

# *Alter Christus*

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

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## *Liturgy and Inculturation*

**By Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI**

[From the book *Spirit of the Liturgy*]

### **Liturgy and Inculturation**

At this point a brief remark about the theme of liturgy and inculturation suggests itself. Needless to say, we cannot go into it too widely and deeply, but by the same token it should not be overlooked.

Everywhere these days the liturgy seems to be the proving ground for experiments in inculturation. Whenever people talk about inculturation, they almost always think only of the liturgy, which then has to undergo often quite dismal distortions. The worshippers usually groan at this, though it is happening for their sake. An inculturation that is more or less just an alteration of

outward forms is not inculturation at all, but a misunderstanding of inculturation. Moreover, it frequently insults cultural and religious communities, from whom liturgical forms are borrowed in an all too superficial and external way. The first and most fundamental way in which inculturation takes place is the unfolding of a Christian culture in all its different dimensions: a culture of cooperation, of social concern, of respect for the poor, of the overcoming of class differences, of care for the suffering and dying; a culture that educates mind and heart in proper cooperation; a political culture and a culture of law; a culture of dialogue, of reverence for life, and so on. This kind of authentic inculturation of Christianity then creates culture in the stricter sense of the word, that is, it leads to artistic work that interprets the world anew in the light of God. As the Greeks so rightly saw, culture is, before all else,

### **Author: Pope Benedict XVI**

Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Ratzinger, was born on April 16, 1927 in Marktl am Inn, Germany. He was ordained a priest on June 29, 1951. From 1946 to 1951, the year in which he was ordained a priest and began to teach, he studied philosophy and theology at the University of Munich and at the higher school in Freising.

In 1962 he was already well known when, at the age of 35, he became a consultor of the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Joseph Frings, at the Second Vatican Council.

In March 1977, Pope Paul VI named Fr. Ratzinger Archbishop of Munich and Freising and on May 28, 1977 he was consecrated -the first diocesan priest in 80 years to take over the pastoral ministry of the large Bavarian diocese. Paul VI elevated him to the College of Cardinals in the consistory of June 27, 1977.

On November 25, 1981, he was nominated by John Paul II to be Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Vice Dean of the College of Cardinals on November 6, 1998. On November 30, 2002, he was elected as Dean of the College of Cardinals.

He served as President of the Commission for the Preparation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and after 6 years of work, he presented the New Catechism to the Holy Father in 1992.

Following the death of John Paul II on April 2, 2005, and his funeral on April 8, Cardinal Ratzinger presided over the conclave to elect a new pope as dean of the College of Cardinals. The conclave opened on April 18 and Cardinal Ratzinger was elected as the 265th Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church on April 19, 2005. He chose the name "Benedict" and became Pope Benedict XVI.

education, taking that word in its deepest sense as the inner opening up of a man to his possibilities, in which his external abilities are developed in harmony with his gifts. In the religious sphere, culture manifests itself above all in the growth of authentic popular piety. Despite all the inadequacies of the Christian mission in Latin America, and despite the fact that so much still needs to be done, Christian faith has put down deep roots in souls. This can be seen in the popular piety in which the mystery of Christ has come very close to people, in which Christ has become truly their own. Think, for example, of devotion to the Passion, in which these suffering peoples, after the cruelty of the gods of the past, gratefully look upon the God who suffers with them as the answer to their deepest longings. Think, too, of Marian devotion, in which the whole mystery of the

Incarnation, the tenderness of God, the participation of man in God's own nature, and the nature of God's saving action are experienced at a profound level. Popular piety is the soil without which the liturgy cannot thrive. Unfortunately, in parts of the Liturgical Movement and on the occasion of the postconciliar reform,

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it has frequently been held in contempt or even abused. Instead, one must love it, purifying and guiding it where necessary, but always accepting it with great reverence, even when it seems alien or alienating, as the dedicated sanctuary of faith in the hearts of the people. It is faith's secure inner rooting; when it dries up, rationalism and sectarianism have an

easy job. Tried and tested elements of popular piety may pass over, then, into liturgical celebration, without officious and hasty fabrication, by a patient process of lengthy growth. Incidentally, the liturgy, without

any manipulation of the rite, has always quite spontaneously, through the way it is celebrated, borne the imprint of each culture in which it is celebrated. A liturgy in an Upper Bavarian village looks very different from High Mass in a French cathedral, which in turn seems quite unlike Mass in a southern Italian parish, and again that looks different from what you would find in a mountain village in the Andes, and so on. The decoration and arrangement of the altar and the interior of the church, the style of singing and praying—all of these give the liturgy its own special character, enabling people to feel completely at home. And yet in every place we can experience it as one and the same liturgy, and in this way we experience,

too, the great communion of faith. The unity of the rite gives us a real experience of communio. When the rite is respected and animated from within, unity and diversity are not in opposition.

### Music and Liturgy

The importance of music in biblical religion is shown very simply by the fact that the verb “to sing” (with related words such as “song”, and so forth) is one of the most commonly used words in the Bible. It occurs 309 times in the Old Testament and thirty-six in the New. When man comes into contact with God, mere speech is not enough.

With regard to the singing of the Church, quite spontaneously, the Psalter becomes the prayer book of the infant Church, which, with equal spontaneity, has

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become a Church that sings her prayers. That applies first of all to the Psalter, which Christians, of course, now pray together with Christ. In its canon of Scripture, Israel had ascribed most of the Psalms to King David and had given them a definite interpretation in terms of theology and the history of salvation. For Christians, it is clear that Christ is the true David, that David in the Holy Spirit prays through and with the One who is to be his Son and who is the only begotten Son of God. With this new key, Christians entered into the prayer of Israel and came to realize that, precisely through them, that prayer was to become the new song. The Holy Spirit, who had inspired David to sing and to pray, moves him to speak of Christ, indeed causes him to become the very mouth of Christ, thus enabling us in the Psalms to speak through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father. Now this exegesis of the Psalms, at once christological and pneumatological, not only concerns the text but also includes the element of music. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to sing—first David and then, through him, Israel and the Church. Yes, singing, the surpassing of ordinary

speech, is a “pneumatic” event. Church music comes into being as a “charism”, a gift of the Spirit. (...) The singing of the Church comes ultimately out of love. It is the utter depth of love that produces the singing. “*Cantare amantis est*”, says St. Augustine, singing is a lover’s thing. In so saying, we come again to the trinitarian interpretation of Church music. The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father.

The question of how far inculturation can go soon became a very practical one for early Christianity, especially in the area of music. The Christian communities had grown out of the synagogue and, along with the christologically interpreted Psalter, had also taken over the synagogue’s way of singing. Very soon new Christian hymns and canticles came into being: first, with a wholly Old Testament foundation, the Benedictus and Magnificat, but then christologically focused texts, preeminently the prologue of St. John’s Gospel (1:1-18), the hymn of Christ in the epistle to the Philippians (2:6-11), and the song of Christ in

the first epistle to Timothy (3:16). In his first epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul provides us with some very interesting information about the order of service in early Christian liturgy: *“When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification”* (14:26). Through the Roman author Pliny, who informed the emperor about the religious services of the Christians, we know that, at the beginning of the second century A.D., singing to the glory of Christ in his divinity was at the very heart of Christian liturgy. One can well imagine that, with these new Christian texts, came a more varied use of the singing than hitherto and the composition of new melodies. It would seem that one of the ways in which Christian faith was developed was precisely in the writing of canticles, which arose

at this time in the Church as “gifts of the Spirit”. Herein lay hope but also danger. As the Church was uprooted from her Semitic soil and moved into the Greek world, a spontaneous

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and far-reaching fusion took place with Greek logos mysticism, with its poetry and music, that eventually threatened to dissolve Christianity into a generalized mysticism. It was precisely hymns and their music that provided the point of entry for Gnosticism, that deadly temptation which began to subvert Christianity from within. And so it is understandable that, in their struggle

for the identity of the faith and its rooting in the historical figure of Jesus Christ, the Church authorities resorted to a radical decision. The fifty-ninth canon of the Council of Laodicea forbids the use of privately composed psalms and non-canonical

writings in divine worship. The fifteenth canon restricts the singing of psalms to the choir of psalm-singers, while “other people in church should not sing.” That is how post-biblical hymns were almost entirely lost.

When we look at the history of liturgical music, we can see extensive parallels with the evolution of the image question. The East, at least in the Byzantine world, kept to purely vocal music. True, among the Slavs, probably under Western influence, it has been extended into polyphony. The male-voice choirs of this tradition, through their sacral dignity and restrained power, touch the heart and make the Eucharist a true feast of faith. In the West, in the form of Gregorian chant, the inherited tradition of psalm-singing was developed to a new sublimity and purity, which set a permanent standard for sacred music, music for the liturgy of the Church. Polyphony developed in the late Middle Ages, and then instruments came back into divine worship—quite rightly, too, because, as we have seen, the Church not only continues the synagogue, but also takes up, in the light of Christ’s

Pasch, the reality represented by the Temple.

### **Dancing**

Dancing is not a form of expression for the Christian liturgy. In about the third century, there was an attempt in certain Gnostic-Docetic circles to introduce it into the liturgy. For these people, the Crucifixion was only an appearance. Before the Passion, Christ had abandoned the body that in any case he had never really assumed. Dancing could take the place of the liturgy of the Cross, because, after all, the Cross was only an appearance. The cultic dances of the different religions have different purposes—incantation, imitative magic, mystical ecstasy—none of which is compatible with the essential purpose of the liturgy of the “reasonable sacrifice”. It is totally absurd to try to make the liturgy “attractive” by introducing dancing pantomimes (wherever possible performed by professional dance troupes), which frequently (and rightly, from the professionals’ point of view) end with applause. Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that

the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment. Such attractiveness fades quickly—it cannot compete in the market of leisure pursuits, incorporating as it increasingly does various forms of religious titillation. I myself have experienced the replacing of the penitential rite by a dance performance, which, needless to say, received a round of applause. Could there be anything farther removed from true penitence? Liturgy can only attract people when it looks, not at itself, but at God, when it

allows him to enter and act. Then something truly unique happens, beyond competition, and people have a sense that more has taken place than a recreational activity. None of the Christian rites includes dancing. What people call dancing in the Ethiopian rite or the Zairean form of the Roman liturgy is in fact

a rhythmically ordered procession, very much in keeping with the dignity of the occasion. It provides an inner discipline and order for the various stages of the liturgy, bestowing on them beauty and, above all, making them worthy of God.

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Once again we face the question: What do we have here, liturgy or popular piety? Very often these old forms of religious expression, which could not be inserted as such into the liturgy, have been integrated into the world of faith. Popular piety has a special importance as a bridge between the faith and each

culture. Of its very nature, it is directly indebted to its culture. It enlarges the world of faith and gives it its vitality in the various circumstances of life. It is less universal than the liturgy, which connects vast regions with each other and embraces different cultures. Consequently, the various



forms of popular piety are farther removed from each other than the liturgies are, and yet they embody the humanity of man, which, for all the differences of culture, remains similar in so many ways. The best-known example in Europe is the spring procession in Echternach.<sup>1</sup> In a little sanctuary in the middle of the desert of northern Chile, I was once able to attend some Marian devotions that were followed in the open air by a dance, in honor of the Madonna, employing masks that looked rather frightening to me. Doubtless behind this lay very ancient, pre-Columbian traditions. What once might have been marked

by a terrifying seriousness, in view of the power of the gods, had now been set free, transformed into an act of homage to the humble woman who can be called the Mother of God and the ground of our trust. Once again it is something different if, after the liturgy, the joy that it contains turns into a “secular” feast, which is expressed in a common meal and dancing but does not lose sight of the reason for the joy, of what gives it its purpose and measure. This connection between the liturgy and cheerful earthiness (“Church and inn”) has always been regarded as typically Catholic, and so it is still.



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