

The Traditional Latin Rite in the Church Today

The following article is the text of the talk given by Father Stephen Shield, curate at English Martyrs Parish, Preston, at the Latin Mass Society's first Northern Conference.

Reverend Fathers, Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen: I would like to approach this subject from a different angle. I would never claim to be a theologian or a historian but what I would claim to be is a priest who is concerned about the very things that Michael Davies has just been mentioning. You could say I'm a recent convert to the Tridentine Mass. I had very little contact with it until after I was ordained - I have only been ordained five years. We were asked by Bishop Brewer to have the old Mass at English Martyrs and we were, to be honest, a bit reluctant because we weren't terribly sure what it was all about; and that's where I am going to start from in this little talk on the place for the traditional Mass in the modern Church.

The first time I was going to celebrate the Mass, or rather the week or so before, was a time which I can only compare with a nightmare. It all seemed so strange, so remote from my experience of Mass. The many rubrics and numerous stage-like directions to be remembered of the old Mass seemed so unnecessary and overcomplicated. Why have all this fuss, and these rubrics, they just get in the way, would anyone notice if I forgot something? Couldn't I just simplify things a little?

The nightmare wasn't over, in fact when the bell rang and I heard the sound of the congregation getting to its feet it seemed as though the nightmare was just about to start! On approaching the altar, I was very much aware of the awesomeness of the moments looming before me. Would I remember everything? I prayed I wouldn't forget that I was saying Mass because I was so preoccupied in remembering what to do and when to move, when to make the sign of the cross, and so on.

Once the biretta was safely in the server's hand, the chalice was on the corporal, the missal was opened, I genuflected and off we went. From that moment things settled down, the Mass began, and while the nerves didn't disappear, they were no longer controlling me and the truth of what we were about came to the fore, why we were there, and what we were doing. I think fear of the old is often as hard to cope with as fear of the new.

A powerful sense of God

When the Mass was over (and I am sure I didn't make too many mistakes), the church locked, and a gin and tonic poured into a slightly larger glass than usual, there came a time to reflect. What had appeared to be a nightmare, ended as a spiritual experience so different to anything I had experienced before. What made it so different and why did I feel so different? There was a powerful sense of the presence of God. It was a feeling of the majesty of the Father, the comfort and warmth of the Holy Spirit, the forgiving and gentle guidance of Our Blessed Lord in that Mass. Could it have been the result of this new experience? Was it this which made it all so different? or was it greater than that?

Continuity and unity

I was thinking along these lines and I remembered something I once heard in a lecture on Spiritual Theology. Fr. Jordan Aumann had spoken of the liturgy as a major source of inspiration for the spiritual life. On looking up his words I was struck by this passage:

“The link between tradition and the liturgy is manifested in such statements as *Lex orandi est lex credendi*—the law of prayer is the law of belief. The liturgy is thus an expression of the vital continuity and perennial unity of the Church's proclamation of the revealed truths to all nations throughout the centuries. As regards the Magisterium, Pope Pius XI referred to the liturgy as “The principal organ of the Magisterium of the Church’.”

(Jordan Aumann O.P., *Spiritual Theology*, S&W, London 1986, p.29).

The liturgy is one of the great sources we have for our inspiration in the Christian life. So what does it mean? What was this tradition? What was this notion of liturgy that I'd just encountered? What do we mean by tradition? Tradition is the transmission of the deposit of faith from one generation to another under the teaching guidance of the Church. This tradition proclaims, explains and applies revealed truths to the people of God throughout the centuries. Human traditions are often subject to error, while the living tradition of the Church is infallible as regards the essential content of the faith.

What do we mean by liturgy? Liturgy is the public worship of the Church. It is the form of piety practised by the Church in fulfillment of her mission to praise and glorify the Blessed Trinity and to sanctify souls. Through this public worship we are able to express our belief in the truths of our faith, and to show to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of His Church. In other words, the liturgy is not simply a necessity of duty, it is a living expression of that which we believe, and of the life

we live in the Blessed Trinity. This is part of the 'vital continuity' Fr. Aumann referred to—the same faith believed by all people, everywhere at all times. The guaranteed continuity of this tradition is what gives life to Christ's Mystical Body, the Church. That body must not be divided, hence Fr. Aumann's phrase 'perennial unity.' All believers holding the same faith which has been preserved and passed on from generation to generation and maintains the unity of the body. The present Holy Father stresses these points, of the tradition and the unity, in his apostolic letter *Ecclesia Dei* when he says:

“It is impossible to remain faithful to the tradition while breaking the ecclesial bond with him to whom, in the person of the Apostle, Peter, Christ Himself entrusted the ministry of unity in His Church” (Quoting *Pastor Aeternus* of Vat. I. DS3020). (*Ecclesia Dei*, 2. 7. 88. para. 4).

The ministry of unity of the Pope; what a responsibility! All of us who claim to follow Our Blessed Lord have responsibilities. The notions of tradition, liturgy, and the oneness of the Church are essential in our understanding of the place the traditional rite of Mass has in the contemporary Church. It all seems strange that all this comes from me being a bag of nerves in the sacristy before a Tridentine Mass but that's where my thoughts started, and that's where I came to, that's how I'd understood what we were doing, we were uniting ourselves in this traditional rite of Mass to the living tradition of the Church. We weren't setting ourselves up as something different, we were a living part of that tradition, moving on, moving forwards. The tradition of the Church is alive, the tradition having come through the Apostles and with guidance of the Holy Spirit continues in the Church today. We were, and are, a part of that tradition because we uphold the truths taught and believed everywhere, by all people for all time.

Justifying our position

The question then must be asked: how can we as people who belong to the living Body of Christ, how can we who respect the ancient rite of Mass, justify our position, since the Church has given us a new Normative Mass? I think it is quite straightforward. On this very point the Pope writes:

“To all those Catholic faithful who feel attached to some previous liturgical and disciplinary forms of the Latin tradition I wish to manifest my will to facilitate their ecclesial communion by means of the necessary measures to guarantee respect for their rightful aspirations. In this matter I ask for the support of the bishops and of all those engaged in pastoral ministry in the Church.” (*Ecclesia Dei*. para. 6(c))

A little further on he says: “moreover, respect must everywhere be shown for the feelings of all those who are attached to the Latin liturgical tradition, by a wide and generous application of the directives already issued some time ago by the Apostolic See for the use of the Roman Missal according to the typical edition of 1962.” (*Ecclesia Dei* para. 6(c)7.)

These directives mentioned are very much concerned with the tradition and unity of the Church. The Pope as chief shepherd has the responsibility of maintaining that unity, and caring for *all* souls in his charge; that is what he is trying to achieve in allowing this wide and generous application of the indult permitting the use of the 1962 missal. We cannot claim to be Catholic and in the same breath deny the teaching of the Church; we cannot put subjective likes and dislikes above revealed truth and the living tradition of the Church. There cannot be dissenting voices, rather there should be voices appealing for legitimate diversity in worship by making the Holy Father's wishes more widely known. Do bishops know, are priests aware, are the faithful aware of this gift we have been given?

Critics may say there should be only one rite of Mass in the west. Yet for generations there were many rites of Mass. As you know, the Council of Trent tried to unify the western rites and decreed that rites over 200 years old could remain, the more recent rites were to be suppressed. But there are other rites at the moment in the west; they may be particular and localised but they exist. For example, Toledo celebrates the Mozarabic rite; Milan has the Ambrosian rite, and so on. So having more than one rite running concurrently is not new. So why was it considered unworthy to be carried on? Why did they bring in a completely different style of liturgy? I wish I knew; I am sure you do too.

Liturgists, all the time, tell us what we should do and how we should do it. They know best, and so they tell us! But they, too, must agree to the Church's teaching; no-one is above that teaching.

I will tell you a little story here. A liturgist came to see a friend of mine at his church and told him he needed to change his church. You need to update and re-order, etc., etc., he said. And my friend replied, “OK, what am I to do?”. “Well you must move the altar nearer to the people“. So my friend said, “If I move the altar nearer to the people there'll be no room in the sanctuary.” And the liturgical expert then said, “Well take out the first six rows of benches.” (*much laughter*). And these are the ‘experts.’ Needless to say, the priest did nothing.

Liturgists fear the old Mass

These same liturgists tell us of the wonders of ancient rites; of the wonder of baptisms as celebrated in fifth century Syria, but one mention of the Tridentine Mass and it's as though you asked them to deny the very existence of God. For some reason they have a fear of the old Mass. What they seek is change, and with typical liberal dogmatism, condemn anyone who disagrees with their point of view. While condemning the Tridentine Mass and those who desire its use, they condone personal changes made in the normative Mass under the guise of legitimate experience of liturgy. Liturgists have told us, and are still hammering their message, that the liturgy must be accessible and readily understandable by everyone. That has been their excuse to find the lowest possible common denominator. They have brought down any notion of the sacred, brought down any notion of sacrifice, all down to "How do I feel?" or, "Where are you at?" or, "Where are we going?" Surely the liturgy is not about that. The liturgy is the worship of God for the glorification of God and the sanctification of souls. It is not to make me feel better, happy, and comfortable. It is for me to bring myself and offer myself with my Saviour to the Father in heaven.

With this lowest common denominator comes the patronising assertion that everyone is without reason, and unable to see for themselves the wonders of the liturgy. Therefore, extra explanations have been provided and ceremonies simplified to the point where they mean absolutely nothing.

For this reason I was particularly delighted to read Cardinal Ratzinger's recent address to the Lebanese bishops who were in Rome for a synod. In speaking to them about their liturgy, based on the document they were discussing, he said, quoting that document:

"...many await a deeper reform and a true renewal of prayers, texts and books. They ask that they be better adapted to the language of the people and their mentality...I wonder: What is the mentality of the people? Are we thinking here about a superficial mentality, created and homogenized by the communication media, or are we thinking about the simple of heart, whose eyes of faith see that which remains hidden to the...wise and understanding (cf. Matthew 11:25)? Following the first line of thought, one quickly arrives at the banalization of the liturgy. We have some sad examples of this in the West; the East should not follow this erroneous path." (*l'Osservatore Romano* 10th January. 1996).

Strong words and a suitable warning to the East, let's pray they take the good cardinal's counsel! He goes on to say that with a great deal of respect and love, the texts may be changed sometimes, but the real profound reform needs to be in peoples'

hearts and in a renewed liturgical education in prayer. Above all, he says, "Our lord must precede our action. With the disciples we must...go to the Lord saying. "Lord, teach us to pray" ... "Guided by the Lord we will find the way."

The changes introduced to modernise the Mass and so make it more accessible and understandable have hardly proved to be the success the experts predicted. Cardinal Ratzinger's plea that the only way to bring around a true and profound reform through prayer is surely a step in the right direction. How often have we heard, change this and change that, we are a community, this will be better for the community, this will let us share together. On it goes with little or no mention of God and prayer, only how we feel and where we are at, and so on. How often are we asked to pray for the good of the Church, to pray for the bishops and priests, to pray for the spread of the Gospel? It has all become secondary. God has been removed and we are on top.

We have heard the arguments over and over again, that the early Church did this and that so therefore it must be right, we must return to it. But liturgical archeology is hardly part of a living tradition. These experts tell us that at the time of the Council of Trent, the academics didn't have the means to find out this wonderful stuff they have discovered about baptisms in fifth century Syria. Well what does it matter? The liturgists at the Council of Trent were not there to change the rite of Mass. They were there to bring around a unity to fight against an enemy which was the Reformation. They wanted Catholics everywhere to believe the same things that had been passed on from generation to generation. They were part of that same living tradition. They were not changing the Mass so that people everywhere in the world would feel more comfortable, more at home, more at ease so they could put their feet up on the pews and enjoy themselves. No, they were fighting off an enemy; the enemy that was trying to destroy the deposit of faith which had been passed on from the Apostles.

The traditional Mass is vital

The place for the traditional Mass in the life of the Catholic Church today, I believe, is vital. The old Mass teaches us a great deal of the centrality of Christ to our faith. The focus of the old Mass is God, not man. There is no confrontation between the priest and the people and, therefore, there is no need for the priest to feel he has to entertain the body in front of him. The orientation of the priest makes a vast difference. As soon as you turn and face someone you create a relationship and you have to react. You cannot ignore the people you are looking at. And so the priests have become part of that and have been pressured by that relationship to entertain, their minds taken away from what they are there to celebrate. The secularism of our society has lead many priests to believe that man comes first, the old Mass cries out

the reverse.

So, all the fears I mentioned at the beginning; the vast number of rubrics and stage-managed movements are not repressive as I first indicated, rather they enable a freedom which has gone from the Mass as it is now. No rules equals chaos, not freedom. Both rubrics and canon law are essential because they are our security and our freedom; freedom to understand why we are there, freedom to concentrate on the truths we are there to celebrate. No rules do not equal freedom, it equals chaos and that is where the new rite has got us—to a state of chaos. Once we overstep the ground protected by rubrics; for example, had I decided to change the old Mass to make it easier for myself I would have changed the rite of Mass which I have no right to do, rather I have the responsibility of doing as the missal directs.

So with the Church's law. Should I deliberately contradict that law in my life I find myself outside the law and consequently beyond that unity which holds and enables the body to grow in peace and truth. The liturgical rules are there to enable the priest and the people to be completely free, so as to be absorbed into the great mystery they are celebrating. This is surely true participation, this is actual participation, this is accessible and understandable worship. How can we call swinging in the aisles, the waving of hands in the air, participation? Such behaviour may satisfy the ego for a moment but nothing of it speaks of eternity, it restricts the souls to the present.

The old Mass is timeless, as should the new Mass be equally timeless. All time is brought together when Christ's Mystical Body gathers to celebrate the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Saviour, and should not to be lost in a few moments of something verging on hysteria. Liturgy is about the worship of Almighty God and the sanctification of the world, it has nothing to do with our being entertained by a priest masquerading as an out of place, second-rate comedian. Obedience to the Church is our security and our only defence. Once we take the law into our own hands, once we step outside her domain, we can't be taken seriously because we have disobeyed the truths we have been given. The mission of the Church—everyone talks about mission statements at the moment, everywhere you go—we have been having governors' meetings all week and it has all been about mission statement this, and mission statement that. I stood up and said “This is preposterous. Our Lord gave us the mission statement, ‘Go out and teach all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.’” That is the mission statement of us all as Christians. Let us make that our mission statement. We all share the mission of Our Blessed Lord. The Church takes this mission seriously, she exists for the sanctification and salvation of souls. This is her very function, nothing should prevent this. For this reason the Mass ends *Ite Missa est - Deo gratias*. Here is that living tradition of the Church at

work, the living tradition of the Church, after “Go you are sent” surely “Thanks be to God” is the most fitting response we can make. By it we are prepared to go out into the world and to take with us the Church's mission of teaching to all nations. We have been given the grace of the Mass, now let us take the message of the Gospel with us to bring others to join in this mystery. How can we bring people in when all they are going to get is a priest with Mickey Mouse ears on to amuse them.

The old Mass a priceless gift

So was my first experience of celebrating the Tridentine Mass the only reason for it seeming so awesome? No, not at all. I have celebrated it many times now and each time I am more aware of the priceless gift we have, more aware of the freedom and timeless nature of the worship of the Trinity. There is no need for any priest constantly to think up new ways of keeping people's attention, or any need to amuse the audience with funny stories. So many things have been thrown out of our churches; statues, vestments, music, and even choirs, let alone doctrine and the lack of prayer, the list is too long to contemplate. We have a duty to preserve beauty in all its forms. The Tridentine Mass is indeed one of those priceless treasures we have. It must not be forgotten, nor must the spiritual benefits be overlooked. This great gift must never be considered to be a thing of embarrassment for us. Be proud of the love you have for the old Mass, never be put down or ridiculed by those who have no knowledge of it, yet revel in criticising it.

Many priests are trying very hard to bring around a more dignified liturgy in their parishes and a sense of the sacred, and I can tell you that some of them suffer at the hands of other priests. Pray for them. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide them and keep them in their mission of trying to bring back the centrality of Christ and the Godhead into the Mass.

I encourage you to support all the efforts made on your behalf by the Latin Mass Society representatives. Do not take the opportunities you have for granted. I regret that I was not involved earlier because that experience of four years ago when we started the old Mass at English Martyrs taught me a lot. It made me re-think the position of the Mass, how important the Mass is. It isn't just something to fill in an hour on a Sunday morning. It has to be the centre of our lives. If the Mass is not the centre of our lives we are not going to be nourished, the mission of the Church is not going to be accomplished because we are not satisfied. Complacency is no help in bringing the old Mass back into the life of the Church. Do something about the love you have for the traditional Latin rite of Mass; for example, invite others to come with you to worship God with you, that they may see the treasure which Almighty

God has given us.

Let us take these thoughts with us, praying for the Holy Spirit's inspiration and courage, that we may not fear the new or the old, but always be watching in charity and firmness for the opportunity to speak of the beauty, the wonder, and the glory of the Latin rite of Mass, praying that it will continue to be said and bring Our Saviour to the altars of our churches, where He can instruct, lead, and inspire us to bring our country back to Him and so share once more in the beauty of the faith of our fathers.

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--Father Stephen Shield