

## Chapter Five

### Liturgical Theology

Two questions immediately plague one who sets off in search of liturgical theology. The first is the question, what is liturgy? The second is then, in that case, what is theology? Both liturgy and theology are highly equivocal terms today. Liturgy is applied to almost any ceremonialized human gathering, sacred or secular. Theology has come to designate almost any sort of religious discourse, in particular those arguments one wishes to denigrate as being hopelessly ideological and thus out of touch with reality, as when it is said that Reaganomics is "theological." In view of all this it may be well to begin by dwelling on what theology is, especially when it is modified by the adjective "liturgical."

Urban Holmes once noted that good liturgy borders on the vulgar. He also said that liturgy leads regularly to the edge of chaos, and that from this regular flirt with doom comes a theology different from any other.<sup>14</sup> So phrased, the observation bears all the marks of a great truth: it is obscure, profound, sweeping, and infects one with a cerebral itch which compels one to scratch up insights of various kinds. One such insight is that "theology" is not the very first result of an assembly's being brought by liturgical experience to the edge of chaos. Rather, it seems that what results in the first instance from such an experience is deep change in the very lives of those who participate in the liturgical act. And deep change will affect their next liturgical act,

3) howsoever slightly. To detect that change in the subsequent liturgical act will be to discover where theology has passed, rather as physics detects atomic particles in tracks of their passage through a liquid medium.

4) There is nothing placid or genteel about either process. In each there is collision, chaos, and a certain violence. In the liturgical instance, what has happened is an adjustment in the assembly of participants to its having been brought to the brink of chaos in the previous liturgical act. This adjustment causes the next liturgical act to be in some degree different from its predecessor because those who do the next act have been unalterably changed. The adjustment to change between acts on the part of the actors is both conscious and unconscious; it is always real. The results of this adjustment show in the gradual evolution of the liturgical rites themselves. This is how liturgies grow. Their growth is a function of adjustment to deep change caused in the assembly by its being brought regularly to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God. It is the *adjustment* which is theological in all this. I hold that it is theology being born, theology in the first instance. It is what tradition has called *theologia prima*.

5) For many this puts us on strange ground indeed, for since the high Middle Ages with the advent of the university and of scientific method, we have become accustomed to the notion that theology is something done in academies out of books by elites with degrees producing theologies of this and that. Theological curricula are filled with such efforts.<sup>15</sup> To argue with minds accustomed to thinking of theology in such a manner that theology at its genesis is communitarian, even proletarian; that it is aboriginally liturgical in context, partly conscious and partly unconscious; that it stems from an experience of near chaos; that it is long