

Glory of the Silent Canon

Homily Preached At The Launch Of CIEL U.K.

At St.James' Spanish Place Saturday 1st March 1997

by a priest of the Oratory

"The things we have heard and understood, the things our fathers have told us, these we will not hide from their children but will tell them to the next generation He gave a command to our fathers to make it known to their children that the next generation might know it, the children yet to be born." (from Psalm 77)

For those of us who love the classical Roman rite, the last few years have been a time of great encouragement. The Holy Father has made it abundantly clear that priests and laity who are attached to the traditional liturgy must have access to it, and to do so is a legitimate aspiration. Many bishops and prelates have not only celebrated the traditional Mass themselves, but have enabled pastoral and apostolic initiatives within their dioceses, initiatives that make the classical liturgy increasingly accessible. Growing numbers of younger priests who do not remember the pre-conciliar days are discovering the beauty and prayerfulness of the classical liturgical forms. Religious communities which have the traditional rites as their staple diet are flourishing, blessed with many vocations. Thousands upon thousands of the faithful are now able to attend the traditional Mass regularly, in full and loyal communion with their bishop, in full and loyal communion with the Sovereign Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ. All this, we must believe, is the work of the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

Some of us well remember the sense of desolation, and to be honest, the feeling of despair in the 1970's and early 1980's, when the traditional rites were virtually outlawed. Now, our sorrow is turning to joy as we see the traditional liturgy making more and more impact on the life of the church in the modern world, drawing more and more souls to the "aeterna Christi munera". Yes; after a few years, comparatively few in the history of the Church, of being all but lost, the traditional and classical Roman rite of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is re-emerging as an approved liturgical option in the universal Church. The classical Roman rite is now spreading far and wide within the vineyard of the Lord. And for this wonderful gift of the Lord to His Bride, what can we say, what should we say, but "Praised be Jesus Christ, today and for ever!"

And yet, there are difficulties. And some of the difficulties are unfortunately rooted in the prejudices of those who insist on labelling our preference for the classical rites as disloyalty to the Church, or simply, nostalgia for times past. One of the reasons for this is that so many of the faithful, when asked why they want the traditional Mass, are not able to articulate the preference except in terms of their dislike for the novus ordo, or as an angry reaction to some of the liturgical abuse to which they have been systematically subjected. To state our preference for the classical liturgy only in polemical and controversialist terms simply won't do. Cheap polemic reduces our love for one of heaven's most sublime gifts to the impoverished level of barrack-room theology and tabloid sacristy gossip.

We all need to be able to say, precisely and charitably, what it is that we think is so wonderful about the classical Roman rite. We need to be able not so much to argue the case, as to offer the case, generously and coherently, to those who enquire, remembering always the wise injunction of Saint Francis de Sales; that we generally achieve more with a spoonful of honey than with a pint of vinegar! So much of the traditionalist apologetic for the classical liturgy has been awash with the bitterness of vinegar, to the extent that the facts of the case have often been rendered quite unpalatable. We must proceed blande et sauvement if we wish to persuade those who for one reason or another, do not quite share our vision. Our approach to them, and to the sacred rites in question, must be spiritual and scholarly before all else. Any hint of "Militant Tendency" is wholly out of place.

What shall one say to the serious enquirer, when we advance the case for "La Messe de toujours", the Mass that will not die? Shall we speak of the dignity of the universal language of the Church, making the Latin Mass intelligible for all, wherever they are, and whatever their own vernacular tongue? Shall we speak of the paramount importance of the orientation of the altar, where both priest and people all face in the same direction, turned towards the Lord, above all for the canon of the Mass? Yes, we should speak of this, of the theocentric nature not only of the eucharistic action itself but of the whole celebration, and how this theocentric focus should be expressed in the architectural and ritual disposition of the sanctuary.

Shall we speak of the venerable stability and consistency of the classical Roman rite, unchanged in its most essential aspects for nearly a thousand years before the codifications of Pope St. Pius V in the sixteenth century? Yes, we should speak of this, of the natural growth of a liturgy that has developed only by pious accretion and elaboration, familiar to generation after generation, where the inherited piety went

hand in hand with an inherited cultural matrix, a cultural embedment which enriched and embellished the worship of the Lord, as the centuries rolled by. All this we should speak of, and so much more besides. The uncapturable heights and depths of the eucharistic mystery require the fullest exposition that we are capable of. Nothing is too good in this cause because, as St. Alphonsus Liguori expressed it: "Even God Himself could do nothing holier, better, or greater than the Mass."

In the midst of the plethora of beauty and piety that the traditional liturgy encompasses, I would like to single out one aspect that I believe we must always speak of with special emphasis, because it is, *stricte dictum*, at the very heart of the matter. I refer to the glory of the silent canon.

When someone attends the classical rite for the first time, they are often surprised that what is obviously the most important part of the liturgical action is done in silence. Even at sung Mass, as today, the consecration happens in silence. It is true, regrettably, that at certain times in our liturgical history there have been abuses in this connexion, organ music overlaying the consecration and other indignities. Nevertheless, the classical pattern of the traditional Roman rite is that after the Sanctus has been sung, silence descends, broken only by the bell. This is the essential glory of the classical rite, the very heart of the matter. I do believe that in our noisy, clamorous modern world, this silence is even more necessary than it was for earlier generations.

The reason for the silence is, that at a very early stage in the Church's liturgical awareness, it was realized that the miracles of grace which occur during the canon should not risk trivialization by being spoken out loud as if the sacred words which effected these miracles were simply in the normal run of ordinary speech. The mystery of the Real Presence, the miracle of transubstantiation, the subsequent pleading of the oblation, all this is the stuff of heaven, heaven come down to earth. Perhaps we would better say that in the canon, earth is raised to heaven. In the canon, the worshipping Church does not sink into silence. No, the truth is, that we rise into silence, a contemplative, anointed silence, over which the Holy Ghost is hovering, a timeless silence which breathes the life of heaven.

The pious and traditional instinct of the Church is that the Lord's astounding words over bread and cup should be breathed again only in a hushed and reverent whisper by the unworthy human agent of the miracle, the priest who is acting in *persona Christi*. These are not words to say aloud, much less, heaven forbid, to sing aloud.

These are words of love, words to whisper in awe and trembling. These are the words of the new and everlasting covenant which changed the world for ever. These are the words which make the Mystery of Faith accessible to humankind, at every moment of every day, until the Lord returns.

In the canon of the Mass, after the consecration, the veil which separates this world from paradise is never so thin, never so slight. We may recall here Mgr. Ronald Knox's felicitous comparison of the eucharistic presence with "the window in the wall". With the eyes of faith we are placed so as to be able to look beyond this world, deep into that transcendent reality which is Christ. Indeed, for a few precious moments, the Son of God will come among us; Eternity Himself. Eternity in Person makes Himself present. The silence of the canon which surrounds that presence helps us to appreciate the timelessness of Christ. For the Lord Who becomes present is the living Lord, the Lord of resurrection, no longer bound by His own laws of space and time. He is the power, the strength, the beauty that fills and animates all creation. His majesty is to be waited on in silence, and adored in silence.

In the silence of the canon, the external signs of the liturgical action become even more poignant: the genuflections, the manual gestures of the celebrant, the repeated signs of the cross over the oblata. These numerous signs of the cross made over the oblata after the consecration are just as important, indeed I venture to suggest perhaps even more important, than those made before the consecration. After the elements of bread and wine have been changed into Christ Himself, the Church repeatedly signs them with the sign of the cross, not of course in order to bless them, for all possible blessing has already occurred in the miracle of transubstantiation. No, the crossings are to designate the oblata, again and again, as the matter of the sacrifice, the very same body and blood that were offered on the cross, now glorified and truly present upon the altar. I am convinced that to omit the crossings after the consecration risks weakening our faith in the identity of the sacrifice of the Mass with the sacrifice of the Cross. In the silence of the canon, that total identity is explicitly affirmed, with the liturgical gestures of the celebrant proclaiming the Cross as powerfully as any words could utter.

There are so many things that we should know and say about the Holy Sacrifice. Perhaps you already know what Father Faber thought about the Mass. He called it "the most beautiful thing this side of heaven." He wrote of the Mass that "it came forth out of the grand mind of the Church, and lifted us out of earth and out of self, and wrapped us round in a cloud of mystical sweetness and the sublimities of a more

than angelic liturgy, and purified us almost without ourselves, and charmed us with celestial charming, so that our senses seemed to find vision, hearing, fragrance, taste and touch beyond what earth can give."

In his Apostolic Letter "Tertio millennio adveniente" (1994) the Holy Father was advising us how to prepare to celebrate the start of the coming millennium. He announced that the year 2000 is to be a Holy Year, with an international eucharistic congress in Rome. He says, "The Year 2000 will be intensely Eucharistic..." Although the work of CIEL will undoubtedly extend far beyond that date, we could perhaps consider what particular contribution we might make to that planned Eucharistic Congress in the eternal city. My dear brethren, the necessary and urgent work of re-discovering and promoting the classical Roman rite is really only just beginning. The necessary work goes far, far beyond the indult of 1984.

I think we must assume that this holy enterprise will only succeed if it is based on prayer and charity. And in furthering that aim, we have made an excellent start today in this votive Mass of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. We believe that nothing happens which has to do with our salvation but that Our Blessed Lady is somehow involved. How could it be otherwise? It was through Her that Christ and His grace were first given to the world. Through Her, the grace of Christ is still pouring into the Church. Now and in the coming millennium we must be prepared to affirm, in faith and charity, that the traditional liturgical option can be, will be, an enormous grace for the Church of the future. "The things we have heard and understood, the things our fathers have told us, these we will not hide from their children but will tell them to the next generation..."

Let us today commend this intention to the Immaculate Heart of the Mediatrix of all graces. Let us implore her glorious intercession, now and in the future. What we are asking must surely be pleasing to Her Immaculate Heart; that Her divine Son will be more widely known, loved and worshipped in His eucharistic sacrifice; that through the traditional Mass the graces of Calvary and the power of the resurrection will flow ever more abundantly to mankind; that the shepherds of God's pilgrim flock will lead their people to heaven in an ever deepening spirit of adoration and praise, centered always on the most Blessed Sacrament of the altar.

My dear friends, if the wishes of the Vicar of Christ are to come about, if the year 2000 is to be, in the Pope's own words "intensely eucharistic", then there is much work and much prayer before us.

"He gave a command to our fathers to make it known to their children that the next generation might know it, the children yet to be born."

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