

THE THEATRE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ITS ROOTS AND RELATIONSHIP TO PSYCHODRAMA *

JOSEPH P. POWER

Moreno Institute, New York City

The Catholic Church has utilized various media to sustain a religious identity. One of these vehicles has been drama, religious in character, centered upon sacramental rituals and celebrations commemorative of the birth, life, death and resurrection of its main protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth. The Church, though not for the same entertainment value as the traditional theatre, has nevertheless constructed an elaborate theatrical environment, replete with accustomed dramaturgical devices: scripts, playwrights, rubrics, costumes, stage, music, professional actors, audience, all to re-inforce and promote that Christian identity. Since the Catholic Church has initiated investigations of its theological positions, stimulated by Pope John and the Second Vatican Council, then I propose, as a part of its present interest in renewal and relevance, that the Catholic Church investigate how it utilizes the dramatic medium, via liturgical rites, to translate the Christian message.

J. L. Moreno's *Theatre of Spontaneity*¹ offers important perceptions into this consideration of the Church's theatrical involvement. Moreno challenges traditional theatre as basically a "worship of death,"² i.e., that all the main ingredients which constitute the theatrical environment are conserves, finished products. The playwright's creative effort is viewed in its completed form, not in the process which led to that final effort. His creation of past moments now pre-empts the vitality of the "here and now."³ The actors surrender themselves to the parameters of a script which has nothing to do with their own individual spontaneity and creativity. The audience, by definition, assumes the role of spectators of an action designed by the playwright and dutifully performed by "professionals." Moreno proclaims that this theatre overlooks the *status nascenti*,⁴ i.e., the birth process of the idea or feeling, and, in its concern for the final product, pays homage to a lifeless product.

The *Theatre of Spontaneity* strove to break this compulsion with the finished product by providing an environment which would openly encourage and support the "birth process." There was no script, save as one evolved in the "here and now,"⁵ nor were there any professional actors, since all who entered the theatre were contributors to the action. The group would actively "warm

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up"⁶ through various stimuli to spontaneous states in order to set in motion this creative, living drama.

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has elected to focus, like the theatre, on the conserved product, the completed script, to promulgate the Christian message and has provided scant space for the creative and spontaneous contributions of individuals striving to live out that message. Presumably, parallel to other institutions, the inculcation of the Christian message is best determined by observation and repetition of a prescribed script and not by personal contribution and discovery of that message within each person. Perhaps what the Catholic Church needs most in this era of renewal is to discover Moreno's principles of spontaneity and creativity as found in the *Theatre of Spontaneity*.

Interestingly enough, the Church was "warming up" to spontaneity within its services during the Early Middle Ages by introducing dramatizations of select readings from the Holy Week services—that time set aside to commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ. This introduction of drama had first originated with the antiphons of Gregorian Chant, sung vowel sounds which were usually included in the Mass, the dramatic presentation of Christ's Last Supper.⁷ When words were added to these Gregorian melodies, the Church began setting the stage for liturgical drama separate from the rituals that constituted its sacramental life. Thus, when it came time to read a passage from the New Testament during the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist—the re-enactment of the Last Supper—the Church dramatized these scriptural passages to create greater impact on its members. Though these dramatizations were still chanted in traditional Latin and portrayed by priests and deacons, the Church had taken the radical step of reviving the dramatic spirit, a spirit so openly crushed by the Church in the Fourth Century. Beginning with the *Quem Quaeritis* trope⁸ which depicted the dialogue between the Holy Women and the Angel at the empty tomb of Jesus after His resurrection, other Easter plays developed which had more elaborate settings and costumes and much more diversified characters and actions. By the Twelfth Century, the important Biblical scenes had been, at one time or another, dramatized during either the Easter or Christmas season.

Drama, however, has a dynamic character that necessitates growth and pushing beyond what has already been accomplished. The Catholic Church had turned to this art form for the purpose of bolstering its religious teachings and, by the Thirteenth Century, found itself locked in a struggle to control and direct that dynamic character.

The crowds were becoming too large to be accommodated inside the church building, in spite of the fact that these buildings had been greatly increased in size. Laymen crowded into the aisles, they lined the walls, jostling one another, at times even quarreling, very often making much more noise than a pious priest had any relish for. And in the second place, these crowds were demanding more and more of the secular element in a

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play; they were making quite impious interpretations of the most soberly intended episodes.⁹

The Church, which had intended the utilization of the dramatic medium for strictly religious purposes, now had to contend with the people's demand that these dramas also include the human elements of the characters with which they so easily identified: their foibles, joys, pains, struggles, humor. Drama was plainly becoming, from the Church's point of view, quite worldly again and faced with this pressure, Pope Innocent III in 1207 issued a decree against "ludi"¹⁰ in the church, except for those forms which the Church carefully dictated in the rubrics of sacramental rituals. This position was further entrenched by decrees of Pope Gratian and Pope Gregory IX, which not only condemned drama in churches, but also went as far as to condemn all entertainers and minstrels.¹¹

The Church now closed its doors to any expression of humanity which did not fall within transcendental boundaries. The full humanity of its members even as it emerged in reaction to the religious dramas, was no longer allowed space to express itself. In point of fact, what the Church did was simply act out its own fear of the group's spontaneity and creativity by strictly limiting the dimensions of its theatrical environment. From this initial "warming up" to spontaneity within its rituals, the Church again turned to a format which carefully delineated how the Christian message was to be translated and the creative impulse of a more participatory format of religious service was no longer allowed expression.

After an interlude of many centuries, the Catholic Church, especially in light of the actions of Pope John, the Second Vatican Council, and the implementation of liturgical reforms by Pope Paul, and even more especially, with the growth of the Pentecostal movement within traditional Catholic circles, appears now to be "warming up" again to alternative liturgical services. In fact, in reading the *Documents of Vatican II* pertaining to the Liturgy of the Church, the phrase, "active participation," appeared enough times to signal a significant change in the Church's approach to the religious services.

By way of promoting active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes.¹²

The people's role, while always active, will take different forms (including a social silence) in various parts of liturgical worship. *Passivity or exaggerated isolation is foreign to the authentic Christian spirit.*¹³ (italics mine)

If the Church leaders are about to embrace "active participation" within the liturgical rites, then the Church has much to learn from the works and writings of J. L. Moreno. The Church which had so vehemently proclaimed its environment as a place where a person could best declare his relationship to God

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through religious services, might now begin providing within that same space an environment where a person can also declare his relationship to himself and to his fellow man. With some assistance from Moreno's concepts of theatre, founded upon spontaneity and creativity, the Church might begin to discover the fuller dimensions of the human person as the link to religious values and living the Christian message.

The liturgical services that the Church relies upon to further a Christian identity are rich with significant feelings and personal values. The Church in re-defining its theatrical environment around spontaneity and creativity would be able to tap into not only these liturgical rituals, but, much more importantly, begin to utilize the creativity and spontaneity of the worshipping community. Some of the ways that the Church might begin to re-define its utilization of the dramatic medium I present in the form of petitions:

1. That the Church investigate Moreno's sociometric system in order to create a viable and cohesive Christian community.
2. That the Church investigate the importance of the "warming up" process to determine the interests of the worshipping community.
3. That the Church give each individual the opportunity to explore in action his relationship to God.
4. That the Church provide true "sanctuary" for each individual to learn how to "love your neighbor as yourself."
5. That the Church provide true "sanctuary" for each individual to heal those feelings which might separate him from another significant person.
6. That the Church provide true "sanctuary" for each individual to test out alternatives within himself and between others.
7. That the Church evaluate and expand the role models offered to the worshipping community as exemplars of Christian life.
8. That the Church give each person the opportunity to assume the important roles in its liturgical rites.
9. That the Church, after the celebration of a particular ritual, allow each person the opportunity to share his personal identification with the roles in the drama.
10. That the Church encourage the leaders of the Christian community to discover the spontaneity and creativity and humanness which lies within themselves and thus be a witness to the community.

The Catholic Church has instituted an elaborate system to support and encourage its Christian identity. If, as it seems to purport in the writings of the Second Vatican Council, the Church is keenly interested in having an impact upon its members via its liturgical rites, then I suggest that the Catholic Church must discover and translate into action those ideas and concepts developed by J. L. Moreno in the *Theatre of Spontaneity*.

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- ¹ Moreno, J. L., *The Theatre of Spontaneity*. New York: Beacon House, 1951. 4th edition has just been printed.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ⁷ Parks, E. W., *The English Drama*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1963, p. 1.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹² Abbot, W. M., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York: America Press, 1966, p. 148.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

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