

COMMENTARY

Beauty and the Roman Liturgy

By Fr. Martin Fox

G.K. Chesterton has a line often quoted: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” It would well apply to the Roman Rite. Many Catholics’ experience is really a minimal shadow of the liturgy as it is intended, as clearly spelled out in the teachings and directives of the church.

This must come as a terrible shock to many Catholics, and in my explanations of this as a priest for four years (and a pastor for two), I have been trying to find a way to soften the blow, but I haven’t found a way to do it, without concealing the truth.

What prompts this reflection is my participation in study and celebration of the sacred liturgy at the Church Music Association of America colloquium. What were we doing? We were learning Gregorian chant and polyphony, and reflecting on the nature of the liturgy in various lectures and conversations, and of course, celebrating the liturgy itself.

There was no minimalism here! Each Mass was celebrated with full use of the music that is integral to the liturgy, from the opening processional *chants*, with the prayers of the Mass sung, either by the celebrant, the choir, or the faithful. In some cases, even the readings were sung. And we have no scruples about using incense and proper ceremony (such as the priests exchanging the sign of peace in the traditional Roman fashion—a kind of embrace, rather than a handshake), and no one fusses about time.

Oh, of course this isn’t something we can easily do in a parish; I doubt any of us really expects it to be just this way in our parish liturgies. As one participant said, “This is offered as the paradigm, from which we draw lessons, and which we keep as a benchmark.” By the way, there is also no gnashing of teeth about Latin. Wednesday featured a Mass almost entirely in English; today, a Requiem Mass (i.e., for the dead), was almost entirely in Latin (the readings and one piece of music were in English). So it goes.

I certainly don’t expect to return to my two parishes and celebrate Mass just like this; but I do hope to bring back better skills and habits in prayerfully and in an orderly way, offering the sacrifice. Many parishioners may not realize how much effort it takes for a priest to make offering the Mass seem effortless! Many, sadly, don’t care, or they think they don’t; they think it doesn’t matter very much how carefully and soberly the priest presides. But it does, because the celebrant, by his steadiness, prayerfulness and care, communicates a reverence and seriousness that benefits all. It need not be fussy or (gasp!) “rigid.” When it is steady, without constant improvisation, then something wonderful happens—the liturgy itself communicates, and it isn’t all about the priest (or anyone else). It is *prayer*.

When one experiences the liturgy in its fullness, with care and attention to the actual celebration of the liturgy, one discovers the important qualities of the liturgy: it is a unity, from beginning to end (as opposed to a series of things we say and do); it is sober and solemn. These don’t mean sad, or cold; but rather, the prayer is not obtrusive. One person at Mass may find occasion for great joy, another for deep insight, another for profound sorrow and conversion,

Fr. Martin Fox is pastor of St. Mary and St. Boniface Parishes in Piqua, Ohio. pastor@stbonifacepiquaoh.org. He maintains a blog at <http://frmartinfox.blogspot.com>

another simply for consolation. The Mass should not impose any of these on you, but allow you to experience them in communion with God and his people.

The liturgy fully celebrated clearly becomes another moment, another place. It is not part of our time and world; it is an escape, a refuge, a sanctuary.

Now, one might ask: is it necessary to do all the full ceremonial, all the “bells and whistles,” in order to experience the Mass this way? I think not; but I do think it is necessary to have the proper reference point. Hence there is the need for a paradigm, a benchmark, not only for the priest, but for all of us. I suspect many, many faithful Catholics come to a solemn “high” Mass, and they see “the Mass” with lots of “extras,” perhaps too many to bear; when one could just as well come to a low-key, early Sunday or daily Mass, and see that, instead, as a Mass that is *abbreviated* and simplified out of necessity. See the difference?

I may be wrong, but I fear there are many Catholics who, for whatever reason, have been brought to a place where they reject the Mass in its fullness; they consider it an imposition, a violation, a matter of a priest indulging all his personal preferences: “Why must we have all this singing? Incense? Latin?” etc.

It is useful and practical to have distinctions between “high” and “low” Mass; but I do think many Catholics are either being deprived, or depriving themselves, if they do not have a meaningful experience of the Mass in its fullness—by meaningful, I mean a lot more than occasional; and I mean, an encounter that is not defensive and belligerent. The cross-armed scowl is not a proper liturgical posture.

In terms of the tiresome-yet-common pre- vs. post-Vatican II way of talking about such things, it is terribly ironic that many think that celebrating the Mass in its fullness, as I have described, is some sort of “pre-Vatican II” thing. The truth is exactly 180 degrees the opposite! The Mass, before the council, was widely (not exclusively) celebrated in the “low” fashion, and then with hymnody almost entirely displacing the proper chants. The council, in seeking to bring about a reassessment and rediscovery of the liturgy, manifestly called for a very different approach. One example will suffice: when, at my prior parish, I sang the entire Eucharistic prayer, someone said, “Oh, that’s like the old days!” She meant in a good way, but no doubt others do not—and, of course, prior to the council, the Eucharistic Prayer was rarely spoken out loud, let alone sung!

So what do we do?

Well, many things might be said, but I believe many of us need to experience some conversion, some dying to self, and some openness. It’s not about what happened when one was ten years old, it’s not about what your pastor did, just after the council, it’s not about personal likes and dislikes. No one has a right—or even good reason—to expect to “like” everything that takes place in the Mass.

Nor is it about immediately grasping the meaning of what is happening. That is a snare and a delusion! “Father, when we sing *Sanctus, sanctus*, I don’t understand!” Well, first, I am tempted to say, “if I told you you’d get \$20 for correctly describing what English prayer corresponds to the Latin *Sanctus*, I am certain almost no one would fail to get his or her \$20 bill.” But set that aside: what makes a person think that he or she understands the *English*? Who really understands what it means to call God “holy”? And so it is with the entirety of the Mass. The English texts are a huge help, but the downside is expecting it to be readily graspable, and that is impossible—or, in fact, the true mystery eludes us still, we haven’t really even encountered it.

The focus of the CMAA colloquium—chant and polyphony—are not the be-all and end-all of liturgy; rather, they are essential parts of the liturgical tradition that, for various reasons, have been almost entirely left out in recent decades, and that is, in my judgment, a harm to the liturgy and more, to the faithful who have a right to their full inheritance, and who, in my judgment, do not really experience the Roman liturgy fully when such things are unknown and alien. ❧