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The place: your typical American parish, not yet blessed by the fruits of *Summorum Pontificum*. The time: any Sunday of the year (chances are it's a "Sunday of Ordinary Time," which befits a form of liturgy so ordinary). The music: smiling ditties of indescribable triteness. The congregation consists of children who have not been catechized, are bored to death, and would rather be texting or playing video games; young adults who are fornicating or engaging in solitary vice in their spare time, as this is the "gospel" they hear preached in their sex-ed classes, and no one even thinks of impeding their vices or correcting their errors; married couples who, with a few happy exceptions, contracept their marital vocation out of existence; older folks who, under the lifelong influence of the capitalist secularism that animates contemporary America, attend church because it's a good habit, like brushing one's teeth or wearing clean clothes. Hardly anyone is morally prepared for prayer and hardly anyone actually *prays* — an unmistakable sign of which is the unstoppable chitchat that pervades the church before the "gathering hymn" fills the electrified air and that resumes right after the "scattering hymn" is over and the altar girls are on their way out. In between was the obligatory reception of a wafer in the hands, for some strange reason that no one can quite explain, except that it's got something to do with belonging.

Apart from exceptional clergy touched by the beneficent dew of Tradition, the priest who heads this congregation — or, shall we say, who presides over this assembly — may be worse off than his flock. It's possible he neither prays his breviary nor does daily mental prayer; perhaps he does not pray or study much at all, which would explain the shallow, vaguely relevant, vaguely left-leaning homilies. His life is busy but superficial. He runs a strong risk of being trapped in one form of immorality or another, be it rampant gossip, entertainment-saturated indolence, self-indulgence at the table, attachment to drink, or worse vices that shall remain unnamed. In sum: the people are lost, confused, surrendered to the all-pervasive secularism, and so is their priest, except that he can hide it better. Nay, he has often gone one step further: invoking Vatican II, he magically makes lack of faith, lack of doctrine, lack of morals, and lack of solemn liturgy sound like a pious accommodation to the modern world. Like the diversity of religions, such accommodation is, after all, willed by God.

In this vast vacuum of intellect, this abandoned mortuary of prayer, this limp indulgence of weak will, is it any wonder that *divine worship* has all but disappeared? Any wonder it has been replaced by a cringeworthy show of self-absorption and self-adulation week after week,

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vividly symbolized by the lack of quiet prayer before Mass, the socializing pandemonium at the Sign of Peace, and the grating sound of trivial chatter in the church the moment Father leaves? It is hard to see any adoration of God going on here; it is a monotonous and flaccid exercise in man-made ritual, a liturgy "of the people, by the people, for the people." It lacks the healthy fear of uncivilized superstition, the rich mystery of the unknown and invisible, the luminous beauty of traditional theocentric ritual accompanied by poignant gestures, chants at once soaring and serene, the burning of candles and incense, whispers and silence. The Mass as it had been prayed and embellished by saints over generations, centuries, almost millennia — *this* Mass was thrown away, replaced overnight with a committee's turgid banality. We are reaping the sickly fruits of this satanic parody of Tradition; the sickliest of them all is Francis's *Traditionis Custodes*, the Latin title of which could perfectly well be translated "Prison-guards of Betrayal."

Modernism a La Carte

The Latin-rite Church is hopelessly mired in the mud of Modernism. The admirable liturgical catechesis of Pope Benedict's pontificate affected for the better a tiny percentage of Catholic parishes and communities around the world; these are where a recognizably *Catholic* renewal is taking place. Yet if it is true to say "things are better than in the days of Paul VI" simply because we have moved from extreme abuse or outrageous experimentation to banality and sterility, from mockery to mediocrity, what kind of improvement is that? Will it not leave people just as cut off from their roots, from the Tradition, from the truth and beauty of the Faith? Will it not be *more* dangerous inasmuch as it looks like a kind of stability and reliability, when in reality it is utter waste and void? The Church in general has not been able to withstand the onslaught of a militantly secularist anti-culture. With her highest and most precious resource in the spiritual combat stripped away. The shift from the old Missal prefaced by *Quo Primum* to the new Missal denuded of Pius V's manifesto of orthodoxy was like going from a cannon to a butter knife, from marching trumpets to party favors.

Bringing the liturgy closer *in its externals* to modern life meant bringing it closer to the meaninglessness and profanity of modern life. Thinking they were doing people a favor, the woolly shepherds of the Church gave her sheep and goats an excuse to give up going to Mass altogether, because the new Mass, having become an echo of the vulgar world, lost its spiritual relevance: it could offer nothing, give nothing to us that we did not already have to satiety. The only thing that can possibly be relevant is that which is totally *irrelevant* to the grinding routine of modern life. The old liturgy carried on in baffling and mysterious isolation, as though it paid not the slightest attention to the world's trip to hell in a customized handbasket. And this was wise, profoundly wise. Many Catholics of the last fifty

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years who stopped attending Mass, or never started going in the first place, *would* have attended the old liturgy, if only because it breathes a spirit of peace and timelessness so refreshingly contrary to the noisy and splintering spirit of modernity. That is the sort of thing that attracted many Catholic converts (for instance, Thomas Merton!), if you look at their conversion stories. To abandon this "irrelevance" was, in fact, to make the Mass finally *truly* irrelevant, in the sense that it no longer answered a deep, wordless need to encounter the sacred Mystery, to come before the divine Other, the presence of God's Kingdom in our midst, under a veil, but more abidingly real than our vanishing reality. The reformed liturgy in sterilized English with third-rate folksy music managed to announce that the Catholic Church has nothing to offer that cannot very easily be found elsewhere, in more potent form. Interested in the latest popular music? Look elsewhere. Interested in feeling the feeling of togetherness? Look elsewhere. This kind of self-stimulating collectivism flourishes more outside church doors than within them — which would make the official clerical attempt to imitate it laughable, if it were not sacrilegious.

The Battle Over Tradition

"Nor can one word" — not even that of the tormented Paul VI — "overthrow a tradition of the whole Church, which stretches from one end of the earth to the other," as the great St. John Damascene remarks in his *Defense of the Holy Images*. "I entreat the people of God, the holy nation, to cling to the traditions of the Church. For just as the removal of one of the stones of a building will quickly bring ruin to that building, so will the removal, ever so little, of what has been handed down." Is this not what we have seen play out, again and again, in recent decades? It was not for nothing that the Fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, back in the volatile eighth century, condemned the iconoclasts who dared to profane or destroy icons and other sacred images: "They had the effrontery to criticize the beauty pleasing to God established in the holy monuments; they were priests in name, but not in reality." The same Council thunderously orders that "all … who fabricate perverted and evil prejudices against cherishing *any* of the lawful traditions of the Catholic Church … be suspended if they are bishops or clerics, and excommunicated if they are monks or laity." Now *that* is a Council that knows its rightful business and is prepared to back up words with deeds.

The Second Council of Nicaea, like many of the great Councils (Trent of course comes to mind), shaped and nourished a Catholic counterculturethat had the wherewithal to stand firm against dominant trends of accommodation to worldliness in any of its seductive forms. Our own age is no different. It, too, demands a persevering counterculture of fidelity to Tradition, ready to stand firm against the relativism and indifferentism that have permeated not only the civil societies around us but also, to a shameful extent, the ecclesiastical

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hierarchy, including much of the Roman Curia and the occupant of the Chair of St. Peter. This is what the faithful had to do during the Arian crisis, when huge numbers of bishops deviated into heresy. This is what we must do today, if there is to be any Catholic Faith left for our children and grandchildren to cling to for salvation. We know that the Faith will not perish, but the God Who is mighty enough to create *ex nihilo* is mighty enough to raise up secondary causes — that means you and me — to act as His instruments in the preservation, transmission, and triumph of orthodoxy.

Losses and Gains

Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, there have been great losses — and also great spiritual gains for those whom the Lord especially loves.

What have the losses been? First, there have been all the faithful who left during and after the liturgical changes — disoriented, bewildered, disgusted, scandalized. Second, there are the faithful who do not understand anything about their faith and contradict it in practice — often enough, ironically, because they *did* continue to go to church, where they imbibed the poison of false doctrine and anthropocentric worship. Third, there are the youth who do not care enough to believe in anything or attend any church. A bleak vista, to be sure.

But there are gains that we must not fail to recognize. These gains are as powerful in their intensity as they are small, as yet, in numerical value. The first gain are the faithful who, in spite of all resistance (clerical or otherwise), fought valiantly to retain the old Roman Rite, with the indomitable spirit of St. John Damascene and the other Fathers of the Church. Were it not for them, we would have nothing left to celebrate today except Bugnini's Mass for the Liturgically Challenged. The second gain are the faithful who, in spite of their lukewarm pastors and trendy bishops, studied the true Faith, practiced it, handed it on to their children, and shared it with their friends. These are the ones, for example, who kept alive the magisterially mandated study of St. Thomas Aquinas when the relevance-mongers of the mainstream Church had thrown his *Summa* into the dumpster, along with their breviaries and *Rituales*. The third gain are the faithful who, in their day, tirelessly worked for the spread of "indult" Masses under John Paul II and/or zealously promoted the spread of the "Extraordinary Form" under Benedict XVI. To paraphrase a clever SSPX article, we went from the zoo to the reservation and now we are back to the zoo; but our secret source of hope is that, in this case, the inmates know more than their keepers, and will outlive them.

When the history of this fearful age of the Church comes to be written in later times — if God permits a reckless and bloodthirsty world to continue so long in being — all these people will come to be seen for what they really are: heroes of the Faith, lights in a world of

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enveloping darkness, unrecognized and unrewarded in their lives but welcomed with rejoicing into the eternal habitations and posthumously remembered for their noble perseverance in a seemingly hopeless battle.

Bugnini's Barricade

In our still-bleak midwinter, we can indeed rejoice at how far we have come since the dark days of 1974, when the Bugnini-controlled Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published in *Notitiae* the following "Note on the Obligation to Use the New Roman Missal," a note worth quoting in full:

> "When an episcopal conference has determined that a vernacular version of the Roman Missal … must be used in its territory, from then on Mass may not be celebrated, whether in Latin or in the vernacular, save according to the rite of the Roman Missal promulgated by the authority of Paul VI on April 7, 1969. With regard to the regulations issued by this sacred congregation in favor of priests who, on account of advanced years or infirm health, find it difficult to use the new Order of the Roman Missal or the Mass Lectionary: it is clear that an ordinary may grant permission to use, in whole or in part, the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal, with the changes introduced by the Decrees of 1965 and 1967. But this permission can be granted only for Masses celebrated *without* a congregation. Ordinaries may *not* grant it for Masses celebrated *with* a congregation. Ordinaries, both religious and local, should rather endeavor to secure the acceptance of the Order of the Mass of the new Roman Missal by priests and laity. They should see to it that priests and laity, by dint of greater effort and with greater reverence, comprehend the treasures of divine wisdom and of liturgical and pastoral teaching which it contains. What has been said does not apply to officially recognized non-Roman rites, but it does hold against any pretext of even an immemorial custom."

This sounds for all the world like a sinister memorandum straight from the desk of a Fascist or Communist overlord. Enter, for a moment, into Bugnini's twisted mind, if you fear not the cold. "Such permission must never be granted, for it injures the glory of the Party… Provincial governors shall see to it, with the effective means at their disposal, that the new order is accepted with strenuous devotion… Each citizen must be convinced of the rightness of these laws, by whatever method of persuasion recommends itself… Above all, there shall be strict enforcement of the will of the Party. Long live the Reform!" There is an astonishing hubris in the statement that priests and laity must strive, with effort and reverence, to

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"comprehend the treasures of divine wisdom" contained in the *Novus Ordo Missae* — fallen from heaven, it would seem, like the golden plates of Joseph Smith! Or is it perhaps more hubristic to claim that the forbiddance of the once-sacred and once-universal liturgy stands "against any pretext of even an immemorial custom"? We wouldn't want any potential pupil to lose out on "liturgical and pastoral teaching" emanating from the rushed compromises of a super-committee.

The history of our time could be described in terms of mighty strokes of the pen. There was the signature of John XXIII at the altar of St. Peter's on *Veterum Sapientia*, which was a dead letter before the ink dried. There was Paul VI's signature on *Missale Romanum*, introducing a new missal for the first time in the history of the Church (St. Pius V did no such thing, as any minimally literate person knows). The Vatican tried to enforce this missal but it never received full acceptance: a large number of Catholics abandoned the Faith (so obviously they did not accept it), and a small number of clergy and laity never abandoned the treasure of the traditional rite. There was John Paul II's signature for the indult provisions, which restored a modicum of dignity to the keepers of this rite. Then came Pope Benedict who, on the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of the new millennium, cancelled out the entire *basis* of the claims made in countless totalitarian dictates of the preceding four decades, and who liberated for the faithful the *real* treasures of Divine Wisdom contained in the traditional liturgical books. Finally comes Francis who, with another stroke of the pen, consigns Benedict's motu proprio to oblivion and puts in place an ukase of his own, full of errors, contradictions, ambiguities, and omissions, like the rest of his pontificate. Papal history normally moves along slowly, like the motion of planets, or the growth of a great oak tree. We have seen the contrary: papal history moving so quickly that it becomes a blur. This is another sign that traditionalists have been right all along. Like the Carthusian motto, *stat Crux dum volvitur orbis* (the Cross stands still while the world turns), we — or rather, the Faith, the Mass, the pursuit of holiness — stand still while the post-conciliar popes veer this way and that.

Seek First God's Kingdom

Broadly speaking, we are losing the battle for culture. Most Catholics do not know their faith, and if it were actually *explained* to them (especially the moral teachings), most would reject it out of hand as absurd, impossible, or subversive of personal freedoms that are dearer to us than God Himself. More and more openly, the media and the movies attack and mock Catholicism — a disgrace made possible only because Catholics are easy targets and hardly raise a protest. (Imagine if the Jews or Muslims were mocked in a major motion picture.) Most of the laity are not serving as leaven in secular society, purifying it and raising it up; secular society has simply assimilated them and brainwashed them to a point

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of almost complete agreement. The Pelosi-Biden Syndrome is not the exception but the rule. Years ago, I wrote twice to the Archbishop of Washington, D.C., Cardinal Donald Wuerl, asking him why, in regard to pro-abortion "Catholic" politicians whose policies were responsible for the deaths of millions of children, he did not imitate St. Ambrose who, after the slaughter of 7,000 people at Thessalonica in A.D. 390, refused to give Holy Communion to Emperor Theodosius I until he had done public penance for his sins. Not surprisingly, I received form letter replies that merely said: "The Cardinal is solidly pro-life. Here's a brochure to prove it."

Some "conservative" bishops might think that, confronted with such a dire situation, the last thing they should care about is restoring the sacredness of sacred liturgy — its distinctive music of chant, organ, and polyphony; its distinctive language of Latin; its age-old customs, rituals, prayers, gestures, vestments, vessels, furnishings, and architecture. "Don't we have more important, more urgent things to worry about?", they mutter with a furrowed brow. But to speak thus is to miss the whole point. The main reason Catholic identity is now so weak is that, over fifty years ago, we began experimenting and tinkering with God's sacred mysteries, and now *nothing* seems holy, nothing permanent, nothing worth reverencing, nothing worth genuflecting before. If each and every local church does not make the solemn, sacred, self-effacing worship of God its absolute pastoral priority, one by one they will go extinct, drowning in an ocean of mediocrity, relativism, and ultimate irrelevance. Catholic identity comes to us first and foremost *from above,* through the liturgy in which God is present and active. The one and only *lex orandi* — that which accords with Tradition — beats as the living heart of the Faith. The Church will survive and thrive only where her shepherds have the wisdom to seek first the Kingdom of God, letting all else be given afterwards.

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