Where's the Party? A Muted Anniversary

Yesterday, we observed the fiftieth anniversary of the going-into-effect of the *Novus Ordo Missae* on the first Sunday of Advent, November 30, 1969—the golden anniversary of a revolution that, at the time, Catholic laity and lower clergy were not agitating for, even if some of them got caught up in the party spirit later on. This anniversary has received a strange lack of attention from Vatican dicasteries, bishops' conferences, theology faculties, diocesan chanceries, and religious orders. One wonders if they perceive how embarrassing it would be to draw attention to something whose fruit has been so paltry and problematic; or if perhaps there might be a conspiracy of silence on the part of those who would prefer to leave as many Catholics as possible in the dark concerning the fact that once upon a time the Church's worship looked radically different.

On either hypothesis, 2019 presents a spectacle that neither Annibale Bugnini nor Paul VI would ever have imagined in their worst nightmares: a world in which the traditional Latin Mass is still attended by millions of Catholics, in ever larger numbers and with a descending average age, a world in which more and more priests and religious are taking up the *usus antiquior*, even as their preferred or exclusive liturgy. Although I do not claim prophetic insight into the future, I would not be surprised if, fifty years from now, the *usus antiquior* will have become the "ordinary" form of the liturgy once again, while the *Novus Ordo* will have become a niche topic of socio-archaeological research. Which is all it deserves to be.

Sadly, we are still far from any future so blessed. And perhaps the most grinding and humiliating reminder of it is the state of papal and episcopal liturgies. In the Roman tradition, pontifical ceremonies are the fullness of the rite, the epitome of divine worship, the court of Christ the King and His entourage, in which we expect to see (in the words of the Christmas carol) "glories stream from heaven afar." "Praise and beauty are before Him," says the Psalmist, "holiness and majesty in His sanctuary" (Ps. 95:6).

Photos and videos of post-conciliar papal and episcopal liturgies more often than not suggest the opposite: disavowal and ugliness, banality and boredom. I think of all the people looking at or watching these things and thinking (why would they not?) that *this* is Catholic worship, when it is, at best, a faint shadow of what Catholic worship has been and should be, and at worst, an irresistible argument against Catholicism for those of a more serious cast of mind who just might have been attracted by something more serious, as was Paul Claudel by Christmas Vespers at Notre Dame in 1886.

Fr. John Hunwicke describes a fellow on whom the BBC (unbeknownst to him) couldn't resist training the camera during the canonization Mass for John Henry Newman:

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> "The cameraman generously showed us quite a lot of shots of a particular chap sitting among the Great and the Good. He very extravagantly leaned sideways and forward while reaching behind him so as to give his bottom a good scratch; then engaged with his texting machine; then started picking at his fingernails. The poor fellow was very restless. Does *Novus Ordo* liturgy have this effect on everyone? Is there a medical name for the physical consequences of Modern Liturgy? Are there known remedies?"

This is a serious set of questions, however naughtily posed. In the decades of my life when, due to choir obligations, I had to attend both the traditional Mass and the *Novus Ordo*—a situation from which I am happily liberated—I found myself feeling distracted, restless, bored, and impatient during the *Novus Ordo* and just the opposite during a traditional Latin Mass, even when the latter lasted much longer and made more demands on me, physically and spiritually.

Banality vs. Ecstasy

I've thought about the reasons behind this contrast that I felt so viscerally. I think the main reason is that, at the *Novus Ordo*, everything is on the same level, in the same register: it is homogeneous and static. We get bored when we think that nothing worthy of attention is happening or might happen, or when there is nothing worthwhile we ourselves can do. In a Tridentine Mass, the use of hiddenness, silence, inaudibility, different levels of voice; a multitude of gestures and articulated space; more kneeling; modal chant (if a High Mass); and, in general, a lot more time to figure out why you're there and what you're going to do about it, add up to a variety and diversity of interior acts and external interactions that never seem to be exactly the same in any two experiences, and always has a slight element of provocation to it, as if the Mass is daring you to stare it down (and you know you will always blink first). One is almost on a knife's edge. You can hear a pin drop, or a baby coo, because there is saturated attentiveness.

It's hard to put this special quality of the old Mass into words; it's a subtle thing, but its manifestations are obvious and influential. In the language of philosophy and mysticism, we could say that the traditional liturgy is more capable of or liable to provoke a kind of ecstasy. By this, I simply mean: being taken out of oneself in one's thoughts and affections, so that one stops (for a little while, at least) thinking about oneself, or even where one is. The reformed liturgy leaves people stuck in themselves—and, for us fallen human beings, there are few fates more dreadful than that.

I suppose one can see why the "Praise & Worship" approach, though deeply mistaken, is

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preferred to the plain-Jane *Novus Ordo* Mass with recited texts and a couple of dull hymns: the rhythmically pumping, repetitious music along with the lyrics of "oily sentimentalism"[1] can also provoke a sort of ecstasy. This one takes place not at the level of the intellect and will, but at the level of the emotions: it's what people are accustomed to call an "emotional high." As such, seeking it will be spiritually harmful in the long run, since one cannot always be on a "high," and it will become more and more difficult to reach that emotional state due to habituation and lack of surprise. The only thing that remains really interesting for rational animals is *truth*—whether understood conceptually by the intellect or beheld in beautiful sensible forms that remind us of it or nudge us towards it.

For St. Thomas Aquinas, "ecstasy" or standing outside oneself is the hallmark of Eucharistic communion, since it makes us live no longer for ourselves, in our own isolated life, but for Christ, into whose Passion, death, and Resurrection we are grafted. In order to *look* like what it *is*, the Eucharist in turn must be housed in a "tabernacle" suited to its inherent dynamism. This tabernacle is the sacred liturgy, which is worthily celebrated when celebrated in a manner that accords with the great mystery it contains and diffuses. "Because the whole mystery of our salvation is contained in this sacrament," remarks St. Thomas, "it is performed *with a greater solemnity* than the other sacraments."[2]

The Qualities of All True Rites

In question 83 of the Third Part of the *Summa,* St. Thomas presents an exposition of the Mass in all its aspects: word, chant, and silence, rubric and ritual, structure, interior acts of prayer. His approach does not start abstractly, with an imaginary liturgy, but concretely with the humbly welcomed liturgy he has received from the Church's tradition. He does not ask in a vacuum how we should worship God, but looks to the divine *cultus* already in existence, in order to learn from *it* how to be reverent and religious. When we look at any traditional rite of the Church, we discover the characteristics common to all such rites, be they Western or Eastern, Roman or Ambrosian, Greek or Slavic: each is an ensemble of sensible symbols, fixed, timeless, visibly extraordinary, unusual for the profane world, hieratic, mysterious, bearers of a secret order and signposts to the transcendent. Jean Borella places an imaginary speech on the lips of "every true rite":

> "Ever in me is your present; in me your ephemeral life can rediscover its surest meaning, because ever in me is the fidelity and the patience of Divine Love and its promise. You who are worn out by the whirl of time and things, you who have been torn to pieces, divided further and lost; come and see, I will gather you together again, unify you, calm you, for I am always the same; I am the language with which your fathers and mothers prayed … I am the long and still fresh

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> memory of people when they remember God."[3]

Liturgical solemnity draws attention to, and keeps attention on, the symbolic representation of our being *loved* as no one else loves us, our being taken hold of and carried into something totally beyond our ken, yet offered to us through ordinary things which in turn provoke us to reconsider how we relate to the world itself. Is not the Christian attitude towards food and drink different, when we see what use God Himself makes of bread and wine? Is not our appreciation of the mystery of the family, surely one of God's most ingenious and intricate creations, magnified a thousandfold when we see that the Son of God lowers Himself to become the Son of Man, offspring of the Virgin daughter of Adam and Eve, and thus a blood relative of each one of us, a brother as well as a Lord?

The sacrament enacted with bread and wine, far from being an anomalous ritual disconnected from daily life, ought to open our eyes to the meaning and value of every table and meal. The sacramental mystery is meant to spill over into the social milieu: what Our Lord does for us, we do, analogously, for one another. He sacrifices Himself for our life, and we sacrifice ourselves for the lives of others; He makes Himself nourishment, and we, to the extent we can, try to nourish those who depend on us or whom God places in our path. At the same time, however, the Church's studied avoidance of merely "common" modes of speaking and acting in the liturgy is *by design,* to help us break free from a profane mindset, to awaken us to the Presence that surrounds and penetrates the entire world—the One who cannot be reduced to or identified with anything in the world. The liturgy is *never* to be done in a commonplace manner, because it is not just a meal, it is the heavenly banquet and, in the words of the poet Richard Crashaw, the "full, final sacrifice on which all figures fix'd their eyes."

Commonplace Liturgy is Impotent

Hence, the post-conciliar enterprise of making the liturgy *more* commonplace, more everyday, casual, horizontal, "welcoming," is ultimately self-defeating. It obliterates liturgy as such, which connects man to the holy, the divine, the Other Who is more myself than I. A liturgy stripped of its mysterious otherness is reduced to the place of last among worldly equals, for it cannot compete against the secular on the latter's terms; in effect, it is sterilized in its power to fecundate outlying culture, prevented from casting an otherworldly light on the potential sacredness of the ordinary elements of this-worldly life. As Joseph Ratzinger writes:

> "Worship, that is, the right kind of cult, of relationship with God, is essential for

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> the right kind of human existence in the world. It is so precisely because it reaches beyond everyday life. Worship gives us a share in heaven's mode of existence, in the world of God, and allows light to fall from that divine world into ours. … It lays hold in advance of a more perfect life and, in so doing, gives our present life its proper measure. A life without such anticipation, a life no longer opened up to heaven, would be empty, a leaden life."[4]

Again: "If worship, rightly understood, is the soul of the covenant, then it not only saves mankind but is also meant to draw the whole of reality into communion with God."[5] A life not straining toward heaven, filled by anticipation with its fragrance, is a life doomed to pointlessness, boredom, and disarray.

Liturgical worship offers us an opening or clearing in which to practice, and thus to make our own, a sacred mode of thinking, feeling, acting, receiving—a mode that challenges our profane assumptions, the worldliness in which we tend to lose ourselves if we are not careful to cling to Christ. We are called upon to receive into the darkness of our lives an Other Who will dispossess us of the fictitious identity we hide behind, and substitute for it a share in His all-embracing light.

Geoffrey Preston, O.P., adds: "The time and place set apart for the holy as we have them now are there lest we fail to be unsettled and settle for the present order of things. The Eucharist is meant to unsettle us, and that in our whole lives."[6] The same is true of all the "foreign" ritual and exalted artistry that belongs to the liturgy as religious cult, as St. Thomas explains:

> "The chief purpose of the whole external worship is that man may give worship to God. Now man's tendency is to reverence less those things which are common, and indistinct from other things; whereas he admires and reveres those things which are distinct from others in some point of excellence. Hence too it is customary among men for kings and princes, who ought to be reverenced by their subjects, to be clothed in more precious garments, and to possess vaster and more beautiful abodes. And for this reason it behooved special times, a special abode, special vessels, and special ministers to be appointed for the divine worship, so that thereby the soul of man might be brought to greater reverence for God."[7]

This is why the liturgy must never become fully "domesticated": if it ever struck us as

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perfectly obvious and familiar, it would cease to be a provocation to the alienated mentality of fallen "enlightened" man, a medicine for his disease, a magnet for his shattered self.

It belongs to the inherent nature and purpose of sacred liturgy to represent, in word, symbol, and silence, the *mystery* of Jesus Christ, true God and true man; to lead us contemplatively *into* that mystery; to nurture a more perfect union between us and the victim on the Cross, risen in glory, to confirm our hope of eternal life; to cleanse our psychic powers, especially the imagination, from profane contamination and consecrate them in the truth, preconsciously as well as consciously; and in all these ways, to bring the Word of the Father to birth in souls of virginal faith and maternal charity.

No Hope for Montini's Leaden Mass

All this requires something totally different from experimental or domesticated liturgy. The true "unsettling" of which Preston speaks, the "unifying and calming" of which Borella speaks, is accomplished primarily by a confrontation with the purest ritual manifestation of both the divine otherness and the divine condescension, a paradox that is vividly communicated in traditional liturgical rites—in their prayers, gestures, trappings, and overall complexion. This is why no alchemy, however papally patronized, will ever be able to get gold out of the lead of Montini's Mass. This is also why the Mass of the Ages, in spite of every abuse of power by which it is opposed, will, with "the fidelity and patience of Divine Love," outlast its intended replacement.

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[1] The phrase is Msgr. Domenico Bartolucci's.

[2] *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 83, a. 4.

[3] Jean Borella, *The Sense of the Supernatural*, p. 62.

[4] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 21.

[5] Ibid., p. 27.

[6] Geoffrey Preston, O.P., *God's Way to Be Man*, p. 89.

[7] ST I-II, q. 102, a. 4.

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