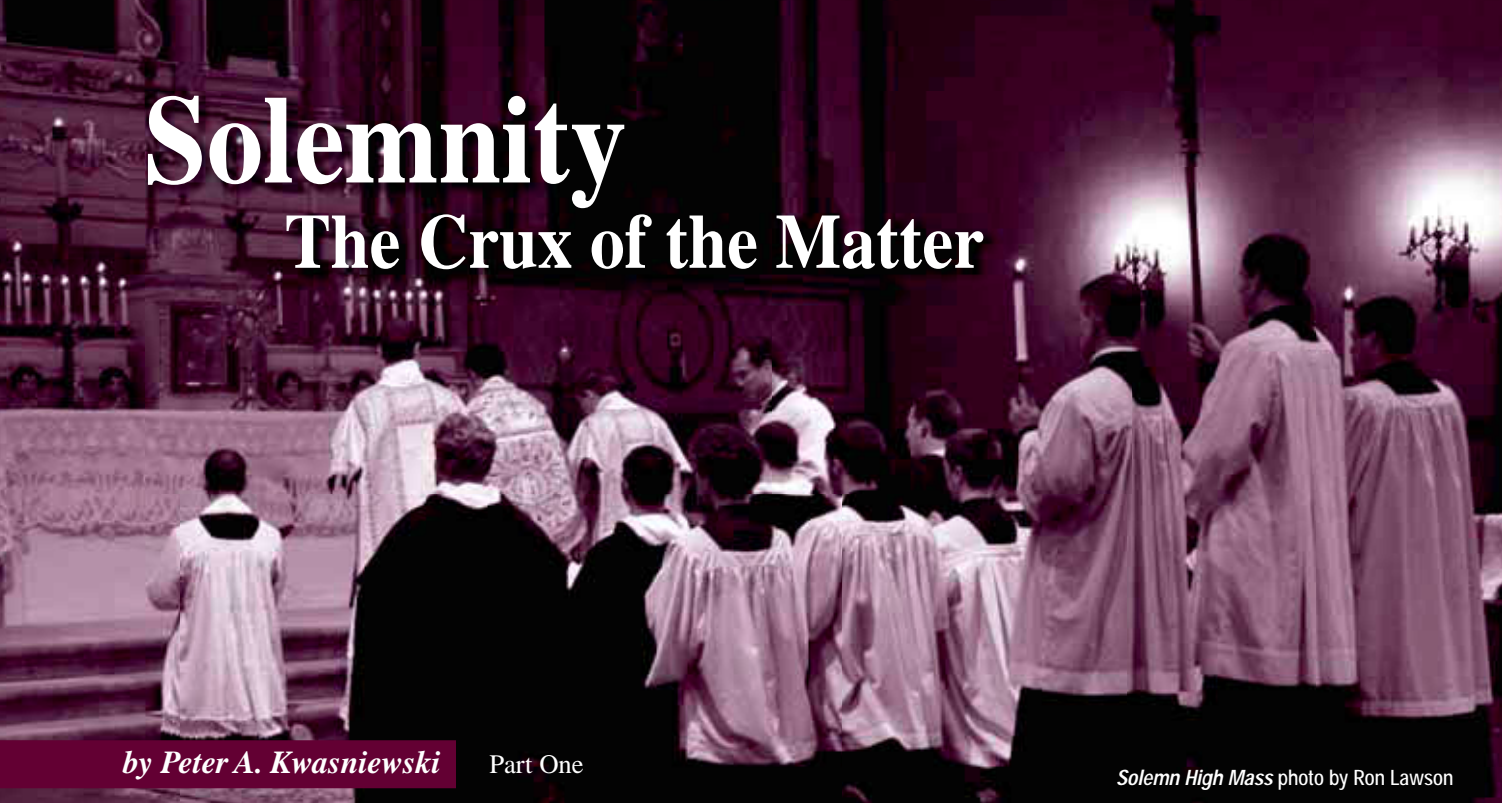


Solemnity

The Crux of the Matter



by Peter A. Kwasniewski

Part One

Solemn High Mass photo by Ron Lawson

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t a recent conference on the sacramental theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, I heard a speaker make the following statement:

It seems to me that most of the disagreements about the liturgy since the implementation of the reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council concern solemnity in one way or another. . . . Whether the arguments assert too much, not enough, or a wholly new understanding of the shape it should take, the question of a certain solemnity in the liturgy has been at the heart of almost all of the controversy.

Now, one might wonder if there could ever be “too much” solemnity, and one might also wonder if most of the committees who autocratically determine the fate of poor parishioners at Mass have given much or any thought to the notion of solemnity in the past few decades. Still, the speaker was stating an important truth. The difference between good liturgy and bad liturgy, as far as the mind of the Church is concerned, often does come down to a difference between worship that is solemn, formal, and devout, and worship that is slipshod and superficial, with a decidedly casual air. So, I began to wonder: Why is the contemporary liturgy, as celebrated in churches across the world, generally so lacking in anything that could merit the description “solemn”?

At first, I asked myself if this might be a fault endemic to the ordinary form of the Roman rite of the Mass, that which follows the Missal of Paul VI. But my happy memories of Oratorian liturgies in which the same Missal was employed with splendor and *gravitas* compelled me to acknowledge that the problem was not—at least

not simply and altogether—a problem with that Missal as such, flawed though it is in many respects.¹ It seemed to be more a problem with the people and their shepherds. It was caused by what parents call a “bad attitude.”

This attitude might be characterized as embarrassment or (may the good Lord help us) boredom when it comes to the very idea of solemnity, the treating of anything with utmost reverence—the kind of reverence that issues in angelic music or silent contemplation. The result is, alas, more than a mere “lack” of solemnity: it is negligence or contempt of the solemnity demanded by the Eucharistic mystery. Even though it *might* be done properly, the ordinary form of the Roman rite is but rarely done in a spirit of *comprehensive* solemnity, whereas solemnity, or at a minimum, sacred dignity, is the very atmosphere in which the extraordinary form of the same rite lives and moves and has its being. The “Solemn High Mass” illustrates this truth with particular forcefulness, although High Mass (or a Sung Mass) and Low Mass are not far behind. Supported by the rich liturgical culture of thirteenth-century Europe, Saint Thomas Aquinas could calmly state: “Because *the whole mystery of our salvation* is comprised in this Sacrament [of the Eucharist], it is therefore performed with greater solemnity than the other Sacraments.”² Implied is that *all* Sacraments were (and should be) celebrated solemnly.

The death of solemnity—as witnessed by the schlocky music used at vernacular Masses, the way priests and servers are dressed and their relaxed bearing, the placement of a clunky table to function as a turned-around altar, the sign of peace (please find me a single layman out of a hundred who invests this ceremonial interruption with anything like a sacred meaning), and other such things—comes, ultimately, from a loss of faith, a loss of confidence, a loss

of responsibility and spiritual authority. The priest seems no longer confident of his role as teacher, ruler, sanctifier *sub et cum Christo*. Such a crisis of confidence reflects the more general loss of faith in the ministerial priest's sublime vocation of standing in Christ's place, representing the Eternal High Priest.³ Loss of solemnity is directly traceable to loss of faith in the Real Presence, in the sacrificial nature of the Mass, and in the spiritual authority of the sacerdotal office. It is thus connected with a passive or active advocacy of the vice of insouciance toward divine things that makes them cease to appear divine in our eyes, even though they remain divine in themselves. Weakened, is the earnestness, undermined the solemnity, that comes naturally to a confident priesthood humbly serving the Holy Mysteries of God.⁴

The Fear of Ritual

One of many errors that poisoned the liturgical reform was the *fear of ritual*, stemming from the view that ritual keeps people away, prevents the priest from "getting in touch" with the people. The new missal has been deritualized, or at least allows and even encourages the priest to deritualize the Mass by injecting the liturgy with extemporaneous remarks, by moving about in a casual manner, and by inviting into the sanctuary numerous unvested laity, which is totally contrary to the spirit of ritual or divine *cultus*. In Thomas Day's *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, there is an hilarious (and appallingly true) description of the schizophrenic liturgies generated by the current rubrics together with poor training and clueless custom: a clearly ritual ceremony performed by people who act as though the ceremony were not a ritual. The priest, wearing ritual vestments, processes down the aisle to the tune of a hymn. He arrives at the altar. He adjusts his microphone. He looks out to the congregation. He smiles, and then descends into utter banality: "Good morning, everyone!" Back to ritual: "In the name of the Father..." Back to chatter: "Today, we remember that we are trying our best but are still failing, and so we go to the Lord for mercy." Back to ritual: "Lord, have mercy." Back and forth it goes, until he dismisses the congregation with "Have nice day, everybody!"

For a long time it struck me as bizarre that so few should sense the utter discontinuity between ritual and quotidian modes of address and bearing, but as I better sized up the mess of modernity, I saw how markedly anti-

ritualistic and indeed anti-spiritual our age has become: anything outside the comfort zone of everyday speech about business or pleasure is alien, dangerous, and threatening, and people avoid that region of dissimilitude as much as possible. The Catholic liturgy, which is all about the sacred, the numinous, the mysterious, is diametrically opposed to the mentality of the Western "marketplace of ideas"; it runs against the grain of the ubiquitous modern lifestyle of indulgent materialism. Any traditional liturgy, whereby eyes and souls are focused on that which is above and beyond, is a serious threat to the triumph of egoism that the government, the school systems, and the private sector are all mightily struggling to bring about in every town and home. Never before have I appreciated so much the slogan: "Save the liturgy, save the world."⁵

We should be clear about this: There has been a war in modern times against *martyrial meaning*, that is, absolute truth worth dying for, worth giving up everything for. One of the main objectives of the nihilist Jean-Paul Sartre was to convince his readers that there was no "truth" to serve, worship, and die for, or put differently, that the only reason to live was to serve the "truth" of oneself. Perhaps this is why Sartre was such a notorious womanizer and drug-user, and so callously selfish: he *did* serve himself, with utmost consistency.

The Sartrean war against ultimate, transcendent meaningfulness has also been at work in the horizontalization and secularization of the liturgy. In many instances, liturgical celebrations are no longer intensely focused on God and spiritual realities—Angels and Saints, grace, sin, Heaven, hell. Adherence to spiritual truth is a martyrdom for the carnal ego: if one truly believes in the transcendent truths of the Faith, one must crucify the

"flesh," which in this case means fallen man's tendency to cheapen, neglect, forget, or treat lightly the dogmas and rituals of the faith. Every phrase of the traditional Mass is worth dying for, because every phrase brings to us (and brings us to) Christ the Lord. The moment one looks upon it as a merely human construct to be tinkered with, to be socially engineered, one has abandoned the martyrial stance toward tradition and truth that has marked all the saints of our holy Church. Can you for a moment imagine Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Francis de Sales, or Saint Pio of Pietrelcina tinkering with the text of the Mass, or sitting down to a committee meeting that has on its agenda the creation of new Eucharistic prayers?

The difference between good liturgy and bad liturgy, as far as the mind of the Church is concerned, often does come down to a difference between worship that is solemn, formal, and devout, and worship that is slipshod and superficial, with a decidedly casual air.

(As the saying goes: “God so loved the world that He did not send a committee.”) The saints accepted with grateful hearts what was handed down to them and used it to sanctify their lives. They were ready to explain and defend the prayers and practices of their ancestors, even if it meant enduring torture and death at the hands of infidels or heretics.

I sometimes wonder about the Consilium or the original ICEL team: what were their *spiritual credentials*—not their academic qualifications, their pseudo-scientific blustering, their convenient curial connections, but, I repeat, their spiritual credentials—to undertake tasks as delicate, demanding, and dreadfully earnest as those of “reforming” and then “translating” the liturgy of the Catholic Church? Was this a question anyone even thought of or bothered to ask? On the contrary, it would not have been amiss to ask Padre Pio (who lived until 1968) to suggest one or two changes to the Missal, but I am almost certain the saintly stigmatist, in his mystical intimacy with Christ, would have respectfully, even vociferously, declined.⁶

All his life Jean-Paul Sartre warred against the belief that something can be so good, so true, so worthy, that one should embrace and defend it with utter seriousness and self-sacrifice. Yet if there is any accurate description of what the ancient liturgy does with respect to the divine mysteries, it is precisely this: it embraces and defends them with utter earnestness, solemnity, and self-surrender.

Music and Vessels Worthy of the House of God

Consider two case studies: Gregorian chant and beautiful vessels.

The main reason Gregorian chant was thrown out of the churches is not that it was in Latin (for the music could have been patiently adapted for English texts⁷) but that it is not “happy” music, it is not “stirring” in the Hollywood sense. Plainchant is not for happy cats but for God-thirsting monastic souls—the kind of monastic soul that is demanded of every Christian according to his mode of life. Chant presupposes a fundamental *seriousness* of soul, and fosters this condition more and more until it becomes what the mystics call “sober inebriation,” *sobria inebrietas*. A person steeped in chant actually comes to perceive the world around him differently—with the eyes of faith, with a contemplative readiness,

penetration, and serenity. Chant is a powerful agent of spiritual change and maturity: it suffuses the soul with an earnest *spiritual* longing for God, a longing embodied and expressed in every curving melody, reflecting the nameless nuances, the subtle currents, of the human soul.⁸ How mature the anonymous composers must have been, how strong and soaring were their aspirations toward God, compressed into these wonderfully diverse and gracious melodies!

The new missal has been deritualized, or at least allows and even encourages the priest to deritualize the Mass by injecting the liturgy with extemporaneous remarks, by moving about in a casual manner, and by inviting into the sanctuary numerous unvested laity, which is totally contrary to the spirit of ritual or divine cultus.

One morning when singing the chants for the Common of Doctors I was especially filled with a sense of awe at their beauty, their sweetness, their melancholy edge, as if to express in music what the *Salve Regina* captures in words: the blending of love, trust, joy, with longing, sorrow, tears. Yes, this is music that can, over time, make those who sing it or hear it grow mature in their faith, which means: grow into contemplatives who know how to suffer and how to rejoice in the Lord. With quite different means, Byzantine chant accomplishes the same goal. In stark contrast, contemporary liturgical music, with its second-

rate sentimental lyrics, schmaltzy melodies, superficial emotions, and strident accompaniments, is not only incapable of producing spiritual maturity, but *harms* the Christian soul by muddying clarity of intellect, diminishing the sense of beauty, drawing the will into the grip of feelings, and creating dispositions contrary to the love of solitude and silence.⁹ In short, it could neither engender nor sustain a monastic community dedicated to a fervent life of meditation and contemplation. That alone is reason enough to “banish it from the sanctuary of the temple,” as the Popes poetically say.¹⁰ If it’s not healthy for people who dedicate their lives to God, it’s not healthy for any of us, since we’re all supposed to be a priestly people.

This was brought home to me powerfully one morning in Austria by a bizarre experience. In the baroque Gothic church there was an upper chapel built atop a lower chapel, in such a way that occasionally two liturgies or services were taking place simultaneously. On that day, a group of us were worshiping in the upstairs chapel at a Tridentine Mass, singing the ancient melodies of Gregorian chant, when suddenly from the downstairs chapel there began to emanate the cacophonous caterwauling of youngsters singing the horrible

ditties of the past few decades. It was a vivid study in contrasts: a traditional manner of worship that is noble, restrained, full of awe, focused on mystery, lovingly conveyed in lilting Latin lines, and a modern way of worship, hyperactive, monotonous and raucous, without measure, beauty, dignity. The fanciful idea occurred to me that upstairs we were fortunate to be caught up in a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy, while taking place downstairs, unbeknownst to its participants, was an image of the ceremonies (for some such there must surely be) of the underworld.

As for sacred vessels, I will never forget a homily by a Swiss priest, preaching on the gift of gold brought by one of the Magi, in which he remarked: “If we do not give the very best we have to God, we do not really believe in God at all. If we have gold, which is precious and costly and beautiful, we must use it for His glorification; if we make sacred vessels out of wood or glass or clay, we are in effect saying that we do not think of Him as all-excelling, beyond everything we can give, so that we *must* give Him the best we can possibly manage to give, even (or especially) when it pinches our pockets. We have cut God down to our size and placed Him in a tidy budget, just as we would do when stocking our kitchen at home; we believe in Him weakly, or maybe not at all.”

This homily was memorable not only because I had never heard a priest say anything like it—expounding venerable traditions of the Catholic Church is not, alas, to be counted among the more common homiletic strategies nowadays—but also because it helped me to understand why Christians have always tried to give God the best. An honest effort in this direction produced the sublime art and architecture of the Middle Ages, next to which their modern equivalents look, on the whole, shallow and rude. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance, for the entire ethos of the liturgy, of the sacred vessels appearing worthy (as much as it is possible for us to make them so) of the Mysteries they are honored to contain. The elevation of the consecrated Victim at Mass is the pinnacle of the many-versed hymn that mankind

and all of creation raises to God; that is the time when the supernatural inward reality of the gifts ought to be most evidently symbolized in the external beauty of the chalice and other vessels on the altar. Of the holy Curé of Ars, Saint John Vianney, who wore tattered clothes, slept on the floor, and subsisted on potatoes, we read:

When it was a question of the objects destined for divine worship, he could not find anything beautiful enough.... His joy was unspeakable when he received from the Vicomte d’Ars a magnificent canopy, superb chasubles, banners, a large monstrance in silver gilt, a tabernacle of gilded copper, some beautiful candlesticks, and six reliquaries.¹¹



The Transfiguration by Fra Angelico

The Mass is a living image or efficacious likeness of the perfect worship offered by Jesus Christ as Head of the Church—the sinless Lamb slain on Calvary, now reigning in the heavenly Jerusalem—and so it makes present in our midst the glorified Savior whose second coming will not be in quiet poverty but in earth-shattering splendor.

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Jesus was born in a humble stable and placed in a manger, true; but the Wise Men did not bring him straw, dirt, and dung, they brought him costly royal gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The way in which our Lord was born revealed *His* humility, which disdains earthly pomp; the way in which the three kings adored Him revealed *their* humility, which looked for the best they could offer, knowing in their wisdom that it was far beneath what He deserved. It is not for us to behave as if we were Jesus come into the world and thus to create churches that look like barns or stables or caves to receive us. It is rather our business to join the Magi and the shepherds in heeding the divine call that beckons us beyond our limits. Responding in faith, we must give our utmost to the *Word-made-flesh*. The same thing can be said of sacred music. Modern man is no different in essence from man of any age, and therefore has no valid excuse for producing or perpetuating eyesores and earaches. Such unworthy stuff is not what most of our contemporaries would want, had they any chance to choose; it is certainly not what any of them need.

As was said, it is true that Our Lord first appeared on earth in a humble manger, hidden and poor. The sacred liturgy, however, is not time-travel to Bethlehem circa 6–4 B.C. The Mass is a living image or efficacious likeness of the perfect worship offered by Jesus Christ

as Head of the Church—the sinless Lamb slain on Calvary, now reigning in the heavenly Jerusalem—and so it makes present in our midst the glorified Savior whose *second* coming will not be in quiet poverty but in earth-shattering splendor. For this reason the instinct of our faith has always been to maximize the beauty of the liturgy and its diverse furnishings and surroundings, yearning for what is to come rather than indulging in backward glances. From that point of view, the liturgists who clamor for a return to evangelical or apostolic “simplicity” are the ones guilty of nostalgia, not the faithful who desire the traditional Roman rite. They want to go back, we want to press forward. It is the difference between archaeology and eschatology. The irony, in fact, is greater: one of the most ancient liturgical customs of all, and one that survived all ages and cultures until it met its match in the hubris

of the modern West, is that of facing eastwards when we pray to Christ, the True Light that enlightens every man (cf. Jn 1:9). In having the priest turn his back to the Sun of Justice and “face the people” in a closed circle, as if *he* were the coming light, advocates of the new liturgical style disdain universal symbolism and banish one of the few customs we can be *certain* the church of the early centuries practiced. Once again, those who defend Tradition find that they are more capable than their adversaries of preserving what the latter claim to value most—in this instance, antiquity. ✠
To be continued in the next issue.

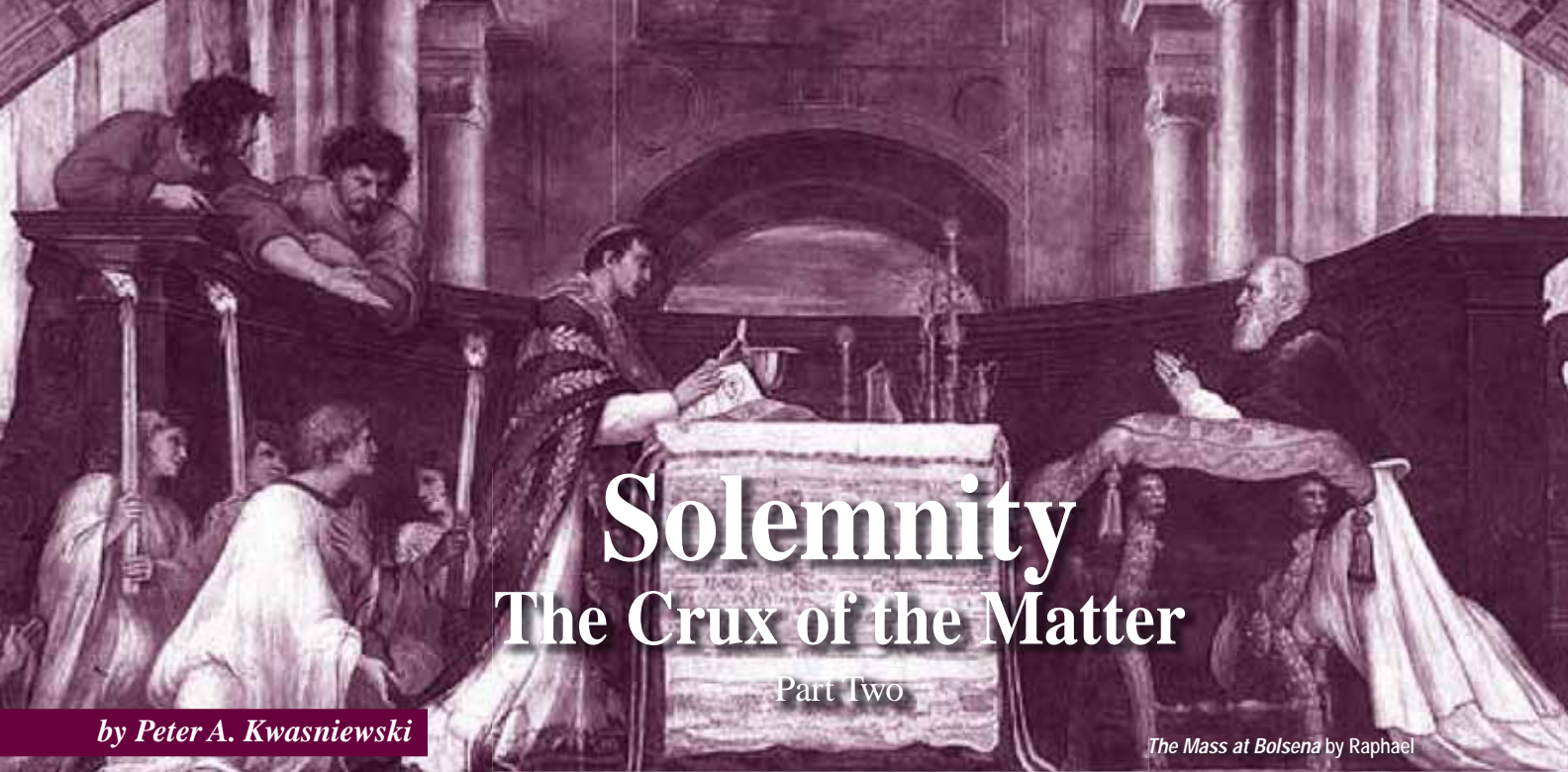
Yet if there is any accurate description of what the ancient liturgy does with respect to the divine mysteries, it is precisely this: it embraces and defends them with utter earnestness, solemnity, and self-surrender.



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Notes

1. I say “not simply and altogether,” because on the one hand it is *possible* to bring the celebration of the ordinary rite into manifest *visible* continuity with the extraordinary rite (as some Oratorians do), but on the other hand, there are many ways in which the Missal of Paul VI neither encourages nor demands solemnity whereas the traditional Missal does this, indeed methodically. This is a key reason why some priests today are unwilling to learn the old Mass: it is too demanding in its regulations of speech, posture, gesture. But it is also a key reason why a good many young seminarians and priests are eager to learn it: what person in good physical shape could hear about a nearby steep mountain with a beautiful view from the top, and not feel the urge to climb it?
2. *Summa theologiae* III, q. 83, a. 4.
3. All of these comments could be applied also to the death of homiletics in our age. There is hardly a priest left in the world who can preach as the Fathers or the Medievals did. Where is a Saint Gregory, a Saint Augustine, a Saint Bernard, a Saint Bonaventure! They are gone; there is hardly such a thing as *preaching* anymore. We hear stories, jokes, platitudes, generic newspaper advice, but little in the way of sustained and robust exegesis of Scripture, little in the way of provocative challenges against popular culture, little in the way of urging asceticism for penance and reparation. The clergy have by and large grown soft and their message is softness. The need for clergy who can effectively preach the Word in season and out of season, stirring up the people to conversion of heart, is as great now as it was at the time of Saint Dominic and the Albigensian crisis.
4. It is important to realize that there are cultural and political reasons for the loss of solemnity that do not exactly correspond to the *Novus Ordo*’s own weaknesses. We might well have witnessed a similar decay of solemnity in the Tridentine rite had it never been supplanted by the *Novus Ordo* (e.g., attempts at “inculturated” Latin Masses, which were already happening before the Council). Perhaps the Tridentine Mass has retained the power to stand firm against these cultural-political forces because its distinctive cultivation of solemnity has been officially marginalized and is now attractively countercultural. Its solemnity, which would have been secularization’s most inviting target, has only been *underlined* and *guaranteed*, due to the old rite’s wholesale mainstream abandonment.
5. This is not to say that there could not be a preoccupation with ritualism that would diminish the joy, zeal, and charity characteristic of a healthy Christian spiritual life. Lovers of tradition may also suffer from the compromise of compartmentalization, whereby what happens in church has little or nothing to say to their consumerist lifestyle and neoconservative ideology. However, my purpose here is not to diagnose lapses or distortions of traditionalism, but on the contrary, to point out that its fundamental instinct is sound—the desire to worship God with the very best that our deep and rich tradition has given us. Relativism is not the final word; certain customs, rituals, sacred songs, and so forth *are* objectively more beautiful and more fitting for divine worship than others.
6. Let I be misunderstood: I am aware that there have been commissions appointed by Popes with a view to evaluating, researching, restoring, or augmenting aspects of the liturgy. My point is not to say that there is never a place for such consultations. Rather it is a question of the *minimum qualification* required of someone who dares to sit on such a commission. I think it will be impossible to refute the claim that the minimum qualification is the most profound respect and reverence for Tradition, such that one would almost rather cut off one’s hand than tamper with what has been handed down. As the *Notitiae* or official notices along with documents like Bugnini’s memoirs reveal, however, this spirit of veneration was shockingly absent from the *Consilium*, the body of theologians entrusted with revising the liturgical books of the Roman rite. The most disgraceful example, to my mind, is the reply published in *Notitiae* responding to a query about why the old offertory prayers were removed. The *Consilium* said, in short: “The Offertory Prayers are redundant and unnecessary, as they anticipate the sacrificial action that is to occur later.” With one smug reply, centuries of worship and theology are swept aside, as if nobody had ever understood the offertory before the enlightened gurus of the *Consilium* came along to explain it. Such a union of hubris and idiocy might possibly be unique in the history of Catholic theology.
7. As Father Samuel Weber, O.S.B. and Jeffrey Ostrowski are each doing with considerable success these days.
8. For further reflections along these lines, see the wonderful little book *Reflections on the Spirituality of Gregorian Chant* by Dom Jacques Hourlier, trans. Dom Gregory Casprini and Robert Edmonson (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 1995), as well as two classics: Richard R. Terry’s *Catholic Church Music* (1907) and Marie Pierik’s *The Spirit of Gregorian Chant* (1939), both republished in 2007 by The Church Music Association of America.
9. For a detailed treatment of the problems mentioned here, see my article “Contemporary Music in Church?,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* 107.1 (October 2006): 8–15, available at <http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/kwasniewski.htm>.
10. For documented summaries of what the Magisterium has taught about sacred music, see my articles “Cantate Domino Canticum Novum: Aspects of the Church’s Liturgical Magisterium,” *The Catholic Faith* 6.2 (March–April 2000): 14–23 and “John Paul II on Sacred Music,” *Sacred Music* vol. 133, n. 2 (Summer 2006): 4–22. These are available at <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=4440> and <http://www.musicasacra.com/publications/sacredmusic/pdf/sm133-2.pdf>. Magisterial interventions of Benedict XVI have only underlined the conclusions made in these articles.
11. Abbé H. Convert, *Eucharistic Meditations: Extracts from the Writings and Instructions of Saint John Vianney*, trans. Sister Mary Benvenuta, O.P. (Wheatthampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke Books, 1964), 100.



Solemnity

The Crux of the Matter

Part Two

by Peter A. Kwasniewski

The Mass at Bolsena by Raphael

Y

our primary service to this world must therefore be your prayer and the celebration of the Divine Office. The interior disposition of each priest, and of each consecrated person, must be that of “putting nothing

before the Divine Office.” The beauty of this inner attitude will find expression in the beauty of the liturgy, so that wherever we join in singing, praising, exalting and worshipping God, a little bit of heaven will become present on earth. Truly it would not be presumptuous to say that, in a liturgy completely centred on God, we can see, in its rituals and chant, an image of eternity. Otherwise, how could our forefathers, hundreds of years ago, have built a sacred edifice as solemn as this? Here the architecture itself draws all our senses upwards, towards “what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined: what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9). In all our efforts on behalf of the liturgy, the determining factor must always be our looking to God. We stand before God—He speaks to us and we speak to Him.

Pope Benedict XVI at the Abbey of Heiligenkreuz, Austria – September 9, 2007

Spiritual Smugness

One may put the problem we are diagnosing in this way. As Saint Leo the Great says, he who abandons the desire of making progress risks the danger of falling back.¹ Saint Bernard of Clairvaux echoes him: To stand still in the way of God is to fall backwards.² We are all in danger of slacking off, kicking back, growing smug. There are no vacations in the spiritual life, but we would like to think there might be, and the temptation is strong to take one anyhow. And that means to negate God, who is a refiner’s fire and

a burning coal, ever near and ready to transform us, if we surrender our will day in and day out. This being so, one cannot underestimate the danger of the spiritual smugness so easily fed by the typical parish enactment of the ordinary form of the Roman rite.³ It is a smugness epitomized in the casual entrance of laymen and women into the sanctuary for lectoring or distributing Communion; the faint half-elevation of the Eucharist, not to mention many other signs of shallow or absent faith in the Real Presence⁴; the overall chummy feeling, the “sign of peace,” the lack of silence before *or* after Mass; the verbal top-heaviness that makes of God a small and tame object ready to be conjured and controlled, ready for a relationship on equal terms at best. God is made “one of us” in quite the wrong way. The Christ of today’s parish is a man, yes—but only a man (sorry, human being). As has been observed more than once, the redaction of the new Missal seems to reflect an almost Arian attitude.⁵

Contrast all this with the reverence paid to the Gospel or the sanctuary in the old rite, the magnificent prayers of the Offertory, the elaborate incensations, the Athanasian-style Preface of the Holy Trinity chanted in a solemn manner, the Roman Canon with its many signs of the cross and its reverent elevations of host and chalice—not to mention all the preparations the priest and people make: the Asperges, the prayers at the foot of the altar, the *Lavabo* accompanied by a psalm. Through such ceremonial actions man acknowledges the supremacy of God and His transcendent mystery, *begs* to be allowed to worship Him, *begs* to be worthy to offer and to partake of the sacrifice that the Son, in His human nature, offers to the Blessed Trinity. The traditional liturgy reflects not only correct theology but correct anthropology. The anthropology

embodied in the old rite, with its panoply of supporting customs and laws, is ecstatic, vertical, and submissive to God, as is *dignum et iustum*; that which is embodied in the new rite, due to its inculturation in the contemporary West, is rationalist, immanentist, horizontal, and dominative, submitting the sacred to a humanistic canon of “community.” The ancient Roman rite, stately and hieratic, gives praise and homage to the Crucified Lord, thrusting the Infinite Paradox directly into the eyes and ears of the faithful who have the eyes to see it, the ears to hear it. Does the ordinary form do this equally well?

Many of the prayers and rituals of the Novus Ordo are poorly proportioned to the sacrifice taking place; they are disjunct from it. The *form* and *content* of the liturgy are at odds, so that what I *believe* is taking place—my faith having been formed by the teaching of both Trent and Vatican II about the Mass—is poorly manifested by the form, which functions with a fraction of the clarity and depth of the ancient rite’s manifestation of the same mysteries. In the ancient rite the form and content are unified, “symbiotic” so to speak. The ancient liturgy, with its poignant symbols and innumerable subtleties, is a prolonged courtship of the soul, enticing and drawing it onwards, leading it along a path to the mystical marriage, the wedding feast of Heaven.

I once had the privilege of listening to a Ukrainian bishop speak about the kind of maturity required of a man and a woman if they hoped to become “successful” spouses. He said that it was the ability to sacrifice out of love, and that no marriage could fail if both spouses had this virtue. He then noted, as an aside, that the Divine Liturgy should not be seen as something to be gotten over with quickly and efficiently, but rather as the very *locus* where love of God and love of neighbor is awakened and fostered—and not through a superficial attempt at being chummy, but by the solemnity and meaningfulness of the ritual itself, which impresses on the soul the lesson of charity that Christ came to teach, both by word and by example. This bishop was convinced that the crisis of marriage, the result of a lack of spiritual maturity, moral seriousness, and strength of commitment, was reflected in the crisis of liturgy itself, the result of a similar lack.

He was likewise convinced that love and family life could become strong again only if spouses threw themselves vigorously into formal liturgical worship. When people are drawn deeply into the mysteries of the Faith in a worthy liturgy, routine antagonisms begin to fall away, because the worshipers are being led to a reality more fundamental than their own being and life.

Unless You Become Like Little Children

The vocational crisis of the post-Vatican II Church is linked, immediately or mediately, to the dismantling and banalization of the liturgy—this becomes clearer all the time. Why is it that the traditional religious orders and societies of apostolic life are blossoming and booming? The longing of the human heart for transcendent meaning and purpose in life, or put differently, for a taste of perfection and holiness, has by and large not been met by the ordinary form of the Roman rite. The problem with the new form of Mass can be stated quite simply: it has neither the mystical silence of the old Low Mass nor the political, dramatic beauty of the Solemn High Mass. It is neither glorious in its outward expression as triumphal celebration nor glorious in its inward dimension as contemplative prayer. So it has neither the outer splendor nor the inner profundity of the old Rite. In its effort to be everything for everyone, it ends up being nothing for anybody. In trying to reach out to the anonymous “modern man,” it ends up creating a vacuum; and grace abhors a vacuum no less than nature does.

For decades, liturgists have advocated special “children’s Masses,” and, since people tend to heed experts regardless of how little common sense the experts may have, many parishes have instituted such stripped-down Masses.⁶ The

sad reality is that the standard “adult” Novus Ordo is *already* a children’s Mass of sorts, what with its simplistic prayers, workbook structure, and vapid transparency. Indeed—and here is another bitter irony—the new Rite cannot nourish children’s souls as effectively as the old Rite is capable of doing. Conceptualize, if you will, the difference between a child seeing a Solemn High Mass according to the classical Rite and a child seeing a typical

It is a smugness epitomized in the casual entrance of laymen and women into the sanctuary for lectoring or distributing communion; the faint half-elevation of the Eucharist, not to mention many other signs of shallow or absent faith in the Real Presence; the overall chummy feeling, the “sign of peace,” the lack of silence before or after Mass; the verbal top-heaviness that makes of God a small and tame object ready to be conjured and controlled, ready for a relationship on equal terms at best.

Sunday parish Mass. Anyone with reliable knowledge of child psychology would be able to see which one of these liturgies, when coupled with catechesis, will have the greater and deeper long-term effect.

My son, age seven, had been present at some Tridentine Masses as a baby, but when he attended a recent *Missa Cantata* it was after a gap of well

over a year. When he got home, he took out a piece of paper, unprompted by anyone, and drew a sketch of what he saw happening at the altar (see *The Consecration* drawn by Julian Kwasniewski). Notice how the key moment of the celebration is immediately grasped—the offering of our Lord’s sacrifice—and how the inherent sacredness of the event is conveyed (the server bending slightly to ring the bells, the elaborate chalice, the exaggerated candlesticks). This same son of mine has *never* drawn a picture of a Novus Ordo Mass, even of a very reverent one; apparently it has never moved him or struck him to the extent that this one Tridentine Mass did. I can hear the liturgical experts saying: “He did not understand it, for he could not translate (or even *hear*) each Latin word.” I tell you this, ye experts sorely wanting in common sense: he saw and wordlessly grasped the very essence of the Mass—an awesome, mysterious, hushed, and holy act of worship centered around the Body and Blood of Christ. Pray, tell me what a 7-year old child picks up and comes away with at a typical parish liturgy in English? Or better, don’t tell me! I will tell you instead what my 4-year old daughter said

after witnessing a mainstream parish liturgy at which a full-grown woman functioned as the head altar server: “Mama, mama, there *are* women priests!” Opportunity for patient catechesis and mild resentment. A liturgy like that is bankrupt before it even starts; by the time it sputters out, we will have witnessed a parody of Catholic Tradition. Only the miraculous presence of Christ prevents it from being a hollow parody.

The ultimate “children’s Mass”—and I mean for every-

one, from the child to the ancient, who seeks to live the vocation of *spiritual* childhood, not for those who remain (or who would have others remain) locked at a childish stage of human development—is a Tridentine Mass with all the stops pulled, thundering orthodoxy and whispering mystery to all present. If you want a church full of

Catholics who know their Faith, love their Faith, and practice their Faith, give them a liturgy that is demanding, profound, and rigorous. They will rise to the challenge. Why was it that the reformers of the liturgy did not see, and still do not see, that the human psyche *needs* a certain opacity, an unsoundable depth, a source of resistance and difficulty, a foreign grandeur that stands in sharp contrast to the familiar shallows of daily life? Man needs this in order to know who he is and why he is here. Without it, he will be confirmed in the nihilistic assessment that everyday life is a trap out of which he can never escape. Liturgy should most definitely *not* be easily accessible and straightforward. That is the way a clean business transaction is—and our dealings with Almighty God cannot be so transparent and conversational. “I am He Who Is, and you are she who is not,” said the Lord to Saint Catherine of Siena. Liturgy ought to convey to us, or at least have the *power* to convey to us, an overwhelming sense of the “allness” of God and the “nothingness” of man, as they are united in the unfathomable mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the incomprehensible intersection of All and Nothing, a wedding that

makes All minister to Nothing so that out of Nothing may be created eternal friendship with All. “How can this be, since I do not know man?”—I do not know man’s potential to embrace God, and even after the Spirit’s overshadowing I remain mystified, for none of it makes “sense” in human terms, and yet it makes vastly more sense than anything man has ever come up with. That is the consoling conundrum that traditional liturgy dances around to the point of reassured exhaustion. Think of the Byzantine rite with its



The Consecration drawn by Julian Kwasniewski

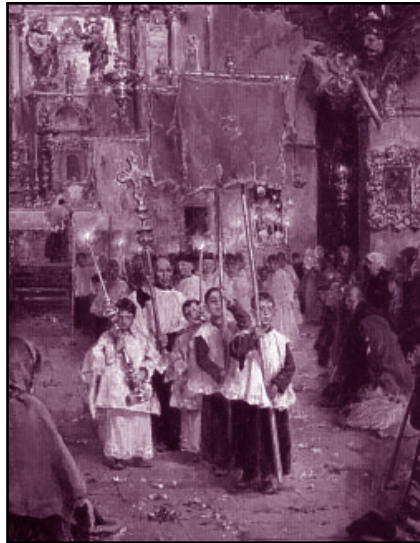
The problem with the new form of Mass can be stated quite simply: it has neither the mystical silence of the old Low Mass nor the political, dramatic beauty of the Solemn High Mass. It is neither glorious in its outward expression as triumphal celebration nor glorious in its inward dimension as contemplative prayer. So it has neither the outer splendor nor the inner profundity of the old Rite.

wavelike repetitions of “Lord, have mercy” and “Grant it, O Lord”; think of the traditional Roman rite with its choreographed positionings, pregnant silences, and dramatic gestures.

So let us put to rest once and for all—or, since the sound bytes that control the thinking of the masses stubbornly refuse to go away, let us at least refute among our acquaintances—the absurd statement that “People can’t understand what’s going on at a Mass in Latin, but everyone understands what’s going on at a Mass in English.” In reality, the most unwashed, unlettered medieval peasant knew better what was happening in the lofty sanctuary of his local church—the peasant who knew, in part from the stained glass windows whose beauty and intricacy still cause us to marvel, that “God died for me, the Blood of Jesus washes away my sins, and all this is wondrously present at the Mass”—than does many a modern parishioner sitting in his whitewashed church of angular artifacts, who does not clearly confess the Real Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist, who confuses sentimentality with charity and sing-alongs with prayer. The kind of understanding that really matters at Mass is attainable by every faithful soul who sets foot in a *real* church with a *sacred* liturgy: it is an intuition of the mystery of the Word-made-flesh, made food for us; the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Calvary present in our midst. Any other “understanding,” no matter how actively participative, is an illusion of the real, a distortion of the form, a distraction from what matters. Having the Mass in one’s native language is no guarantee that a person will understand the mystery of the Mass. On the contrary, if the vesture of the ceremony is too familiar, the participant too easily thinks he has mastered what it’s all about. The familiar becomes the routine, the routine becomes the ignored. Our own language is a comfort zone that insulates us from the shock of the Gospel, the scandal

of the Cross, the lure of the unknown. How many times have you seen the faithful mouthing the Nicene Creed at an English Mass and wondered: Do we have *any idea* what we are saying? I would rather have a huge dose of foreign-

ness, of music that is not current, words that are strange, language that is archaic, hieratic gestures that are grandly incongruous to a democratic society. A person thrown into this situation knows at least that he is dealing with something utterly different and possibly far deeper than his day-to-day occupations. Such an anomalous situation has the power to intrigue—and as we know from mystery novels, intrigues involve whispered secrets, bloodshed, loose ends, and a lot of investigation.



Procession at the End of Mass by Arcadio Mas y Fondevila

For decades, liturgists have advocated special “children’s Masses,” and, since people tend to heed experts regardless of how little common sense the experts may have, many parishes have instituted such stripped-down Masses. The sad reality is that the standard “adult” Novus Ordo is already a children’s Mass of sorts, what with its simplistic prayers, workbook structure, and vapid transparency. Indeed—and here is another bitter irony—the new Rite cannot nourish children’s souls as effectively as the old Rite is capable of doing.

Verbum Caro Factum Est Versus Verbiage

If one wishes “the people” to participate actively in the liturgy—where *participatio actuosa* is understood as the *Church* understands it: heightened awareness of and receptivity to religious language and symbolism, with appropriate responses, audible and inaudible, verbal and non-verbal—then one will try to respect elementary facts of human psychology. A slowly processing line of beautifully vested ministers gracefully approaching the altar, to the accompaniment of the mighty sound of the pipe organ or the heavenly melody of chant, engages the senses and the soul to deeper, more lasting effect than an ill-clad priest sauntering out of the sacristy and beginning Mass in rapid-fire vernacular punctuated with personal touches. If the liturgy cannot immediately *show* something meaningful to a wide-eyed child, then it has failed. The bowing priest reciting the Confiteor, the acolyte swinging a censer, the subdeacon, deacon, and priest aligned hierarchically

during solemn Mass, the awesome stillness of the Roman Canon—all of these things speak directly to the heart, to the heart even of a little child who has managed to sit

still and watch, as I have seen countless little children do, even at lengthy solemn liturgies. The Novus Ordo liturgy has little to say to such souls because it *only* says, it does not *do*, bow, breathe, keep silent, keep watch, swing the censer, hear the melodies, watch the interplay of ministers as they reverently discharge their sundry tasks. The meaning, the *power* of the spoken word decreases in proportion to its increase in prominence. At the limit case, we have a liturgy in which an awful lot is *said* but hardly anything solemn or sacred registers on either eye or ear.

Case in point: One Sunday my wife and I attended a Latin Novus Ordo liturgy at the Karlskirche in Vienna, and the entire liturgy was nothing but words, words, words. The priest stepped out of the sacristy and began talking. The talking went on. The readings went on, the Homily went on, the Offertory and Canon went on, always words, rarely song, never *symbol*. And after the final prayer, the priest stepped back into the sacristy. That was all. Phenomenologically, it was no more than a prayer service. Any child who was there—a child in years or a child in heart—would have found scant nourishment for human nature, even if he received the greatest spiritual nourishment possible from the most Holy Eucharist. This is the problem: how long can a situation last in which the very purpose and content of the liturgy, its infinitely precious gift of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, is at cross-purposes with its hollow, banal form, the trackless waste, the desert where no man dwells? Judged by the standards of sacred significance, the new liturgy, overrun with verbiage and muzak, is frequently a lifeless desert.

In a recent interview, the exceptionally clear-spoken Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith of the Congregation for

Divine Worship had this to say:

For years the liturgy has endured too many abuses and many bishops ignored them. Pope John Paul II had made



A Divine Rendition by E. Torrini

In reality, the most unwashed, unlettered medieval peasant knew better what was happening in the lofty sanctuary of his local church—the peasant who knew, in part from the stained glass windows whose beauty and intricacy still cause us to marvel, that “God died for me, the Blood of Jesus washes away my sins, and all this is wondrously present at the Mass”—than does many a modern parishioner sitting in his whitewashed church of angular artifacts, who does not clearly confess the Real Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist, who confuses sentimentality with charity and sing-alongs with prayer.

a sorrowful appeal in *Ecclesia Dei Adflicta* which was nothing if not a call to order to the Church to be more serious in the liturgy. ... In the face of such a situation, the Holy Father [Benedict XVI] could not be silent: as we see in the letter written to Bishops about the *Motu Proprio* and also in his many discourses, he felt a profound sense of pastoral responsibility. This document, therefore, beyond being an attempt to find unity with the Society of Saint Pius X, is also a sign, a powerful call to arms, by the universal shepherd, to a sense of seriousness [*serietà*].⁷

This “sense of seriousness” is precisely what ritual or ceremonial solemnity serves to promote by creating and fostering the right attitude in worshipers—the awareness that we are, or will soon be, kneeling before the Crucified and Risen Lord hidden under the veil of the Holy Eucharist, and that this privileged position of ours demands from us the utmost humility, adoration, and hunger for holiness. Only when these virtues (and others akin to them) characterize, *visibly and audibly*, every aspect of our public worship will we have liturgy that is authentically *sacred*, true to its own immutable nature, and therefore spiritually healthy for all who partake of it.

When I look at what Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux have to say about their experience of the liturgy within their overall longing for contemplative union with the Holy Trinity, I ask myself: Would they have recognized the “full, final, Sacrifice on which all figures fix’t

their eyes” (Crashaw) in the impoverished get-togethers of today’s parishes? Or granting that they would have dis-

cerned the bare reality of the divinely-guaranteed sacrifice in spite of the distractions with which it was overwhelmed, what would their reaction have been? It could only be one of utmost dismay, confusion, sorrow, and even horror. Let us not be mistaken: the saints know best what liturgy is about, caught up as they are in the blessed liturgy of heaven, enraptured by reality fully unveiled. They are much more aware than we are of the offensiveness and harmfulness of an earthly liturgy that so poorly reflects and even routinely contradicts its heavenly exemplar. If we are supposed to put on the mind of Christ, we are also supposed to put on the mind of the saints who best imitated Him.⁸ This means: We must stop compromising when it comes to the worship of Almighty God; we must carefully avoid, or banish from our churches, all mediocrity, banality, worldliness, and modernism.

The mission of restoring the traditional Mass (and, for those who are called to the work, the parallel task of “reforming the reform”) is truly daunting, even overwhelming. In the face of continued grim resistance from certain Bishops and priests who shepherd (if such be the right word) a poorly-formed and malobservant laity, we might at times be tempted to despair, or at least to feel discouraged. At times like this, when our movement is marked with a new hopefulness and energy yet still hampered by opposition and faced with enormous obstacles, we must often

remind ourselves that success will come, and can only come, from Him who is all-powerful. “Jesus looked at them and said: ‘With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God’” (Mk 10:27). Whatever be our liturgical lot in life, whatever be the fortunes of our fight, we know that Christ our King, in His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, has already overcome the world and is waiting for us to join Him in His victory. “I have said this to you, that *in Me* you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). This world of incessant strife is only our proving ground, where our Lord tests our fidelity to the cause of Truth (cf. Jn 18:37). The good fight having been fought, the stains of our sins having been purged, we are borne off to a temple not made with human hands, to a throne that cannot be overthrown, an altar that can never be altered—to the ineffable beauty of Christ and the God of infinite

consolation and glory, to Whom be “blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might ... for ever and ever! Amen” (Rev 7:12). ☩

If you want a church full of Catholics who know their Faith, love their Faith, and practice their Faith, give them a liturgy that is demanding, profound, and rigorous. They will rise to the challenge. Why was it that the reformers of the liturgy did not see, and still do not see, that the human psyche needs a certain opacity, an unsoundable depth, a source of resistance and difficulty, a foreign grandeur that stands in sharp contrast to the familiar shallows of daily life?



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Notes

1. Saint Leo, *Tractatus septem et nonaginta* 40.1.
2. Saint Bernard, *Letter to the Abbot Garinus*, Letter 254, nn. 4–6.
3. I hasten to add, although it will not make me popular among my traditionalist brethren, that if and when the extraordinary form becomes mainstream (as it has a good chance of doing), we face—indeed, we are already facing—analogous spiritual dangers, all the more dangerous owing to their subtlety, their pristine outer garments. In short: we too can become smug in our “possession” of the treasure of Tradition; we can develop a law-abiding Phariseism that looks down upon our fellow “ordinary” Catholics who are not yet in a position to appreciate what we appreciate. We must fight against such pride and vanity without, of course, abandoning any of the gifts the Lord Jesus Christ has given to His Church.
4. A beautiful custom is the *Sanctus* procession with candles and the use of incense at the elevation of the Eucharist. I have seen this done in the context of the ordinary form of the Roman rite, and it already catapults the celebration into a new sphere of solemnity. The very fact, however, that candles and incense at the elevations (or, for that matter, at the Gospel) are extremely rare in parishes shows how far we have fallen from any sense of the sacred—any awareness that the Gospel is the awesome word of God before which to tremble, that the Eucharist is the incarnate Word of God before which to kneel in the most profound humility, abnegation, and adoration. Call me a pessimist, but I
5. For evidence, see my article “Offspring of Arius in the Holy of Holies,” *The Latin Mass* vol. 15, n. 4 (Fall 2006): 26–33.
6. Former articles of mine on the liturgical reform have been criticized as self-contradictory because I am said to be an expert calling into question whether liturgical experts should be trusted. But I am by no means an “expert” in the sense of one who is so enamored of a contemporary narrow academic discipline that he loses all ability to see the big picture—the tradition and its theology. I am proud to be an amateur aspiring to follow in the footsteps of Pope Benedict, who is also not a “liturgist” or “liturgical expert” in the reductive sense. In fact, this is why his opinions on the liturgy are routinely rejected by the self-styled experts of the establishment. “He can’t possibly know what he’s talking about; he doesn’t have a doctorate in liturgy from San Anselmo” (or wherever). So I say it again, and with full consistency: today’s experts in any number of fields are almost always worthy of distrust.
7. Parts of the interview are available at <http://wdtprs.com/blog/2007/11/archbp-ranjith-interview-in-losservatore-romano-on-liturgy/>.
8. See 1 Cor. 2:16, 4:16, 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 6:12.