

Fr. Louis Demornex Turns To The Ancient Rite

Dom Louis Demornex

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The door opens on what has all the appearances of being a woodshed, a warehouse or an old cellar. Instead it is the house, rather the presbytery of the parish church of Fontanaradina, a district of Sessa Aurunca, 170 inhabitants and a handful of old houses clinging to the mountains of the Casertano.

Father Louis Demornex, the parish priest, is a good giant with a white beard and a black cassock, who wears sandals even in winter. Sixty years old, the son of French mountaineers, he has been living here since 1970, the year of his ordination to the priesthood. He is responsible for the souls, in addition to those in his own parish, of those in the parishes of two other districts Corigliano and Aulpi and he goes up and down the mountain at the wheel of a beaten up Peugeot which seems to be kept together only through the miraculous gaze of the little plaster Madonna placed on the dashboard.

“When I first came to this house the - he says - the roof was falling in and there were no windows. I called it my Bethlehem. Then, thanks to the help of the lads of the parish, we installed electricity and running water. Now I call it my Nazareth...”.

This priest, who lives in real poverty (“I have nothing, my only riches are in the Tabernacle”), from the first of February, 2000, to be exact, began to celebrate the Sunday Mass in his three parishes according the ancient Tridentine rite that was in force until the Second Vatican Council. Missal of St. Pius V, prayers strictly in Latin, back to the people, Gregorian chant. Father Louis wrote three letters to his parishioners, to explain his decision. He explained that at first it was the lack of respect towards the Eucharist which characterized, in his opinion, the new rite:

“Today the consecrated fragments are profaned; the particles fall on the floor and are trampled under foot. And then the priest does not purify his hands, or washes them and throws out the water...All that reminds one of a woman who throws her newborn child into the garbage. Whoever does this, either no longer believes that each fragment is Jesus Christ whole and entire, and that is heretical. Or they do believe and that is sacrilege.

Father Demornex made his momentous decision therefore on a matter of principle: “I cannot say Mass turned toward the people - he says - it distracts me, I risk losing my recollection. And then the Tridentine rite is no longer prohibited: John Paul II

gave an indult, permitting it. On weekdays, when the faithful can be counted on the fingers of one hand, I have been using it for some time. Now I have started to celebrate this way on Sunday also.”

For three months nothing happened. Even if in the churches of Fontanaradina, Corigliano and Aulpi the clock seems to have been turned back thirty years the attendance at Sunday Mass remains high. Some parishioners protest, others go to Mass elsewhere. Some, however, begin to come from neighbouring communities. Then on May 6th past, a Saturday, the bishop of Sessa Aurunca, Antonio Napoletano, intervenes. As was predictable. He summons the portly priest from the mountain in order to deliver a letter to him, in which he accuses him of carrying out his pastoral duties in “a backward-looking and archaic manner”. “I have learned - writes the bishop - that you are wandering openly away from the liturgical dispositions now in force” and are celebrating “the Eucharist with your back turned to the people of God, contravening the apostolic Constitution of Paul VI through which the reformed Missal was promulgated in keeping with the norms of the Council”.

Conclusion:

“I invite you to review your behaviour and also your incardination in the diocese of Sessa Aurunca...Otherwise you are free to choose another diocese which better suits your ideas”. A clear invitation to change his ways or pack his bags. Notwithstanding the lack of priests, discipline is discipline.

A few hours after having received it, Fr. Dermornex read the letter to all his parishioners, during the three Masses celebrated on Sunday May 7th. “I ask your pardon if I have scandalized you - he said from the pulpit - if I have betrayed you - if I have been a bad parish priest. I have to go”.

The reaction of the faithful was unexpected and surprising: weeping, embraces, pleas to change his mind. The young, having just left the church, jumped in their cars and began to collect signatures in support of the priest. In scarcely two hours they collected 400 (Corrigliano has 600 inhabitants), while at Sessa Aurunca 800 signed. “First when Fr. Louis came - the letter written in the hand of the parishioners read - there were few people who went to Mass, very few frequented the sacraments. Now the participation is massive, there is great catechesis taking place, Catholic Action has been revived, so many devotions considered by many to be pastimes for the elderly which instead are aids along the road of Faith”.

Notwithstanding the affection of the faithful, the “antiquated” father Demornex decided to leave his three parishes. The demonstrations of the people surprised him, but did not make him change his mind: “I have always tried to do the will of God, not that of man. And the Gospel teaches: the crowd which applauds you today tomorrow can shout “crucify him”. He went to Naples to stay with friends, and sent his letter of resignation to the bishop. “I have committed the unpardonable error of being fond of and stimulated by pre-conciliar motives”. But the faithful insisted, organized protests in front of the Chancery of Sessa Aurunca, asking for a meeting with the bishop. Monsignor Napolitano said to them: “I did not send him away”. So, after barely eight days of “exile” and so many pleas from the parishioners, the priest went back. And he continues to this day celebrating, undisturbed, the Tridentine Mass. “I taught the young people to follow it and they do it willingly - explains Fr. Louis - . For me the important thing is not the ancient rite, but what it contains. With the Mass of Saint Pius V it was the Church which celebrated in you. The new Mass, on the other hand, does not exist, because everyone celebrates it in his own way, with creativity, introducing variations”.

In the clear eyes of the giant with the cassock there is a great serenity, notwithstanding the pneumonia which afflicts him. He moves about like a guide in the little church, pointing out the relics of Saint Theresa of the Infant Jesus and of Saint Pius X which decorate the altar. He has the look of a child who has just been given all the toys of the world. “Since I have been saying the old Mass again I am rejuvenated. Now I await the decisions of my bishop. In March he will make his pastoral visit, then we shall see. Perhaps I shall have to leave the parish...But, please, do not say that I am a follower of Monsignor Lefebvre, because it is not true. I do not belong to any party. I am and want to be, by God’s grace, simply a Catholic”.

Among the letters which Fr. Louis has placed on the table of the little kitchen with the cracked walls there is one missive of solidarity which arrived from the Vatican. It is from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith who in his autobiography (*La mia vita*, San Paolo Editor, 1997) affirms: “I am convinced that the ecclesial crisis in which we find ourselves today results in large part from the collapse of the liturgy...The liturgical reform has produced extremely grave damage for the Faith”.

The priest, who is now seated in front of a steaming plate of lentil soup just served for the guest and for himself, does not want to talk about this letter. Then, after having resisted the persistence of the journalist for a long time, admits: “Yes, I wrote to the Cardinal to tell him my story and the motives which drove me to celebrate with the

old Missal. And he replied to me”.

On the 15th of July, the prince of the Church who is the custodian of Catholic orthodoxy replied to him personally, to the priest, with the sandals who lives in the cold and bare “Nazareth” of Fontanaradina. “Your letter struck and moved me - the reply from Ratzinger to Fr. Demornex reads:

What you say about the laicisation of priests, about liturgical anarchy and about the many profanations of the Eucharist is unfortunately true. You have confided your profound discomfort to the bishop: he has not understood and has invited you to leave the parish. From the formal and juridical point of view it is his right”. “You know well - concludes the Cardinal - that I cannot advise you to rebel...Be assured that the Lord never imposes the weight of a cross on you without helping you to bear it. I promise you that I shall remember your sorrow in my prayers before the Lord”. Father Louis Demornex has discovered that he has a friend in Rome itself.