

Homily for October 30th 2021

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

“Worship as Play”

Aristotle said that the best activities are the most useless. This is because such things are not simply a means to a further end but are done entirely for their own sake. Thus, watching a hockey game is more important than getting a haircut, and cultivating a friendship is more valuable than making money. The game and the friendship are goods that are excellent in themselves, while getting a haircut and making money are in service of something beyond themselves.

In this sense, the most useless activity of all is the celebration of the Mass, which is another way of saying that it is the most important thing we could possibly do. There is no higher good than to rest in God, to honour him for his kindness, to savour his sweetness— that is, to praise and worship him.

The liturgy is the best form of play. We play hockey, dance, paint, and play musical instruments because it is simply delightful to do so. We play in the presence of the Lord for the same reason.

In the second chapter of the Bible, Genesis chapter 2, we find Adam in the Garden of Eden. The language used here in Hebrew speaks of Adam as being the first priest and the Garden of Eden as the first temple. In fact, the same Hebrew term is used to designate Adam’s cultivation of the soil and, much later in the biblical narrative, the priest’s activity within the Jerusalem Temple. Adam, we hear, walked in easy fellowship with God in the cool of the evening and spoke to him as to a friend.¹

This is another way of saying that Adam’s life, prior to the fall, was entirely liturgical. At play in the field of the Lord, Adam, with every move and thought, effortlessly gave praise to God.

We might say Worship bookends the entire Scripture, for the priesthood of Adam stands at the beginning of the Bible and the heavenly Liturgy of the book of Revelation stands at the end. In the closing book of the Bible, John the visionary gives us a glimpse into the heavenly court, and he sees priests, candles, incense, the reading of a sacred text, the gathering of thousands in prayer, prostrations and other gestures of praise, and the appearance of the Lamb of God. He sees, in short, the liturgy of heaven, the play that preoccupies the angels and saints for all eternity.²

Now what is needed for play to unfold properly? People need to use their bodies. You can have the hockey rink ready to go, you can have the piano ready to be played, the canvas and paints in

¹ Bishop Barron, Robert. *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (pp. 20-21). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid.* (pp. 172-173).

place. But if there are no teams, no pianist or artist, the play of the puck, hammers hitting the strings and the paints applied by the brushes to the canvas, the play will not occur.

Worship requires the play of both God and us. Think about it this way. In the Mass Jesus gives us his body, so that in turn we can give Him our bodies. When we think of it this way, the play represented in the Mass goes beyond the examples already used, to the play of sexual intimacy, as God intends in marriage. The most expressive English word for worship, is the word Adoration. This comes from the Latin *adoratio*, which in turn is derived from “ad ora” (to the mouth). To adore, therefore, is to be mouth to mouth with God, properly aligned to the divine source, breathing in God’s life.

The interplay between God and us, this adoration, is expressed in what was the most important Old Testament Text for the Jewish People. Our first reading. Called the “Hear O Israel.”

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ³

The Jewish people understood something of great importance. It is as we choose to worship God and put him first that the words found at the beginning of this reading can be understood.

² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, that your days may be long.

The shape of the biblical story declares to us that the play of liturgy – especially the Mass - is what rightly orders the personality, since we find interior order in the measure that we surrender everything in us to God. This is the lesson from Deuteronomy.

But here is the problem, in a world like this to adore God, to know how to play and love each other as God desires for us is so challenging. I mentioned a minute ago the Worship of Heaven depicted throughout the Book of Revelation. When you read Revelation carefully, you realize that on earth, all hell is breaking loose because of the Cosmic Battle between God and Satan. Revelation declares that to truly worship in a world like this is profoundly difficult, just as it was hard for Adam to tend the Garden after the Fall. The cultivated and arable land of Genesis 2 gives way to the thorns and thistles of Genesis 3.

So, although the worship of God is the most useless and most necessary act we do, it often doesn’t seem like play but a chore. In turn so much of our life loses its lustre and sense of wonder and it seems that what we experience is being on the losing team, playing way below 500.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Dt 6:4–6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

This brings us back to how in worship we want to more fully discover that as Jesus gives us His body in the Eucharist, we in turn offer Him our bodies. Jesus in defining the greatest commandment quotes Deuteronomy 6 doesn't quote it word for word. Deuteronomy states:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might

Jesus says:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength⁴

Deuteronomy and Jesus both mention loving God with our heart, soul and strength. Jesus adds we are to also love God with all our mind.

What I want to leave you with today is this focus on mindfulness as worship. We have heard today that God desires us to see worship as the greatest form of play where we learn to adore him. But in a world like this it is so easy for us to be distracted and discouraged to worship. Therefore, Jesus invites us to cultivate mindfulness in our acts of adoration, as we intentionally bring our bodies to Jesus. Of course, the fullest expression of this is in the Mass, where having adored Jesus by touching him mouth to mouth as we receive His body in the in the Sacrament we then go out into the world to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

May we ever more discover that the most useless activity is the most important of all. The play of worship.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Mk 12:29–30). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.