanctify the whole course of the

¹⁶ V.PATHIKULANGARA, *Mar Thomma Margam* (Kottayam, 2004) 116. Hereafter PATHIKULANGARA, *Margam*.

¹⁷ The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life (Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (1980) No.9. Hereafter, The Contemplative Dimension.

¹⁸ PATHIKULANGARA, *Margam*, 123.

¹⁹ PATHIKULANGARA, *Margam*, 127.

²⁰ YOUSIF, *An Introduction*, 5-6.

day" (SC 84).²¹ It is the celebration of one's own commitment to *Išo Mšiha* according to the rhythm of liturgical seasons and the timings of the day.²² It is the Church's school of prayer.²³ It prepares and leads the faithful to the celebration of the Holy Qurbana and extends the spirit of the Holy Qurbana to the seven liturgical hours of the day, in effect to the whole day. All Religious must have the awareness that it is the official prayer of the Church. So it must be celebrated in religious communities, according to the directions of the Mother Church as solemn as possible.

If one feels practical difficulty in celebrating Liturgy of the Hours because of the community pieties as well as personal pieties he or she may avoid the practices of those pieties without any scrupulosity. This is so because Liturgical prayer is the prayer of the Church.

To do the work in collaboration with God's infinite creative activity one needs to have the 'ammanuel experience'. Prayer, especially liturgical prayer is the channel through which one enters into the divine milieu. Liturgy of the Hours helps one to be in touch with the infinite love of God revealed in history. Therefore, prayer and contemplation on fixed liturgical hours, is essential in religious communities. Seven times prayer²⁴ can be celebrated at least in formation houses and in all houses during retreat days. The following are the Seven Times Prayers.

رَمْسَا *Ramsa* 6 P.M

سُبَا'َا *Suba'a* 9 P.M.

لِيلْيَا *Lelya* 12 P.M.

قَالَا دَسَاهْرَا *Qala dsahra* 3 A.M

سَپْرَا *Sapra* 6 A.M.

قُوت'َاَا *Qut'aa* 9 A.M.

يَدْدَانَا *Eddana* 12 A.M.

5.5. Icons of the Liturgical Seasons

Icons are the meditative writings of divine mysteries which are revealed in the Holy Scripture. The fundamental principle of this art is a pictorial expression of the teaching of the Church, by representing concrete events of sacred History and indicating their inner meaning.

²¹ *The Contemplative Dimension*, No.12.

²² PALAMATTAM, *Archives of the Sisters of St. Thomas, Typikon and General Statutes* (1992) 16. Hereafter *Sisters of St. Thomas, Typikon*.

²³ R.TAFT, *The Liturgy of the Hours in the Christian East: Origins, Meaning, Place in the Life of the Church* (Rome) 273.

²⁴ V.PATHIKULANGARA, *Qala d-Shahra :Vigil Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church at 3.00* (Kottayam, 2010)12.

This art is intended not to reflect the problems of life but to answer to them, and thus, from its very inception, is a vehicle of the Gospel teaching.²⁵ Icons which were written basing on the spirit of the Liturgical Seasons are helpful to contemplate the divine mysteries. The chapels of the religious communities which are decorated with the Icons of the seasons are helpful in the liturgical catechism of their members as well as other believers.

5.6. Spiritual Exercises and Popular Devotions

Christian spirituality is fundamentally ecclesial and sacramental. There is no universal spirituality in the Church. Each individual Church has her own spirituality centered on her particular liturgical traditions (O.E. 3).

Retreats, recollections and meditations are important spiritual exercises for the fruitful spiritual life of the religious. Liturgy, reading of the Word of God and meditation together forms a cycle in the spiritual life of a religious. If one wishes to lead a life in tune with the spirituality of his/her Church or the spirit of the liturgical season of his/her Church, he/she must give prime importance to the Holy Qurbana and the Liturgy of the Hours. For recollections and retreats the Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy on Sundays could be used. Sunday readings open the treasury of the spirit of the season. On retreat days the celebration of the Holy Qurbana in its solemn form may be preferred.

Religious have their own spiritual exercises and popular devotions in common as well as personal. II Vatican Council says:

Popular devotions of the Christian people, provided they conform to the laws and norms of the Church, are to be highly recommended....But such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them (S.C.13).

So spiritual exercises and popular devotions of the religious must be infused with the spirit of the liturgical season, day and feasts. Private devotions are to be understood as personal endeavors to make oneself convinced of the reality and relevance of the salvation accomplished in *Išo Mšiha*. So religious must give prime importance to the official liturgy of the Church. Practicing spiritual exercises and popular devotions which are not in tune with the liturgical season e.g., monthly devotions and novena practices and the shortening of the official liturgy for the sake of devotions are serious deviations from the part of the religious.

²⁵ LEONID OUPENSKY AND VLADIMIR LOSSKY., *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G.E.H PALMER AND E. KADLOUBOVSKY (Crestwood, 1999) 27.

5.6.1. *Lectio Divina* (Spiritual Reading)

The religious are always enthusiastic in their spiritual growth. For this purpose they read many books. The books which foster the liturgical spirit of the season shall be included in their reading. Reading of the Word of God in the liturgy, reflection on it, and daily life in accordance with it will accelerate the spiritual growth with a stable liturgical basis. The writings of the Fathers of the Church also must regularly nourish the spiritual life of the religious.

Lectio divina is nourished by the word of God, where it finds its point of departure, and to which it returns. The seriousness of biblical study, for its part, guarantees the richness of the *lectio*. Whether this latter has for its object the text of the Bible itself, a liturgical text, or a great spiritual page of Catholic tradition, there is a faithful echo of the word of God, which must be heard and, perhaps, in the manner of the ancients, even murmured. This initiation requires courageous practice during the times of formation and all the further stages depend upon it.²⁶

5.6.2 Abstinence and Fasting

A generous asceticism is constantly needed for daily conversion to the Gospel (cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, 17 February 1966, II-III, 1, c). For this reason, religious communities must not only be prayerful groups but also ascetical communities in the Church. In addition to being internal and personal, penance must also be external and communal (cf. CDM 14; cf. SC 110).²⁷

Fasting is a spiritual medicine. Mar Thoma Nazranies considered fasting as the most important form of penance and the greatest means of God experience.²⁸ Religious are specially called to follow the rhythm of the liturgical cycle in fasting.

The commonly directed fasting days are 50 days fast before Resurrection,²⁹ 25 days fast before Nativity,³⁰ 15 days fast before Assumption,³¹ 8 days fast before *Mariam's* Nativity,³² 3 days fast in the period of *Denha*,³³ Friday and Wednesday fast with special prayers, abstinence

²⁶ CONGREGATION, *Directives* No.76.

²⁷ CONGREGATION, *Directives* No.14.

²⁸ N.J. KALAMBUKATTU, "Liturgical Spirituality of Thomas Christians," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians* 21.4 (2010) 32-54.

²⁹ P.J. PODIPARA, *Nammude Reethu*(Malayalam, Mannam,1958) 31-32,41-42; Here after PODIPARA, *Nammude Reethu.*, C. PAYNGOT, *Aradhanavadsaram*(Malayalam, Kottayam, 2001) 131-133. Here after PAYNGOT, *Aradhanavadsaram*.

³⁰ J. MOOLAN, *The Period of Annunciation- Nativity in the East Syrian Calender: Its Background and Place in the Liturgical Year*(Kottayam, 1985) 65., C. PAYNGOT, *Thirunalukal*(Malayalam, Kottayam,1999) 13. Here after PAYNGOT, *Thirunalukal*.

³¹ PODIPARA, *Nammude Reethu*, 41.

³² P.J. PODIPARA, *The Thomas Christians* (London,1970) 93., PAYNGOT, *Thirunalukal*, 330.

³³ C. PAYNGOT, *Malabar Sabbah Pudiya Velichathil* (Malayalam, Kottayam, 1995) 221-222.

and almsgiving.³⁴ Sunday, being the day of the Lord's resurrection, is considered as a non fasting day throughout the year.³⁵

5.7. Retreats for the preparation of Great Feasts

Special retreats can be conducted as a preparation for the great feasts basing on six events of the history of salvation, namely; the Nativity-Epiphany, Resurrection, Pentecost, Transfiguration, Exaltation of the Cross and the Parousia.³⁶ On these most important feast days of the liturgical year the most solemn form of the Holy Qurbana (the Raza) may be preferred.

5.7.1. Recollections Basing on the Liturgical Season

Our religious are really enthusiastic in conducting retreats and recollections. To make the religious community ecclesial and liturgical, they can arrange the recollections at the last day of each liturgical season as an evaluation of that liturgical season and as a preparation for the liturgical season to come. Selection of retreat preachers also is very important. Preachers must be selected from the same liturgical tradition. This will help to celebrate the authentic liturgy of the Mother Church in its solemnity.

Celebration of the Holy Qurbana and the Liturgy of the Hours must be considered as the heart and soul of every retreat. Preaching should help the effective participation in the Holy Qurbana as well as Liturgy of the Hours. The preacher should create a stable and progressive spirituality in his hearers basing on the prayers, symbols and mysteries revealed in the prayers of the Church.

5.8. Sunday Celebration

Sunday is the first day of the week and the Lord's Day.³⁷ As fathers of the Church proclaim, it is also the 8th day of the week, namely the eschatological day i.e., the day of Resurrection.³⁸ Hence it must be celebrated most solemnly and its spirit must be diffused to the other days of the week.³⁹

³⁴ G.NEDUNGATT, *Spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church*, in A.Thottakkara ed., *East Syrian Spirituality* (Banglore,1990)183.*Sisters of St. Thomas, Typikon*, 18.,

³⁵ V. PATHIKULANGARA, "Liturgical Spirituality of St. Thomas Christians," *The Harp* 21 (2006) 104.

³⁶ PATHIKULANGARA, *Divine Praises*, 130.

³⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Dies Domini*, 1.

³⁸ MOOLAN, *Liturgical Year*, 59.

³⁹ *Sisters of St. Thomas, Typikon*, 17; P. KANNOOKADAN, *The East Syrian Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome, 1991) 157., MOOLAN, *Liturgical Year*, 59., PAYNGOT, *Thirunalukal*, 248..

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