



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

Issue Two

A Keyhole for Unbelievers? The Public Character of *Cultus* and the Broadcasting of the Mass on TV

ROBERT SPAEMANN

*This article appears here by permission of [Communio: International Catholic Review](#).
The original was published in German in 1954.*

The broadcasting of Mass on television, which is already taking place regularly in several countries, has—by contrast with those countries—led to a lively and fundamental discussion in West Germany. Here, the weight of arguments and Catholic public opinion has been in favor of a categorical refusal of such TV broadcasts of the Mass; this is in part because it constitutes, as a matter of principle, a profanation and is contrary to the public character of the Christian *cultus*, and in part because the alleged spiritual usefulness of this practice is questioned and it is instead feared that it will do greater damage in the long run. “The desire to be modern,” writes Fr. Karl Rahner, “may very soon turn out to be highly unmodern. Once the TV set has become part of the ordinary furniture of the average person, and once he is used to being the spectator of just about anything between heaven and earth on which an indiscriminately curious camera preys, then it will be an unbelievably exciting thing for the philistine of the twenty-first century that there still are things which one cannot view while sitting in a recliner and chewing on a burger.”

By contrast, the advocates of the new practice seem to have ended up on the defensive. There does not seem to be a clear answer to the question, why it is better to do it rather than not. Certainly, there are the sick and elderly to whom one hopes to be charitable. And one assumes without further argument that staring at the small screen—being totally different from the presence in the actual space of worship—would be suitable to intensify spiritual participation in the mysteries. Yet it is likely that a prayer book fulfills that purpose much better. Experiencing a lack is always more fruitful than having some surrogate.

There is also talk of the need to penetrate all areas of the world with Christianity; but there are no precise reflections—based on a sociology of these technologies—that would demonstrate why this must lead, of all things, to a TV broadcast of the Mass. After all, evangelization as an initiation into the mystery loses its point, if the mystery itself is used as a means for evangelization.

Given the weight of the arguments that are raised against this controversial practice the discussion apparently now focuses on the question of whether there are any conclusive reasons to say that this practice is indeed contrary to the nature of the Christian cultus in any strict sense. In order to deny this and so as to contend that it is possible in principle to broadcast Mass on TV, one now often proposes an argument that to my knowledge has not yet been subjected to a more thorough critique, even though it really cries out for such a response. It is the argument concerning the “Public” (*Öffentlichkeit*). Mass, so it is argued, is not primarily an act of private devotion (though that certainly also needs to be part of it). It is essentially a “*cultus publicus*,” a public cultic act. The encyclical *Mediator Dei* of Pius XII has also re-empathized this public social character. Just as the sacrifice on the Cross itself, so Mass is offered in the name of the whole of humanity. Even where it is celebrated in a tiny chapel, it is not the celebration of an esoteric mystery, but a public act in the strict sense. And while we would strongly disapprove of TV broadcasts of acts like birth, begetting, or death, nevertheless, the broadcasting of Mass—so the argument goes—can in no way be regarded as similar in character.

The premise of this argument is indeed indisputable: the character of the Mass as a *cultus publicus*. But it is amazing how unabashed one takes advantage of the ambiguity of the notion of the “Public,” how one takes it to be self-evident that this involves the same kind of “publicness” that we encounter in soccer games, movie theaters, or those who are “public nuisances.” I, for one, believe that it must quite definitely be denied that TV, as we know it today, can be counted as a “public sphere” in the sense that is here under discussion. We are far from a proper understanding of what “public” meant in that ancient sense, which is the basis of the Latin notion of the “*res publica*” or even today of the Code of Canon Law. “Publicness” is, after all, first and foremost a term of law, but in the sense in which law must be understood as the expression of an ontological structure. Public in this sense is, for example, an official decree, even if it is only “publicized” or “made public” in the Federal Gazette. *Not* public, but only private, are communications of a manufacturer of stockings, even if they are plastered on billboards. For in this latter case there is nothing else at play but the subjective will of individuals to manipulate other individuals. Such a will, as loudly as it may announce itself, cannot constitute “publicness.” Public is not that which just *happens* to be actually known by all members of a society, but rather that which in a particular case *ought* to be known by all, even if this “public knowledge” can perhaps only be known with great effort (e.g., by visiting a library, looking up the code of civil law, or seeking the counsel of a lawyer). The sentence

“ignorance does not protect from punishment” (*ignorantia legis non excusat*) depends entirely on this sense of “publicness.”

Certain legal acts, sales contracts, etc., that are publicly sanctioned, are not characterized by being enacted at a random place in the streets, but rather in the chancery of public notary as a representative of the Public. The shrinking of the forms of representation and the all-encompassing domination by merely economical—i.e., not public—forms of social interaction, have led to a loss of a living notion of the Public. Mere bureaucracy is not an appropriate representation of the “*res publica*.” Entering a birth into the registers of the registry office is a very abstract, formal act. But if we read that the French queen had to give birth to her child in the presence of the entire assembled court, then we become aware of this age’s, perhaps exaggerated, degree of intensity in its sense of the Public. In more recent times, this degree of intensity often becomes apparent only in the limit case of war: in the “public” death of the soldier (which has misled some to consider the public nature of the political sphere as consisting only in its relation to war). These two cases have something in common that makes them instructive for our topic at hand. They are characterized by the fact that, in them, the Public demands from a human being the most personal, most subjective, and most intense acts.

And here it needs to be said that in all these cases it is indispensable that the “spectator” is also a “witness,” i.e., that he, too, must step out of his private space and into the specifically circumscribed public sphere. The borderline of the indecent and perverse is transgressed precisely by the one who peeps through the keyhole, i.e., the one who wants to enjoy the event without the seriousness of being part of it, without public attendance, without being a “witness.” The death of the soldier is public, it occurs on the open battlefield. The one who sees it is usually a comrade-in-arms. But even a reporter must enter at least the zone of danger and thereby somehow still participate in this qualified form of the Public. But it is villainy to show such pictures to people in the movie theater or on TV for the satisfaction of their private curiosity. And likewise with executions. In former times they were public. Had Hitler been present personally—face to face—at the execution of the men on July 20, 1944, then we might still call him cruel or vengeful; but by having the executions privately screened in film for himself, he lowered himself below any humanly characterizable standard. By contrast with theater, film is—with a word of Cocteau (who indeed ought to know)—the “art of the keyholes.” The movie theater is the place where one can see without being seen, where one can enjoy without the seriousness of participating. And in TV broadcasting this situation reaches its apex, because the rest of the audience is absent as well.

Justly, therefore, an advocate of TV broadcasting of the Mass has coined the phrase: “a keyhole for the unbelievers.” But the “*cultus publicus*” of the Mass cannot tolerate this keyhole-situation. And first of all, what does the notion of the Public mean with regard to the Church and her liturgy? We might say that an absolute concept of the Public can, after all, be realized only in the theological sphere. All empirical-political organizations of human associations are characterized by an element of arbitrariness or randomness. The transition from private to public is fluid and any sphere of the public is by its particularity not itself entirely public. Even in the age of economic globalization there is not yet a political “global Public.” The Bible, on the other hand, does have a notion of a global Public, whose actualization, however, is of an eschatological nature: the assembly of all nations before the Son of Man appearing as their judge. Even the character of Abraham cannot be understood apart from his relation to the one

“in whom all nations of the earth will be blessed.” Precisely in the sacrifice of his son does Abraham enter into the position of a somehow officially recognized “public person”—just as the people of Israel as a whole will later. Only in this way can it become intelligible that the Church prays in the Easter Vigil that “the whole world might enter into the sonship of Abraham and the dignity of Israel.” The Church understands herself to be the legitimate place where the unity of humanity is realized under the rule of God—not as the tower of Babel, but as the Body of Christ. Recognition of the Church as a legally public corporation is therefore not the cause and condition of its theologically-grounded public character, but merely its political expression.

Now it is from this perspective that the notion of a *cultus publicus* must be understood. This *cultus publicus* is first of all the sacrifice of reconciliation on the Cross; it is furthermore the abiding representation of humanity before God in Jesus the High Priest, of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks; it is, finally, the cultic representation of the redeeming sacrifice in the celebration of the Eucharist, with the surrounding wreath of the liturgy of the Church. It is noteworthy that Pius XII in his encyclical “*Mediator Dei*” distinguishes the celebration of the Mass and the liturgy of the Church from the private sphere as “the public prayer of the eminent bride of Christ.” It is not an external element that characterizes the Christian cult as public, but rather the fact that, in it, the Church as Church, as the “Bride of Christ,” as humanity reconciled in Christ, acts through someone who is specifically delegated for that purpose. Absolution in the confessional is likewise a public act (as the historical explanations of Poschmann again have shown) and not a “private confession,” as with a psychoanalyst. And yet this is not a reason to relocate it out of the secrecy of the confessional.

So what follows from this more precise conception of the notion of the Public for the question of whether the Christian cult, especially the Mass, may be broadcasted on TV? This question has already largely been answered by the aforementioned analogies. The analogy is first and foremost that Christian worship is not just any public ritual, but that it is prayer, public prayer. If someone were really to read the encyclical, which defenders of broadcasting the Mass on TV like so much to quote, then he would discover that the pope is concerned—against extreme positions in the Liturgical Movement—to prevent the tearing apart of “objective” liturgy from subjective piety. Liturgy fulfills its purpose only to the extent that the subjectivity of the participants is involved therein. And so, here, too, we have the case of this highest measure of intensity of the Public, in which (as in public childbirth and public death) the vital intimacy of the person is claimed to the highest degree.

This constitutes the difference from public rituals such as coronations of kings and popes, whose purpose is fulfilled with its “objective” performance. Such ceremonies can be “*tele-vised*” indeed. In the case of the Mass, however, it remains unintelligible from which principle one could possibly justify the keyhole-situation, the justification of being a spectator without the seriousness of being really there. The Mass is public—this means, firstly, that it is offered in the name of the whole church as the “Bride of Christ;” and it means, secondly, that all men are, in principle, invited to participate, to be really there. They are asked to step out of their private isolation and enter into the Public of the Corpus Christi. This invitation is issued to the individual, i.e., it is in a sense delivered privately, just like the invitation of the royal paterfamilias, including on the radio and on TV. There may even be words of edification communicated to the individual Christians. If the Church here is approaching also individuals outside of the Church, then she does so in competition with other social groups, other forces and

intentions. In this context, she appears in a sense as one private company amongst others, as a “limited liability company.” In doing so, the Church takes into account the reality of her situation in the contemporary world. Yet this situation does not represent the self-understanding of the Church. This self-understanding is represented first and foremost in the celebration of the Eucharist. Here the Church does not turn as a private institution to private individuals, but rather, those who leave their individual isolation and enter into the public sphere of the Mystical Body of Christ turn towards God.

TV broadcasting makes this public occurrence into a private spectacle for individuals in their personal rooms, who see without being seen. This is, first of all, a violation of the intimacy of prayer, which, according to the exhortations of the pope, must not be removed from the Mass. It is the typical situation of the indiscretion of a seeing without being a “witness.” Even the unbeliever who is present at divine worship is still a witness; even he must at least externally conform to the rules of the Public of the believing participants—just like the reporter who enters the zone of military danger. He does not need to do this in front of the TV set—and it is in this situation of the keyhole that profanation consists.

Profanation is also a “re-privatization” of that which is essentially a *cultus publicus*. The strictly public character of the Mass is concealed, if it is lumped together with the other elements in the pseudo-public sphere of sensationalism. (In the best case scenario, the public cult becomes a mere means—and not at all the best means—to instigate personal piety, but without the ability to let it emerge into the public space of the “*sacrum commercium*.” But this is a reversal of the natural order of things.)

Empirically, the Church today is one society among others, one element in society. She must make her voice be heard; she is in the situation of the messenger at the hedges and fences. But in her self-understanding, she is the public sphere per se, the representative of all humanity before God and of God before humanity, the Corpus Christi. She is inevitably forced to obscure her public, universal character, if she dumps the center of her life, the celebration of the mystery, into the bankruptcy estate of all the other private items of publication.

Robert Spaemann (1927–2018) was a preeminent German philosopher.

www.humanumreview.com