

An Unexpected Defence of Tradition

by Michael Davies

In his book *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, Monsignor Klaus Gamber insists that the change to Mass facing the people was a mistake. He has even stated that a return to traditional belief in the Eucharist will only come about with a return to the traditional altar:

- A real change in the contemporary perception of the purpose of the Mass and Eucharist will occur only when the table altars are removed and Mass is again celebrated at the high altar; when the purpose of the Mass is again seen as an act of adoration and glorification of God and of offering thanks for His blessings, for our salvation and for the promise of the heavenly life to come, and as the mystical reenactment of the Lord's sacrifice on the cross (p. 175).

The opinion of Msgr. Gamber was endorsed in July 1996 by a theologian who would have been imagined by traditional Catholics to be the last man to take such a stand. Max Thurian, a brother of the French Protestant Taizé community was one of the Protestant observers who advised the Consilium (committee) which composed the New Mass. In 1969 he expressed his satisfaction with the *Novus Ordo Missae* by stating that Protestants could now celebrate the Lord's Supper with the same prayers as Catholics. The French daily *Le Monde* announced on 12 May 1988 that Max Thurian had not only become a Catholic but had been ordained to the Catholic priesthood by the former Archbishop of Naples, Cardinal Ursi. Father Thurian was invited to join the International Theological Commission and, as a member of this commission and a celebrated convert, he caused a considerable stir with an article which he contributed to the 24 July 1996 *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition). The opinions that Father Thurian expressed in this article attained even more significance in view of the fact that he died a few weeks later on 15th August, one day before his 75th birthday. The article, "The Liturgy and Contemplation", thus represents his final thoughts on the Catholic liturgy. His comments included the following:

- The great problem of contemporary liturgical life (apathy towards worship, boredom, lack of vitality and participation) stems from the fact that the celebration has sometimes lost its character as mystery, which fosters the spirit of adoration.

We often encounter an inflation of words, explanations and comments, homilies too long and poorly prepared, which leaves little room for the mystery being celebrated...

- Serious mistakes have sometimes been made in certain places: the location of the altar, tabernacle, and celebrants' chairs, overpowering illumination, excessive removal of ornamentation, etc...The fact that the celebrants and faithful constantly face each other closes the liturgy in on itself. On the other hand a sound celebration which takes into account the pre-eminence of the altar, the discretion of the celebrants' ministry, the orientation of everyone towards the Lord and the adoration of His presence signified in the symbols and realized by the sacrament, confers on the liturgy that contemplative atmosphere without which it risks being a tiresome religious disquisition, a useless community distraction, a sort of rigmarole...
- Wherever tradition has left stupendous altars placed against the apse, this arrangement could be respected by dividing the celebration into a face-to-face between the celebrants and the community for the Liturgy of the Word and a common orientation towards the altar from the time of the offertory to the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer. This solution is preferable to setting up a second, portable altar in the shape of a chest or small table...The urgent need for the Church's liturgy today is to arrange everything so as to foster in the greatest possible way the contemplative adoration of the Lord , who reveals himself to His people in Word and Sacrament, and whose humble unobtrusive servants are the celebrants.

In view of the respect in which Father Thurian was held (rightly or wrongly) by the Vatican, his assessment of a typical parish celebration of the Mass today could hardly be more significant. If a traditionalist had made the same assessment it would have been dismissed as an outrageous exaggeration, but the liturgical establishment cannot dismiss the Father Thurian in the same manner. They have therefore employed their standard and, one must admit, very effective technique and ignored him. Be sure to pass on this message to your parish priest and to your bishop: "The great problem of contemporary liturgical life (apathy towards worship, boredom, lack of vitality and participation) stems from the fact that the celebration has sometimes lost its character as mystery, which fosters the spirit of adoration." If they ask who says so, reply the late Father Max Thurian and smile smugly at their total confusion.

Renewal in England and Wales

Father Thurian's assessment of the liturgical reform is certainly endorsed by recent Mass attendance figures for England and Wales. Although Catholics form only a small minority of the population in these countries, about 9%, it has been possible to take some satisfaction in the fact that there are more worshippers in Catholic churches on Sundays than there are in Anglican churches. The 9 December 1996 issue of *The Times* revealed that by the end of the millennium Anglican Sunday attendance will exceed that of Catholic. This is not because Anglican attendance is increasing but because it is now declining at a slower rate than Catholic attendance. The Catholic decline is now of about 55,000 a year, more than the entire Catholic population of Wales. In 1954 Mass attendance in England and Wales was 1,886,600, in 1964 2,114,219, in 1994 1,190,307 and 1995 1,135,047. The *Times* report quotes an official Catholic estimate of a Mass attendance of 600,000 only in ten years' time. It can be added that in Brazil, the country with the world's largest Catholic population, there are now more Protestants at Sunday worship than Catholics. Despite incontrovertible evidence that the catholic Church is declining into oblivion throughout the entire western world the official position of the Vatican and national hierarchies is that the Church has never been healthier, and massive celebrations are planned for the millennium to celebrate the mythical renewal. With every year that passes Orwell's 1984 appears to be nothing less than an allegory of the Catholic Church since Vatican II.