



Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

Part 2: Timelessness of Right Worship

Consider this crazy endeavor: a person sets out to count as high as they possible can. So they start their count: one, two, three, four.....[some time passes as they continue]....one million, two-hundred thirty-seven thousand, four-hundred sixty-five....[they have been at this for a while, but they keep going]....six-hundred forty-three billion, two-hundred seventy-one million, nine-hundred eighty-three thousand, two-hundred twenty-six....[they are persistent...they haven't given up yet]....[and so on....] Will they ever finish their count? On one hand, we might say, "Of course they will not finish. They are going to get tired of it and quit." We might also think: "even if they will never tire, they will eventually die and be stopped by some other thing in their efforts." Or, it just may cross our minds to give this answer: "No matter how hard they try, they will never finish, because no one can count to infinity."

This example, unrealistic and silly though it may be, illustrates this point: we as human beings are limited such that we can not attain the infinite by our own efforts alone. We are limited by space, by time, by our own energies, etc....by our own finite capacities. Any endeavor to obtain the fullness of the infinite by *our own efforts only* will never be brought to completion without something of our limitation preventing it. [In a secular atheist's point of view, such an idea on limits may ring hollow, as this realm of limitation is the great challenge that must be overcome in a secular worldview.] However, for we as believers in Jesus Christ, limitation is not something to shun; we can humbly acknowledge our limits before God so that we might rightly open ourselves to sharing in His eternal

being - as such sharing in His life is His gift to us.

This "relationship" of God (who is infinite, perfect in His life, truth, goodness, and beauty) and us (who are made in His image and likeness, limited though we are) is fundamental to understanding the true purpose of worship. While we might be accustomed to seeing our prayer and worship as rooted in *our own efforts* to go to God, the Church has always believed that the true nature of worship is rooted in God's gifts to us - beginning with the very lives we are living and centered upon the very saving works that He has accomplished for us in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ. Worship in this way is an encounter with the perfections and infinite nature of God - as He wills to give of Himself on our behalf. Accordingly, to understand the nature of worship in the most complete and proper way is to consider the following: that our worship begins in *God's works on our behalf - that we might receive from Him a share in His perfections that we are otherwise unable to possess (as our limits would prevent us from possessing what is perfect and infinite.)* Such worship is truly "timeless" as God is always able to offer His gifts to us (in His infinite, eternal nature), drawing His children more deeply and perfectly into Himself.

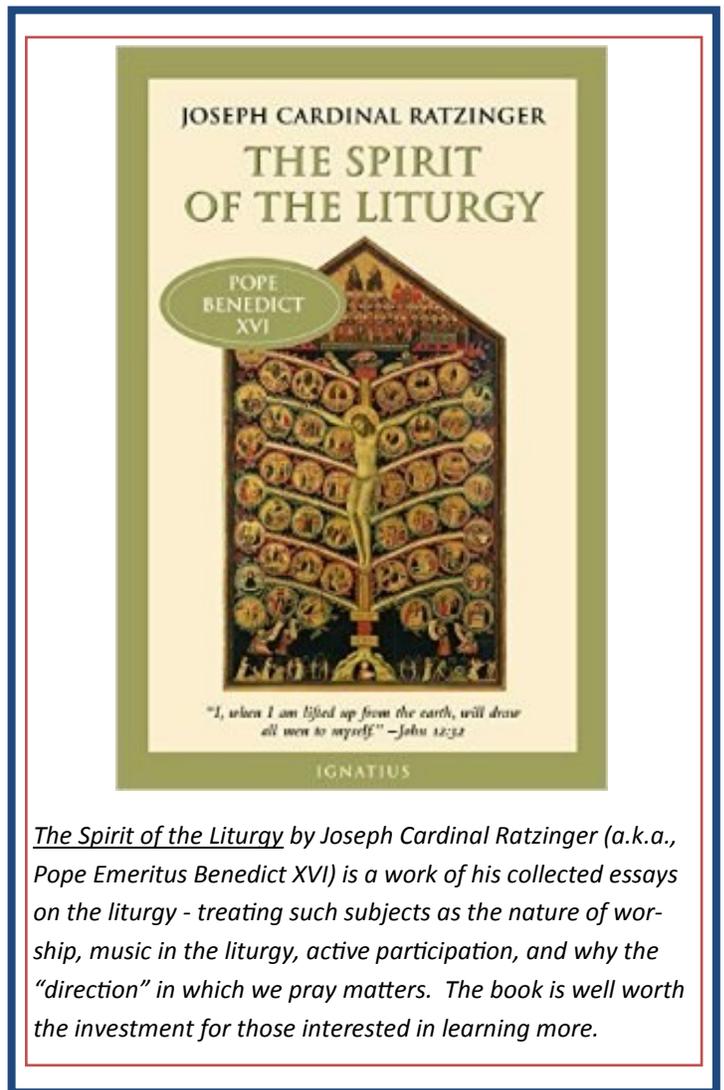
To characterize this dynamic, Cardinal Ratzinger (a.k.a., Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) offers a very clear explanation of how worship necessarily *must* come from God, lest we turn it inward upon ourselves, making worship more about "self-affirmation." In his book, [The Spirit of the Liturgy](#), he illustrates this point of why worship cannot be invented by human beings through the example of Aaron fashioning

for the people a “golden calf” (Exodus 32) showing their endeavor to have two errors: that they turn to worship of an image (which is prohibited) and that such a turning results in their reduction of God to one of “their own” making for their own self-affirmation. Here are some key quotes that express his points:

“Man himself cannot simply ‘make’ worship. If God does not reveal himself, man is clutching empty space. Moses says to Pharaoh: ‘[W]e do not know with what we must serve the Lord’ (Exodus 10:26). These words display a fundamental law of all liturgy. When God does not reveal himself, man can, of course, from the sense of God within him, build altars ‘to an unknown god’ (cf. Acts 17:23). He can reach out toward God in his thinking and try to feel his way toward him. But real liturgy implies that God responds and reveals how we can worship him. In any form, liturgy includes some kind of ‘institution.’ It cannot spring from imagination, our own creativity – then it would remain just a cry in the dark or mere self-affirmation. Liturgy implies a real relationship with Another, who reveals himself to us and gives our existence a new direction.” (Ratzinger, pages 21-22.)

And on the golden calf incident, he says:

“There is no obvious turning away from God to the false gods. Outwardly, the people [in their worship of the golden calf] remain completely attached to the same God....And yet it is a falling away from the worship of God to idolatry [in two ways.] First, there is a violation of the prohibition of images. The people cannot cope with the invisible, remote, and mysterious God. They want to bring him down into their own world, into what they can see and understand. Worship is no longer going up to God, but drawing God down into one’s own world....Man is using God, and in reality...he is placing himself above God....[Second,] the worship of the golden calf is a self-generated cult....Worship becomes a feast that the community gives itself, a festival of self-affirmation. Instead of being worship of God, it becomes a circle closed in on itself: eating, drinking, and making merry. The dance



The Spirit of the Liturgy by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (a.k.a., Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) is a work of his collected essays on the liturgy - treating such subjects as the nature of worship, music in the liturgy, active participation, and why the “direction” in which we pray matters. The book is well worth the investment for those interested in learning more.

around the golden calf is an image of this self-seeking worship.” (Ratzinger, pages 22-23.)

In these words, Cardinal Ratzinger places before us a very plain example of false worship - one that is focused on “self,” both in terms of who initiates the worship and in terms of the end goal. On the contrary, true worship that is timeless is always and necessarily instituted by God (who reveals Himself to us) and is meant to draw us from our limitations into His perfections - which only God can accomplish. Our “act of worship,” then, is not about our initiative or self-affirmation; it is to open ourselves in humility and receptivity to His gifts, and to give ourselves in response to these gifts (in praise and thanksgiving). Our humble response may be limited; but such humility and receptivity is the real way of worship the “counts onto infinity.”