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REVIEW

Johannes Paul CHAVANNE,
Die Kirche in den Texten ihres Gottesdienstes.
Beitrag zu einer liturgischen Ekklesiologie
(Theologie der Liturgie 22), Regensburg 2024

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Reviewed Book

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Review

CHAVANNE, Johannes Paul, *Die Kirche in den Texten ihres Gottesdienstes. Beitrag zu einer liturgischen Ekklesiologie* (Theologie der Liturgie 22), Regensburg 2024.

JORIS GELDHOF

Somebody had to write this book, and the scholarly community has every reason to be excited and grateful that Johannes Paul Chavanne, Cistercian monk of Heiligenkreuz and professor of liturgical studies, was the one who actually made the effort to do it. The intuition that lies at the basis of the book's conception is brilliant. The meticulous way in which the research has been carried out is exemplary. The writing and the formal qualities of the publication are outstanding. And the "contribution to a liturgical ecclesiology" – as the subtitle phrases it far too modestly – that has been made by the appearance of this book, is one that will last. One can only hope that the book will soon become a standard reference, not only because of the specific topic it treats, but also because of the method it adopted.

Chavanne's central idea is that the doctrine of the church as well as the academic study of it, ecclesiology, can benefit immensely if only they take into account the church's *lex orandi* more seriously. For the liturgy of the church is so rich and varied that it is not merely a source of inspiration for thinking, which one can consult or not, *ad libitum* so to speak. Rather, the liturgy is an indispensable – and moreover an inexhaustible – resource for any reflection on the church, the reasons for her existence, and the nature of her mission. As a matter of fact, oversight of the liturgy is no longer an option in ecclesiology after a thorough read of Chavanne's tome.

What the liturgy has to offer is not merely ornamental, and therefore optional, for ecclesiologists; it is constitutive, and in that sense essential.

The volume, which results from the author's *Habilitationsschrift*, prepared and defended at the university of Trier, Germany, is intelligently organized. It opens with a couple of epistemological remarks on why and how the liturgy serves as a genuine source of knowledge, insight, and understanding. Subsequently, there are four major parts of unequal length. The first among these is relatively short; it develops the argument that an ecclesiology which only relies on theological writings misses something crucial. Surveying a fine selection of ecclesiologists, Chavanne rightly observes (and compellingly demonstrates) that hardly any of them, even those who promote a so-called eucharistic ecclesiology, unfold their thoughts through a profound engagement with primary liturgical texts.

As a result, that is precisely what Chavanne undertakes in the second and most elaborate part of his book. It is above all in this part that the reader finds the master at work. One cannot but be in awe of the breadth of his knowledge, the depth of the insights gained from liturgical material, and the many connections that are foregrounded and briefly commented. Chavanne embarks on a long journey through the liturgical books pertaining to the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, adding to those the liturgical books for religious professions, including the consecration of abbots and abbesses, as well as the book for the consecration of altars and churches. One would only wonder why funerals and blessings have not been included as additional separate sections, for one would expect to find useful resources for ecclesiology there, too. To some extent, this is an unfair criticism, however, because there is no doubt that all the material which Chavanne did cover is substantial, theologically coherent, and overall impressive indeed.

An intriguing finding is that the liturgy-based ecclesiology which Chavanne patiently unpacks, seems most densely present and most richly varied in the context of the celebrations of the Eucharist and of the consecration of altars and churches. That one would find a lot of pertinent metaphors, concepts and ideas in the missal is to a certain extent not a surprise; that would be hypothesized by any scholar who is familiar with the Roman rite. But it is a commendable and praiseworthy innovation to put this material alongside an in-depth analysis of the ritual for consecrating

a church and an altar. Another very good idea is that the discussion about other sacraments and rituals has been significantly expanded by exploring corresponding mass forms and ritual masses. Truly, these texts are a treasure trove for liturgical theologians, and they should be inspired by Chavanne's example to further unearth it.

The purpose of the third part is to draw from the second part ecclesiological insights at a more theoretical level, so that the survey of liturgical texts is made fruitful for discussion and reflection. Chavanne amply succeeds in achieving that goal, inasmuch as he takes the reader again on a challenging journey of thought that is generously inspired, first and foremost, by liturgical sources but also by the teachings of Vatican II – a major point of reference for Chavanne – and an admirable amount of secondary literature. There is probably some unintentional irony in the fact that, after all, one recognizes in the structure of this third part the sequence of the classical chapters of dogmatic theology, ranging from trinity to christology to ecclesiology and eschatology, with Mariology as a kind of pious afterthought. The truth is, however, that Chavanne shows a much wider horizon than this, if only by demonstrating that a liturgical ecclesiology is much more profoundly eschatological than the more theoretical ecclesiologies abounding, and that a broad and “thick” understanding of sacramentality beyond the seven privileged rituals of the Church is an inevitable consequence of taking the church's liturgical self-expression more seriously than hitherto has been done.

The fourth part, which should actually not have constituted a separate part in the overarching design of the study, quickly discusses some contemporary challenges. Chavanne addresses these issues – most emphatically, synodality – with the nuance and perspicacity typical of him, but they could as well have been taken up in the general conclusion, especially because they are not handled with the same rigor and breadth as the other parts.

The weakest point of the book, however, is the lack of a liturgical hermeneutics properly so called. While Chavanne makes it abundantly clear that his main focus is liturgical texts, understood as expressing the church's self-understanding, he does not explain how, i. e., with the aid of which interpretive tools, he reads them. He does quote from almost the entire liturgical books production that came into being after Vatican II, but

there is hardly any detailed attention to the Latin original version of the texts, for subtle differences in vocabulary, genre, and grammar, or for matters of style. This makes it difficult to comprehend which criteriology he used for the occurrences of “the church”, both explicitly (verbatim) and implicitly or by way of allusions, in the texts he analyzed. Supposing that he did not aim to include each and every reference to “the church” in the Roman rite as currently in use, what, then, is the rationale behind his choices, what are the limits of his approach, and how exactly did he delineate his corpus? Moreover, if he did not opt for a purely inductive method, extracting from liturgical texts mere mentions of “the church”, what are the preconceptions and implications of his hermeneutical framework? And how are exegetical and dogmatic data influencing his reading of liturgical prayers, blessings, acclamations, rubrics, responses, antiphons, etc.? Without any doubt, it is a good thing that the reader is informed *why* liturgical texts are considered, but one would have liked to hear more about *how* they are interpreted.

It is a pity that Chavanne’s book does not contain indexes, for, if there had been an index of liturgical and biblical sources, that would no doubt have constituted a mine of helpful information for other scholars to work with. This omission, however, may have to do with the arrangements of the series in which the volume appears – and there is the practical reality, of course, that creating a decent index requires a legion of work. Nevertheless, fellow researchers are certainly spoiled for choice with an extensive bibliography. The books that are listed are mostly Germanophone, which is understandable given the intellectual milieu of the author. It is unfortunate, however, that some relevant sources in French (e. g., Yves Congar and Aimé-Georges Martimort) and English (e. g., Massimo Faggioli and Mattijs Ploeger) are omitted. While it is somewhat cheap to point to such omissions, it is nonetheless relevant, because the bibliography evidently reflects a certain bias that runs through the entire book. Even if ecclesiologists largely neglected liturgy, liturgists generally did not lose sight of the church ...

In conclusion, one should have the greatest respect for what Johannes Paul Chavanne accomplished with this outstanding scholarly work. It is to be commended for the huge amount of meticulous research that went into it, for the intellectual thoroughness with which primary and

secondary sources were intertwined, for the broad and deep theological vision that it conveys, and ultimately also for the wisdom it speaks. Chavanne's book is an example for many scholars today and will hopefully inspire a next generation not only of ecclesiologists and liturgists but of theologians of any kind. May *Die Kirche in den Texten ihres Gottesdienstes* be read by many and be blessed with a wide and longstanding reception history.