

It is the Mass that Matters

By Michael Davies

Father Fredrick Faber (1814 – 1863), Superior of the London Oratory, had dedicated himself to the conversion of England, but he realized, sadly, that this was not going to happen. He had no doubt, as to why this was the case, and he had no hesitation in making his opinion clear to his fellow Catholics: “And you wonder why we have not converted England! Verily we do not look like a people who have come to kindle a fire upon the earth, nor to be pining because it is not kindled?”

In this article I shall deal with two reactions to the imposition of Protestantism in England, particularly the imposition of the Protestantized Mass. On June 9, 1549, the Feast of Pentecost, the immemorial Latin Mass, brought to England by St. Augustine of Canterbury nearly one thousand years before (597), was replaced by a new English Mass or Communion Service, composed by Thomas Cranmer, the apostate Archbishop of Canterbury. The prayer book containing the new service had been imposed with the authority of Edward VI, the sickly young son of Henry VIII and his third wife, Jane Seymour. Edward had ascended to the throne in 1547 and was no more than the puppet of a Protestant-dominated Council established to rule the country until he came of age – which, of course, he never did. Although Henry VIII had, to all intents and purposes, made himself pope as well asking of England and Wales, little else had changed in the religious life of the country. The traditional heresy laws were enforced far more severely in England than in any Catholic country, and the Latin Missal remained unchanged but for the removal of the feast of St. Thomas of Canterbury and the prayers for the Pope in the Canon of the Mass.

Thomas Cranmer, like all the Protestant Reformers, hated the Mass as if it had been a living enemy, but while Henry reigned he bottled up his hatred rather than risk losing his head. The repudiation of the Pope had give him no satisfaction while what he termed “popery” remained, and by popery he and his fellow Protestants meant the Mass. It was the Mass that mattered, not simply to Catholics but also to Protestants. As soon as Edward had been crowned Cranmer began working on his celebrated Prayer Book, which contained a new Mass or Communion Service. It was to be celebrated entirely in English, with Communion under both kinds, and without a single specific reference to the hated doctrine of sacrifice. In the secluded Devonshire village of Samford Courtenay the parishioners of St. Andrew’s Church were present on this first occasion that any Eucharistic rite but the immemorial Latin Mass had ever been celebrated within its hallowed precincts. They heard the new service read, discussed it, and decided that they did not like it. They told their parish priest, Father Harper, that they were resolved to retain the faith of their forefathers, and that he must use the ancient missal and say the Mass to which they had been accustomed all their lives. He agreed. The fight for the Mass had begun, and it was an entirely lay initiative, what would be known today as a grassroots reaction to the new Prayer Book.

The Protestant historian Sir Maurice Powicke has explained with admirable clarity why Cranmer’s new Mass was considered an outrage by tens of thousands of humble Catholics throughout England. “The real cause of the opposition of country clergy and Devonshire peasants,” Powicke writes, “was the proof which the Prayer Book seemed to give that all the agitations and change of the last few years really were going to end in a permanent cleavage between the past and the present, and the strange, foreign, imposed.”[\[1\]](#)

The news of the restoration of the Latin Mass in Samford Courtney spread through Devon, and, to quote a contemporary account, “as a cloud carried with a violent wind and as a thunderclap sounding through the whole country: and the common people so well allowed and liked thereof that they clapped their hands for joy and agreed in one mind to have the same in every of their several parishes.” They did indeed “have the same,” and the traditional Mass was restored in parishes throughout Devon.

The Duke of Somerset, President of the Council, realized that he would either have to abandon the Reformation and give the people back their Mass, or suppress them by using the foreign mercenaries that he had assembled for an invasion of Scotland.

The Devonshire peasants united with Cornishmen who had risen independently, and who had an additional reason for not liking Cranmer's Prayer Book – namely, that most of them could not speak English, their native Cornish being a separate Celtic language similar to Welsh. A number of Devonshire gentlemen joined the peasants, and with gentlemen to lead them, the rebels were formed into an organized force. They soon obtained effective control of the West Country. The Religious nature of the rebellion is made clear by the fifteen demands of the rebels of which the following examples are typical:

“We shall have the Mass in Latin, as was before.

We will have the Sacrament hang over the high Altar, and there to be worshiped as it was wont to be, and they which will not thereto consent, we will have them die like heretics against the Holy Catholic Faith.

We will have images to be set up again in every Church, and all other ancient Old Ceremonies used heretofore, by our mother the holy Church.

We will not receive the new service because it is but like a Christmas game, but we will have our old service of Matins, Mass, and song and procession in Latin as it was before.”

By insisting that it was, the Mass that mattered and that it mattered more than anything else, the humble peasants of Devon and Cornwall displayed a profoundly Catholic instinct, a true *sensus Catholicus*. Their conviction that if the Mass could be destroyed the Faith itself would be destroyed was one that they shared with the arch-heretic Martin Luther, who once said: “Once the Mass has been overthrown, I say we'll have overthrown the whole of Popedom.”^[2] The Protestant heresy was directed not primarily against the papacy but against the Mass.

The Catholics of the west had demanded that those who would not accept their demands should “die like heretics against the Holy Catholic faith.” In the event, it was the rebels who died when the rebellion was eventually crushed, principally due to the presence of foreign mercenaries. The Catholic army fought in battle after battle with a courage that even their opponents acknowledged, but only one outcome was possible. The final battle took place at Kings Weston in Somerset on August 29. Exhausted by forced marches, the rebels were in no condition to withstand the royal army. After “great slaughter and execution”, they were overwhelmed, leaving 104 men prisoners. Singly or in pairs, they were hanged in Bath, Frome, Wells, Glastonbury, Ilminster, Dunster, Milverton, Wilverton, Wiveliscombe and other Somerset towns. At least 4,000 West country men died for the traditional Mass at the hands of the royal army, an enormous number at that time. The new Mass in English had received its baptism of blood. In their deaths as in their lives, the peasants of the west had shown that for them, it was truly the Mass that mattered. Some words from the Book of Wisdom seem to have been written specifically for these martyrs for the Mass:

In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure was taken for misery. And their going away from us for utter destruction: but they are in peace. And though in the sight of men they suffered torments, their hope is full of immortality. Afflicted in few things, in many they shall be well rewarded: because God has tried them, and found them worthy of himself. As gold in the furnace he hath proved them, and as a victim of a holocaust he hath received them, and in time there shall be respect had to them (Wisdom 3:2-6).

After the imposition of the "new uniform order" of worship in the summer of 1549, and the suppression of the popular risings, the pace of the Protestant movement quickened. An Act of Parliament, reinforced by a royal proclamation, ordered the calling in for destruction of all the old "superstitious" Mass books, which the recalcitrant continued to use; the reforming bishops diligently searched out survivals of "popish superstition" in the liturgy; churches were denuded of their vestments, and texts aimed against the Real Presence

and the Mass were painted on the walls. This phase of the Edwardian Reformation is described as "purely destructive" by the Protestant Professor Bindoff, a conclusion endorsed and expressed very forcefully by Dr. Eamon Duffy in what is already an historical classic

- The Stripping of the Altars:

At the heart of the Edwardine reform was the necessity of destroying, of cutting, hammering, scraping, or melting into a deserved oblivion the monuments of popery, so that the doctrines they embodied might be forgotten. Iconoclasm was the central sacrament of the reform, and, as the program of the leaders became more radical in the years between 1547 and 1553, they sought with greater urgency the celebration of that sacrament of forgetfulness in every parish in the land. The churchwardens' accounts of the period witness a wholesale removal of the images, vestments, and vessels which had been the wonder of foreign visitors to the country, and in which the collective memory of the parishes were, quite literally, enshrined.[3]

Cranmer's liturgical revolution was so bitterly resented by the ordinary faithful that many could be induced to attend the new services only by the threat of legal sanctions. Msgr. Philip Hughes writes:

The new Act of 1552 began by lamenting that, notwithstanding "the very godly order set forth by the authority of Parliament for common prayer in the mother tongue," something "very comfortable to all good people" desiring to live a Christian life, "a great number of people in divers parts of this realm ...refuse to come to their parish churches and other places where common prayer ...is used." So failure to attend the services on Sundays and holy days, "there to abide orderly and soberly during the time of the common

prayer" was now made an offense.... Moreover, a new offense is created: anyone who is present at services of prayer, "administration of sacraments, making of ministers in the churches" or any rite at all otherwise done than is set forth in the Prayer Book, shall upon conviction go to prison for six months on the first offense, for a year on the second, and for life on the third. Such are the first penalties to be enacted in England for the new crime of hearing Mass, or of receiving the sacraments as they had been received ever since St. Augustine came to convert the English, nearly a thousand years before.[4]

Edward VI died in 1553, and Mary, the devoutly Catholic daughter of Catherine of Aragon, came to the throne determined to restore the Catholic faith cost what it may. Professor Bindoff notes that soon after her accession to the throne "the Mass was being celebrated in London churches `not by commandment but of the people's devotion,' and news was coming in of its unopposed revival throughout the country." [5]

The restoration of the Catholic faith under Mary Tudor, in union with the Pope once more, and the restoration of the traditional Latin Mass, were welcomed with enthusiasm by all but a handful of fanatical Protestants. Queen Mary died on November 17, 1558, while Mass was being celebrated in her bed-chamber, and Cardinal Reginald Pole, the last Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury, died on the same day.

Mary's half sister Elizabeth was crowned as a Catholic and promised to reign as a Catholic, but broke her word almost immediately and reverted to Protestantism, as this gave her religious as well as political control over her subjects 99% of whom were still Catholic-minded. "Under Elizabeth, the aim was the extirpation of Catholicism during her lifetime." [6] This was to be done by promulgating laws that would force the Catholic people to choose between their faith and financial ruin, imprisonment, and, in some cases, death. She reimposed Cranmer's 1552 Book of Common Prayer with a few slight modifications. Clerics who refused to use the new Prayer Book, or who used "any other, rite, ceremony, order, form, or manner of celebration of the Lord's Supper, openly or privily...or who speak in derogation of the book, forfeit a whole year's income and go to prison for six months. If they offend a second time they go to prison for a year and, ipso facto, lose all their benefices. For a third offense the punishment is imprisonment for life." Next there come penalties to discourage lay critics of liturgical change. All who speak or write in derogation of anything the book contains, or do anything to cause any clergyman to use any other form of service than what it contains, or who interrupt or hinder the performance of those services, are liable, for a first offense, to the very severe fine of 44 marks. For a second offense there is a fine four times as great; and for a third offense the penalty is loss of all goods and chattels and life imprisonment. Furthermore, it was made an offense for anyone to absent himself from the Sunday service in his parish church. All Englishmen were now obliged by law to attend the parish church every Sunday and holy day, under penalty of a fine of twelve pence each time they were absent. Heavy penalties were also imposed for anyone found guilty of assisting at the forbidden Latin Mass: six months for the first offense, twelve months for the second, and life imprisonment for the third.[7]

The first missionary priest did not arrive in the kingdom until 1574. His name was Lewis Barlow, a Welshman from Pembrokeshire.^[8] But by that time the vast majority of Catholics had already drifted into what proved to be an irreversible habit of compromise. The attitude of the typical Catholic during the first decade of the reign of Elizabeth was very different from that of his forbears in 1549. It is well summarized in Msgr. Philip Hughes' masterpiece, *The Reformation in England*: "The vast bulk of the nation were untouched by any marked desire to revolt from the old faith, but it is equally true to affirm that they were not moved by any great desire to defend it."^[9] They most certainly lacked the will to kindle a fire upon the earth. Most English Catholics eventually surrendered to the constant and tenacious pressure of the Government, lost contact with the Mass, and attended the English services. This almost universal apostasy, the true turning point in the religious history of England, was not a sudden and spectacular surrender. It was gradual, but it was cumulative, and in its effects it was permanent.

The Catholics who went to the Anglican services were a sufficiently large body to be given a special name. They were called, aptly enough, "Church Papists": Churchgoers for legal purposes, but Papists in sympathy. It was the new liturgy which eventually destroyed the old faith. Only a handful of the most fervent Catholics refused to attend the Prayer Book services, and the law *lex orandi, lex credendi* imposed itself as it inevitably will. As you pray, so shall you believe. Msgr. Hughes writes:

Once these new sacramental rites, for example, had become the habit of the English people the substance of the doctrinal reformation, victorious now in northern Europe, would have transformed England also. All but insensibly, as the years went by, the beliefs enshrined in the old, and now disused, rites, and kept alive by these rites in men's minds and affections, would disappear- without the need of any systematic missionary effort to preach them down.^[10] In other words, what had taken place was the destruction of Catholicism through the compromise of the vast majority of English Catholics with the Elizabethan liturgical reform. In the 45-year reign of "Good Queen Bess" two generations of Englishmen had reached adulthood without ever experiencing a Latin Mass, or having their hearts and minds raised to God, to repeat the words of Eamon Duffy, "by the images, vestments, and vessels which had been the wonder of foreign visitors to the country, and in which the collective memory of the parishes were, quite literally, enshrined." Protestantism seemed to have triumphed totally, but there were still some who refused to compromise. The Protestant Professor Owen Chadwick explains, "A small number were not reconciled to change and preferred to maintain their traditional worship in other lands. These men were not attracted by the whitewash and the destruction or by seeing vestments, pyxes, images, copes, altars and censers being sold on the open market."^[11]

Above all, it was the young men who went to seminaries in Europe who preserved the Faith in Britain. They returned to give the Mass to the people and only too often to give their lives for the Mass, the traditional Latin Mass which is found in the Missal of St. Pius V. The despised Catholic remnant thus had a treasure denied to those who treated them with such contempt, the Mass of St. Pius V - "the most beautiful thing this side of heaven," as Father Faber expressed it. This was the pearl of great price for which they were prepared to pay all that they had - and pay it they did, priest and layman, butcher's wife and schoolmaster. The victors had the churches and cathedrals built for the celebration of the traditional Latin Mass, the vanquished had the Mass, and it was the Mass that mattered.

It is indeed the Mass that matters, and I am sure that all who read this will agree that the manner in which the holy sacrifice is offered also matters. Because the Mass is the making present of the Sacrifice of Calvary, it should be enshrined in a rite of the greatest possible reverence and dignity, a rite in which the awe-inspiring nature of the sacrifice we offer is made manifest in every prayer and every ritual gesture. For 1500 years the rite of Mass developed in a natural and almost imperceptible manner, with the addition of new prayers and ceremonies that gave ever clearer liturgical expression to its sacrificial nature, but always in conformity to the fundamental principle of fidelity to tradition.

The sixteenth-century Protestants rejected the principle of fidelity to tradition in favor of the principle of the destruction of tradition. Their concern was not to reform the existing order but to introduce a new one that conformed to their heretical beliefs. "The Protestant Reformers," writes Father Adrian Fortescue, "naturally played havoc with the old liturgy. It was throughout the expression of the very ideas the Real Presence, Eucharistic Sacrifice and so on they rejected. So they substituted for it new Communion services that expressed their principle but, of course, broke away

utterly from all historic liturgical evolution." IT would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of Father Fortescue's insistence that in composing new services the Protestant Reformers "broke away utterly from all historic liturgical evolution:"[\[12\]](#) History thus makes clear to us the distinction between true and false liturgical reform. The essence of a true liturgical reform is that it contains no drastic revision of the liturgical traditions that have been handed down. Its most evident characteristic is fidelity to these traditions. This means that the liturgical reform that followed the Second Vatican Council should, like that of the Protestant Reformation, be termed a revolution. It "broke away utterly from all historic liturgical evolution." It is not necessary for the Catholic position to be expressly contradicted for a rite to become suspect; the suppression of prayers that had given liturgical expression to the doctrine behind the rite is more than sufficient to give cause for concern. The suppression in the Novus Ordo Missae, the new Mass, of so many prayers from the traditional Mass is a cause not simply for concern but for scandal. In almost every case they are the same prayers suppressed by Luther and by Thomas Cranmer.

The Mass of Pope Paul VI is valid and contains no heresy, but the suppression of prayers which had given liturgical expression to the doctrine behind the rite is more than sufficient to give cause for concern to all those faithful who, like the martyrs of Devon and Cornwall, possess a true sensus Catholicus.

The fact that the Mass of Pope Paul VI as it is celebrated in so many parishes today constitutes a breach with authentic liturgical development has been confirmed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith:

J. A. Jungmann, one of the truly great liturgists of our time, defined the liturgy of his day, such as it could be understood in the light of historical research, as a "liturgy which is the fruit of development".... What happened after the Council was something else entirely: in the place of the liturgy as the fruit of development came fabricated liturgy. We abandoned the organic, living process of growth and development over centuries, and replaced it, as in a manufacturing process, with a fabrication, a banal on-the-spot product."[\[13\]](#)

As was the case during the reign of Elizabeth I, the contemporary Church papists who take part each Sunday in what can only too often be termed liturgical travesties, grow accustomed to them. Their children accept as normal tables in place of altars, female acolytes, sanctuaries infested by hordes of extraordinary Eucharistic monsters, standing for Communion, Communion in the hand, mindless ditties in place of Gregorian chant. Like the children of the Elizabethan church papists, two generations of post Vatican II Catholics have reached adulthood without ever experiencing the traditional Latin Mass and the feelings of awe, reverence, and the majestic presence of God which it evokes.

"Keep the Faith" was the watchword of the faithful remnant during the reign of Elizabeth I, and one cannot keep the Faith by compromising. What I have been trying to make clear is that the effect of decades of attendance at a typical celebration of the new Mass can be identical to the effect of decades of assistance by the church papists at Anglican services during the reign of Elizabeth I. To paraphrase Msgr. Hughes, as the years pass by, the beliefs enshrined in the old, and now disused, rites, and kept alive by these rites in men's minds and affections, disappear.

Msgr. Klaus Gamber sums up the effect of the postconciliar reform in one devastating sentence: "At this critical juncture, the traditional Roman rite, more than one thousand years old, has been destroyed."[\[14\]](#) The post Vatican II has brought no good fruits whatsoever - only, as Msgr. Gamber puts it, "a liturgical destruction of startling proportions - a debacle worsening with each passing year."[\[15\]](#)

I have mentioned the Western Rising not for its historical interest, great though this is, but because we, like the martyrs of 1549, are engaged in a conflict, and what is at stake is the Mass, the precious gift of the Holy Eucharist, which is seen today as no more than symbol by 70% of young American Catholics.[\[16\]](#) We are engaged in a war with the same objectives as the martyrs of the West, and when we bear in mind the sacrifices that they made because the Mass truly mattered to them, we should be prepared to make the sacrifices needed to restore the Mass of St. Pius V, sacrifices involving time, money, travel, and bearing the disapproval or even ridicule of fellow Catholics, clerical and lay. Let us not be like those Catholics in Elizabethan England who were untouched by any marked desire to revolt from the old faith, but were not moved by any great desire to defend it. Like the western martyrs let us say, "We will have the mass in Latin, as was before. We will have the Sacrament hang over the high altar, and there to be worshipped as it was won't be.... We will not receive the new service because it is but like a Christmas game." If this makes us rebels, then I for

one am happy to be one. Those of us who fight for our Latin liturgical heritage may be termed reactionary, ignorant, or even schismatic, but in reality, we are in the direct tradition of the Maccabees of the Old Testament. The commentary upon the Mass for the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost in the St. Andrew Daily Missal states:

One of the most outstanding lessons which may be drawn from the books of Maccabees...is the reverence due to the things of God. What is generally called the rebellion of the Maccabees was in reality a magnificent example of fidelity to God, to his law, and to the covenants and promises that he had made to his people. These were threatened with oblivion and it was to uphold them that the Maccabees rebelled.

The Mass of St. Pius V epitomizes the faith of our fathers; it is the liturgy celebrated in secret by the martyr priests of England and Wales, it is the liturgy that was celebrated at the Mass rocks of Ireland, it is the liturgy celebrated by the North American martyrs who died deaths that are too horrific to describe, it is the Mass described by the great English Oratorian Father Frederick Faber, as "the most beautiful thing this side of heaven." We will have the Mass - the Mass of St. Pius V, and if we take our faith seriously we must resolve to kindle a fire upon the earth, a purifying fire that will make this insistence a reality.

Footnotes:

[1] M. Powicke, *The Reformation in England* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 86-87.

[2] *Werke*, Vol. Xb, p. 220.

[3] E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale, 1992), p. 480.

[4] P. Hughes, *The Reformation in England* (London, 1950), vol. II, p. 126. Emphasis mine.

[5] S. T. Bindoli; *Tudor England* (London, 1952), p. 168.

[6] J.I. Dwyer, *The Reformation in England* (CTS, London, 1962), p. 21.

[7] Hughes, vol. III, pp. 33-34.

[8] D. Bellinger, *English and Welsh Priests 1558-1801* (Downside Abbey Press, 1984), pp. 36, 203.

[9] Hughes, vol. III, p. 49.

[10] Hughes, vol. II, p. 111.

[11] *The reformation*, p. 285.

[12] A. Fortescue, *The Mass: A Study of the Roman Liturgy* (London, 1917), pp. 205-6.

[13] Preface to the French edition of the Reform of the Roman Liturgy by Msgr. Klaus Gamber.

[14] *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, K. Gamber, Pg. 99.

[15] *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, K. Gamber, Pg. 9.

[16] February 1995 issue of the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, an article by Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw.