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“Ten Decades to a More Christ-like You!”: Liturgy as God's Workout Plan for the Church

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Imagine that you have decided to run a marathon. These days, one Web site after another tells us that anyone can do it. One need not be an elite athlete from Kenya to take on this challenge. And they're right. Attend a marathon and you'll see all shapes and sizes—young, old, tall, short, thin, not-so-thin—in the tens of thousands, plugging away, mile after mile. But, although anyone can do it, no one can simply wake up one morning and say: “I'm going to run a marathon today.” It's just not that easy. One has to train. One has to transform one's body into a body that can run 26.2 miles. And the only way to do that is to run, day after day, week after week, month after month. Walking is allowed; techniques can be varied; but in order to run a marathon, one has to train for a marathon.

The Christian life is no different. Although all are called to be a Christian, no one can simply wake up one morning and say: “I'm going to be a Christian today.” It's just not that easy. To be a Christian, to live as a Christian in the world, to “run the race” (in St. Paul's words, e.g., I Cor 9:24), one has to train. One has to transform one's body into a body that can be Christ in the world.

To many people, this sort of claim will sound strange. Christianity, they will say, is about our beliefs, not our bodies. I am a Christian, they might say, as long as I believe the right things, as long as I have my propositions straight or can recite the catechism, or as long as I have been baptized. Certainly, we will want to make sure we

don't do certain kinds of things with our bodies (see the Ten Commandments) but otherwise, Christianity is primarily about my beliefs and my (inner) personal relationship with God, not about what I do with my body on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, we get very testy when the church tries to tell us, even in a minimal way, what to do with our bodies—what to eat (fish on Fridays, fasting), how to have sex (within marriage, no contraception), how often to attend Mass (weekly), and so on. We call her premodern, or physicalist, or say she needs to get with the signs of the times.

In this essay, I want to push, probe, and problematize how we think about the body (*the body?*), especially in relationship to liturgy and the Christian life. Heirs of René Descartes as we are, I am concerned that Christians in the United States, and in Western culture in general, veer troublingly close to a new gnosticism. As our bodies have become increasingly understood as raw material for technological manipulation (see biotechnology), essentialized, natural templates for predetermined meaning (a new sort of natural law), or the vehicle for the expression of my own personal identity (Locke's labor theory of value gone Madison Avenue), we have lost sight of how our bodies are that material substrate through which we act and interact with the world. In doing so, we become oblivious to the ways in which our bodies (like the clay from which they were drawn) are constantly shaped and formed by the cultures in which we live. The power brokers in our culture and the cosmos, however, recognize this fact of life and use it to their advantage.

God, the original shaper of that clay, recognizes it as well and therefore has given us the liturgy. The liturgy is a complex, grace-filled, and ultimately mysterious practice. At the risk of being reductionistic, in the following pages, I wish to single out one aspect of the liturgy: the body. How do we think about the body in liturgy? What is going on with the body in liturgy? The analysis that follows will be, admittedly, suggestive rather than methodical. But, I wish, through analogy and the articulating of assumptions, to sketch a different way of thinking about the body in liturgy. The point I will argue is this: one central and necessary function of Christian liturgy is to form the body of Christ, the church, by transforming the bodies of Christians. The vector that connects the Eucharist and attendant practices with the Christian life necessarily runs through bodies—the bodies of Christians and the body of Christ.

Three Analogies

Most of us, I hazard, have engaged in exercise, even at the most *ad hoc*, occasional level; some of us have participated in organized sports; some readers might even have attained a level of proficiency—lettered in high school, played college ball, or even spent time at the professional or semiprofessional level. Thus, most of us have some experience of what we could call “the body in athletics.” Putting the many other dimensions of athletics aside for the moment, what might we say about the body in athletics?

In athletics, the body seems to be everywhere. Few aspects of athletics do not involve or touch on the body in some way. The body is obviously necessary for and central to the entire enterprise of athletics. But, if we think about our own bodies as they have participated in athletic activities, or if we think about the bodies we have watched as sport spectators, one point immediately becomes clear: athletics entails and requires the transformation of the bodies within its scope. Athletics works with and through the body in order to reshape it; without reconfiguring bodies, athletics could not even begin to do what it seeks to do. Even if we are simply trying to get in shape, lose weight, or maintain our health, one of our end goals is to change our bodies from their current state of being to some different level of fitness. We want them to be different: smaller, lighter, leaner, more muscular, healthier. We want them to be able to do different things: be faster, process oxygen more efficiently, metabolize at a higher rate, and so on. And we do this, we seek to achieve this transformation, by means of activities that engage our bodies, such as running, biking, stair-stepping, weight-lifting, or aerobics. In order to see any results, we have to engage in these activities regularly, say, a minimum of three times a week. It is not easy. Our lifestyles inveigh against it. It's time-consuming, often boring, a real drudge. But if we

do it, if we have the discipline to stick with it, slowly and over time our bodies change; they begin to look different, to feel different, to walk differently. They become capable of doing things we formerly found impossible—running ten miles, lifting 100 pounds, doing a cartwheel. And these things that were formerly impossible, we now do with ease. It's almost as if they are second nature; we can even do them in daily life, not just at the gym, if, say, we had to move the refrigerator or wanted to skate fast, not in a hockey game, but just for fun on a sparkling winter's day.

These same dynamics are equally present, though more intensely, in organized sports. Unlike our individual exercise programs, organized sports do not seek to transform the body simply for its own sake. Organized sports train bodies toward specific ends, instilling in them specific skills and abilities. Again, through specific regimens of bodily practices—routines of training and drills that are often boring, often physically grueling—different sports reshape participants' bodies in specific ways, to be able to do specific sorts of things, such as block a tackle, do a lay-up, sprint, skate backwards, do a backflip. And as they do this, they produce very different sorts of bodies. Think of how different the physiques are in football, weight-lifting, basketball, gymnastics, track, or hockey, and how different these bodies are from the average, normal, run-of-the-mill human body. Not only are these bodies capable of doing things that they formerly could not do, but they also are capable of doing things that the rest of us can only dream of. They are powerful, fast, agile, and precise; they can hit, catch, shoot, throw, bend, and balance in ways that often astound spectators, with significant levels of endurance and toleration of pain.

One cannot get to this point overnight. To achieve these sorts of outcomes takes years or decades of engaging in very mundane routines four, five, six days per week. It's not impossible, but it does require dedication, consistency, and discipline. But when one engages in these activities on a regular basis and achieves some level of skill, one takes on a new identity. One becomes (and becomes known as) a gymnast, a soccer player, a cyclist. And importantly, most organized sports seek not only to produce individual bodies capable of extraordinary things. The point of this transformation is to produce not only skilled individuals, but, rather, a team—a coalition of skilled bodies that are capable of performing a series of specific tasks in concert, and that is especially efficacious in resisting or challenging another similar sort of team. In other words, the point of all this bodily transformation in athletics is to create a corps, a social body, as it were, capable of publicly performing specific actions (playing the sport) better than any other team.

I hope by now that we all are beginning to get a sense of where this analogy is heading. But before moving to my point, let us consider, more briefly, two further examples. I raise these examples to suggest that the bodily dynamic outlined above is not peculiar to athletics alone. Think upon learning to play a musical instrument, a process many of us will be acquainted with, whether through our own sufferings through music lessons as a child, participation in school band or orchestras, or the attainment of “accomplishment” (the word applied to musicians). What might we say about the body in music? In many ways, it is less obvious than the body in athletics. Now that many of us listen to music primarily through recorded media, and now that we have the capability of producing virtual, synthesized music, it is easier to overlook the embodied dimension of musical performance than it is to overlook the embodied dimension of athletics. But as before, music works in and through the body to reshape it; without reconfiguring our bodies, at least to some extent, skilled musical performance cannot be achieved. To begin with, as anyone who has picked up a musical instrument knows, one of the first tasks in learning how to play an instrument is figuring out how to get one's body around it. One has to physically adapt oneself to it: sit properly at the piano and stretch one's hands; figure out how to keep the cello upright between one's knees; hold the guitar up while moving one's fingers both on the frets and on the strings. At first, it is awkward; our hands and back might even hurt as we try to adapt. But eventually, through bodily engagement, our bodies will move from their current state of being to one that is more conformed to the instrument.

This is only the beginning. In addition to figuring out how to manage the instrument physically, in order to attain even the slightest skill, one must engage in a series of routine, mundane, often boring, often difficult, physical activities by which one's body becomes capable of playing the instrument. Finger exercises, chord changes on the frets, scales (and more scales and more scales), over and over again, day in and day out, week in and week out, until one's fingers and arms and lungs and body can do things with the instrument not before possible. Proficiency requires practice, but practice results in a transformed body, a body that can now do different things. And when it is transformed well, it can do these things as second nature. As accomplished pianists know, when one learns to play a piece, it gets in one's hands so that if one then looks at the music or looks at one's fingers when playing, one will surely mess up. The music itself becomes embedded in our bodies; our bodies often know how to play better than we do. While many people play instruments for their own personal pleasure, if one gains any sort of level of skill or proficiency, one takes on an identity: one becomes a pianist or a cellist or a guitarist. And again, the end point is to play with others, in a concerted sort of way, be it in a garage, a talent show, a pub, a recording studio, or a symphony hall. In other words, the end point of the transformation of the body in music is to produce not only skilled individuals, but, again, a social body capable of performing a series of specific activities in public for the benefit of those who listen.

Allow me to impose on your patience as we consider one final example: the military. Though most of us likely do not have direct experience in the military, many of us know someone that is or has been in one of the branches of the armed forces, and if not, images of the military are never far from public view. What might we say about the body in the military?

As with athletics, in the military the body is more immediately visible. Even more clearly than in music, the military works in and through the body to reshape it; without reconfiguring the bodies of recruits, it could not do what it needs to do. In order to accomplish its objectives, the military has to turn average, ordinary citizens into soldiers, and it knows that it takes far more than a one-hour-a-week catechesis to do this. Unlike our previous examples, the military does not have the luxury of time; they must effect this transformation faster. So they start with boot camp. They start by putting recruits through a process far more intensive than that of athletics or musical training, a 24/7 immersion in a system of physical and physically grueling program of drills, penalties, uniforms, and communal living.

Over the course of a few short months, it seeks to deconstruct those who enter its orbit, to “dis-embody” deeply held habits—of individuality, freedom, choice, for example. It starts by minimizing as many markers of physical uniqueness as possible—shaving heads, donning bodies with identical uniforms. Then, through bodily activities, it seeks to reconstruct young men and women as military bodies, bodies that can do things previously impossible: to kill systematically and efficiently, whether on command or by instinct; to unquestioningly obey orders; or to kill or even die to protect one's comrades. These are not actions that come naturally, but through routinized, physical, bodily practices, they become second nature.

If one successfully completes boot camp, one takes on a new identity. One becomes a soldier or a Marine. Bodies so transformed often are so for a lifetime; military bodies are easy to pick out of a crowd by virtue of standing, sitting, walking, and speaking in a particular way, even if the person left the military long ago. And even more than in our previous two examples, the military does not seek to transform individual bodies for their own sakes. The reason for putting individual bodies through these ropes is solely to produce a corps, a platoon of bodies that will act in an organized, concerted, team fashion, and that will be more skilled, more powerful, and more effective than the armies that come up against them.

We are now ready to turn to the body in liturgy. But is this a turn we can make? In some ways, unlike the preceding examples, the body does not seem to be everywhere in liturgy. If we think about our own bodies as they have participated in liturgical activities, it's not entirely clear what they have to do with the whole

endeavor. If one attends a mostly white, suburban Catholic church in the United States, like most of the churches I have attended in my life (or, I imagine, if one attends most white middle- to upper-middle-class mainline Protestant churches in the United States), one might be hard-pressed to see the body in liturgy at all. Beyond sitting, standing, walking up for communion, and occasionally (but not always) kneeling, the body in much mainline U.S. liturgy has become invisible or is highly downplayed. There are many congregations to whom the phrase “the frozen chosen” applies.

Thus, the connection between the body in liturgy and my foregoing examples may not be immediately obvious. Nonetheless, if we pull our lens back from our own immediate experience and listen to our liturgies themselves, reflect on liturgy and worship as it occurs in many non-Caucasian or non-U.S. settings, listen to the central convictions of the faith, and think about the historic weft of the Christian tradition, we will find, I will argue, that the body is both necessary for and central to the entire enterprise of the Christian life, and that the liturgy is the workout or training ground by which our very bodies are transformed from their current state of being to something radically different—bodies that we might call “Christo-form” or “eucharistic.” By way of the liturgy, God works in and through the bodies within its purview, attempting to reshape them into the body of Christ. Without reconfiguring our bodies in this way, the church cannot be who it is—the body of Christ in the world—or do what it is called to do, namely, the work of Christ in the world.

Which Body? Whose Liturgy?

Behind such a claim lie a number of assumptions about the body, the liturgy, and the Christian life. Let me begin with the body. In addition to the cultural attitudes toward the body identified in the introduction above, contemporary Christians tend to think about the body (our bodies) in three general ways. One approach takes a negative attitude toward the body. The body is seen as the prison from which the soul will eventually be freed, as that wild and passionate enemy that must be reigned in, denied, or repressed in order for our souls and spirits to be pure and good. A second and related attitude sees the body not as much as a negative but as neutral and perhaps irrelevant. Drawing on the cultural heritage bequeathed us by Descartes, some see the body simply as a machine, a tool for accomplishing the purposes of the soul, mind, or spirit. The mind or soul is where the true person resides; the body, while along for the ride, is neither required for personal identity nor does it really touch it or affect it. A third attitude, of more recent vintage, views the body more positively and sees a greater connection between one's soul and body, but in this perspective my body is very much “my own”—a product and projection of my own individual identity and therefore my possession.

While these attitudes certainly have had their advocates through the Christian tradition, they are difficult to square with a theological account of the body, especially as we find it in scripture and the convictions of the creeds. Week after week, we affirm that God created human bodies and called them good; that the Son of God became flesh and became incarnate in a human body; that this body was real, not just an illusion, and so suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried; that Christ's very body was raised up and ascended; and that because of this, Christians too (as individuals and as the church) likewise hope for a *bodily* resurrection, and so on. In conviction, doctrine, and dogma, the claims of the Christian tradition rest on a powerful and positive view of the human body.

This positive assessment, however, ought not be equated with the third attitude mentioned above. For just as the body (from a theological perspective) is not a negative entity, neither is it an individual entity. As is clear throughout the writings of St. Paul, our bodies are not our own possession. Once we are baptized, our bodies are no longer our own: they are Christ's, now part of Christ's body. Our job, according to Paul, is to allow Christ to conform our bodies to his—to become Christo-form—so that Christ can live and act in and through us in the world. What is more, not only do our bodies become the property, possession, and protoplasm (as it were) of

Christ; we become, through Christ, connected to the bodies of all the rest of the baptized; we become members of one another (e.g., 1 Cor 12:27).

Theologically, then, it is difficult to uncritically adopt most of the regnant cultural views of the body: it is neither raw material to be manipulated at will, a fixed template of meaning, a personal possession, a prison house, nor an ass to be flogged. The bodies of the baptized, at least, are part of God's good creation, now taken up into and owned by the person of Christ, interconnected thereto and thereby interconnected to a whole host of other people, both living and dead.

Thus, my body is no longer “my” body; it is materially and spiritually part of a larger body politic, the body of Christ, also known as the church. Post-Pentecost, to speak theologically about the body requires that we always have in play three different meanings of the body simultaneously. In the liturgy, this becomes the most obvious. In the Roman Catholic context, there is the body that is the focal point of gathered liturgy (or any liturgical practice), namely the body of Jesus the Christ, whose life we hear portrayed in the gospels and whose passion we celebrate in the Eucharist. When we gather to worship, this body is the focus of our attention and, we maintain, is truly present. By the efficacy of this presence, the church itself becomes the body of Christ that both worships God and is sent from worship into the world. This gathered people—in worship and beyond—is understood to be the concrete, tangible, walking, active mode in which Christ is now present and active in the world. But clearly, this corporate body needs legs to walk—real legs, not metaphorical ones. The body of Christ is present and active in the world only through the concrete, tangible, mobile bodies of Christians.

But Christ can only be present and active in the world through those bodies insofar as those bodies resemble Christ, at least in some measure. How then do we, the ones with the legs, come to resemble Christ? Granted, on rare occasion, Christ does appear to zap a given person, who falls off his horse and is immediately transformed. On other occasions, God appears to start from scratch, and someone gets pregnant (see Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary). But for the rest of us, grace generally works with (or perfects) nature. Foolish ground-of-Being that God is, God appears to prefer the far less logical and efficient approach of patient persuasion, waiting for us to come around, to cooperate, to participate in the divine life, to the far more directive mode of simply changing us without our consent.

Thus, it is as we participate in the divine life, with our wills and hearts and bodies, that we begin to be transformed into Christ. And what else is participation in the divine life but worship or, in our case, liturgy? Let me pause here to clarify some assumptions I am making about liturgy. First, for the purposes of this essay, I am using the term *liturgy* in its broadest sense. Liturgy in this sense includes not only Sunday worship and recognized sacraments, but equally those activities we would put under the heading of prayer, devotion, sacramentals, and spirituality. Liturgy is the panoply of ways in which we, individually and corporately, worship God, come into God's presence, and find ourselves participating in the divine life. In this sense, liturgy, to do its work, entails more than simply the once-a-week gathered Sunday worship. Liturgy is a thick network of practices that holds the Eucharist as its central hub. While the network of practices mutually inform each other, the Eucharist, corporately celebrated, norms the whole. The Eucharist remains the central liturgical practice of the church. One cannot choose, for example, personal prayer instead of gathered Sunday worship.

Second, unlike our opening analogies, we are not the primary agents of liturgy or the Christian life. The liturgy is God's work, God's action, not ours. In the celebration of the Eucharist, God gathers us in, reconciles with us, speaks the word to us through Scripture, receives our offerings, hears our prayers, transubstantiates wine and even the least-reasonable facsimile of bread, shares with us the divine life by communing with us, creates us as the church (creates us anew each and every time), and sends us into the world as Christ's body. In short, by way of the liturgy, God invites and enables us to participate in the divine life and the divine work in the world.

And as we do, as we freely and joyfully enter into God's work and participate in it to the utmost of our abilities, we cannot help but be transformed. For, as the work of God, the liturgy must be like all God's other actions, always creative and transformative. Every time the liturgy is celebrated, God does something ever-new. Every time the liturgy is celebrated, God creates. Every time the liturgy is celebrated, God works to transform fallen creation—to create a redemptive body and redeem created bodies.

Liturgy can exercise these effects not only because it is God's work. Liturgical practices can transform and conform our bodies to Christ because they are intrinsically corporeal. By their nature, liturgical practices impact and engage our bodies. One cannot, despite televised Masses and televangelists, worship “virtually.” Even the practice of silent, solitary, eremitic, mental prayer engages and forms the body in particular ways. Unlike many of its participants, the liturgy takes the body quite seriously. Liturgy requires that Christians assemble bodily. We gather together, coming out of the world as the “ek-klesia” (which comes from two Greek words: *ek* meaning *out* and *kaleo* meaning *call*) to form a visible, tangible, body politic, the congregation, the church. We come into the Lord's presence, where we stand and sing for joy, lifting up our voices in ways we rarely do elsewhere. We mark our bodies with the sign of the cross, a gesture we don't think consciously about and mostly take for granted, but a gesture that again and again marks our bodies and our identities as those belonging to Christ crucified, who come together in the name of the trinitarian God. For each element of the Mass, one could highlight the bodily component: bowing in contrition, sitting at Jesus's feet as he speaks his word through scripture, extending and grasping hands in peace and reconciliation, receiving Christ's body into our hands and mouths, and so on. Moment by moment, the liturgy works on and through our bodies, seeking to conform us ever more closely to Christ.

Equally, many liturgical rites attend specifically to the body. Consider, for example, the marvelous Orthodox rite of chrismation:^{[1](#)}

Sweet ointment in the name of Jesus Christ is poured upon thee as a seal of incorruptible heavenly gifts.

The eyes [are then anointed]:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ enlighten thine eyes, that thou mayest never sleep unto death.

The ears:

This holy anointing be unto thee for the hearing of the divine commandments.

The nostrils:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a sweet smell from life unto life.

The mouth:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a guard for thy mouth and strong door for thy lips.

The hands:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a cause for good works and for all virtuous deeds and conduct.

The heart:

This seal establish in thee a pure heart and renew within thee an upright spirit.

The back:

This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be to thee a shield of strength thereby to quench all the fiery darts of the Evil One.

The feet:

This divine seal direct thy goings upon life everlasting that thou mayest not be shaken.

Here the candidate's body is anointed again and again and again—the eyes, the ears, the nostrils, the mouth, the hands, the heart, the back, the feet. As the candidate is anointed, God and the community (via the rite) seek to reshape her body, giving each part a new theological configuration. She puts on Christ and is girded for battle, to fight the good fight, to run the race, to sing to the Lord a new song.

“That Christ Will Be Magnified in My Body” (Phil 1:20)

Through the liturgy, then, God takes our enfleshed bodies, connects them to the ministering, crucified, broken, and risen body made real and present in the word and in Eucharist, and simultaneously forms the church and acts to incrementally conform our bodies to that of Christ. To break it down in terms of our analogy, liturgy is that set of practices by which our bodies are transformed from their current state of being into that radically different state of excellence, Christ-likeness, so that thus conformed, the bodies of Christians can function as a corps, a body politic that is material rather than metaphorical, the corporate body of the church.

If space permitted, a methodical analysis of how liturgical practices foster Christic or eucharistic bodily formation would now follow, as would a careful display of the writings by Paul, who from prison could proclaim: “My eager expectation and hope is that I shall not be put to shame in any way, but that with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil 1:20). In lieu of this more rigorous argument, allow me to at least sketch how the body in liturgy maps onto the examples with which this essay opened.

If we are to think about the body in liturgy, then, we must start with the corporate body. In keeping with our opening analogies, the purpose of liturgical formation cannot simply be to transform individuals. Rather, through liturgy, God works to create a corps, the church, the here-and-now body of Christ active in the world. One is produced as a Marine primarily for the sake of the corps and for the defense of the nation; to learn to kill for one's own sake would be regarded as a sociopathology. One is produced as an athlete for the sake of a team; one cannot play football alone. Of course, there are personal or individual benefits to being so formed, but this is not the primary outcome. While individual martyrs may have understood their deaths as benefiting their souls personally, their deaths effectively strengthened the church itself; the truth and faith it witnessed and preached emerged publicly before its pagan detractors as something worth dying for.

Can one take the analogy too far? Might it be a stretch to think of the church as a team whose purpose is to enter to win the game, or to defeat an opposing army? In the case of the body of Christ, the issue is not, perhaps, a matter of beating another team or army but being able to resist other forces that seek to form us in deeply embodied ways. St. Paul himself, evoking this notion of resistance, maintains that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). But at times, our struggle may well be with a more material reality. Contemporary consumer culture, for example, instills in our bodies habits of individualistic over-consumption, of constant stimulus, and of waste—habits that conform us to the person the market longs for us to be rather than conforming us to Christ.

The liturgy, on the other hand, forms us personally and corporately to share our goods, to spend time in silence with the Lord, to steward creation, and to give gratuitously. The liturgy forms us, in other words, to do things increasingly impossible within our culture. Whether such formation is understood as ability or resistance may be

a matter of perspective. Was the Civil Rights movement, nurtured as it was by the powerful worship of Black congregations, a demonstration of how liturgical formation enables corporate bodies to do a new thing, that which was not previously possible? Or does it demonstrate the role of liturgical formation in preparing bodies that, when regathered in the public square, were able to resist, with their very bodies, those forces that sought to silence the witness for truth by the use of fire hoses or incarceration? I would suggest that this is a false dichotomy, that most often new bodily capabilities simultaneously engender capabilities for resistance to attempts to undo the transformation.

Liturgical practices, then, train the bodies of Christians and the body of Christ toward specific aspects of Christ's person, inculcating in them specific skills and abilities: faith, hope, charity, patience, humility, bearing with one another, prudence, truthfulness, temperance, peacemaking, mercy, reconciliation, a hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, the ability to bear persecution, compassion, the directing of all things to the Father, and so on. Instilling such skills requires a panoply of bodily practices—the Eucharist, reconciliation, the praying of the office and the Liturgy of the Hours, fasting, hospitality, group Bible study, the sacrament of reconciliation, contemplation, the spiritual exercises, praying of the rosary, the corporal works of mercy, giving testimony, and more. Such practices shape participants' bodies in specific ways, to be able to do specific sorts of things—to practice hospitality, to forgive an offender, to bear the burdens of another, to welcome children, to live and stand with the poor. And because Christ is multifaceted and God is endlessly creative, these practices configure Christians and the church in a variety of ways. Think of how different are the embodiments of discipleship (and the bodily requirements for) the martyrs, contemplatives, the mendicants, the hundreds of religious orders, those who care for the sick, and those who pursue social justice. Throughout history, we have esteemed these witnesses, not only because they seemed different from the average, normal, run-of-the-mill Christian but primarily because they became (largely through prayer, worship, and bodily regimen) capable of doing things that seemed impossible for the rest of us. They embodied grace and mercy and joy and love in ways that often astounded spectators, with significant levels of endurance and toleration of pain.

But none of them got to this point overnight, nor will we. They achieved these outcomes through years or decades of engaging in very mundane routines every day. So it is for us. As is the case with soldiers and athletes, becoming Christian requires, to at least some extent, that we first become deconstructed. As dieters must change their eating habits, becoming Christian requires that we unlearn many of the habits of our life, habits that are deeply embodied. This, of course, is called conversion; and it is hard! As anyone who has tried to develop a practice of prayer knows well, simply learning how to sit still, in silence, for more than five minutes, is initially almost impossible. We have to unlearn our cultural habits of constant noise, constant sound, constant movement. It takes time and regular practice. Even then, progress may initially be made quickly, but then ... like dieting and exercise ... we hit a plateau. The body resists. Daily practice is an effort, a chore; such obstacles can be worked through, but only with disciplined consistent attention to practice. And once a desired state is achieved, it must be maintained through both practice and performance, over a lifetime. It is a case of “use it or lose it.” But as we do it, we become, more and more (assisted surely by God's grace), persons who can sit in God's presence, be attentive to God, and even perhaps listen to God speak to us, whether in the silence of contemplation, the words of scripture, or the words of another person.

To listen attentively to God or another person in silence requires physical transformation. We become capable of doing something distinctive, something previously not possible for us. Likewise, consider another liturgical practice, that of giving testimony. In giving testimony, one stands before the congregation to give witness to “how I have seen God working in my life.” This action shapes the one testifying in at least two ways. First, one engages in a culturally difficult task, of speaking of God out loud and of giving witness to God's presence and power in particular situations. Second, she who gives testimony becomes configured as one who gives witness to God out loud *in public*. Clearly, hearing the testimonies of others is important for learning the language of

witness and for learning how to see God's presence in one's life. But only in stepping up to the lectern and saying the words do we become capable of speaking publicly of God. As we become reshaped in liturgy, we become more capable of doing these same things out in the world, perhaps eventually in a way that is natural, instinctive, intuitive.

Habeas Corpus

More could be said, but I hope the foregoing sketch is sufficient to begin a serious reconsideration of how we think about the relationship between liturgy, our bodies, and the Christian life. Let me close with a few caveats and a few questions, especially for those who oversee liturgy week in and week out.

Caveats: Clearly, practical liturgical formation is neither easy nor instantaneous; it is a gradual process of growth or habituation over time. Henri de Lubac observes that such is the case even for the church, that “the Church and the Eucharist make each other, every day, each by the other.”² If such is the case for the church, for the body of Christ, how much more so for its individual members?³ Nor is it automatic. One can certainly attend Mass for decades and bear little resemblance to Christ. Grace will not coerce or compel; God waits for us to do our part. And, of course, bodily formation is but one component of the complex dynamic of liturgy. Catechesis is certainly necessary. Grace, as mentioned, is a *sine qua non*. More could have been said about the epistemological function of embodied action—how physical action or interaction is generally critical for coming to knowledge and understanding.

Caveats aside, let me close with some questions for liturgists and worship leaders. If we see the connection between liturgy and the Christian life as running through both the bodies of Christians and the body of Christ, might this lead us to look at liturgy in a whole new way? Might we ask: what sorts of bodies do our current liturgical practices produce? Do certain liturgical practices form bodies in ways that are inconsistent with Christian norms? Might we now be more open to a broad spectrum of liturgical practices, aware of the diverse forms Christic embodiment can legitimately take? How might we highlight the corporeal dimension of our liturgies so that they may be more formative? Do current liturgical practices simply reinforce the ways in which the bodies of worshipers have already been produced by our culture? What sorts of culturally produced bodily configurations need first to be deconstructed if Christic formation is to be possible? How might liturgy enable us, physically, to better resist the idols of our culture? As liturgical practices in the West have become less embodied, have they become less effective in forming persons as Christian disciples? If so, how might we rejuvenate the link? It may be the case that the liturgies of Western Christianity will have become more bodily, following the example of the far more embodied liturgical celebrations of African-American and Hispanic churches in the United States, and most liturgies outside of the North America and Western Europe. In these churches, where embodied participation is not suppressed, one often finds a greater linkage between worship and life.

Becoming a soldier or an athlete or a musician does not happen overnight, but over years of training. Should becoming Christian—or Christo-form—be easier? Is it less important? Should it be less demanding? I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether liturgical boot camp might not be a new model to develop for the rite of Christian initiation or maybe for next Lent's unit of adult education. But short of that, let us begin to look at liturgy anew, as that gift to the church that forms us—body, spirit, character, community—into not only God's people but Christ's very body in the world.

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Notes

1. Cited by Vigen Guroian, "Seeing Worship as Ethics: An Orthodox Perspective," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 13 (1985): 342–343.
2. Henri De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Paris: Aubier, 1949), 292.
3. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* signals this continuous, recursive dynamic when it notes: "The liturgy daily builds up those who are in the Church, making of them a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling-place for God in the Spirit" (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* [*Sacrosanctum concilium*] in A. Flannery [ed.], *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, Study Edition* [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1986] no. 2).