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Marcel Mojzeš

From the Reform of the Liturgy through Metamorphosis to Being Conformable to Christ

Od reforme liturgije skozi metamorphosis do oblikovanosti po Kristusu

Abstract: The author analyzes and summarizes the work of Thomas Pott OSB *La réforme liturgique byzantine* and proposes a biblical basis for the renewal of the liturgy. He also examines the thoughts of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. The analysis has shown that the idea of reform is linked to the center of the teaching of the Gospels and of St. Paul about the human person and to the experience of a new life in Christ. The Greek word μεταμόρφωσις (*metamorphosis*), in the New Testament sense, refers to a process of transformation of thought and of man as such. *Metamorphosis* invites to go *beyond the form*, to discover the true essence of the liturgy. In relation to the liturgy, it is necessary to rediscover the action of the Holy Spirit, which transforms man into being conformable to Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Liturgy, Man, Jesus Christ, *Metamorphosis*, Reform

Povzetek: Avtor analizira in povzema delo Thomasa Potta OSB *La réforme liturgique byzantine* in predlaga biblično podlago za prenovu liturgije. Obravnava tudi misel zaslužnega papeža Benedikta XVI. in papeža Frančiška. Analiza je pokazala, da je ideja reforme povezana s središčem nauka v evangelijih ter pri svetem Pavlu (o človeški osebi in izkušnji novega življenja v Kristusu). V novozaveznem pomenu se grška beseda μεταμόρφωσις (*metamorphosis*) nanaša na proces preoblikovanja mišljenja in človeka kot takšnega. *Metamorphosis* vabi k poti »onkraj forme (oblike)« – k odkritju pravega bistva liturgije. V razmerju do liturgije je nujno ponovno odkriti delovanje Svetega Duha, ki človeka spreminja v bitje, oblikovano po Jezusu Kristusu.

Cljučne besede: liturgija, človek, Jezus Kristus, *metamorphosis*, reforma

1. Introduction

The liturgical reform has been implemented in practice in the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Recently, even a “reform of

the reform” (Kocik 2003, Kunetka 2013) has been discussed, although Pope Francis made it clear that talking about “reform of the reform” would be a mistake.¹ It is also important to talk about the theological foundations of liturgical reform (Salliers 2015) and don’t forget that “the liturgy has a pedagogical capacity through the stimulation of emotions and convictions of the faithful” (Krajnc 2014, 441).

This study aims to provide an insight into deeper layers of meaning and significance assigned to the term “reform”, not only in relation to the liturgy, but also to a whole Christian life of which the liturgy is an inherent part. The Christian life itself is an inspiring source of spiritual experience since life exists in the liturgy as much as the liturgy exists in life (Krajnc 2018).

The deeper meaning and significance of the term “reform” is expressed through the concept of *metamorphosis*, as suggested by Thomas Pott OSB in his monograph *La réforme liturgique byzantine* (Pott 2000).

Our exploration of different connotations of the term *metamorphosis* is primarily grounded in the Scriptures. Performing a detailed analysis of the term in its broader biblical context enabled us to further develop ideas suggested by Pott. From a philosophical point of view, we can affirm that love itself is transcendent (Schrijvers 2017), it goes *beyond the form*.

Furthermore, we point out the presence of the content of the term *metamorphosis*, i.e., an effort to go *beyond the form* in relation to the liturgy as presented in the teachings of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Finally, we emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of *metamorphosis*.

2. The Idea of Reform Is Deeply Christian

In his monograph on the reform of the Byzantine liturgy, in addition to a historical overview of implemented reforms, Pott explains the idea of reform as such. He is inspired by Ladner’s book *The Idea of Reform* and says that the concept of “reform” is essentially Christian in its origin, its initial development and expresses the Christian conception of the course of history. The idea of “reformation” is connected with the center of the teaching of the Gospels and St. Paul about the human person with the experience of his/her »renewal« in Christ. In the Scriptures, terms such as *μεταμόρφωσις* (lat. *reformatio*, but also *transformatio*) and *ἀνακαίνωσις* (lat. *renovatio*) refer to personal reformation, a renewal towards making man the image and likeness of God (Pott 2000, 19).

In his book, Pott discusses several New Testament concepts. We will carefully explore two of them: *μεταμορφοῦσθαι* (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18) and *μετασχηματίζειν* (Phil 3:21) (Pott 2000, 26).

¹ Pope Francis did so in the introduction to a collection of his homilies and intercessions from the time when he served as archbishop of Buenos Aires (2016).

3. Biblical Context

The following section further examines the whole text (and context) of the above-mentioned New Testament coordinates. In his letter to Romans, the Holy Apostle Paul writes: “do not be like this world but transform yourself (gr. μεταμορφοῦσθε) by renewing your mind (gr. ἀνακαινώσις τοῦ νοός) so that you can discern what is God’s will, what is good, kind, and perfect.” (Rom 12:2)

The goal, therefore, is to know, to judge, to decide (gr. δοκιμάζειν) what is “God’s will, what is good, kind and perfect.” According to Holy Apostle Paul, in order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to do two things:

1. not to resemble this world,
2. to transform yourself into a renewed mindset.

In the first point, Apostle Paul uses the verb συσχηματίζειν, which could be descriptively translated as »following the same pattern« as the world. Jesus himself says in John’s Gospel that although Christians are in the world, they are not of the world: “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why the world hates you.” (Jn 15:19)

In the second point, a verb from which the term μεταμόρφωσις is derived is used. The expression ἀνακαινώσις τοῦ νοός, meaning a renewal of thinking, is connected to it. Apostle Paul uses the terms καινός and νέος to express the basic renewal of a person who becomes a “new man” and a “new creation” in Christ.

Pott further mentions three New Testament verses which refer to this “novelty” of Christian in Christ: 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 4:23 and Col 3:10. Let us quote here the full text of these verses, introducing their broader context where necessary: “That is why we do not waver (gr. οὐκ ἐγκακοῦμεν); indeed, though this outer human nature of ours may be falling into decay, at the same time our inner human nature is renewed (gr. ἀνακαινοῦται) day by day.” (2 Cor 4,16)

“You were to put aside your old self (gr. παλαιόν), which belongs to your old way of life and is corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind was to be renewed (gr. ἀνανεοῦσθαι) in spirit so that you could put on the new (gr. καινόν) man that has been created on God’s principles, in the uprightness and holiness of the truth.” (Eph 4:22-24) In this chapter Apostle Paul goes on to talk about what is to be the consequence or concrete manifestation of this new life in Christ: Putting off your old self means putting off lies and telling the truth: “So from now on, there must be no more lies. Speak the truth to one another since we are all parts of one another.” (Eph 4:25)

Finally, in the Letter to the Colossians, the Holy Apostle Paul also returns to the topic of putting off the old way of life and says: “You have stripped off your old behaviour with your old self and you have put on a new (gr. νέον) self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed (gr. ἀνακαινούμενος) in the image of its Creator.” (Col 3:9-10) According to the Apostle Paul, the meaning of the process of a constant “renewal” of the new man in Christ,

therefore, consists in the “true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator (gr. εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν)” (3:10).

The Holy Apostle Paul’s theology about the new life in Christ is in a way developed by St. Gregory of Nazianzus in his 44th homily, in which he explains the significance of the celebration of the feast of consecration or restoration (gr. ἐγκαίνια) of the temple. In this homily among other things St. Gregory comments on the name of Psalm 29 (For the Restoration – Sanctification of the House) and says, “This house is us who have been recognized as worthy /... / to be called the Temple of God. Behold, you know the meaning of the Feast of renewal – sanctification (gr. ἐγκαίνια). Therefore, renew yourself, you who have been freed from the old man who is in you, live a renewed life /... / Thus man is renewed, so is the feast of renewal celebrated – the sanctification of the temple.” According to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, to consecrate, therefore, means to restore, to restore God’s original order and God’s original purpose in things and in man.

The second biblical place mentioned by Pott in connection with the verb μεταμορφοῦσθαι is from the Second letter to the Corinthians: “And all of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (gr. μεταμορφούμεθα) into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit a more glorious image.” (2 Cor 3:18) *Metamorphosis* in the Christian is thus the work of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, let us look at a verse from the Epistle to the Philippians, where the Holy Apostle Paul uses the verb μετασχηματίζειν: “who will transfigure (gr. μετασχηματίσει) the wretched body (gr. σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως²), of ours into the mould (gr. σύμμορφον, lat. *conforme*) of his glorious body (gr. σῶμα τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ), through the working of the power which he has, even to bring all things under his mastery.” (Phil 3:21) So, God has the power to transform, to overcome the limitations, the misery of our body, to follow his scheme (μετασχηματίσειν) and give him the same form (σύμμορφον) as his glorified body, literally “the body of his glory.”

After presenting the biblical context, let us return to the liturgy and to the application of the biblical message to the liturgy.

4. **Go Beyond in Relation to the Liturgy according to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI**

The fact is that the term *reformatio* had been used in the history of Christianity even before the emergence of the liturgical movement in Western countries in the 19th century. One well-known example is the period of the Reformation 500 years ago, most commonly associated with Martin Luther (Svatoň 2017). In any

² *Ταπεινώσις* in Greek means lowness, helplessness, weakness, poverty, humiliation, despondency (Prach 1993, 514).

case, in general, *ecclesia semper reformanda est*.³ However, it is important to distinguish between true and false reform in the Church (Congar 1968).

As for the reform of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, we can also learn a lot from the reflection that is already taking place after the reform in the Western Church. One of the most renowned authors in this field is Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who maintains that “the crisis of the liturgy and thus of the Church in which we continue to be found is only minimally caused by the difference between old and new liturgical books. It is becoming increasingly clear that, in the light of all these controversies, there has been a deep disagreement about the nature of liturgical celebration.” (Ratzinger 2010, 441)

It is interesting to note that the Pope Emeritus perceives a connection, and even identifies the crisis of the liturgy with the crisis of the Church. In his speech delivered on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Council’s Constitution “Sacrosanctum Concilium”, the then Cardinal Ratzinger spoke in a similar manner:

“In my opinion, a large part of the problems associated with the concrete application of the liturgical reform have to do with the fact that insufficient account has been taken of the fact that the starting point of the Council is the Passover; too much emphasis was placed on purely practical things, risking losing sight of what was at the center. It therefore seems essential to me to take this approach again as a criterion for renewal and to deepen even further what the Council necessarily indicated.” (Ratzinger 2010, 775–776)

In an effort to restore the liturgy, the pope emeritus calls for a deeper move, for the structure (scheme) or external form of the liturgy. In his speech he also reminded us of one beautiful statement of Origen: “In fact, it is always necessary to go further, to go beyond.” (Ratzinger 2010, 772; López 2013) Benedict XVI further develops this idea in the sense that it is not necessary to present oneself definitively with any good until we come to the good in which we can remain. The liturgy – as the Council teaches us – allows us to enter into this “metaphysical” dynamic “to go beyond.” This is the idea that several Church Fathers share (Ratzinger 2010, 772–773). Perhaps the best known in this context is the statement of St. Augustine: “My heart is unhappy until it rests in you, O God.” (*Confessiones* 1,1)

The ultimate aim of the effort to restore the liturgy cannot, therefore, be the liturgy itself. In the words of Benedict XVI: “In every liturgical reform, in every liturgical celebration, attention should be focused above all on the primacy of God.” (Ratzinger 2010, 793–794) And this is a matter of faith, which is God’s gift.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI concludes that in deepening the liturgical life, the impulse must come from the one who truly lives the faith. Such a belief, lived together and celebrated in the liturgy, is the basis for the existence of exemplary places, where the liturgy is celebrated in the right way and where it is possible to experience in person what the liturgy actually is (2005, 380).

³ This statement is based on the teachings of St. Augustine (Mahlmann 2010, 384–388).

In this regard very interesting seems the reflection upon the circumstances in which Romano Guardini wrote his famous book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, which was after the experience of beautiful and existential liturgical celebration (Langenbahn 2018).

5. *Go Beyond According to Pope Francis*

Similarly, the Holy Father Francis speaks of the necessity to *go beyond* in his Apostolic Letter *Aperuit illis* which institutes the celebration of a Sunday of the God's Word:

“A similar transfiguration takes place with sacred Scripture, which transcends itself whenever it nourishes the lives of believers. As the Apostolic Exhortation ‘*Verbum Domini*’ reminds us: ‘In rediscovering the interplay between the different senses of Scripture it becomes essential to grasp the passage from letter to spirit. This is not an automatic, spontaneous passage; rather, the letter needs to be transcended.’ (VD 38)” (AI 14)

An important principle is to recognize that “sacred Scripture transcends itself whenever it nourishes the lives of believers.” Similarly, we could say that “liturgy transcends itself whenever it nourishes the lives of believers.”

To explain this principle, the Holy Father Francis refers to the event of the Transfiguration of the Lord: “A similar transfiguration takes place with sacred Scripture.” And what actually happened during the Transfiguration? For example, we can read about it in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured (gr. μεταμορφώθη): his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as dazzling as light. And suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them; they were talking with him. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; if you want me to, I will make three shelters here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with shadow, and suddenly from the cloud there came a voice which said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him.’ When they heard this, the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear. But Jesus came up and touched them, saying: ‘Stand up, do not be afraid.’ And when they raised their eyes they saw no one but Jesus.” (Mt 17:1-8).

This event is also mentioned by the evangelists Mark (9:2-9), Luke (9:28-36) and even by the Apostle Peter in his second letter (2 Pt 1:16-18). Note that the Greek word for transfiguration is μεταμόρφωσις. We also find this word on the Greek icons of the Transfiguration of the Lord.

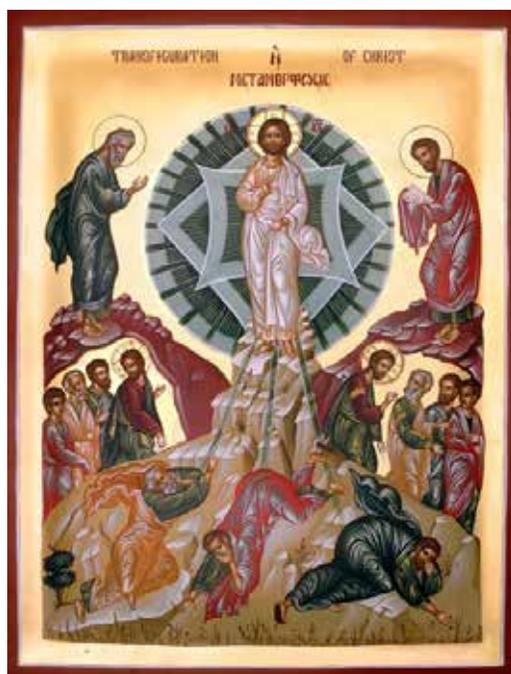


Figure 1: *The icon of Transfiguration of the Lord.*

The Greek word μεταμόρφωσις is composed of two parts: μετα – “beyond” and μορφή which means “form.” The word *metaphysics* has a similar meaning – what is “beyond” physics, what transcends the physically perceptible world.

6. God is ἀσχημάτιστος

In an interesting Ukrainian article entitled “Pure Prayer and States beyond Prayer in the works of Evagrius Ponticus and Isaac of Syria”, written by Fr. R. Sideľnik (Sideľnik 2016), we read, among other things, that in Greek Patristic there is an expression about God being ἀσχημάτιστος that is, without a scheme. It does not mean that God lacks something; it simply means that he is not limited by any scheme. Even St. Evagrius Ponticus claims that the restriction of God in some scheme or place is fruitless and may be the result of enemy forces. (Sideľnik 2016, 154, note 47).

In the light of this patristic expression about God, we can better understand the previously quoted words of Holy Apostle Paul, who uses the verb συσχηματίζειν in relation to the world in Romans 12,2: “do not be like this world” – do not be in the same pattern as the world. The world, the worldly perception, can therefore be schematic, but God remains ἀσχημάτιστος, we cannot reduce him to any scheme.



Figure 2: *The metamorphosis of a butterfly.*

7. Μορφή Θεοῦ and μορφή δούλου in Christ and in the Liturgy

Holy Apostle Paul explains in the Letter to the Philippians that Jesus Christ, who has existed since eternity in the μορφή (form) of God, in his love for man and in an effort to save him, accepts the μορφή (form) of the slave: “Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God (gr. ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ ὑπάρχων), did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself (gr. ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν), taking the form of a slave (gr. μορφή δούλου), becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being.” (Phil 2:5b-7a)

Jesus, although still living in the form of God, took the form of a slave in an effort to save man. God was and he is willing to *go beyond* the form. Similarly, we could say that in the liturgy we can be motivated by the same love of God and the effort to save man, to *go beyond* the form and discover a living God who, through liturgical celebration, gives us the opportunity to participate in his own life. In this sense, we can understand also the title of the book of one of the famous liturgists and my former professor Robert Taft SJ (1932–2018) *Beyond East and West* (Taft 1997).

8. *Metamorphosis in the World of Living Nature as an Image of Spiritual Metamorphosis*

The term *metamorphosis* is also used in the world of wildlife, especially in butterflies, to describe the process of transforming a caterpillar through a cocoon into a beautiful butterfly.

It is a complex developmental cycle, which has four stages: egg, caterpillar, pupa, butterfly. In order for a caterpillar to become a butterfly, it needs to change its form – to leave the static cocoon, so that it, transformed into a butterfly, can shine with beautiful colours and fly. If a caterpillar decided to remain only a caterpillar, or just a cocoon, it would never become a butterfly.

In nature, however, God arranged it so that the caterpillar was created to turn into a butterfly. We could say that this process is a picture of the spiritual *metamorphosis* that takes place during the liturgy. Everyone is called to become a butterfly. The path of this transformation also leads through such forms of liturgy that may outwardly resemble a static cocoon. However, the form of the liturgy is not the goal, only the means through which the constant transformation takes place (gr. μεταμόρφωσις, lat. *transformatio*). Just as a caterpillar transforms into a free-flying butterfly, which makes others happy with its beauty, so can the Christian be transformed through the liturgy. In the splendour of a flying butterfly, we can see the image of life in Christ.

9. The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Process of Metamorphosis: To Make Us Conformable (gr. Σύμμορφοι) To Christ

We have already mentioned a quote from the Second Letter of Holy Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, which says that the Spirit of the Lord transforms us (gr. μεταμορφούμεθα) (2 Cor 3:18). Similarly, Pope Francis emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in reading the Scriptures in his Apostolic Letter *Aperuit illis*, where he wrote, among other things, that

“sacred Scripture, by the working of the Holy Spirit, makes human words written in human fashion become the word of God. The role of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures is primordial. Without the work of the Spirit, there would always be a risk of remaining limited to the written text alone. This would open the way to a fundamentalist reading, which needs to be avoided, lest we betray the inspired, dynamic and spiritual character of the sacred text. As the Apostle reminds us: ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.’ (2 Cor 3,6) The Holy Spirit, then, makes sacred Scripture the living word of God, experienced and handed down in the faith of his holy people.” (AI 9)

What is mentioned here is the transforming role of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the human word written in a human way into the word of God, and thus transforms the Scriptures into the Word of the living God. Similarly, we could say that in relation to the liturgy we also need to rediscover this transforming activity of the Holy Spirit which transforms human words and human gestures into the words and actions of the living God himself.

But first and foremost, it is about transforming the human heart. Even what happens at the celebration of the Eucharist, that is, the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ by the Holy Spirit, should not end in the transformation of gifts (bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ) but should lead to the transformation of those who eat the Body of Christ and drink his Blood so that they may become more and more involved in the life of Christ and thus become part of the Church – the mystical body of Christ. We therefore need in the first place to allow the Holy Spirit to transform our interior life, our heart.

In his Apostolic Letter “*Desiderio desideravi*”, the Holy Father Francis writes: “... so that the Spirit, plunging us into the paschal mystery, might transform every dimension of our life, conforming us more and more to Christ.” (DD 21) To become conformable (gr. *σύμμορφος*) to Christ, to have “the form of Christ” means to have, just as he has, the human will freely subordinated and united to God’s will (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1997, 553–559), to have the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16) and also his sentiment. To have a sentiment of Christ means to be *συμπαθής* (Heb 4:15) – to be able (in Christ) to suffer with others. It is especially the liturgy that helps people become more conformable to Christ. The Holy Father Francis says:

“The celebration concerns the reality of our being docile to the action of the Spirit who operates through it until Christ be formed in us. (Gal 4:19) The full extent of our formation is our confirmation to Christ. I repeat: it does not have to do with an abstract mental process, but with becoming Him. This is the purpose for which the Spirit is given, whose action is always and only to confect the Body of Christ. It is that way with the Eucharistic bread, and with every one of the baptized called to become always more and more that which was received as a gift in Baptism; namely, being a member of the Body of Christ.” (DD 41)

10. Conclusion

It follows from the lines written above that when considering and attempting to restore the liturgical life, it should be kept in mind that:

1. The idea of reform is connected with the center of the teaching of the Gospels and the Holy Apostle Paul about the human person and with the experience of a new life in Christ.
2. The word *metamorphosis* (gr. *μεταμόρφωσις*) in the New Testament sense expresses a process of transformation of thought and man as such, and not stagnation in some, old or new form. *Metamorphosis* invites us to *go beyond the form*, to discover the true essence of the liturgy, that is, fuller participation in God’s life.
3. In relation to the liturgy, we need to rediscover the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms so that the goal of the renewal of the liturgy will be not only the li-

turgy itself, but first and foremost the glory of the Father present in Christians living in Christ as the Church, which is his mystical body.

4. The Holy Spirit works to make us more “conformable” (gr. σύμμορφοι) to Christ, to bear resemblance to him, and have the “form” of Christ in thoughts, sentiment, and deeds. This applies not only to the liturgy itself, but also to the entire Christian life that both “springs from and culminates in the liturgy” (SC 10).

Abbreviations

AI – Francis 2019 [Aperuit illis].

DD – Francis 2022 [Desiderio desideravi].

SC – Second Vatican Ecumenical Council 1963 [Sacrosanctum concilium].

VD – Benedict XVI. 2010 [Verbum Domini].

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