

Modelling Liturgical Evolution: Identity, Interaction & Community

An alternative perspective on Organic Development in the Liturgy¹

Dom Oswald McBride

In the conclusion of the paper which he read to this Commission's Symposium this time last year, Dr Alcuin Reid made the following comment:

"I think that it is true to say – especially in respect of the Liturgy – that today the Church is at a new crossroads and that in many ways liturgical reform and renewal is moving beyond simply that which followed Vatican II ... it may be that this transition will lead us down paths – seemingly new, possibly also old – which we do not prefer or have envisaged. Yet if we do so in faith, preserving charity, and out of love and fidelity to the great tradition of the Church's sacred Liturgy, we ourselves may make a contribution..."

This paper is offered as a contribution to that ongoing debate. More, it is offered as a "thought experiment" – an alternative perspective – regarding some of the issues which Dr Reid raises in this and other works, most notably, his volume entitled "The Organic Development of the Liturgy". Reading and re-reading this book, I have been, and to some extent remain puzzled by his use of the word *organic* – and it is that point from which I wish to start this little adventure into the alternative. If we are truly at a crossroads with regard to the future of the liturgy, then it is important that we look around us; a crossroads is, after all, a place where we can choose one path or another, and in making that decision, we need to be clear about both the map we are reading and the goal for which we are heading. At any crossroads, it would be foolish simply to continue walking straight ahead, only because that is what we have been doing up until now; likewise, it would be equally foolish to turn round and go back the way we came, on the grounds that at least we know the way. This little paper may represent a significant detour from the high levels of discourse of the previous speakers; nonetheless, whilst we may, and before we make our final decision about the road ahead, let us pause a little and look at the view from where we are.

Evolutionary Interactions

As some of you may know, I was a medical doctor before I became a monk. Being a scientist rather than an arts graduate automatically gives one a slightly skewed perspective in a monastery – the different patterns of thought and experience give one a different style of thought, of analysis, of writing. As a scientist pondering on the term "organic" with respect to liturgical development, I began to wonder whether there might be something to learn from the perspectives offered by science, and in particular evolutionary biology to our analysis of liturgical history. What follows is – as already stated – a thought experiment.

¹ This is a revised and annotated version of a paper given at the annual EBC Liturgical Commission Symposium, held at Worth Abbey on the 10 April, 2007.

At its most basic level, evolutionary theory relies on two interlocking interactions to produce organic development. The first phase of the interaction can be described by the expression:

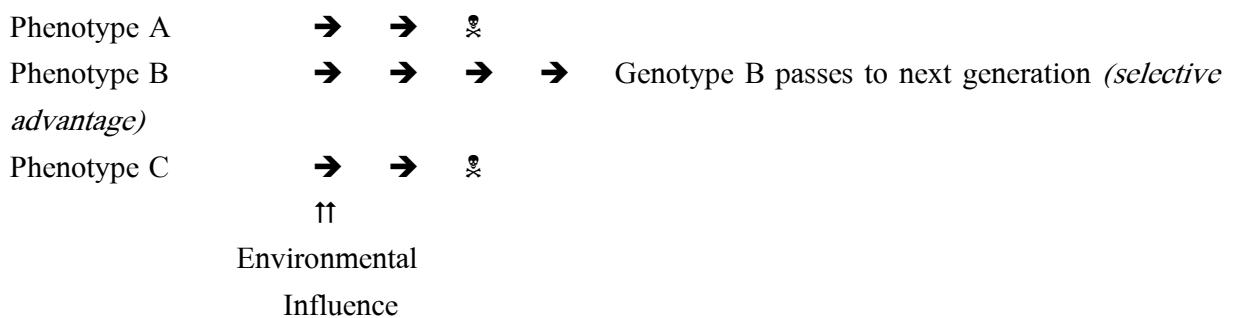
Figure 1:

Genotype + Environmental Influence → Phenotype

That is, the genetic constitution (genotype) of any organism interacts with the environment in which it finds itself to give the final appearance of the organism (the phenotype). What this means is that it is not solely the genes of the organism which determine its characteristics. Rather, those characteristics are the product of a complex interaction between the genes and the environment. As an example, it is well-known that until the mid-20th century the people of Glasgow were of shortish stature as a rule; this was not primarily a genetic flaw, but rather the influence of poor diet caused by general poverty. With post-war improvement in nutritional status, the raw “genetic potential” was unleashed, and the average stature returned to normal ranges. In this case, the environment was acting as a brake or control on the genotype.

The second interaction is a little more complex. We might summarise it thus:

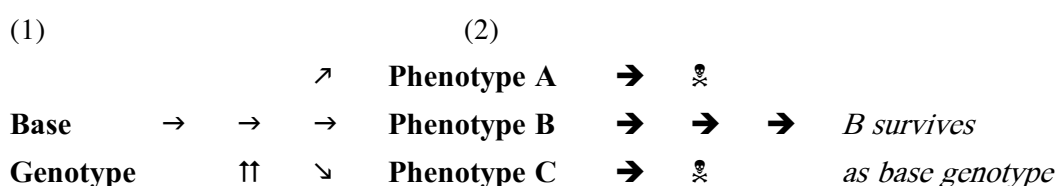
Figure 2:



Minor variations in the genetic constitution of individuals of the same species, and even of the same populations, result in a variety of different phenotypes, that is slightly different individuals, being produced in any given generation. This is a commonplace fact – we do not all have red hair, or blue eyes, or bat ears, but some people do. A second interaction with the environment may result in one of those individuals having what is called a *selective advantage* over the others – for some reason it survives better in that particular environment, and because it survives it can breed, and because it can breed it passes the genes for its characteristics on to the next generation. Over time, this gradually results in what Darwin described as “survival of the fittest”, by which he meant the survival of those organisms best suited to their environment, best “fitted in” to their particular circumstances, and not fittest in the sense of the one which can lift most weights in the gym, or run the furthest or quickest.

We might summarise both these levels of interaction on a single diagram thus:

Figure 3:



Environmental
Influences

↑↑ *for next generation and*
Environmental *interaction (1) reoccurs*
Influences

What is perhaps most important is the significant role which environmental influences can play on both the generation of phenotype and on the selection of survivors. One last, and crucial point in this regard. The process is not static, but dynamic and open to change. If, for example, the environmental influences originally responsible for selecting line B as survivor were to change, even very slightly, it is possible that the selective advantage of B's characteristic might be reduced or even lost. Phenotypes A and C retain the possibility of survival value for as long as they remain "part" of the population; they are not absolutely a dead-end, nor are they "pre-destined" for failure.

Can we see any parallels between this series of evolutionary interactions and the "organic development" of the liturgy? I believe it is not impossible, nor even implausible to suggest that we can.

It has long been a liturgical truism that *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (Prosper of Aquitaine, *Contra Collatorem*, VIII), a dictum which may be more familiar as the tag *Lex Orandi: Lex Credendi*. Some modern liturgical scholars have furthered this to include a third term – *Lex Vivendi* – to highlight the necessary link between both dogma, the liturgy and the "lived gospel" or "lived liturgy" of the Christian life. Again, we enter the realm of inter-activity – an interaction between the dogmatic core of the liturgy, the living Christian and historical environment in which it is situated, and the liturgy's own characteristics. To stretch a point, we might re-draw Figure 1 above as follows:

Figure 4:

Genotype + Environmental Influence → Phenotype

and add the parallel:

Dogma + Environmental Influence → Liturgical expression

This might seem tenuous, but for the fact that there are so many examples of precisely this process of interactive expression in the development of liturgy in history. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that it is almost the characteristic *par excellence* of the praying Church that its liturgy develops in precisely this fashion. At the macroscopic level, one could cite the collision of the Early Church with the Roman and Byzantine Imperial court and its influence on liturgical ritual – the use of incense, acolytes, vestments etc. all arise from just this type of interactivity. The stabilisation of the European liturgy around the "core" of the *Hadrianum* (the nucleus of the so-called "Gregorian Sacramentary") is another such example, springing from the historically

· This is, of course, much over-simplified. In terms of the generation of differences between individuals – what is known as "variation" – the processes of environmental interaction are much less significant than the processes of gamete formation by Meiosis and sexual reproduction. Those processes cannot be ignored in terms of evolutionary theory, but they do not contribute much to our "thought experiment" at this stage.

contingent event of Charlemagne's coronation and his admiration for all things Roman, and the historical success of his power-base. At the microscopic level, too, we can see exactly this same process. Liturgical texts spring up because they are needed, but they are needed by concrete communities, and often their writing expresses the particular needs felt at particular times. Often, it is not impossible to discern this "interactive" level in liturgical texts (in much the same way that some NT scholars have sought to discern the needs of particular communities as expressed in the Gospels and letters of Paul) – although there are times when later needs again change the texts so that there are discernible strata of community interaction which can be "unpicked". The classic example is, perhaps, the Collect for the 15th Sunday of Ordinary Time, probably originally written by Pope Gelasius I in c. 492 AD as a diatribe against the *Lupercalia* festival in Rome, but then altered and generalised (perhaps by Benedict of Aniane) to serve first as an Eastertide collect and then transferred also into "Ordinary Time" in MR1970.

Deus <qui> errantes in via posse redire veritatis lumen ostendis: da cunctis qui Christiana professione censentur, et illa respuere qui huic inimica sunt nomini, et ea quae sunt apta sectari. Per...

(Sac. Veronense #75)

*Deus, qui **errantibus ut in via possint redire justitiae**, veritatis **tuae** lumen ostendis: da cunctis qui Christiana professione censentur, et illa respuere qui huic inimica sunt nomini, et ea quae sunt apta sectari. Per...*

(MR 1570 Dom.Tertia Post Pascha) – **changes in bold**

The original reference to those "wandering the streets" seems to refer to the pagan ritual involved in the *Lupercalia*, and the second half of the original version is a strong diatribe that Christians should abandon such pagan practices, no matter how popular. The later revision (as seen in MR1570) not only corrects what was seen as a grammatical error in the first clause – something of a fetish amongst Carolingian scholars – but adds the term "justitiae" to tighten the theology.

Another rather beautiful example is the "three-fold" expansion of a Preface for the feast of St Laurence found in the *Missale Gothicum* – an almost complete re-working of an original preface for the same feast found in the *Sacramentarium Veronense*, and a re-working which springs from the heroic, poetic and dramatic needs of a late seventh century Frankish community (see appendix).

In short, the liturgical life of the Church can be seen in terms of "inter-activity" – as the product of the interaction between the dogmatic and liturgical "tradition" and the particular historical circumstances of praying communities. I would contest that, for any developments to be described as truly "organic", this "perspective of interaction" cannot be ignored or set aside, but must be taken seriously. We will return to this point in our conclusion.

Patterns of Evolutionary Development

In his fascinating book on the origins of multicellular invertebrates in the Burgess Shale in British Columbia, a book which also attempts to fathom an "evolutionary" analysis of history,

· Gould, S.J. "Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History", Penguin Books, London 1991.

the late Stephen Jay Gould points to a number of common fallacies in our understanding of evolutionary theory. Perhaps the most significant for our purposes is what he refers to as the fallacy of the “ladder” – that is, that evolutionary change shows a predictable and incremental movement (dare one even suggest “organic”?) from simple to complex, from primitive to ideal, from primaeval slime to the glory of mankind. It is the sort of picture of evolution which most people – probably rather unthinkingly – accept, since the iconography of a ladder is so familiar from the textbooks we used when we were at school, and since it is so clearly satisfying. Life begins simple, and progresses through stages to reach *Homo sapiens*, and the job of evolutionary biologists is to fill in the “missing links” in this ladder of progress.

The problem is that this is simply wrong, and wrong for a number of reasons. In the first place, species do not turn into other species – chimpanzees and gorillas did not turn into primitive hominids, but rather belong to a family which originally shared some characteristics but differed in others and which, over the course of time and through geographical separation resulted in the separate evolution of the present day species which we recognise (a process which is called *Adaptive Radiation*). In other words, each branch of an evolutionary family tree arises from an ancestor which has characteristics of both subsequent lineages, which then develop separately. For example, both fish and amphibians share a common ancestor (“fish-like ancestor”). One branch develops independently to form early fish and then modern forms, while the continuing changes in the separate ancestral line produce an “amphibian-like ancestor”. Once an organism has changed substantially from the ancestral form (fish-like, bird-like etc.), it cannot return, but will either continue to become more and more separate from the ancestral form or become extinct.

In the second place, and perhaps more significantly, evolution is not a purposive process (at least as it is generally understood by biologists); it is not a striving for a single perfect goal on the part of creation, as if every little amoeba grew up dreaming of being a human. Such an interpretation is teleological in the extreme – a crass restatement of the anthropic principle. It *is* a striving for perfection in the limited sense that we have outlined above in the description of the process of “survival of the fittest”, but even here – as we have also noted – the “goal” is both decided by and remains subject to the processes of interaction with the environment.

What – if anything – can this tell us about “organic development” of the liturgy? I would like to suggest a couple of things which might act as salutary warnings to an over-simplistic “ladder” interpretation of liturgical history. Firstly, if we see liturgical development as progress towards some “perfect goal” which – once reached – must remain immutable, we are taking a risk. If you examine diagrams which outline the development of the anatomy of the horse, you see a pattern of increasing specialisation towards one function, that of running. The final structure is, indeed, almost ideally suited towards running, but retains no flexibility for anything else. Indeed, this almost paradigmatic set of diagrams, often used to illustrate books on the power of evolutionary change to produce “perfect structures”, conceals the fact that the horse is an “end-stage” organism – a solitary remaining example of what was once a much more diverse and flexible lineage within the mammalian kingdom. “Perfection” carries a heavy price – and that price may be annihilation if circumstances change. If we choose to label one liturgical rite or text as “perfect”, we risk incurring the same price tag; indeed, one might almost say that we

risk the liturgy becoming a “living fossil” – perfect, unchanged, but going nowhere. There are recognisable symptoms of this “over-specialisation” or “fossilisation”. The first is allegorisation of the liturgy – when a layer of interpretative commentary is super-imposed on an action or ritual in order to give “meaning” to something the original purpose of which has been lost or forgotten. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in both Eastern and Western liturgical history. The second is the rise of para-liturgies, “devotions”, which gradually replace an active and sustaining liturgy in the lives of the faithful – and again, one can think of numerous examples here. The much-lamented falling off in the popularity of such devotional practices since the Second Vatican Council might – in the light of the comments above – beg a significant question. In the second place, there is almost the opposite risk of the ladder model when analysing liturgical history. Whilst evolutionary developments tend to be wrongly interpreted as a move from simple to complex, in liturgy there is often the opposite interpretative movement – from “pristine” to “decadent”, and it is no surprise that the language of these terms is so provocative. Both such interpretations wrongly interpret the processes involved, and in the latter case lead to an increasingly dangerous tendency towards pure “liturgical archaeology” – as if twenty-first century Christians can seriously pretend that they live in the fourth century. Yet again, the link between the *environment* of the praying community and *its* liturgical expression of its faith is severed.

Perhaps one last example of pattern within evolutionary biology may be helpfully considered before we try to draw some conclusions. Recent studies have begun to favour “catastrophe theories” as a major intervening stage in the development of life on Earth. Perhaps the most famous is the suggestion that the climatic changes caused by the impact of a super-meteorite into the Gulf of Mexico were responsible for the disappearance of the dinosaurs – everyone’s favourite extinct creatures. Even this mass-extinction, however, pales into insignificance compared to earlier events in the wake of the so-called “Cambrian Explosion”, some 570 million years ago, as evidenced by the Burgess Shale fossils mentioned above. In this tiny area of the early fossil record a huge range of organisms is represented, many more than have “modern” descendants. As an example of the magnitude, the more than one million species of arthropods which have been described to date fit into four main groups – uniramians (the group including insects), chelicerates (the group made up of spiders and scorpions), crustaceans (like crabs and wood-lice) and the now-extinct trilobites; the Burgess fossil beds contains not only examples of these groups, but also remnants of a further twenty additional designs which “never made it”. The reasons for this huge mortality remain unclear, but have allowed Gould to suggest that alongside the normal processes of evolution outlined above, there ought to be added a further dynamic of *initial diversification followed by decimation* – episodic explosive creativity followed by a gradual sifting down. The episodic nature of this phenomenon means that after each “catastrophe” which decimates what has gone before, the remnants undergo a new phase of diversification – filling the vacated evolutionary niches, although with a slightly less varied range of initial possibilities now available, since only the “remnants” body-plans are around to

· There has been much recent debate as to the exact number of these “lost” phyla. Recent studies by Conway Morris, one of the team whose results were originally reported by Gould, have reduced this number somewhat.

act as the starting material for new development. Thus, rather than a simple developmental process in which there is a steady increase in diversity over time – a pattern which would look rather like a bush springing from a single stem or, as Gould terms it, a “cone” of increasing diversity – we would see a more complex pattern of episodic creativity followed by die-back, with only a few basic body-plans being successful enough to survive and act as templates for future development at each evolutionary stage.

The significance of such a suggestion for the “organic development” of the liturgy should be relatively clear.

Examination of the tradition shows just such a pattern of diversification followed by decimation, not just in the early church, but throughout most of the first 1500 years as each community strove to express its faith. My own work on the texts for the feast of St Laurence shows the pattern very clearly, perhaps since Laurence is such a significant and popular saint. In the *Sacramentarium Veronense*, the earliest collection of Roman (and probably papal) texts, there are no fewer than 50 formulae for the feast, including 14 proper prefaces; in the next generation of papal texts (the *Paduense*, archetype from the Gregorian lineage) the number of formulae falls to 12, but interestingly 3 (25%) are new compositions. In the almost contemporary Gelasian Sacramentary – a parochial book – the number of formulae is 19, but 68% are new compositions. The story continues throughout the mediaeval period, with a new burst of creativity in the 11th century. If nothing else, it should allow us to demarcate two distinct, but on-going processes in liturgical development, at least at the textual level. The first is a process of original creativity, as each generation seeks to make its liturgy “speak” to the people of its time and which leads to diversification. The second is a process of codification, of editing and pruning the products of the living tradition, a process of decimation which seeks to maintain the “best”, but can potentially lead to stagnation and the “fossilisation” of the tradition itself. Ideally, there should be some balance between these two, to allow the genuine need for new texts, new rites, new expressions to be answered, but also to avoid a liturgical “free for all” and chaos.

Finally, the mention of extinction should perhaps lead us to consider the natural end-point of nearly all “organic” processes, which is death. Death – the dissolution of the elements making up a living organism and their return to be recycled through the natural cycles – is the culmination of life as we know it. However, both in theology and evolutionary biology, death is not considered to be the end of the process, although it may represent, at least in biology, the end of a particular instantiation of a species in a particular individual, or even of a species itself. Rather, evolutionary mechanisms enshrine the concept of transmission, the ability of the genetic material to pass through or be transmitted across generations, influencing the future (what Newman might have referred to as “continuity of principle”); an individual organism may die, but if it has reproduced, at least part of its “genotype” will be transmitted to its offspring. Death cannot, therefore, be considered as a “blockage” to organic development; rather, it is almost a necessary part of it. Indeed, one can go further. At the cellular level, there is a constant process of cell death involved in the maintenance of the organism, whether cell death which creates waterproof structures like human skin (the outer cornified layers of which are dead) or is a consequence of cell damage or malfunction. Perhaps even more significantly, there is a specific

process called *apoptosis* – programmed cell death – which is necessary for embryological development. Certain cells are programmed to die because of their location or age, and it is this process which creates the structures we recognise. To give a trivial example, if the cells surrounding the embryos digits do not die in an organised and pre-programmed fashion, then it would not be able to form normal fingers and toes, but would retain the webbing areas in between each digit. Death can sometimes be a necessary part of normal life.

Again, the relevance of these observations to liturgical development may be apparent. If we are truly to accept that liturgical development is “organic” in its nature, then we must also accept that death – in this case, the loss of particular elements from within the liturgy, be they texts or rites – is a normal part of that organic process, and is nothing to be surprised at or afraid of. Again, historical examples of such liturgical “losses” are legion, and perhaps we should expect there to be more in the future.

Conclusions

In the late 19th century, the theory and mechanism of evolution proposed by Darwin caused huge controversy. This might be regarded as surprising, since many of his ideas about gradualism and change had been relatively commonplace amongst at least some of his intellectual contemporaries for almost a century. Newman himself had not only adumbrated his own theories and criteria for development in the 1840’s, but also came to have a relatively positive view of Darwin’s ideas, leaving himself somewhat in a minority amongst theologians. In a little-known letter of December 1863, he wrote as follows:

“There is as much want of simplicity in the idea of creation of distinct species as in that of the creation of trees in full growth whose seed is in themselves – or of rocks with fossils in them. I mean that it is as strange that monkeys should be so like men with no historical connection between them, as that there was no history of facts by which fossil bones got into rocks ... I will either go whole hog with Darwin or, dispensing with time and history altogether, hold not only the theory of distinct species but that also of the creation of fossil-bearing rocks...”

I think Newman makes a crucial point in this hard-hitting passage. The issue at stake with Darwin and his contemporaries, and – I would suggest – with our understanding of the “organic development” of the liturgy is, at its most fundamental point, our view of history. As Newman rightly notes, the corollary of abandoning the concept of an historical connection between Man and the apes in the face of the fossil evidence is that we have to “(dispense) with time and history altogether”. The principle point of controversy between Bishop Wilberforce and Darwin’s supporters can be seen less as a dispute over whether we have monkeys as our ancestors, or even God’s ability to be the Creator, but as a challenge to our own historical viewpoint and its significance, a challenge which at that time seemed to overthrow previously enshrined and comfortable historical “verities” – principally Man’s status as the necessary pinnacle of the divine creation – and to demand a radical re-think of our assumptions. I believe we may be faced with a very similar situation today, as we stand at this new “crossroads” in the Church’s liturgical life.

The comments and illustrations I have offered in the previous sections are in many ways trivial, and deliberately so. They in no way either prove – or even seek to prove – that there is any substantive connection between Darwin or neo-Darwinian theories of evolutionary biology and

the Church's liturgy. Rather, as I have suggested above, they are an extended metaphor, a "thought-experiment" by which I would hope to encourage new interpretations of the evidence before us. Just as Darwin's ideas provoked (and continue to provoke) a radical re-interpretation of human history, so too, I believe that there is evidence to suggest that there is more than one possible interpretation of liturgical development, more than one simple explanation for the "liturgical fossils" which litter the strata of church history.

This should be an incredibly positive intuition since, at least potentially, it offers us the possibility of freedom from mere tyrannical ritualism, from a mind-set which demands much more than mere obedience to properly constituted ecclesiastical authority so that the liturgy may truly be celebrated "in the name of the Church", but one which seeks to constrain not only Man but God within one formulaic expression, to "contain" the mysteries not to incarnate them in the wide variety and circumstance of Catholic community. In the words of one of my professors at the Liturgical Institute in Rome, such a mind set does not produce liturgy, but magic.

I suspect that this may have been the intuition of the Council fathers at Vatican II when they called for a *recognitio* – a reconsideration of the Church's life in the modern world. Perhaps the reforms which sprang from that *recognitio* are, as yet, incomplete and imperfect. However, I do not believe it to be impossible that they represent the opening phase of the next episode of the "decimation-diversification" process outlined above. Similarly, the "re-priming" of the rites and liturgical books which – to so many – seems to represent a major cataclysm and discontinuity in liturgical history, the point at which both baby and bath water were thrown away, might equally well represent a new phase in the interaction between varied genotypes and their environments, the fading of a former lineage to allow the blossoming of a new but until now latent lineage, equally rooted in the fore-going tradition, but only now reaching maturity.

I would like to conclude with an appeal, echoing again the quotation from Dr Reid with which we began. If we continue to view liturgical development both with suspicion and from within a single interpretative framework of comfortable prejudice, rather than with the faith and charity which he calls for, I fear we will get nowhere. If the liturgy is to be what we believe it to be – the place of encounter between God and humanity, the locus where both the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity is to occur, and the continuation of the salvific work of Christ who is himself the objective content of our liturgy – then we really must take the dynamic and living aspect of the liturgy as seriously as we can, and not only as a work of historical scholarship or of mere "tradition".

Perhaps we, as monastics, have a special responsibility here. We know all too well, from our daily lived experience, how deeply inter-connected our identity – both as individuals and as communities – is with our liturgical life. We also know, and only too well, how hard is the daily struggle to maintain our spiritual growth together in the face of the liturgy, of its demands and of it (and our) shortcomings. Perhaps we are particularly well-placed to see the wood from the trees, to discern the encounter with Christ amidst the rubrical minutiae, because we already inhabit a "ritual order" which is no longer present in our modern and increasingly fragmented societies, and thus have the duty to teach that skill of liturgical discernment to others.

Above all, however, we must admit that there are no simple answers here. The multitude of liturgical forms, both historic and present within the Christian Churches bears witness to the fact

that there is no *single* right answer to the questions we face, no *single* perfect earthly liturgy. But then, that should come as no surprise – for the liturgy is the foretaste, and not the fulfilment, of the Paschal feast of the Kingdom.

10.iv.07

APPENDIX

Sacramentarium Veronense #776

Vere dignum: in die sollemnitatis hodiernae, qua beati Laurenti hostiam tibi placitam casti corporis glorioso certamine suscepisti. Prunas namque superposita stridebant membra vivencia, nec tamen erat poena patientis, sed piae confessionis incensum. Neque terreno liberari cruciatu martyr optabat, sed coronari deprecabatur in caelis.

Missale Gothicum # 398 (// = parallel passages; C.1, 2, 3 = commentary passages)

Link: Vere dignum et iustum est, omnipotens sempiternae Deus, tibi in tanti martyris Laurenti [festivitate] laudis hostias immolare.

// Qui **hostiam** viventem **hodie** in ipsius levitae tui **beati Laurenti** martyris ministerio per florem **casti corporis accepisti**.

C.1 Cuius vocem per hymnicam (?) modulamen (?) psalmi audivimus, canentis et dicentis: Probasti cor meum Deus, et visitasti nocte, id est in tenebris saeculi, igne me examinasti et non est inventa in me iniquitas.

// O **glorioso certaminis** virtus!

C.2 O inconcussa constantia confitentis!

// **Stridunt membra viventia** super graticulam **inposita et prunis** saeventibus

C.3 anhelantes incensum suum in modum timiamatis divinis naribus exhibent odorem. Dicit enim martyr ipse cum Paulo: Christi bonus odor sumus deo.

// Non enim cogitabat, quomodo in terram positum a passionis periculo **liberaretur**, sed quomodo inter martyres in caelis **coronaretur**.