

## **Locating Liturgy: Worship in Its Contexts: Gay and Lesbian**

Good ritual is an expression of spirituality. It is as much a spiritual practice as is meditation. If ritual is alive and engaging, it can be one of the ways a person can move toward wholeness and holiness. For gay persons it can be the antidote to so much of the denigration of their bodies that they feel and that they inherited from family, society, and the church.

By gathering in community to engage in symbolic action we can open the door to discovering ourselves so that we might experience the full life that is ours to live: everything from the pleasures of life, that we were often taught to deny ourselves, to the sorrows of our humanity that we have sought to escape.<sup>1</sup>

The celebration of the liturgy brings with it hundreds of years of tradition, the experience of the Christian community since its foundation, carrying in its prayers and structure the pattern of centuries of Christian living with its struggles and victories. Through the centuries the liturgy has been a primary liminal experience for so many, a place where they could live temporarily on the margins, freed from the oppressive structures of society and its institutions. Unfortunately, the liturgy has not always been that for gays and lesbians who have found in their worship only an additional form of oppression. So, the presence of gay/lesbian people in the liturgy is as much a challenge to the liturgy as the liturgy is a source of spirituality for them. To accept gay persons in the celebration of the liturgy means that all the worshippers must accept their own sexuality. The integration of our sexuality both

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<sup>1</sup> From the article, "Gay Rites Primer," which appeared in The White Crane Newsletter: for the development of gay men's spirituality (P.O. Box 170152, San Francisco, CA 94117-0152, Summer 1990), p. 1.

in our personal growth as well as in our spiritual lives is difficult because it is not simply an individual matter. We are carried along by centuries of alienation of sexuality and of the body from the spiritual life. The split between sexuality and spirituality in Christianity is well known.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of this split, this breaking off of sexuality as sinful, are devastating to gay and non-gay alike. Having a core part of ourselves that we are taught to tightly fear, question, and control, creates a society that is out of touch with a primal force.....We are wonderfully made! Yet we are told in church that part of our very selves is sinful. In order to be spiritual, we must deny our bodily needs, and, most especially, deny our sexual needs.<sup>3</sup>

Gay persons in the liturgy will be an ever present challenge to the church to be true to itself. How can worshipping communities continue to marginalize gays, demanding, in effect, that they remain silent about their sexuality and still claim that sacramental life is about inclusiveness. Sacramental worship is about the

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<sup>2</sup> For a treatment of the ambivalence toward sexuality in the history of Western culture and how that has been concretized in the area of homosexuality see The Mythology of Transgression: Homosexuality as a Metaphor by Jamke Highwater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Highwater's book is a study of outsiders (homosexuals being one example) and how they have had a profound influence upon the culture at large. He "points to a paradox at the center of Western values---the competing notions that the outsider is at once sinful and wise, that in everyday life the transgressor is ostracized, while in our most durable folklore and religious legends, heroes must break the rules to achieve greatness." (from book jacket) For him homosexuality is our modern metaphor of transgression. He provides much food for reflection on why we are so conflicted and contradictory about such an important and so natural a part of our lives. His work helps to explain why in Christian liturgy we use sexual imagery and even sexual (at least very sensual) gestures and yet are so hesitant to acknowledge sexuality as an indispensable part of our journey to God.

<sup>3</sup> We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God's Grace for Lesbians and Gays by Marilyn Bennet Alexander and James Preston. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 54. This is a good book for dealing with the place of the sacraments in the spiritual life of gays.

removal of any ambiguity about the presence of God in creation and human living, about placing all of creation in the story of God's love for the world and God's desire for its transformation. For it to be authentic, then, it cannot allow the gay worshipper to remain hidden or to fall into a kind of limbo existence. At the end of a liturgy gays should not be left wondering what their place in the body of Christ is, do they have a role to play, and to what degree are they worthy to participate?

It is true that the liturgical texts and forms have been marked through the centuries by the struggles, conflicts, and even deaths that the community has suffered, especially in its ethnic/racial minority groups. It is also true that not all the groanings in the Christian community have found voice and tongue in the liturgy. The homosexual voice has been silenced. Women's voices have been silenced too, but at least there are women who are visible in the history of salvation, in particular Mary herself. Are there any gay people in the bible that are like the gay people you know, whether brother, father, cousin, friend, or acquaintance? We know that the liturgy reflects and brings to expression the actual community that is celebrating. Because the community is silent about homosexuality, the liturgy remains mute and so a deficient symbol. Liturgies celebrated by gay/lesbian groups such as Dignity<sup>4</sup> have their value for the individuals, but because groups like Dignity are themselves marginalized, so also are their liturgical celebrations. The acceptance of gays and lesbians into the Christian community publicly could be as traumatic as was Paul's acceptance of the gentiles without the need of their

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<sup>4</sup> Dignity is the American national organization of Roman Catholic homosexuals which promotes various causes in support of gay people and provides a home for many Catholic gays. There are many local groups throughout the United States. They gather for their own liturgical celebrations. In many places they are not allowed to meet and celebrate liturgy in Catholic churches because they do not distance themselves from a position which is open to homoerotic genital activity among gays.

becoming Jews first, a point made by Jeffrey Siker. But if this is not done, the body of Christ will remain fractured.

The Church must realize that shameful silence produces a distorted image of God, the body of Christ, and of oneself, a dysfunctional search for intimacy, and entrapment of ordination, and many times, a complete exit from the Church. The Church's act of silencing lesbians and gays is not a passive or benevolent act of love. In silencing the complete selfhood of gay/lesbian Christians, the Church obstructs their full participation in the body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The liturgy in some real sense is the tradition of the church, it is where scripture comes alive in its proclamation and it is the spiritual source for the various schools of spirituality in the church. It is important that scripture be a liberating experience for gays and lesbians since so many of our God images are taken from scripture. Gays and lesbians can also help the church to broaden and enrich the images of God found in the liturgy. In offering an example I will let the authors of Equal Rites speak for me:

Images that focus on God's presence with humanity, and even on God's vulnerability, may be especially appropriate for lesbian/gay-oriented worship. Power images such as Judge and Father that emphasize divine omnipotence can be problematic because they have been used to oppress lesbian and gay people. Depending on the worship context, lesbians, gay men, and their supporters may respond well to such images as Gentle One, Justice Seeker, Giver of Hope,

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<sup>5</sup> We Were Baptized Too, p. 21.

Compassionate One, Healer, Comforter, Companion, Creator, lover, Amazing Grace, Liberator, Risk Taker, and Friend of the Poor.<sup>6</sup>

The liturgy has an intuitive quality because it is primarily a symbolic experience. Our form of worship is that of the proverbial tip of the iceberg, most of which lies in the area of the unconscious where so many of life's decisions are already made. The most significant part of the liturgical experience remains invisible. Yet part of liturgy's task is to bring to expression that which is hidden in the depth of the human heart and express it in ritual form. This surely is a form of discernment, but is only so, if the external forms of worship remain in contact with the deeper unconscious sources where the energy of all symbols resides. The authors of Equal Rites have written on this point.

Ritual is an integral part of life. It provides the actions and forms through which people meet, carry out social activities, celebrate, and commemorate. Whether the acts appear casual or dramatic, sacred or secular, they express a meaning and significance that extend beyond the particular event itself. Rituals, like myths, address the urge to comprehend human existence; the search for a marked pathway as one moves from one stage of life to the next; the need to establish secure and fulfilling relationships within the human community; and the longing to know one's part in the vast wonder and mystery of the cosmos.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P. xvi-xvii (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 1995). I recommend that director and directee acquaint themselves with Discovering Images of God: Narratives of Care Among Lesbians and Gays by Larry Kent Graham (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). See chapter eight for some discussion of the images of God and the liturgy.

<sup>7</sup> P. xiii.

Liturgy can become a place where gay persons gather in community, whether it be with other gays or not, where they can experience the life-giving acceptance of others, where they are permitted to touch themselves deeply. Spiritual discernment needs a context. It does not exist by itself. For many a gay person it will be ritual which provides this context.

Good ritual brings people together, strengthening the ties that already bind them, and creating new ones where ties do not already exist. And so ritual is very much about intimacy. Symbolic action touches and reveals our deepest selves and when this is shared we have true intimacy.<sup>8</sup>

Here is a clear example of how the liturgy can be a form of spiritual direction for gays and lesbians. So much of the time in spiritual direction and counselling is devoted to dealing with issues of intimacy, in particular, with blocks to intimacy because of society or family upbringing, because of lack of societal support, or due to past broken relationships, betrayal, and abuse. The liturgy may offer gay men and women the chance for some self nurturing, some contact with themselves as bodies needing the contact of other bodies, and a way of letting the unconscious express its desires and needs in symbolic forms.

The increasing interest in the formation of gay and lesbian ritual groups says that the need for ritual is no less present than in the past. It may be that a gay man or woman will find their most meaningful ritual experiences in these ritual groups where the ritual is a way for them to discover their identity. As the writer, Robert Barzan, in the White Crane Newsletter put it: "We are learning to drink from our own inner wells of refreshment, find there the direction and nourishment we need to continue the life journey."<sup>9</sup> Gay ritual groups can help make it possible for gays

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Barzan in White Crane Newsletter, (Summer 1990) p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> P. 5. Robert Barzan is a former student of mine.

to participate more fully in the church's liturgy because now, already grounded ritually, they can bring resources to the liturgy as well as receive the particular Christian shape to their spiritual life. The Christian church has had experience with ritual for a long time and can offer much to those men and women who are searching for resources in constructing their own rituals.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the director should encourage directees, gay or not, to use their imaginations in creating ritual experiences.<sup>11</sup> The authors of Equal Rites speak to the urgency of this matter.

Lesbians and gay men are in need of a greater ability, perhaps even a greater willingness, to live symbolically. They make the best they can of their circumstance without, for the most part, the benefit of inspiring myths and rituals that are attuned to the unique needs of sexual minorities. All lesbians and gay men have suffered the loss of positive self-images as a direct result of their second-class status and consequent objectification in a heterosexual-dominant society. It is painful

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<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that gay men must not utilize other ritual resources. Two books which could be helpful for them are the already mentioned Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations by Kittredge Cherry and Zalmon Sherwood as well as Daring to Speak Love's Name: A Gay Lesbian Prayer Book by Dr. Elizabeth Stuart (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992). Some books for personal reflection are: Proud To Be and Reclaiming Pride, the latter by Joseph H. Neisen (Deerfield, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1994). An especially good book of reflections on scripture for gays and lesbians is The Word is Out by Chris Glaser (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). I am indebted to Xavier Seubert for the additional following reference of an example of gay appropriation of religious ritual: "Havdalah: A Metaphor for Queer Lives," by John Nalley The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review III, #4 (1996), pp. 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Lesbians also can find resources in Women Church, a movement that has groups of Roman Catholic women gathering for worship without the presence of an ordained priest. Dream work can stimulate the imagination to assist in the invention of rituals. See Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth by Robert A. Johnson (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986). For general background in doing dream work, consult Dream Work: Techniques for Discovering the Creative Power in Dreams by Jeremy Taylor. Robert Bosnak explores the places of dreaming among the Australian Aborigines in his Tracks in the Wilderness of Dreaming (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1996).

to consider the countless lives wasted, the talents atrophied, and the sickness suffered by sexual minorities who were never allowed, much less encouraged, to know themselves and take strength and happiness in that knowledge. Rites play an important role in offering lesbians and gay men images and symbols that affirm their experience<sup>12</sup>.

Christian spirituality is a journey done in the context of faith in the power of the spirit of God to move the individual to deeper union with God. This is also a description of what liturgy is all about: living in a world of faith, under the guidance of the Spirit to achieve closer union with God as a community. Union with God is a mature experience, one of great depth. It is not some kind of romantic outburst. The guidance of the liturgy can help gays and lesbians look at the place of romance in their lives. Is it something which is equated with sexual experience? Is it that which only turns gays more inward, making them more selfish, less aware of a world in need? The liturgy can help gay people to see that their union with God, while it might make use of sexual imagery, does not require the presence of sexual exchange in their lives. On the other hand, an embodied liturgy may make it possible for them to discover that union with God is found in their experience of their sexuality. Whatever form this homosexual experience takes for gays who wish to follow the spiritual path, the call of the liturgy will be to move away from a personal spiritual life which does not lead to greater sensitivity to the needs of the world around them. It can help them grasp that all of their relationships, especially their romantic ones, are part of a larger social structure. Union with God, union with others, and union in intimate friendship must move in the same direction, namely, the urging of human structures to become more fully human. This union

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<sup>12</sup> pp. xv-xvi.

with God cannot be separated from union with one's brothers and sisters, one's community wherever that may be found. John J. McNeill speaks to this:

The whole meaning and direction of our spiritual growth is a movement from isolation and alienation into greater union with each other. At Holy Communion, each of us receives the body of Christ, and being one with the body of Christ, we shall become one with each other. This is a symbolic prophecy of the mysterious and joyous transformation of our bodies at the resurrection, when our bodies will become the perfect means of communication and oneness.<sup>13</sup>

Union with God for the Christian must mean union with Christ and also with the church.<sup>14</sup> But that means that gays and lesbians must be willing to “take a chance on the church,” to paraphrase the title of McNeill’s book. To make this possible, it may be important for an individual gays to belong to some form of the gay community such as a gay support group or a gay ritual group. It is important that the gay man or woman experience the positive support from a community, however loosely connected with the Church, to counteract some of the negative messages coming from the official church. The reasons that McNeill gives for the importance of the gay community for the gay person apply particularly to the gay or lesbian who wish to participate in liturgy fully. Gathering together in real

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<sup>13</sup> Taking a Chance On God, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Many younger people today embrace Christian values but have little to do with institutional religion. They are looking for a simple, evangelical presentation of Christianity. We can only hope that as they mature, they will see that the spiritual life is not only a Jesus and me relationship, but that salvation comes through community. If we are to identify with the Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian communities for example, it seems impossible to avoid the institutional church all together. We have that strange expression “I am a non-practicing Catholic (Christian).” It can be helpful to explore the meaning of such an expression with those who may use it. This may open up many areas for examination. Surely, the statement means more than “I believe, but do not practice my belief.” Belief without practice is no belief at all.

celebrating communities, gay men and women can find their personal dignity upon which they can build a life based on the “dignity” of the daughters and sons of God. Gays often come to liturgy in a wounded fashion because of the alienation, silence, and separation imposed on them and so are in need of some help in self-acceptance. The acceptance in these gay groups provides the groundwork for their acceptance of themselves in the church where the response to them may be ambiguous. McNeill points out that not only has this been the first time in history when there existed anything like a Christian gay community where gays can seek support as they try to integrate their sexuality in their spiritual lives, but

the impact of the gay Christian community on the American church has been powerful. There is no question that most churchgoers are much more aware of the existence and the problems of gay Christians and take a more open, pastoral attitude toward them than was the case in the past.<sup>15</sup>

Not only does the liturgy presuppose community, it must presuppose the gay community as well.

The place of the liturgy in the spiritual life of the gay person is expressed eloquently by Cleaver:

In the liturgy, we break the Word and we break bread, but breaking is not why we come. We perform these ritual acts to recreate the body of Christ and to become one people of God around the table. Just so, gay men are not creating our theology to break the body of Christ. We break the Word of God open so that we can see into its depths. We break bread together to be united to one another. We will raise our voices in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

song and in prayer, just as we always have; what will be different is that we will use our real voices and call out our real names. The body is damaged not when our presence around the table is acknowledged but when it is forbidden.<sup>16</sup>

For gay Christians in particular, liturgical worship must “become the paradigm of the breaking down of all human division and inequality.”<sup>17</sup> Liturgists speak of liturgy as a kind of play, playing at the kingdom of God. It is an hour long, once a week rehearsal for this kingdom where we act as if all that Christ desired for this world has come about. It is a dress rehearsal for the actual experience of our world made complete. This is not just poetic imagery. It implies that for this hour the usual barriers that dominate our lives, in particular our sexual dualism, become irrelevant. True, these barriers return once we leave our worship. But hopefully, they will have less control over our lives. Liturgy will not automatically change a homophobic society into one which accepts homosexuality as a gift; however, liturgy can assist the process because it serves a prophetic role. In another place I described that prophetic role thus:

Establishing the kingdom of God is not primarily a dramatic happening. It must also take the form of justice to oneself, that is, of self-acceptance and deep contact with one’s bodily self. The liturgy can be a most appropriate place to experience the justice in oneself, namely, that one is loveable and loved. Worship does not supply the solutions for removing the injustices of society. It offers no recipes for how to deal with

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<sup>16</sup> Cleaver, p. 141. This theme is developed in terms of gay rights in secular society and the full acceptance of gays into the mainstream by Bruce Bawer in his popular book, *A Place At The Table*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> *Models of Liturgical Theology* by James L. Empereur, S.J. (Nottingham: Grove Books, Limited, 1987), p. 39.

international conflict, debilitating family structures, or social tensions.....it is worship which makes possible this process whereby the worshippers can get in touch with fundamental experiences of justice, or lack of them. From such insight they can move to action in building this kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

I do not naively believe that most Sunday services are this kind of liturgy for gays or anyone else. Gays and lesbians are called to find liturgical services or to create their own ritual experiences where they can have a place where they can communally discern forms of injustice so as to move to greater liberation. Here they will experience their true liminality. Here the sexually dispossessed take possession of their sexuality . Here the sexually poor become sexually rich. Hopefully, even now some gay men and women will be able to find in the church's liturgy the place where they can reclaim the goodness of their fully sexual bodies. Part of the ministry to gays and lesbians will be to make Christian liturgy a place where all divisions become irrelevant, especially the division between body and spirit.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp.40-41. For a telling story of how highlighting the prophetic quality of the liturgy can be threatening to a publisher closely associated with the Church of England, see the preface of Dr. Elizabeth Stuart to her book, Daring to Speak Love's Name: A Gay and Lesbian Prayer Book (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).