

Here dancing is tied with love, with diversion, with profaneness, with unbridling of the senses: such dancing, in general, is not pure.

For that reason it cannot be introduced into liturgical celebrations of any kind whatever: that would be to inject into the liturgy one of the most desacralized and desacralizing elements; and so it would be equivalent to creating an atmosphere of profaneness which would easily recall to those present and to the participants in the celebration worldly places and situations.

Neither can acceptance be had of the proposal to introduce into the liturgy the so-called artistic ballet[2] because there would be presentation here also of a spectacle at which one would assist, while in the liturgy one of the norms from which one cannot prescind is that of participation.

Therefore, there is a great difference in cultures: what is well received in one culture cannot be taken on by another culture.

The traditional reserve of the seriousness of religious worship, and of the Latin worship in particular, must never be forgotten.

If the proposal of the religious dance in the West is really to be made welcome, care will have to be taken that in its regard a place be found outside of the liturgy, in assembly areas which are not strictly liturgical. Moreover, the priests must always be excluded from the dance.

We can recall how much was derived from the presence of the Samoans at Rome for the missionary festival of 1971. At the end of the Mass, they carried out their dance in St. Peter's square: and all were joyful.

## Endnotes

1. Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 37; C.L.D., 6, p. 44.

2. In favor of the insertion of artistic dancing into the liturgy, reference can also be made to the text of *Gaudium et spes*, nn. 53, 57, 58. However, the cited texts speak of manifestation of culture in general, and of art which elevates with the true and beautiful. They do not speak of dancing in a specific manner. Dancing also can be an art. Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the conciliar Fathers, when they were speaking of art in the Council, had "in view" also the reality of dancing.

N. 62 of the said constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, can certainly not be appealed to in this instance. When such number speaks of the artistic forms and of their importance in the life of the Church, it intends to make reference to the artistic forms as relative to the sacred furnishings. The counter proof stands in the texts cited in the footnote: article 123 of the Constitution on the Liturgy and the allocution of Paul VI to the artists at Rome in 1964 (C.L.D., 6, pp. 64 and 735 respectively).

FROM THESE DIRECTIVES, from the NATIONAL CONFERENCE of CATHOLIC BISHOPS, all dancing, (ballet, children's gesture as dancing, the clown liturgy) are not permitted to be "introduced into liturgical celebrations of any kind whatever."

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## Dance in the Liturgy

The following essay appeared in *Notitiae* 11 (1975) 202-205, and is labeled as a "qualified and authoritative sketch." It is the mind of the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship that this article is to be considered "an authoritative point of reference for every discussion on the matter." Therefore, it is commended for study by diocesan liturgical commissions and offices of worship. (This English translation first appeared in *The Canon Law Digest*, Vol. VIII, pp. 78-82 and is used with permission.)

### The Religious Dance, an Expression of Spiritual Joy

The dance can be an art: a synthesis of the measured arts (music and poetry) and the spatial arts (architecture, sculpture, painting).

As an art which, by means of the body, expresses human feelings, the dance is especially adapted to signify joy.

Thus, among the mystics, we find intervals of dancing as an expression of the fullness of their love of God. Recall the cases of St. Theresa of Avila, St. Philip Neri, St. Gerard Majella.

When the Angelic Doctor wished to represent paradise, he represented it as a dance executed by angels and saints.

The dance can turn into prayer which expresses itself with a movement which engages the whole being, soul and body. Generally, when the spirit raises itself to God in prayer, it also involves the body.

One can speak of the prayer of the body. This can express its praise, its petition with movements, just as is said of the stars which by their evolution praise their Creator (cf. Baruch 3:34).

### **Various examples of this type of prayer are had in the Old Testament.**

This holds true especially for primitive peoples. They express their religious sentiment with rhythmic movements.

Among them, when there is a question of worship, the spoken word becomes a chant, and the gesture of going or walking towards the divinity transforms itself into a dance step.

Among the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers and in the conciliar texts there is mention of dancing, an evaluation of it, a comment on the biblical text in which there is an allusion to the dance; more frequently there is a condemnation of profane dances and the disorders to which the dances give rise.

In liturgical texts, there are at times allusions to the dance of the angels and of the elect in paradise (cf. "Among the lilies thou dost feed, surrounded by dancing groups of virgins") in order to express the "joy and the "jubilation" which will characterize eternity.

### **Dancing and Worship**

The dance has never been made an integral part of the official worship of the Latin Church.

If local churches have accepted the dance, sometimes even in the church building, that was on the occasion of feasts in order to manifest

sentiments of joy and devotion. But that always took place outside of liturgical services.

Conciliar decisions have often condemned the religious dance because it conduces little to worship and because it could degenerate into disorders.

Actually, in favor of dance in the liturgy, an argument could be drawn from the passage of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, in which are given the norms for adaptation of the liturgy to the character and the traditions of the various peoples:

"In matters which do not affect the faith or the well-being of an entire community, the Church does not wish, even in the Liturgy, to impose a rigid uniformity; on the contrary, she respects and fosters the genius and talents of various races and people. Whatever in their way of life is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error, she looks upon with benevolence and if possible keeps it intact, and sometimes even admits it into the Liturgy provided it accords with the genuine and authentic liturgical spirit."  
[1]

Theoretically, it could be deduced from that passage that certain forms of dancing and certain dance patterns could be introduced into Catholic worship.

Nevertheless, two conditions could not be prescind from.

The first: to the extent in which the body is a reflection of the soul, dancing, with all its manifestations, would have to express sentiments of faith and adoration in order to become a prayer.

The second condition: just as all the gestures and movements found in the liturgy are regulated by the competent ecclesiastical authority, so also dancing as a gesture would have to be under its discipline.

Concretely: there are cultures in which this is possible insofar as dancing is still reflective of religious values and becomes a clear manifestation of them. Such is the case of the Ethiopians. In their culture, even today, there is the religious ritualized dance, clearly distinct from the martial dance and from the amorous dance. The ritual dance is performed by priests and levites before beginning a ceremony and in the open air in front of the church. The dance accompanies the chanting of psalms during the procession. When the procession enters the church, then the chanting of the psalms is carried out with and accompanied by bodily movement.

The same thing is found in the Syriac liturgy by means of chanting of psalms.

In the Byzantine Liturgy, there is an extremely simplified dance on the occasion of a wedding when the crowned spouses make a circular revolution around the lectern together with the celebrant.

Such is the case of the Israelites: in the synagogue their prayer is accompanied by a continuous movement to recall the precept from tradition: "When you pray, do so with all your heart, and all your bones." And for primitive peoples the same observation can be made.

However, the same criterion and judgment cannot be applied in the western culture.