

The Liturgical Drowse

When I'm at mass, I often find myself at the edge of sleep and occasionally right over it into a twenty-second burst of shallow, eye-closing, neck-relaxing sleep. This can happen during the Gloria, or the Creed, or even the Sanctus, short though it is; sometimes, though much less often, it happens during the homily or the lections; and perhaps most often it happens during the eucharistic prayer, where I can drowse in an incense-threaded bell-punctuated haze. And even when I don't actually sleep, I often -- perhaps as often as not -- spend some part of the liturgy in lullaby-lulled somnolence. I think of this as the liturgical drowse.

The liturgical drowse doesn't, I think (though I may not be the most reliable informant), prevent me from speaking my part. I can easily recite the Creed in my sleep -- perhaps more easily than when fully awake and thinking about it. And the same goes for the other parts of the mass written on my memory. But the drowse does prevent me from being aware that I'm saying my part as I say it; and sometimes it's deep enough that even when I re-run things in my mind, as you do when you've heard a clock strike without counting, and then do a mental replay to figure out what hour it is, I can't be sure whether I continued to vocalize. I become, when enjoying the deeper forms of the liturgical drowse, something close to a somnolent automaton, though one perfectly capable of fairly complex action and utterance.

What causes the liturgical drowse? No doubt it has something to do with the soporific effects of deep familiarity. Since I was received into the Catholic Church in 1996, I've been at, I should think, upwards of two thousand masses, not to mention many hundreds of recitations of one part or another of the Liturgy of the Hours. This is of course nothing compared to the number a daily-mass-going cradle Catholic will clock up over a long life, and doubly or trebly nothing compared to what a fifty-year Benedictine of traditional observance will manage. But it's still quite a lot. Among the activities I perform on a regular basis complex enough to have required of me a significant effort of learning (cooking, driving, lovemaking, gardening, eating, using my native language), mass-going is exceeded in frequency only by using my native language (I do this nearly all the time: I get paid to read and write and speak), driving (which, regrettably, I have to do almost every day), and eating (for obvious reasons). The rest occur much less frequently.

I used to worry about the liturgical drowse. Participation (full and active), attention, engagement, enthusiasm -- aren't these what I should be seeking? Isn't a thoughtful and engaged response to what I'm hearing and seeing and smelling what God asks of me? Isn't dreamy automatism quite the other thing? Well, maybe; and sometimes that kind of engagement happens -- Scripture strikes a chord, a phrase from one or another of the prayers hooks me, my mind and heart race, I feel fervor, my heart is strangely warmed. Sometimes, though not often, I cry a little and with deep feeling, especially at the agnus dei and the non sum dignus. But increasingly I've come to think that the liturgical drowse is nothing bad, and may even serve as an anticipation of what is to come, when (I hope) I see God face to face and know as I am known. But why might this be?

It's quite normal to drowse -- at least in the sense of being occurrently unaware of what you're doing, and of finding it difficult, should you try, to reconstruct in memory what you did -- when you're doing something you're profoundly used to, deeply habituated to. Which of us has not driven fifty miles in a driving-drowse, or had a conversation in a speaking-drowse, or played the piano in a keyboard-drowse? I've conducted entire classes as a teacher in something approaching this condition, and I don't think they've been bad ones.

Drowsing in situations like this while yet still performing can be a mark of love, a mark of something having been written so deeply on our hearts and minds that it has become us, taken us over, overwritten us in such a way that we are its habit-laden instruments (recall that virtues are, according to Aristotle and the scholastics, habits). A really good habit, deeply learned, requires neither thought nor attention. If, as I speak, I begin to think about syntax and lexicon and ornament I relapse into silence; so also if I begin to think about what it seems like to me to be speaking. Speech in general, and especially inspired speech, filled with the breath of the triune Lord, abrogates the sense of agency: it doesn't seem like anything to you to perform it as you do. In that it's like etiquette, courtesy, and love. Do you have to decide whether to kiss your spouse when you see her (or him) after an absence? Whether to hug your child when she runs to you? Whether to shake the stranger's hand? And does it seem like anything to you to do these things as you do them? I hope not. The extent to which you answer any of those questions affirmatively is the extent to which you're not doing those things virtuously. Being aware of what you're doing as you do it is greatly over-rated.

So what about the liturgical drowse? Perhaps it's exactly an anticipation of heaven, of a time when I will have become one who sings the Sanctus with such depth and passion and profundity that nothing else is possible for me, a time when God's kiss and my return of it are all there is, a time when I have no more need of its seeming like anything to me to be me. That, perhaps, is what it's like to be a truly human agent, one whose actions are fully responsive to God's. And if that is so, the liturgical drowse is not only not a problem, but the fullest foreshadowing of final flourishing.

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