

PAIX LITURGIQUE

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THE MASS OF PAUL VI: A FORMLESS RITUAL FORM?

The liturgical reform of Paul

VI, elaborated as it was in the late-1960s theological context and religious outlook, has not fulfilled its optimistic promises—far from it. While many today agree that it was largely a failure, few see the possibility of drawing up a realistic balance sheet for it. For our part we have occasionally provided a critical analysis of some of the rituals of this reform: baptism (see our Letter 413), confirmation (Letter 471), and Christian burial (Letter 443).

Now we wish to examine

the heart of the reform: the Mass as promulgated in the Apostolic Constitution *Missale romanum* (April 3, 1969). Many others have done this before us, starting with Cardinals Ottaviani and Bacci in their *Short Critical Study of the New Order of Mass in 1969* (trans. Anthony Cekada [Rockford, IL: Tan, 1992]), but we thought it would be timely, as the half-century anniversary of the reform approaches, to contribute an update of these analyses.

We are devoting a three-letter

series to considering both the ritual, or rather non-ritual, aspect of the new Missal—the topic of this first letter—and its actual content. Indeed a first examination of the new Missal brings out an entirely astounding ceremonial aspect: compared with the Mass that came before it and with other Catholic liturgies (Oriental liturgies, the Ambrosian liturgy, etc.), the new Roman Mass is no longer truly a rite. It is like a formless form.

The whole complex of Catholic

rituals came together in Christian Antiquity following Christ's command to "Do this in memory of Me" and the Breaking Bread ceremonies among Apostolic communities. Between the sixth and seventh centuries the *Ordines romani* bear witness to the considerable development of the ceremonial universe in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in parallel with the rich treasury of patristic catechesis in the same period. The monasteries and cathedrals of the Middle Ages handed this inheritance on and the Counter-Reformation Rome received it with care. The Tridentine era was deeply conscious of the liturgy, most especially the Roman liturgy, as the vehicle of a concrete transmission of dogma in the realm of sacrament and prayer (*lex orandi lex credendi*). As such, one of its characteristics in the field of worship was the clarification and canonization of the *Ordo*, viz., of the way in which ceremonies are ordered.

In the twentieth century there was a double movement: a “return to the sources”—i.e. a supposed recovery of ancient liturgical forms beyond the later “additions” and “accretions”—along with an adaptation to present times. It mounted an attack on the “fixism” of dogmatic formulations. At that point the meticulous care with which traditional liturgical books ordered the liturgy through rubrics (directions about the ordering of the ceremonies in red letters, *rubrae*) came to seem obsolete. It only took a few years for things to explode. At the very first stages of the Conciliar reform there was an overflowing of creativity: what was happening at the top (the commission for the implementation of the liturgy constitution) went into overdrive at the ground level, as perfectly illustrated in Michel de Saint-Pierre’s *The New Priests*. The continual changes that were gradually introduced from 1964 (instruction *Inter oecumenici*) to 1968—think of the “1965 rubrics,” soon overtaken by those of 1967 (instruction *Tres abhinc annos*)—gave the impression that when it came to the liturgy, norms were meant to evolve. Thereupon the 1969 Missal came along, literally pulverizing the older ritual universe.



I – A Ritual Universe, pulverized

From the point of view of the rules to follow, going from one Missal to the other product one is seized by the impression that one is passing from one world into the other. Instead of gestures and bodily postures being strictly determined by immemorial custom, the new rubrics are merely indications—often simple suggestions—and rather general at that. So much so that learning the Mass, which takes up a lot of the concrete formation of priests who celebrate the traditional Mass, no longer happens in present-day seminaries where the Mass of Paul VI is taught. For what is true of the meaning that comes through liturgical translations is also true of the rite: a certain personal freedom is considered legitimate and the resulting uncertainty is considered unimportant or even desirable, the better to be “real.” Just take, for example, the beginning of Mass:

a) Gestures

- In the traditional

Missal:

The priest “ascends the Altar at the middle, and having placed the Chalice on the Gospel side, extracts the Corporal from the Burse, unfolds it in the center of the Altar, and places on it the veiled Chalice. The Burse is placed on the Gospel side etc. . . . When the priest has descended to the lowest level of the Altar, he turns toward the Altar, and standing in the middle, with his hands joined before his breast with fingers extended and together, and with his right thumb over his left in the form of a cross (which form is always to be observed when joining the hands until after the Consecration), and with his head uncovered, having first revered the Crucifix or Altar, or if a Tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament is on the Altar, having genuflected, standing erect, he begins the Mass. Etc. . . . Then, bowing with his hands joined, he proceeds with Deus, tu conversus, and with what follows in the Order of Mass, up to Aufer a nobis, etc. . . . Then, bowing with his hands joined over the Altar so that only the little fingers touch the front part of the mensa of the Altar, and so that the remaining portions of the hands are between himself and the Altar, with his right thumb over his left in the form of a cross (which form is always to be observed when placing the joined hands upon the Altar), etc. And kissing the Altar in the middle, with his hands placed on the Altar equidistant from his body to his left and his right . . . he proceeds: “[Saints] whose relics are here” [t]he Celebrant puts incense in the Thurible thrice, saying meanwhile: Ab illo benedicaris, “Be blessed by Him,” etc.

- In the new Missal: “The

priest goes up to the altar and venerates it with a kiss. Then, as the occasion suggests, he incenses the cross and the altar, walking around the latter. . . . Then, facing the people and extending his hands, the priest greets the people, using one of the formulas indicated.”

b) Words

- In the traditional

Missal: “Standing thus before the lowest step of the Altar, as described above, he signs himself with his right hand from forehead to breast with the sign of the cross, saying in an intelligible voice: In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen [Then] he again joins his hands before his breast and pronounces in a clear

voice the Antiphon: Introibo ad altare

Dei. The minister kneeling behind him and to his left replies: (In Solemn Masses, the minister stands henceforth) Ad

Deum, qui laetificat juventutem meam. Then the Priest, in the same manner, begins, alternating with the minister or ministers, to say the psalm (Ps 42) .

. . . the Celebrant, with hands joined, ascends the Altar at the middle: Aufer a nobis . . . “Take away from us our iniquities, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that we may be worthy to enter with pure minds into the Holy of Holies. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.” . . . Then, bowing with his hands joined over the Altar so that only the little fingers touch the front part of the mensa of the Altar, and so that the remaining portions of the hands are between himself and the Altar, with his right thumb over his left in the form of a cross (which form is always to be observed when placing the joined hands upon the Altar), he says quietly: Oramus te, Domine, “We beseech Thee, O Lord, by the merits of Thy Saints (he kisses the center of the altar) whose relics are here, etc.” . . . At a solemn Mass, when it is not a Mass for the dead, the celebrant puts incense in the Thurible thrice, saying meanwhile: Ab illo benedicaris, etc.”

- In the new Missal : [After the priest has kissed and incensed the altar, as the occasion suggests], “Once the Entrance chant is concluded, the priest and faithful, all standing, make the Sign of the Cross. The priest says: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. . . Then, facing the people and extending his hands, the priest greets the people, using one of the three formulas indicated, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, etc.” . . . The priest himself or some other minister may also very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day. . . Then the priest invites those present to take part in the Act of Penitence, for instance saying “[L]et us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.” There then follow four possibilities: 1. “I confess to Almighty God, etc.”; 2. “Have mercy on us, O Lord, etc.”; 3. “You were sent to heal the contrite of heart” with two variations: “You came to call sinners etc.” or “You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us etc.” 4. The blessing and sprinkling of water: “Dear brothers and sisters, let us humbly beseech the Lord our God to bless this water etc.”

II – The multiplication of free choices

And so option follows option and choices multiply, as the rest of the celebration confirms: a) at the end of the first reading during the Liturgy of the Word one may, “as appropriate,” observe a moment of silence. The second reading is not obligatory. The acclamation of the Gospel is ordinarily the Alleluia. One may, or not, incense the Gospel and carry candles for it. b) The profession of Faith may be made with the Constantinopolitan Creed, or the Apostles’ Creed. c) The universal prayer contains ten possible introductions, not excluding other formulations, and nine concluding prayers, although one may also draw inspiration from the Good Friday universal prayer or even from others. d) The offering of the gifts at the altar (as well as of other gifts meant to meet the needs of the Church and of the poor) may be organized with complete freedom. The priest, in a high or low voice, says the words of presentation: “Blessed are You, God of the universe etc.” to which the people may respond with an acclamation: “Blessed be God, now and forever.” e) Whereas the Roman liturgy, as well as the other rites, had tended since Antiquity to tighten up the texts at the heart of the Mass—doubtless in order to guard orthodoxy—it is hard to keep an accurate count of the new prefaces: forty six for the Temporal, ten for

the Sanctoral, thirteen for the Common of Saints, sixteen for the departed, weddings, religious professions, votive Masses. . . . f) Above all, while the Eucharistic Prayer introduced by the Prefaces had been (and probably always had been) just the one, now there are officially eleven Eucharistic Prayers: four main ones, two for reconciliation, three for Masses with children, one for large gatherings, and a choice of four for particular circumstances—1. The Church on the Path of Unity; 2 God Guides His Church along the way of Salvation; 3. Jesus, the Way to the Father; 4. Jesus, Who Went About Doing Good—for which there are four respective prayers of intercession (equivalent to the Roman Canon’s *Te igitur*) in the second half of the prayer, after the consecration, as in the Eucharistic Prayers II, III, and IV. And there are still more, since certain bishops’ conferences, particularly on the occasion of special events, have sought approval for specific Eucharistic Prayers. g) The Consecration is followed by a choice of three acclamations. h) The introduction to the Our Father has two variants, but others too are available. Mutual charity and peace are expressed according to local custom. A choice of two prayers, at the priest’s discretion, follow the *Agnus Dei*. i) The blessing over the people may also be given in a solemn mode with twenty-six possible tripartite introductions, each punctuated by three *amens*.

The confusion of languages The explosion of the rite has become even more tangible with the disappearance of Latin. The estimated number of translations into the languages and dialects in which the liturgy, curiously still called the Latin liturgy, is celebrated is somewhere between 350 and 400 (the Congregation for Divine Worship is unable to reach a precise figure). These translations were made under the impulse of national bishops’ conferences and approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship. In fact, an instruction dated January 25, 1969 opened the door to great freedom, particular as far as concerns realities that are “contrary to modern Christian ideas,” the updating of the content of the prayers, with an invitation to come up with new creations.

There has since been a certain movement of restoration that seeks to rectify translations that are in insufficient conformity with the Latin editions (*Liturgiam authenticam* instruction, March 28, 2001), but the results have been insignificant, with the possible exception of the English-speaking world. Bishops’ conferences have taken rather extensive liberties, the most famous of which being the translation of *pro multis* (blood shed “for many”) at the Consecration of the Precious Blood, translated as “*per tutti*,” “*für alle*,” “for all,” or again the translation of *consubstantialem* in the Creed to “of same nature,” “*de même nature*.” These liberties, in a certain number of cases, aimed at liturgical inculturation (*Varietates legitimae* instruction, January 25, 1994). So for example in China, in an echo of the Chinese rites controversy, the ancient Confucian rites in honor of the dead ancestors were celebrated from February 15, 1972 on. In Zambia, the mingling of water with the wine was suppressed on the pretext that it had no biblical foundation, even though its omission had already been condemned at the council of Florence for monophysitism, since the water symbolizes the humanity of Christ. The Zairean rite, which is the Congolese adaptation of the Roman rite promoted by Cardinal Joseph Malula, Archbishop of Kinshasa, was approved in 1988 along with its invocation of the ancestors, a penitential rite transposed to right before the offertory, diverse dialogues between the priest and the people, and rhythmic gestures and movements.

One may certainly denounce what are called the “abuses” of celebrants who follow their own ideas, but openness to creativity is an intrinsic characteristic of the new liturgy. When the new Missal indicates that the priest says a greeting by using “one of the formulas

indicated,” or when it proposes “for example” an address for him to give, the book itself is inviting him to personal creativity. For each of the ministers to insert addresses and personal comments, which is nowhere prohibited but in fact called for in this worship style, actually becomes natural. The vernacular language too is conducive to the celebrant’s providing a personal “interpretation” of the text he is proclaiming, the whole thing with the best pastoral intentions in the world. The restoration attempts we have witnessed since 1985, besides being hit-or-miss, collide with this fluid and “living” characteristic of the new Mass.

The new Mass, a *lex orandi*? The famous axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi*, “the rule of prayer governs the rule of faith” can be explained by the fact that all the elements of the Roman Church’s universal discipline are, insofar as they contain matters of faith and morals, one of the expressions of the ordinary and universal magisterium: the Church of St. Peter cannot lead her faithful into error in the manner in which she commands them to pray. This expression of the one faith naturally requires a certain canonization (1), i.e. a means of conveying it. Admittedly the ritual explosion that the reform caused is of secondary importance compared to the changes made to the very content of the message, a subject we shall deal with in our next two letters. But in the general 1960s context of dogmatic relativism, the Latin Church’s abandonment of her traditional ritual universe was an important factor in the weakening of worship as conveyor of the Roman profession of faith. This new subjectivity as manifested in the rite is not without presenting difficulties with respect to the rigor of the new ceremonies’ doctrinal value. Let us posit the following hypothesis: the “pastoral” character of the new liturgy corresponds to the “pastoral” character, i.e. the non-dogmatic (infallible) character, of the Second Vatican Council to the extent that the new liturgy that emerged in the wake of the Council does not claim to convey through prayer a supreme rule of faith. This is simply the case because it does not seek to be, in the strongest sense of the term, a rule of prayer, a *lex orandi*.

(1) In the sense of a codification.