

THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF WORSHIP

In his wonderful book on the Rosary, *Five For Sorrow, Ten For Joy*, the English Methodist minister J. Neville Ward offered the following insight:

Faith grows only through a continuing program of worship, prayer, reading, thinking, observant exploration of the world of loving, learning how to be silent.

This program is not in itself exciting... [It] is in principle no more interesting than what goes into the training program of a football team... The public worship of the church, for example, cannot normally grip anyone not interested in faith. It will naturally give the impression of an unfamiliar dimension of experience; if it also seems real and serious and suggests that it concerns the mystery in which all human life is lived, it will have done all that is can do and accordingly it must rarely do as much as this. There is no reason why the best possible worship should appeal to a mind undisturbed by any longing. ...[Worship's] principal purpose is to help the worshippers in their common journey to God and the true life, and its effectiveness is not measured by their reaction to a single or several services but by their prolonged experience of the common life of the church...

The “skinny” of Ward’s words is that worship is less about “moving us” and more about “equipping us”; that it will draw us to the extent that we desire more or other in our lives; and that faithfulness is hard work. We all know this, but sometimes we forget.

It raises the question for us, where and in what do we find the primary exercise of our Catholic Faith? The answer will vary for each of us, but Ward suggests that if the answer is “Sunday worship,” we’re in trouble. To work from his analogy (changing from his “football”–soccer–to ours), it would be as if to think that a series of calisthenics or wind-sprints or drills was the whole purpose of being on a football team. No: we have to encounter another team and out-play them, being more versatile on offense and stronger on defense than they are, with fewer turnovers and penalties. And if we get injured, it’s not the end of the road for us: there is medical attention and rehab–then an eventual return to the game.

Where else is our training regimen, besides Sunday Mass? Again to refer to the excerpt, how do we pray (beyond a blessing prayer before meals)? What do we read–besides a newspaper or a bit of fiction? There are good, even excellent, commentaries on the books of the Bible that are aimed at Christians instead of scholars (those of William Barclay and T. H. [Tom] Wright come immediately to mind). Do we take time actually to think, or are we too “busy” with things to do? The trouble with thinking and praying is that they require us to be silent, and this is not what we do well (or often, or at all). Finally, the purpose of suggesting “observant exploration of the world of loving” is to allow us to see where love makes a difference and where we could make a difference when love is lacking. This would allow us (and others with us) to develop a strategy for bringing Jesus Christ to the world, step by step. It would allow us to bring an answer–the Christian answer–which can appeal to those whose minds are disturbed by longing: for meaning, for love, for direction, for mission. As Christians, ours should be lives dedicated to what used to be called “pre-evangelization”–living in such a way, in Jesus Christ, that others would be moved to ask, “Why do you do this? Why do you live this way? What makes you care?”

Would a good New Year’s resolution (no, it’s not too late to make one) be to allow Sunday Mass and the other dimensions of my “training” to form me into the kind of Christian that would cause one other person to ask those questions of me?