Beyond Verbal Instruction: Liturgy, Art, and Architecture

There are no speeches nor languages, where their voices are not heard...
—Psalm 19:3 (Vulg.)

Preaching, informal instruction, and private devotional reading all presented the basics of Christian doctrine in terms of the spoken or written word. For the thirteenth-century Christian, however, the word was only one part of religious experience. The primary experience of the Christian faith would have been in the rituals that made up what we collectively refer to as the liturgy.¹ The liturgy (and rituals that we call para-liturgical) gave structure to the year and its seasons, to daily life, and to prayer and worship. Most of these rituals took place in the space of the parish church. The other place that one would find the rituals of the liturgy would be in the churches of the religious. From the arrival of the Franciscans and Dominicans, urban laypeople often frequented the churches of the friars, not only to hear their preaching, but also for their liturgies, particularly on feast days.²

The structure, ornamentation, and decoration of the church itself also presented the Christian religion in language beyond that of words. Although vast majority of surviving parish churches from medieval England are unadorned today (and nearly all of the mendicant churches were destroyed or repurposed during the Dissolution), in the period covered in this study, these churches

¹ For a basic introduction to the liturgy in western Europe in the Middle Ages, see Harper’s *Western Liturgy*. A good social-historical approach to the liturgy in Western Europe of the Middle Ages appears in Eric Palazzo, *Liturgie et société au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Aubier, 2000). On the liturgy in medieval England in particular, Richard Pfaff’s *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) has superseded all earlier works. When discussing the liturgy, we ought to note that medieval people would not have thought in terms of a unitary set of rituals known as “the liturgy,” but would rather have thought in terms of offices and *ordines*. Martin Morard, “Quand liturgie épousa prédication: Note sur la place de la prédication dans la liturgie Romaine au Moyen Âge,” in *Prédication et liturgie au Moyen Âge*, eds. Nicole Bériou and Franco Morenzoni, Bibliothèque d’histoire culturelle du Moyen Âge 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 79–126, p. 81.

would have been outfitted with a broad range of ornamentation. Painting, sculpture, hangings and other ornaments presented the Christian religion visually. Contemporaries often remarked that the best way to excite devotion to Christ was through a visual imagination of the events of the life of Christ, particularly his passion. If the shape and ornamentation of the church presented the Christian faith in more than words, so too did most of the liturgy itself take place through gestures, through physical and sensory cues. Most learning of Christian religion under such circumstances would, as Evelyn Birge Vitz has noted, have taken place "by osmosis."

Michael Clanchy in particular has noted the gradual rise of a "literate mentality" in England over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with the dispositive and epistemological value of text coming to the fore. This rise in a literate mentality nevertheless occurred against the backdrop of a culture in which spoken word, gesture, and image still conveyed an immense amount of rhetorical heft. As Clanchy has noted, oftentimes early medieval archives would have resembled, "a magpie's nest," holding a set of objects whose commemorative role came from the part they had played in a solemn act. So a cup or a staff placed on an altar would represent a conveyance of a property to a religious foundation, or a sword might represent the role of an ancestor in the Norman Conquest. Thus physical objects that had accompanied a set of gestures reinforced the memory of an event that had been oral. Although thirteenth-century England was moving from an oral to a literate mentality, the physical, visual, and aural would still play a strong role in the transmission or retention of knowledge, whether knowledge of a grant of land or knowledge of the Creed and Articles of Faith.

The parish church itself, its built environment, would have presented a clear illustration of the centrality of the Christian faith to daily life. The spires of the

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5 There is surprisingly little work on the liturgy and its role in religious education, although Evelyn Birge Vitz takes some initial steps in that direction in “Liturgy as Education in the Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Education*, eds. Ronald B. Begley and Joseph W. Cotersky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 20–34.

6 Clanchy, *Memory to Written Record*, 156–9.