New Flowers in the Garden
Liturgical Renewal in Latin America

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One of the most beautiful things that we celebrate each spring at our house is the appearance of new flowers that beautify the garden and announce the arrival of spring, renewing life as well as hope.
And the most marvelous thing is that even when the colors and aromas of the flowers are repeated, the garden is never quite the same. It is always new, always different, always astonishing, always a miracle.
When I think of the process of liturgical renewal in Latin America, I think of the image of the garden of life, constantly renewed by the creating and re-creating action of God, celebrated once and again by his people in a thousand diverse ways.

Nevertheless, our "liturgical gardens" are not always places where colors are renewed, spaces fragrant with the aroma of the commonplace, spots where life flourishes in all its fullness. As a well known feminist theologian has aptly put it, "I see that many services, celebrations, and masses in the churches do not reflect the everyday life of people, their concerns, their worries and joys. Nor is the language of everyday life used there, or the way of behaving that we have in our own setting. We also see that these traditional worship services do not attract many new people nor the younger ones. ... What to do?"[1]
This is a very suggestive analysis of the reality of our "liturgical gardens." Several years out from this dramatic statement, we should ask ourselves if our celebrations have evolved or if we are still stuck in the same place, lamenting but incapable of doing something to transform that reality. The efforts of several pastors, male and female, of laymen and laywomen interested in the emergence of a more pluralist and contextual living out of their faith that would be reflected in worship and in all of the work of the church, have not always enjoyed the support necessary to allow a new liturgy to bloom. The attempts have only given rise to very partial progress. Meanwhile, many attempt to decorate the "garden" with artificial, plastic flowers. And others are resigned to coexisting with postcards of the glorious flowers of the past.

This stagnation where liturgy is concerned is, in turn, one of the causes of the erratic evangelizing experience of many of our faith communities. The gospel does not get through as it should to those unfamiliar with it because "in order for there to be evangelization, one needs a democratic, participatory setting, where the language used respects" the culture of the place where the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be communicated. "It is not the concepts that evangelize, but rather the Christian events present within the community and brought into the space of celebration."[2] In that sense,

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[1] Mary E. Hunt, "La liturgia desde una perspectiva feminista," in *Mujeres – Vida nueva*, Cuadernos C.E.C. no. 2, Buenos Aires, 1989.
[2] Atilio Hartmann, *Espacio de la Fiesta, espacio de Dios*, Paulinas, 1991.

those who live out the gospel with gladness, who sing with fervor, who live out their faith fully and share it authentically and intelligibly with others are the ones who announce good news (gospel).
For this reason, the renewal of the "liturgical garden" is one of the areas in which Christian churches should be more and more interested. One might say: "This is nothing new." Of course it is not new. Liturgy is as old as the church itself and there are innumerable writings that refer to worship and to its due order and development. What I wish to do is refer to liturgy not as inherited rites and formulas but rather as the expression of ourselves, of what arises out of the faith community itself, of what is created there as a service of love to the Lord of life and as a response to everyday questions. Worship is that privileged space in which a dialogue between reality in all its dimensions and the gospel becomes possible. And this dialogue must take place with our own words, with our own rhythms and sounds, with movements and symbols with which we can identify, with the aromas and flavors of our own country. In the words of the theologian previously quoted, in liturgy we must be able to see "the root of human experience striving to celebrate."[3]

The apostle Paul may be able to shed some light on our search. He said in one of his letters to Christian men and women in Corinth: "To the Jews I became like a Jew ... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law" (I Corinthians 9:20a and 21a). He understood, and thus wished to pass on to the Corinthians, that it was not possible to comply with Jesus' call to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom if one was not willing to assume the cultural values of the peoples to whom the gospel of Christ was to be communicated.
In general this is something that evangelical churches in Latin America have done very late and only in part. My father used to remind me of the anecdote of the old Dutchman, now settled in Argentina, who prayed in a very loud voice in order to evangelize his neighbors. He was convinced that the power of his prayer, his constancy and faithfulness to God, his love for "lost souls" would bear fruit. But the poor man insisted in praying ... in his native tongue!
Our celebrations, in spite of recent developments, are still very similar to the prayer of the man in the story: they have the best of intentions, they spring forth from sincere hearts, but they preserve a language and a structure that are not our own. The old slogan of the Calvinist Reformation ("the Reformed church is always reforming") hardly seems applicable to certain aspects of the life of the church.

I was reading recently an article written thirty years ago by the well known composer Homero Perera, that refers to sacred music and to the tensions created by the incorporation of new elements into the life of the church. It is hard to believe that since then in many churches, especially the historic ones,[4] we have made so little progress in bringing music and liturgy up to date. He mentioned prejudices such as this one: "It is

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[3] *Op. cit.*, note 1.
[4] When we say "historic churches," without belaboring the point, we refer to the Catholic Church, Orthodox churches in their various manifestations, and to the churches that arose out of and as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

not convenient to play this music in the house of God."[5] And today, with different overtones, these phrases are repeated when we consider the introduction of unaccustomed elements into our liturgy. Who does not delight nowadays in listening to a movement from the renowned *Messiah* by G.F. Handel? Many of us think that that is indeed appropriate music to listen to in church and dismiss out of hand any other musical way to please the Lord. What many do not know, perhaps, is that the *Messiah* was scorned en England by the churches of its day because its author composed operas and tended to frequent less than hallowed halls. What makes this musical composition valuable today? The mere fact that it is played on traditional instruments, its antiquity, its familiarity to our ears?

Jaci Maraschin, a pastor in the Brazilian Episcopal church and a prominent liturgist, wrote once that "our churches, in general, are dehumanized places. There, as if God were not pleased with life, people speak in hushed tones, or not at all, and behave as if we were in the presence of the God of death [...]. One of the greatest impediments to the exercise of creativity is the pews to which we have become accustomed. Their weight, their bulk, their sacredness are the trenches of conservatism [...]. In the sanctuary, everything should be movable and provisional. As if the church were a tent. And we would have the possibility of sanctifying it each time in a different way."[6] Banners, murals, the redistribution of objects within the sanctuary, the incorporation of sculptures, lights, candles, colors, chairs instead of pews, Bibles with comprehensible language, fewer words and more gestures ....[7] The range of possibilities for a gradual re-creation of spaces for celebration, our "liturgical gardens," is immense and there are no limits to human creativity placed at the service of the God to whom we must render a renewed homage every day of our lives.

Faith communities on our continent are beginning to acknowledge more and more this need to travel the path of liturgical and also musical renewal. These communities, some of them for several decades, some more recently, are moving toward their own models for celebration. Without disowning the richness of a heritage that has generously fertilized the soil, men and women of faith are sowing new songs, new poems, new preaching styles, new movements, and new symbols, making their "liturgical garden" a space fit for the manifestation, celebration, and sharing of life as a joyous anouncement of that "other possible world" to which Jesus calls us.

From our place at Red Crearte, we wish to accompany, affirm, and strengthen this process, walking along side faith communities, providing resources, offering various workshops in liturgical and musical renewal and writing and trying to publish materials that preserve the multicolored richness and the fresh aromas of our "liturgical gardens."

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[5] *Educación Cristiana*, no. 90, Oct.-Dec. 1967, pp. 6-7.
[6] Quoted in Hartmann (see note 2).
[7] Pastor Juan Gattinoni often reminds us that Jesus not only said that we should preach but also said: go, do, share, celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptize, etc.