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“All of Us” before God: Phenomenological Contours of the Liturgical Assembly according to Franz Rosenzweig and Jean-Yves Lacoste

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Abstract: This article treats the notion of liturgical experience that was introduced into contemporary philosophy by Franz Rosenzweig at the start of the twentieth century. His original and deep thinking in the *Star of Redemption* describes, among other things, the liturgical feasts of Judaism and Christianity as ramparts against finitude and as openings onto the ultimate. The article will bring together his descriptions of the liturgical assembly as a dialogical and choral “we” or “all of us” with the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste who has made liturgy the very heart of his magisterial phenomenological work. Putting these two authors into conversation allows us to uncover some salient traits of what makes for a liturgical community, such as the link between the liturgical assembly and the notion of communion. Drawing on both Rosenzweig and Lacoste, we can see, first, that this community is not simply cultural or ideological, but that its core lies in the concrete experience of exposing oneself before God. Next, I take up the idea of eschatological presentiment in Lacoste and the choral response-structure in Rosenzweig and suggest that this eschatological anticipation is manifested in the flesh of the assembly, endowing it with a dimension of responsibility. Finally, the liturgical assembly becomes a concrete body in which the kingdom is able to come near in the density of presence as fraternity within an aura of love. By doing so, a “thinking otherwise” may prove capable of illuminating philosophical understandings of human community more broadly.

Keywords: liturgy; phenomenology; community; voice; eschatology; kingdom; love of neighbor



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1. Introduction

How can philosophy study the liturgy? Such study might immediately imply a slide into theology or fail to respect the separation of the disciplines and thus neglect the practice of a kind of “methodological atheism”. Yet, this much-disputed distinction or separation fails to realize that every human person is at heart liturgical, less from specific religious givens than from the fact that we already exist in the world. According to Heidegger’s classic formulation in §12 and §13 of *Being and Time* (originally published 1927), we are always already in the world, “worlding” (*welten*) and “building” the world “poetically”, or even just “technically”, as he affirms in a later essay (Heidegger 1987, p. 73). One wonders whether such “building” according to the “dimension” of “the sky and the divinities” or of “the earth and mortals” (Heidegger 1971, p. 219) does not in some way already imply a kind of “ritualizing”. In fact, Jean-Yves Lacoste suggests that if Heidegger had truly taken account of this transcendent dimension, his description of being-in-the-world would not have fallen into the ambiguity of a neo-pagan sacred, but would have led to a deeper appreciation of the world and changed his description of it (Lacoste 2004, pp. 15–18). Lacoste takes up this liturgical question and draws on the Judeo-Christian tradition in order to articulate an alternative liturgical being-before-God as “the most human mode in which we can exist in the world” (2004, p. 98). The human being is fundamentally “liturgical” in this broad phenomenological sense.

Consciously or not, Lacoste thereby follows the lead of a different German philosopher who is contemporaneous with Heidegger, namely the Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig

(1886–1929) who was—as far as we can tell—the first to employ the term “liturgy”, properly speaking, in his philosophical reflections. *The Star of Redemption* (Rosenzweig 1985; originally published 1921) remains without question his extraordinary magnum opus. An appendix to the work, published four years later (Udoff and Galli 1999), admits to his search for a “new thinking”, which permits him to include the notion of revelation fearlessly and without drama. Surely this constitutes the source of his audacity. Just as for Lacoste, liturgy for Rosenzweig, and especially Jewish and Christian liturgy, renders the world not so much sacred or divine but *holy*; and thereby it makes it more human or even the most human. This is where the properly philosophical interest of liturgical experience lies, understood here less as ecclesial rite or religious ritual than first of all as an exposure of human beings before God (*coram Deo*).

A phenomenological analysis of liturgy, informed by its Jewish and Christian expressions, can certainly open new fields for the kind of thought that wants to take into account its original and marginal modality. Other phenomenologists have already suggested that such ordinary phenomena become transformed or are given differently, when eternity intrudes on time. For example, Jean-Luc Marion argues that a painting might function iconically or that certain phenomena saturate our concepts (cf. Marion 2002, 2016). Emmanuel Falque (2012) analyzes the human as such and shows how resurrection can produce a “metamorphosis of finitude”. These analyses can serve as an impetus for further philosophical thinking. Liturgy, in Lacoste’s sense, then, would refer to these surprising phenomena that expose us to astonishment or even wonder—and what is more philosophical than such wonder? All this is to say that the intervention of *coram Deo* into thought, as it is proposed by Lacoste, will not go unnoticed by anyone who is truly searching for the truth of the human condition. Consequently, if there is a theology of liturgy, as there obviously is in the ecclesial world, there is also a philosophy of liturgy, which gives us a whole liturgical anthropology to think. Phenomenology, with its willingness to start from the concrete matters of experience and to reveal the invisible even through the visible, is perhaps especially qualified to take up such a challenge.

Liturgy in this sense of “being-before-God” (*coram Deo*) accordingly evokes surprise and question when, through its intrinsically communal dimensions, it proposes a departure from the customary solipsism of modern philosophy. Rosenzweig employs the plural expression “all of us” (1985, p. 236), which clearly cuts across the classical horizon of the ego or the I, which sometimes recognizes that it implies a singular “you” but rarely thinks in terms of a “we”. What I would like to tackle here is this question of an originary “we”, not in an exhaustive fashion but as a starting point and call for a broader reflection. The idea of liturgical experience as shared prayer, as a plural “before God” or as public choral chant addressed to God, might obligate us to think the human otherwise than either as a structural leftover of the unconscious or instead as a pure autonomous subjectivity. To do so would weaken our relationship to finitude and to immanence as the sole plane of possible human projection. Instead, as we will see, the corporeal dimension will be enlarged in an astonishing fashion all the way to the universal or even to the cosmic. By investigating how we could situate ourselves within a strong communal connection or by affirming the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of an eschatological aim, our way of thinking community might be renewed via the “wonder” of liturgy.

2. Shared Communion

The experience of liturgy suggests a shared communion with characteristics that cannot be reduced simply to the fact of being together. It offers more than a simple “intersubjectivity” in Husserl’s sense and is not the kind of Heideggerian “coexistence” (*Mitdasein*), in which solicitude toward others concerns primarily the parallel capacity of others to anticipate their mortal destiny. We certainly exist in the plural; that is not the point here. Phenomenological reflection has not ignored the fact that this plurality is always “in danger” of reducing relations between subjects to a relationship of objectivity (cf. Lacoste 2011). In fact, Husserl thinks intersubjectivity from the starting point of a

shared world of aims, thus essentially from an inter-objectivity. Community gathers together around a linguistic or cultural base, the “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*), which regardless how much it may be shared remains on the order of the object. In other words, to employ Buber’s famous distinction, although “I-thou” is opposed to “I-it”, it also derives from it and accordingly always risks returning to it (Buber 1970). Yet, as Lacoste underlines, “liturgical experience” (in the restricted sense as an experience of shared prayer) “is for those who know neither subject nor object” (Lacoste 2006, p. 50). This is surely its first contribution to envisioning community from a different standpoint. Those who celebrate liturgy cannot really be reduced to simple plural intentional consciousness aiming at a shared world, because they are always already held by the one before whom they present themselves. The liturgical “we” or “all of us” is no more a community of sensibilities than a cultural gathering. It results neither from a corporeal juxtaposition of people in space nor from a shared center of interest in time. The “assembly” (*ekklēsia*) is more than a gathering of bodies or of thought. Furthermore, it deals not simply with worldly objects but with matters (such as bread, wine, oil, etc.) that assume an exceptional value in the ritual framework, to the point of being invested with the divine presence itself, e.g., such as the Eucharist or holy chrism in Christianity. What it has in common is thus far more on the order of a communion that is made up of heterogeneous and diverse personalities. This communion is received as the effect of a very specific convocation addressed to everyone intimately.

Liturgical participants do not actually take the initiative in this “we”. They do not try to mold or construct the “all of us” by themselves, but receive it and humbly sink into it. The sounding of bells serves as the symbol of a convocation that implies an initiative that does not derive from the subject but that reaches it “from elsewhere” (cf. Marion 2020). The liturgical participant is always already called to a universal and unitive communion, where there is “neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, but all are one” (Galatians 3:28). Perhaps it does not come all that naturally; yet it corresponds to what is most human in us. This union is produced by the shared appeal and aim. It is thus a community of convocation and of destiny, or perhaps of vocation, but not a community of life or of fate, which could vary from one liturgical participant to another. The call to celebrate together immediately ushers us into a history and a memory, namely that of a community that transcends space and time. In this sense, it opens a future that is called the “kingdom”. Although this kingdom is still to come, by orienting itself toward it the liturgical assembly renders its coming more imminent, more actual. Moreover, the community itself is not yet realized but above all a demand. It is brought together by a call, enjoining it to correspond to this call by itself being the community who calls out: “thy kingdom come!” (Luke 11:2). The convocation is an invocation. The assembly, as a community of praise and supplication, gathers around a call that is a promise. There is an inchoate and eschatological dimension in liturgical communion, because the world remains incomplete as long as it has not moved into the kingdom where all is communion.

Whether merely sketched out or anticipated, communion remains a gift: it creates itself no more than the event does. It happens provisionally, surreptitiously, from the intimate core of the celebrating assembly. It does not explain itself—this is why it is hard to turn it into a concept—but, although desired and expected, it is experienced as an unhopéd for overflow. In his essay “Liturgy and Coaffection”, Lacoste describes this overflow under three modalities. First, he understands it as relation to the other that is reconciled, authentic, and eschatological (2006, pp. 52–55). Actually, in liturgy, ethics is taken for granted: we find ourselves all equal in dignity before God. We are reconciled with ourselves and with others who act no longer as a threat to us. Second, the Heideggerian “they” (*das Man*) and its chatter are no longer givens before the performative word that characterizes liturgical experience. Although liturgy does not always say what it does, it always does what it says, whether visibly or invisibly. Those at liturgy must correspond to this authenticity that is given to them, which passes through a specific language, a relation that is at the same time initiatory and dialogical. Through precise and repetitive formulations, whether sung

antiphonally or recited, the mystery of sacred languages or of consummated silence offer in this way a level of unvarnished speech that breaks with the banality of ordinary language. Third, liturgy espouses a temporality broadened to the infinite, a space dilated to the universal, where the boundaries between here and hereafter become porous. Celebrating liturgy thus includes the entire cosmos, the vegetal and the animal, the living and the dead, angels and principalities: “The ‘we’ of liturgy is extraordinarily inclusive. Having neither temporal nor spatial limit, prayer must be understood as an act always posited in the plural and implying all those who can and have been able to pray. The two or three assembled here for prayer are the empirical face of a ‘we’ that shatters all empirical boundaries” (Lacoste 2006, p. 54).

Liturgical communion thus permits us to think the communal dimension of the human differently. To the Heideggerian *Mitsein*, characterized by the “they” of indifference, of competition, or of the ambiguity that hinders authentic human relations, this communion contrasts a different “with”, which raises these relations instead to the level of the absolute, beyond even space and time. By universalizing relations, liturgical communion at the same time singularizes them. Liturgical participants find themselves caught up in something greater than themselves, and thereby discover themselves instead within a broadened horizon. As Christina Gschwandtner underlines: “We are ‘each’ only as we are part of all, but participating in all allows us also to experience ourselves as ‘each’, not an isolating ‘each’, but a particular ‘each’” (Gschwandtner 2019, p. 166). Taking humans out of the inauthenticity of a finite and anxious existence, the liturgical assembly thus suggests a shared life to them, an experience of truth through the authenticity of their certainly particular exposure before God.

Indeed, liturgy provokes an attitude of truth before God that brings about an authenticity of relation to self (humility, singularity) and to others (charity, universality). This is a truth that is at the same time *adequatio* of self to self, of the self to the other, and of the self to God (albeit an experience that is in some way already limited by the fact of its rarity in the worldly domain) and *alētheia*, as an unveiling of an invisible but absolute presence and an un-forgetting of our so far unknown essence (creaturely, filial, saved). The liturgical participants are summoned to live a moment of truth without fleeing or hedging. This truth also decenters them and brings down all the idolatries of self-reference or of the pagan notion of the sacred. Being before God assumes a distance that maintains transcendence. Rosenzweig turned this requirement of truth into the culminating point of his magnum opus, just as it is the apex of liturgical communion. He writes: “Thus it is only before the truth that the frenzy of all paganism collapses. Its blind and drunken desire to see itself and only itself . . . In the sight of the truth not only does the Perhaps lose its validity—for that had long since disappeared—but in the final analysis every Possibly too. The Star of Redemption, in which the truth achieves configuration, is not in orbit. That which is above, is above and stays above. . . . Views of the world and of life are absorbed into the one view of God” (1985, pp. 421–22).

Liturgy claims to lead us to this point. It subverts the expectation of a “new beginning” of all the possibilities that Heidegger thought in terms of *Ereignis* (Heidegger 2003). The final truth toward which it orients those who surrender to it is instead on the order of a miracle, that is to say, the coming of what appears impossible for us and yet simultaneously is expected because predicted in it. Rosenzweig says: “Prediction, the expectation of a miracle, always remains the actually constitutive factor of realization, while the miracle itself is but the factor of realization” (1985, p. 96). The kingdom of truth, this divine gaze that passes over all things, thus begins in this miracle of liturgical communion. It is not yet its full and entire realization as the parousia will be, but it anticipates it already in its own manner. Nevertheless, no miracle leaves us indifferent: it overturns pre-established schemata, it calls into question our concepts, and it calls witnesses.

The liturgical “we” is decidedly very destabilizing. The communion that it undergirds is neither given in advance nor from the outset. It requires the responsibility of participants who really want to enter into the “play” of the truth, which calls for a “tight game” as

much as a recovery of the levity and innocence of childhood. For before God we are all children. Being together “differently” in liturgy reminds us of this modality of the kingdom, which does not imply something less than adult maturity, but rather its eschatological accomplishment. This is why the overflowing communion of liturgy is simple and joyous. In this regard, it places the liturgical participants at the margins of the normal world. Lacoste notes: “We exist in the world but we no longer belong to the world. And when the ‘with’ takes, liturgically, the shape of being-at-peace or of shared joy . . . it signifies here the definitive in the midst of the provisional (although it certainly does not bring it about)” (2006, p. 58). The parenthesis is important: being at the margin of the world, at the threshold of the kingdom, liturgy remains “pre-eschatological”, “non-parousical”. The liturgical participants are not able to cross the boundary between the human and the divine. All the same, there is a kind of miracle for a moment, for an hour: the here “with” the hereafter. In liturgy, the two call to each other. Although the hereafter remains in the beyond, it can all the same transform something here-below by its very coming. Whoever meets up with the absolute does not escape unscathed. Yet, one must always agree to expose oneself to it.

The “with” of the “we” assumes the determinate and firm decision to come to expose oneself consciously and voluntarily before God, to acquiesce to this unfathomable presence, which escapes as much from any a priori as from any of our empirical experiences. One must thus choose a certain disabling, a non-mastery that Lacoste calls a “will to powerlessness” (obviously in reference and in contrast to Nietzsche) (2004, pp. 163–67). Instead of wanting to be more, liturgy teaches us to want to let go. We offer ourselves together by expecting and watching at night, without dominating its obscurity or flickering. Who can get their hands on a star? Even more so for the Absolute. This shared communion could never be a project or even an intentional aim, but is rather an orientation toward what remains unknown and inaccessible. Liturgy is neither scheduled nor transacted, but allows us to enter into a gratuity that has long since been forgotten by the world. A communion without any aim other than itself may appear utopic and useless. Yet it is crucial today when all is bought and sold. The liturgical community is not grounded on economy or efficacy. It has no other interest than God, thus the disinterest in person. We gather by the gratuity of its appeal like the chant that constitutes it. Before God, chanting could not be an aesthetic labor. The beauty that arises from liturgical communion—unless it is the communion that emanates from it—is offered to all without ulterior motive: it remains an unforeseeable grace.

3. Choral Presentiment and Responding Flesh

The initial choice of responding to this gracious appeal—the synergy between this response and this gift is called faith—forms an assembly that nothing else could initially have gathered together. The motley gathering of believers from all horizons, all kinds, all languages results in a liturgical “style” that is surprisingly unified despite not being the fruit of a disciplinary uniformity. A ritual, in which personalities would be blurred under the pretext of rubrics or rather play interchangeable roles for ideological reasons, would not be able to offer a liturgy in the proper sense of the word. Caricatures of being before God in this sense are not lacking. The communion at stake here is of a different order. It derives rather from the experience of an eschatological desire that touches at the most personal in its subjective impression but that the shared liturgical celebration manifests in an unparalleled fashion. Lacoste summarizes it as follows: “In these experiences, the human is more than being in the world. One might even dare to say that the human amounts to *more than existing*. . . . [In liturgy], we are in the world in a mode of being-beyond” (2006, pp. 161, 163; emphasis added). There is certainly an allusion here to the Heideggerian Dasein, which Lacoste judges insufficient for expressing the entirety of the human. Being at prayer manifests that the earth or the world no longer constitutes the sole future of humanity. It offers a kind of “presentiment” of the kingdom, to which we all feel ourselves called in the most intimate way. Without already offering the eschaton as such,

its perspective tears the closed horizon of finitude. Something beyond the world dawns yet without being a world behind the world. Liturgy is celebrated in this present world, with its words, its matter, its flesh. For Rosenzweig, those who pray do not pretend to leave the human for the holy (1985, p. 176). Instead, a human response to a divine call becomes a human call hoping for a divine response. Praise really is not possible without lamentation and supplication, for the very reason that it arises from this world blanketed by violence and distress.

Although liturgy anticipates universal eschatological fraternity by turning the other into a “brother” or a “sister” in its ephemeral midst, this is still a fragile communion bearing and assuming the pains and fractures of a profoundly wounded world. It is thus a surprising communion that mingles the supreme joy of standing together before God with the choked cry of the whole world’s weeping. Having lived through it in the trenches of World War I, Rosenzweig described in masterful fashion this cry of human existence in this world, wailing before an inescapable death, the cry of wanting to live (1985, pp. 3–4). This cry is not denied by liturgy, but, to the contrary, heard and doubled by another cry that transforms it into this ardently hoped-for “more than existence” of which Lacoste speaks (Lacoste 2006, p. 166). “The soul” of the one praying calls to this God, who appears to it in revelation as its “lover” in Rosenzweig’s cherished terminology. Yet, employing amorous language must not hide the drama of the cry and the pain of an exposure that is not a flight from the real but an aspiration of a transfiguration of the real. Rosenzweig says: “The soul cries out: Oh that you would part the heavens and descend. [Isaiah 63:19] . . . Revelation climaxes in an unfulfilled wish, in the cry of an open question. . . . The prayer for the coming of the kingdom is ever but a crying and a sighing, ever but a plea. . . . The cry which the soul utters . . . no longer derives from the blissful pacification of being loved. It rises in new unrest from a new depth of the soul which we have not yet recognized. It sobs beyond the proximity of the lover, unseen but felt, and into the gloom of infinity” (1985, p. 185).

For Rosenzweig, liturgy in its song thus doubles the cry of the mortal and overdetermines the sobbing of finitude by the cry of the eschatological. The hope manifested in this way in the liturgical celebration according to him offers the sole possibility of victory over death. This victory certainly does not hinder anyone from dying at the appointed hour, but in the “we” of the Liturgy of the Hours it crosses times and ages, and in this way it permits the surprising experience of eternity. The cry both precedes the chant and serves as its beginning. Liturgy for Rosenzweig is described more in terms of song than of rite, although one does not exclude the other. His “us” is dialogical and polyphonic rather than formal, for the song is made by the voices and not just by the accuracy of the score. Liturgy becomes the place of an existential transformation that happens to it precisely in its choral dimension before God. In it the kingdom becomes the echo of all the cries of the world that are transfigured by it. He describes this chorus:

Or is it? Nevermore will the departed life join in the hymn of praise to redemption. The departed nevermore, but—and in this But the chorus swells to an immense vision of that We of all the voices which co-hortatively drags all future eternity into the present Now of the moment: ‘Not the dead!’—indeed not, ‘but we, we will praise God from this time forth and to eternity’. [Psalm 115] . . . The We are eternal; death plunges into the Nought in the face of this triumphal shout of eternity. Life becomes immortal in redemption’s eternal hymn of praise. (1985, p. 253)

The “we” or “all of us” refers to those who chant despite everything throughout all the turmoil, all the wounds, the entire history of humanity. Hope is chanted in psalmodic fashion. Redemption is choral: chant responds to cry, praise to lamentation, love to death, a love that is “as strong” (Song of Songs 8:6) in its endurance, transfiguring all things by passing through them. (The biblical verse from the Song of Songs that “love is strong as death” is the central pivot around which the whole *Star of Redemption* turns and which gives meaning to its entire reflection.)

The modalities of this choral hope are not a matter simply of singing together, but of responding together through the chant. Responding to God, responding from everyone, the liturgical call is actually parsed in a responsorial fashion: the liturgical participants find themselves called personally to celebrate with all, but also live from this call in the name of all. They keep watch and pray, in the name of those who have prayed before them and from whom they inherit the words and gestures, or in the name of those who no longer pray because they are dead. The communion thus becomes memory and memorial. They watch and pray also in the name of those who, by their own prayer, by their celebrations, are in communion with them by the world, and in the name of those who no longer feel themselves belonging to this same “world” and no longer see the need for standing before God. They pray in the name of “The one who believed in Heaven/The one who does not believe”, in the celebrated words of the poet Louis Aragon in his poem “La Rose et le Réséda”, written as a call to unity during the 1943 occupation. The person at prayer could never pretend to carry the response of everyone before God, as if a sole voice would suffice for creating harmony.

Mixed voices are the concrete expression of the “polyphonic” character of any liturgy, whatever its melodic line may be (which can actually be monodic). This character indicates in this case a modality of the phenomenon, not a musical genre. Prayer is always a question of voice because it is the song of an originary and existential cry. Nevertheless one must underline with Emmanuel Falque that “a voice is not simply the emission of a sound (a cough is not a voice), and there is no voice without signification (and thus without the expression of some pathos)” (Falque 2016, p. 70). What actually makes the voice unique is that it specifies everyone, translates (even betrays) the singular personality, while offering itself to be heard by others more than by oneself. One hears one’s voice not as it gives itself in the world but only according to our internal ear, which is very different. The experience of recording the voice is very “telling” in this respect because one barely recognizes one’s own voice when hearing oneself. The voice is thus eminently personal, while first of all revealing itself as “for the other”: no wonder that it is so significant in liturgy.

The choir of liturgical participants similarly manifests the “miracle” of voices interlacing in Rosenzweig’s sense of “miracle” (cf. above). One voice draws on another, finds itself in the other voices to the point of fusing with them. This allows the choral event something like a “new voice”, a shared voice soaring up from all the mingled timbres, never heard as such before and as ephemeral as the chant it sustains. Yet, this soaring up produces its own eternity, just as the instant produces the hour for Rosenzweig. He describes the hour philosophically as the temporality typical of liturgy. In fact, liturgical celebration cannot be understood in chronological time, but occurs in the kairological time of the “hours”: each service becomes an event, each repetition a “today”, each feast a new beginning and at the same time an accomplishment: “In the hour, then, one moment is recreated, whenever and if ever it were to perish, into something newly issued and thus imperishable, into a *nunc stans*, into eternity. . . . From being solar and lunar periods, day and year, week and month too now become hours of human life” (1985, p. 290). The inextricable link between the liturgical feast and the chant pertaining to it derives from this. Voices lift in major and minor sounds, the manner of psalmody or of the filling in silence, the “color” proper to each feast. This is not an affair of aestheticism, but it is rather eternity that is in play here: its tendency to intrude into time by the liturgical invocation and convocation as it is truly lived out. In this way liturgy ceaselessly transforms time into hours and the ticking of clocks into “the stroke of the bells” (cf. Rosenzweig 1985, p. 290), in the polyphony of voices that commingle before God. The temporality and corporeality offer a new way of relating to them that does not fail to question them. The interlacing of voices thus bears within it also a very specific relationship to time. The same is the case for the link to the body, for the voice is by nature something like a sensory and sonorous focus point of the lived body or of the flesh. Here, it is attuned to other voices, and thus to other bodies, in order to give rise to a new voice and thus surely also to a “new body” that effectively is even more a new flesh.

The choral dimension of liturgical communion really must go through the body. Nathan Mitchell writes that “Body is the liturgy’s native language, its first speech” (Mitchell 2007, p. 149). The contrary is also true: liturgy also fashions our relationship to the body through the chant, word, and gesture that it puts to work. It offers a first bodily language before God, a way of going toward God with one’s body in addition to one’s soul or one’s spirit. Yet one must also note with Gschwandtner that “the frailty of corporeal bodies is not somehow transfigured liturgically into glorious bodies or pure souls communing with each other in some splendid spiritual fashion. Rather, finite and fragile bodies become gifts or conduits and recipients of grace and hospitality: they are opened beyond themselves but neither suspended nor erased” (2019, p. 100).

Lacoste aims at this phenomenized “flesh” by defining liturgy as “relation” to the Absolute, “communion” in the “we”, and “presentiment” of the kingdom. It is an invisible flesh that is appresented in the assembly of bodies in prayer who form a body through voice, gesture, hearing, word, and silence—all the way to the sacramental consuming of the Eucharist (“Corpus Christi!” “Amen!”). The word did not just become flesh in the past, but becomes shared matter in the liturgical today of the epiklesis, which is none other than the Hour of the Spirit. The flesh of the assembly is insensibly formed by the body of Christ, even to its antiphonal response in an “Amen” offered to God. Falque says: “At that time, in the Incarnation, there was no body without a voice; today, in the Eucharist, there is no voice without a body” (2016, p. 72). And we must add that what is true for the eucharistic body of the holy elements, is just as true for the shared flesh of the mystical body of the liturgical assembly. The voice of the Spirit incarnates the “we” under a choral modality that reveals a shared pathos: the flesh of the Word shared in its communed body, an “edgy” sensibility, given here by giving itself “through Him, with Him, and in Him” in the name of all. (It is, of course, a question whether this does not require a Catholic or Orthodox conception of the Eucharist and whether a similar body can be formed with other conceptions of communion. This question cannot be pursued in this context.)

Thus, in liturgy to become a body means more than congregating or joining together, but it means sensing together the insensible, seeing together the invisible, singing together the inaudible, to the point of experiencing in a strange “experience of non-experience” what we call this “shared flesh” that cuts across it. Lacoste has made the pivot of his philosophical analyses this phenomenon proper to (Christian) liturgy. He explicates it as follows:

Existing before God, *coram Deo*, does not mean sensing God. Rather, the relationship of the human and God is most often accomplished as an affective non-experience. Conversely, participating in co-presence with God constitutes a “we”. No longer could one expect that this we is constituted purely as a “sensing together”. . . . One can thus conclude about the logic of presentiment that when people gather together to pray more is going on than an adding up of individual experiences. (2006, p. 60)

Lacoste insists perhaps inordinately on this affective non-experience and its non-parousial character. Certainly, one could not compel transcendence to become sensorial in the immanence of affects. It could presumably do so but it surely is not obligated to do so. For Lacoste, prayer does not have to await fulfillment in perception; instead, it distrusts it. Non-experience imposes distance at the level of the senses; in his view, this confirms that the prayerful approach is not idolatrous. No presence could be the product of a project, however pious. It always occurs on the order of an event, of the unexpected, of transcendence. It will emerge into full light only on the last day of the Parousia. In the here and now, we celebrate in the tension between the clear and the hidden, on the threshold of the Absolute. He writes in the final lines of his work *Presence and Parousia*, which here instead seems to mean presence or parousia: “We want the parousia, but we must be content with presence. Even so, each thing appears and is given in its time” (2006, p. 338). Yet, the “presentiment” and the “communion” of which he speaks establish a link between the two—and Rosenzweig taught us that liturgy is the place of the “hour”. His notion of

the hour does not so much imply “not sensing anything” by expecting “finally to sense”. Liturgical experience is given more as a palpable, sayable, remarkable presentiment than as something sensed. Presence is approaching; the kingdom glimmers not in an unvarnished light but in a dim aura, in which the liturgical participants find themselves caught up more than seeing it. Nothing could be proven by it, yet liturgy offers the presentiment that everything could be shown in it and the absolutely Transcendent be encountered. This is a presentiment that brings forth faith growing into certainty, a hope that also illuminates charity.

4. The Aura of Love

The liturgical response takes the specific form of chant (as “responsory”). Rosenzweig explains that this particular modality is not an “imperative” (“Give thanks!”) but a “cohortative”, which means that the subject is included in what it expresses (“Let us give thanks!”). The self is invited and thereby becomes the one inviting, is called and becomes the one calling. Rosenzweig says: “Praise and thanksgiving, the voice of the soul, redeemed for harmony with all the world, and the voice of the world, redeemed for sensing and singing with the soul—how can these two voices blend as one . . . except in the unity of him before whom they sing, whom they praise, whom they thank?” (1985, p. 232). Thus, only a shared offering “to God” (*à Dieu*) as a transcendental aim toward the absolute, which paradoxically in itself interiorizes all the way to the universal of the world, offers an adequate response to the call for liturgical celebration. The response thus becomes also responsibility for humanity and for the whole world. At stake here is the “all” of the liturgical “we”. This “all” includes each human being connected to the cosmos through melodies, architecture, or textures. Yet, the “we” also brings forward what is most personal in everyone: the intimate desire for communion and for “more than living”. This “we” brings together all ages, the whole past, the entire present, to the point of paradoxically turning a shared future into memory (the kingdom). The “we” contains something that is not about the totality of totalizing philosophies, which try to have replies for everything and which Rosenzweig berates in his criticism of the Hegelian system, but touches on the universality of experiences to which we must respond before God.

With that in mind, one can say that liturgical communion puts forward a different modality of responsibility for another than that described by Levinas who draws a link between the task of ethics and liturgical disinterestedness (cf. Levinas 1972, pp. 45–46). Although he is a keen reader of Rosenzweig, he does not develop this point and does not anchor his thought in the liturgical dimension. Yet, the “responsibility of everyone for all others” that Levinas proposes perhaps finds its true intelligibility in this responsorial dimension of liturgy. This would have to be spelled out much further and cannot be accomplished here. Yet, we need to remember that there is an ethics at play in this liturgical dimension of celebrating “on behalf of all” that qualifies the communion manifested thereby. Before God, the “we” is truly on behalf of all. Party quarrels and factions are laid to rest. Faithful to its etymology—*leitourgia*, “public service” of the people—liturgy calls for a gift of self in the service of others, in which everyone agrees to allow the other “under one’s skin”, in one’s voice, to the point of “shedding one’s skin” by giving the other (one’s) voice (Levinas 1974, pp. 146, 97).

Rosenzweig underlines repeatedly that the anticipation of the eschaton that the liturgy envisages cannot be given by love itself without prayer. This is why love and prayer are linked. Liturgy is for the purpose of the brotherhood that it establishes. Having as horizon the kingdom of communion, prayer has no other purpose than the love of the neighbor who intrudes on the dialogue between the praying person and God. Its hour is not so much a matter of forcing the coming of the kingdom than of entering into God’s time. This is the time that weakens not God but death, the time of the presence of love victorious in fidelity, the time of the moment when the other becomes a brother; in short, the time that is always already more because imbued with eternity. In other words, liturgical experience teaches humans that they can exist in a pre-eschatological modality via the aim of a dialogical

kingdom where all will finally be in God in a relationship of brotherhood and truth. One prays in order to love and loves by praying. Above all, Rosenzweig sees in prayer the possibility of dilation of the love of the neighbor, although it is a blind love, obsessed by the care to be given to the other, focusing on the neediest. Only the hindsight of liturgy can allow us to see beyond the face of the other, to see no longer only wounds to bind up or mouths to feed, but a brother or sister in the light of the kingdom contemplated in him or her.

For the act of love as such is still blind; it does not know what it is doing, nor is it supposed to now. It is quicker than knowledge. It does the highest . . . But prayer is not blind. Into the light of the divine countenance it puts the moment, including the act first performed . . . It is an appeal for enlightenment. . . . Love acts as though there were, at bottom, no God, nay not even a world. For love, the neighbor represents all the world and thus distorts the eye's view. Prayer, however, pleads for enlightenment and thereby, without overlooking the neighbor, sees beyond the neighbor, sees the whole world to the extent that it is illuminated for it. . . . Prayer establishes the human world order. (1985, pp. 267–68)

The liturgical “us” thus acclimates the gaze of love to the light of the kingdom to come. Rather than fleeing the world, it permits us finally to see it according to its true end. While Lacoste thinks the epochē of the world so that the kingdom is able to appear in the final parousia (2006, p. 61), Rosenzweig contends instead that the kingdom reveals the present world fully. The parousia anticipated within liturgical prayer allows the world to appear as human. Perhaps this is what distinguishes Christianity from Judaism. Or what links them mysteriously. In this case the other would no longer serve as the object of an ethics or as a rival to my ego, but as the subject of the same kingdom together glimpsed in the beyond of the face. The closest neighbor is revealed as strangely inaccessible, linked to a mysterious kingdom that is transcendent and immanent at the same time, according to modalities still to be excavated. When those at prayer come to the help of others, they see them, thanks to prayer, against the horizon of the kingdom. No longer is anything merely worldly or human, but, for that very reason, in the clarity of the ultimate, all becomes holy, truly human and divine, and the world gains its true meaning from this. The link between eschaton and truth still manifested here derives from this.

Rosenzweig speaks of “enlightenment” or “illumination”. He makes it the essence of prayer. The other becomes the closest neighbor in prayer through what is furthest away and yet continually approaches. When others are loved, they become haloed by the kingdom, by this liturgical clarity. One might be able to speak of liturgy in this sense as an “aura” of love by drawing on Walter Benjamin, another Jewish thinker. In Benjamin, “aura” refers to the appearing of what is far away via what is near, although he uses it in regard to the work of art (Benjamin 1969). The aura is the density of presence that emanates from the “here and now” of a work. This density makes the work always “distant”, lofty, maybe sacred. It cannot be produced or reproduced by human technical skill alone. To the contrary, because it is fragile, it can be denied or corrupted by a cold and rote technology, which purports to master or seize it. It is a quality of presence that one can urge but cannot demonstrate. This is a charm that emerges from the very relation that it establishes from its manifestation alone. For Benjamin aura refers to contemplation, to culture, to “real” presence, to authenticity. This permits us to liken it to the experience of liturgical prayer in Rosenzweig. Indeed, Benjamin himself shows that the aura of the work appears best in a place of ritual or liturgy: “It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual” (1969, p. 6). We can accordingly replicate this by saying: the unique value of authentic love finds its foundation in the liturgy, which illuminates it.

In this illuminating character of liturgy one recovers the connection between the ethical and the liturgical, glimpsed already in Levinas, but with a typically Rosenzweigian

corrective of the ethical by the liturgical. He does not think liturgical communion without the light of the star that bathes all of redemption in its light. It is the revelation of the originary love of God, and in its relation to this light and this love, as creation, it gives access to the world. Still, this singular clarity is not reserved for a solitary mystic. To the contrary, the star shines for the choral and liturgical assembly who, by psalmody, recapitulates the worldly and opens itself to the holy. The trembling voices singing the psalms, filled with the cries of anguish and anxiety before death, discover in their very fragility a sign of hope: something other than death, the thirst for salvation revealed here. This is not the final chant (the swansong of death), but it is oriented toward the ultimate: the song as sign of life beyond death as the canticle of a shared hope. In Rosenzweig's words: "And in this enlightenment, since it is supposed to be common to all, the same thing should be enlightened for all. It is common to all, beyond all individual points of view and beyond differences of perspective conditioned by the differences of the points of view, and so it can be but one thing: the end of all things, the ultimate things. . . . The searchlight of prayer illuminates for each only that which it illuminates for all, only the farthest: the kingdom" (1985, pp. 292–93).

5. Conclusions

Liturgical community allows us to think shared communion in a new way. In liturgy, praise anticipates the eschatological assembly where all will find themselves members of one another, members of a shared body. Its shared flesh is foreseen and tasted in this way. Because this luminous flesh is experienced as that of a gathered body, it surely also has a face. What is this face of the kingdom? Here philosophical description must end, because only liturgical experience can sketch its contours. Whether a transfigured or crucified face, whether under the star or under the cross, in either case it reveals itself in the dialogical, choral, and polyphonic dimensions of liturgy. It appears in the move from the "us" of the assembly to the "you" invoked. We are only ultimately together before God, if we intone together a resounding "you" from our uncertain voices, from our wounded lives. Liturgical communion draws its strength from this fragility and its vitality from this audacity. It teaches us that there is no "we" without a "you" or that the "you" addressed to God—or, more precisely, the "to you" that is the language of love—is the final "all of us". This orientation forms the assembly if it lives and abides in it. Accordingly, this aim is not simply intersubjective; even less is it the intentionality of an object. Yet, it is a shared offering together to become subjects of the kingdom to come, a liberating, choral, and plural subjection. The only subjectivity agreed to here is that of the self's deposition to another, with others and in their name. Rosenzweig describes this: "Thus the We must say Ye, and the more its own volume increases, the louder the Ye resounds out of its mouth as well. The We must say it, though it can only say it by way of anticipation and must await the ultimate confirmation out of another, an ultimate mouth. This is the decisive anticipation . . . in which the coming kingdom is really a-coming, and eternity thus a fact" (1985, p. 237). Now we understand in it how the liturgical assembly experiences, chants, and manifests "the aura of love", the liturgical and transfiguring radiance of this "To you, O Lord!"

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