

PAIX LITURGIQUE

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AN INTERVIEW WITH FATHER CLAUDE BARTHE ON SETTING UP THE EXTRAORDINARY FORM IN A PARISH

On November 30, 2015, the French magazine *L'Homme Nouveau* published a booklet on the different forms of celebration that the extraordinary form of the Roman rite allows for. It had a preface by Fr. Claude Barthe, the chaplain of the international Summorum Pontificum pilgrimage. (1)

At about the same time we published an account of the very interesting and original talk that Fr. Milan Tisma gave at the first Summorum Pontificum conference in Chile. We took advantage of this coincidence to ask Fr. Barthe whether he would give a point-by-point commentary on Father Tisma's witness, and thus go more deeply into the paths available to parish priests who wish to enrich their daily and Sunday liturgies in the spirit of Benedict XVI's *Motu Proprio*.

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Fr. Barthe presiding the 2014 Summorum Pontificum Pilgrimage procession in the streets of Rome.

1) Recovering the sense of the sacred: that is the first point Fr. Tisma tackled in his presentation. There is nothing new here as such, since there are many testimonies from laymen and priests alike who explain that their interest in the extraordinary form of the Roman rite stems from the greater sacrality they see in it. Yet by way of explanation Fr. Tisma relies on the notion of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto had worked out in his day. Does this reference surprise you?

Fr. Claude Barthe: This reference to Rudolf Otto's book *The Idea of the Holy* in which the notion of "the holy" is analyzed as being both terrifying (*tremendum*) and fascinating (*fascinans*) is interesting in that it helps to correct the modern tendency to completely erase the transcendent in worship and to scale God down to our own level. But you have to hold up both ends at once: God is by nature The Incomprehensible—He cannot be apprehended in Himself—and yet He communicates Himself to us through Revelation and through the Incarnation of the Word, the Emmanuel, God with us who made Himself one of us. St. Thomas, in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, explains that the supreme "fittingness" of the Incarnation is precisely to make us understand that it is possible to reach eternal happiness, which consists in the union of our soul with what is infinitely beyond it. This is made possible because divinity has united with our humanity. The humanity of Jesus Christ—so near to us and so to speak palpable in the Church—immerses us in the unplumbed depths of the divinity that is united to that humanity; this is the divinity that shows through in the miracles it performs, for example in the remission of sins and in the Eucharistic Transubstantiation.

2) In Father Tisma's view, if the liturgy is deprived of mystery it ceases to be an epiphany (a manifestation) of God's glory and His perfect holiness. Do you agree?

Fr. Claude Barthe: I completely agree. Fr. Tisma is right to target this reduction of the divine to the merely human, of faith to simple reason in today's liturgy where access to the transcendent is flattened out, so to speak. This liturgy, which is intended to be "close to the people," ends up being of no interest to them to the point that they no longer set foot in church. Ironically the true closeness that a properly understood liturgy establishes between man and God's incandescent holiness passes through a sense of absolute estrangement.

German novelist Martin Mosebach expresses this well in his book *The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). He says that the inherent paradox of the liturgical action is in the fact that it unveils and reveals the mystery while shrouding and hiding it. It hides the presence of the infinite and inscrutable God with veils of respect, forms, and rites; by that very fact it reveals it and brings the soul to this presence in truth. It is an epiphany that hides, the better to manifest itself.

Is a consecration, in the vernacular on a table set in the midst of the assembly, of bread that is soon to be taken in the hand for communion, better understood in faith than the consecration in the Oriental liturgy, sung amid clouds of incense in a mysterious sacred language behind the veil that has fallen before the iconostasis gate? The question answers itself: in the first scenario you think you understand but you don't get it since the closeness that a banal liturgy produces

makes a true encounter in faith difficult. On the other hand the sacred remoteness in the liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom truly brings the soul closer to God. Liturgy is like the luminous darkness in which Moses received divine revelation: at once obscure and dazzling. Put another way, it is like the “bright cloud” that overshadowed the three disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration of their Lord (Mt 17:5). Let’s take the example of the “Nativity” of the Blessed Sacrament at the heart of the Mass, during the consecration: genuflections; kneeling; torches; incense; bells; sacred linens; precious objects to receive It (chalice and ciborium); the Communion rail at which one kneels, hands under a white cloth to receive the Host on the tongue; the majestic tabernacle in which It will be reserved. All of this puts one at a remove by means of the respect of adoration, yet at the same time brings one closer by serving the act of faith.

3) For Fr. Tisma it is the duty of pastors to work for the reconciliation among the faithful with all the liturgical means at their disposal, in the first place with the regular celebration of the extraordinary form. From a French point of view, isn’t this claim—and we could not have put it better ourselves—a pipe dream, a pious wish?

Fr. Claude Barthe: Well it’s certainly a pious work, and it’s the work of *Paix liturgique*, for which one cannot praise it enough. In France the priests who understand this duty are still too few, it’s true, but their number is increasing. A specific experience makes it possible for me to mention an idea that was inspired by Christmas. In many parishes of France midnight Mass is celebrated at 9 or 10pm, after sunset. There is nothing to prevent the pastor from celebrating, or having a suitable priest from a community devoted to the traditional liturgy celebrate, a Mass said at the appropriate hour, midnight, and in the extraordinary form too. He’ll be surprised at the crowd, included the number of parishioners who usually worship in the ordinary form. More generally, parish pastors shouldn’t hesitate to call upon priests familiar with the extraordinary form who, in addition to a traditional Mass, could also help out with confessions, visits to the sick, funerals. At the same time they would also foster reconciliation among priests.

4) After Rudolf Otto, Fr Tisma also draws on another German, Msgr. Klaus Gamber, to introduce a little-used notion in the traditional world: the fact that the liturgy is a “little homeland” for Catholics, and that they have been deprived of it only to become liturgically stateless persons. Is this not one of the reasons (which is usually not faced so openly) of the success of what sociologists call “identity Catholicism”?

Fr. Claude Barthe: Yes, Msgr. Gamber regretted that Catholics had been deprived of their “little homeland”—*Heimat*—because in the new rite, which is splintered in the extreme, there no longer exist two Masses that are the same. When I was a child we took family vacations in Spain, which wasn’t far from where we lived. We’d go to Sunday Mass in any town or village and we had the same Mass as that we were familiar with in our own parish. We understood everything, so to speak . . . except the sermon, which was in Spanish. Catholics the world over, wherever they went to Mass, felt they were everywhere at home. At the time of the liturgical reform talk was not yet of globalization, but of a “global village.” It is truly astounding that the cobblers of the new liturgy did not understand that the liturgy already contained a universal link that opened the gates to a City that covered the whole world, the global village of the Catholic liturgy. Furthermore, as secularization was already achieving considerable progress and Catholicism was becoming ever stranger within its Global Village, they might have noticed (if they had considered the true “signs of the times”) that Catholics needed more than ever to meet in a family house. Now, if indeed identity Catholicism, in a spectrum that runs from the SSPX to the Communauté Saint-Martin, is attracting practicing Catholics and vocations, it is because it offers a traditional or traditional-leaning ritual that gives a concrete experience of this community of faith and of belonging to the *familia Christi*. The use of Latin has much to do with this: praying and singing in the Roman Church’s sacred language expresses and strengthens the bond of unity. Unfortunately the Catholic hierarchy and its experts have been totally out of step with the times for the past half century.

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Liturgical workshop during the 2015 Chilean Summorum Pontificum meeting.

5) Gradualism and continuity are the two principles that Fr. Tisma recommends to establish the extraordinary form at the parish level durably and permanently: what do you think?

Fr. Claude Barthe: I fully agree. In my little book on the implementation of the reform of the reform, which has the Mass in the extraordinary form as its baseline, I advocated gradualism. Forgive me if I quote myself: “The practice of the reform of the reform in a parish or in an ordinary worship location is, nearly by its very nature, a gradual process, a more or less rapid transition from an ‘ordinary’ state to a close to ‘extraordinary’ state. The law of gradualism may here be applied without any problems of conscience.” (2) Increasing the share given to Latin, reintroducing Communion on the tongue, using Eucharistic Prayer I (the Roman Canon), orientating the altar towards the Lord, reintroducing the prayers at the foot of the altar (they are said in a low voice) are the principal steps to take—little by little. For example, the altar may be “set straight” for a few occasions, then always for weekday Masses, then for the major feasts, and finally every Sunday, continuously. Most of the priests who have implemented a traditional reorientation in their parish have done it this way.

6) Fr. Tisma also proposes a simple gesture for a concrete reorientation of the parish liturgy by placing Our Lord Jesus Christ in the center of attention: a single altar for both liturgical forms, “space management” of the sanctuary, use of the different forms of the extraordinary liturgy, etc. You keep up with many parish priests who celebrate in *utroque usu*: do you have other examples along these lines?

Fr. Claude Barthe: From a symbolic point of view the most important and also most difficult thing to convince people of—not the majority of the faithful, mind you, but the most “reformed” among them (religious sisters, the ladies who give Communion, the permanent deacon)—is celebrating Mass facing the Lord. Hence the transition scheme I mentioned, and for which I could point to several concrete examples. Another important aspect is the formation of altar servers (many if possible) who can serve in both forms: they contribute a lot to making the ceremonies more solemn, and to the gradual transition from the ordinary to the extraordinary. All the priests who have a pedagogical outlook prepare photocopied booklets for every Mass, so that the faithful in attendance may follow the rite by simply turning the pages, whether in the “reform of the reform” ordinary Mass or in the extraordinary Mass. Not only does everything run smoothly but liturgical piety gains a lot too. I could mention many other points too: one priest has the organ play during the offertory, which lends solemnity to the moment as he silently recites the traditional prayers; another says the Eucharistic prayer, whether in Latin or in French, not in a high voice but *sotto voce*, or even changes from the vernacular to Latin from the Consecration on, which also produces a powerful sacralizing effect; yet another, as a way of removing existing altar girls without protest and also to add a festive note, transformed them into a sodality of Children of Mary in white albs who take their place at the head of the nave, as uniformed scouts and the choir do. And so on.

7) Lastly, Father Tisma also mentions the preservation of local liturgical uses or privileges. Is this permitted under the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* and the instruction that accompanies it? Do such uses survive in France, anyway?

Fr. Claude Barthe: In France as elsewhere there have always been remains of ancient uses in local churches. These had been preserved up until Paul VI’s reform, and therefore *Summorum Pontificum* authorizes them since it turns the clock back to 1962, just before the Council. There also have always been pious habits added to the ceremonies. For instance the larger churches of France had a *Suisse* [a “Swiss Guard”, a quasi-military sort of verger or beadle] who walked up and down the aisles to keep order, especially during Communion, and who would strike the floor with his halberd to indicate when to kneel. I knew Notre Dame’s *Suisse*, who must have served until the mid-1960s; another reappeared at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet (the SSPX church in Paris) about ten years later. Some parishes or communities have also reestablished the custom of distributing blessed bread, which was once very popular at High Mass: anise-flavored or brioche-type cakes (depending on the province) are presented to the celebrant who then blesses them at the offertory; then they are broken into bite-sized pieces and distributed to the faithful towards the end of the Mass. In some religious communities as late as the 1970s a lamb was blessed on Holy Saturday and eaten during the Easter dinner. There are also brass bands playing on St. Hubert’s day during the hunters’ Mass. Perhaps you’ll say all of this is part of a bygone folklore, but it is popular. A more liturgical and very French usage is to have cantors vested in copes not only for vespers but also for the High Mass, singing before a huge lectern when possible, which really looks grand.

(1) *La messe traditionnelle dans tous ses états*, collection Paix liturgique (Paris: Éditions de L’Homme nouveau, 2013), 52 pages.

(2) *La Messe à l’endroit. Un nouveau mouvement liturgique*, collection Hora Decima (Paris: Éditions de L’Homme nouveau, 2010), 102 pages.