

Western Culture and the Mass of the Roman Rite

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What is the relationship between the Mass of the Roman Rite (Understood as that Liturgical form in place from Pope St. Gregory the Great to the institution of the Mass of Pope Paul VI) and the culture of the West.

Now in a more general way, of course, the whole of western civilization is the child of Christianity. We owe this understanding to the many works of the great Christopher Dawson. Everything from food and clothing to art and architecture derives from the Christian world-view.

The Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* by a supernatural cause means that the cosmos is an intelligible artefact, the product of a divine mind and so knowable by our finite minds and thus science and rational inquiry are born. Contrast this with Eastern philosophies, which typically regard the cosmos as an illusion, or Greek philosophy which holds that the cosmos is eternal and the matter of which it is composed is irrational. The Greeks lacked the idea of creation, and so, in the end, reality is inexplicable. Thus it is no surprise that science and technology did not emerge from their culture. The medieval philosopher had a saying: God wrote two books, nature and the Bible. This basic intelligibility of the cosmos created, in turn, another unique Western institution-the university. As that name implies, because God is one, truth must also be one.

In the moral sphere, the fatherhood of God as maker of the Covenants entails the moral equality of his children and so in the West we see development of the concept of human right and the rule of law.

Even more fundamentally, what we might call the characteristic optimism of Western culture, its belief in progress, moral and material (Tempered always by the shadow of Original Sin) is a consequence of the idea of "Salvation history", that history has a point, a meaning and a destination, unlike cyclical theories of time common to Eastern and Greek philosophy.

Now how does all this relate to the “Mass of the Ages”?

There are two main points here:

1. The full meaning of history is revealed in the God-man. Hence, the perpetual representation in the Mass of Christ's sacrifice, at the same time, an ongoing revelation, deepening, and uncovering of God's plan in history.
2. The Mass effects the unity of the eternal and the temporal, time and eternity. The tabernacle thus houses the immediate presence of objective truth in the midst of a transient and perishable world. This is consonant with and greatly reinforces the characteristic (until recently) Western reality sense - that goodness, truth and beauty are objective properties of a real world. Arts and science, technology politics, economics and engineering, and above all morality, all partake of an objective, ever present reality. I am not arguing that this is in any way explicit in Western consciousness but that the liturgy which presents the eternal in the temporal has anchored the characteristic Western “Reality sense” and is thus causally linked with all of the institutions of Western culture.

In philosophical terminology, the Catholic Mass solves the ancient philosophical problem of the one and the many: How is it that the constant flux of nature presents itself to the human consciousness as a stable intelligible order? The puzzle is the doctrine of the incarnation/consecration: The one God is made incarnate in the transient appearance of created matter-and more: Something as transcending the speculation of philosophical theory, something entirely unexpected. In the reception of the sacrament in Holy Communion this unity is made to us most intimate, thereby overcoming subjectivity and scepticism. This means that any radical alteration in liturgy would have a profound effect on culture and conversely, anyone wishing to undermine Western Culture would naturally target that liturgical form which is at its source.

I am certainly not suggesting some sort of conscious plotting. But notice how those who deny the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist speak of this sacrament. They don't announce their disbelief with a shade of regret, or in profound anguish that they have struggled with the doctrine but, alas, cannot bring themselves to believe: “Oh what a beautiful doctrine, if only it were true!” No, their rejection is filled with contempt: “It's only a piece of bread, “Cookie worship”, “Playing with your food!” It's not merely that they don't believe the doctrine to be true, but they don't want it to be true.

In the years since the Second Vatican Council, the liturgical heart and soul of the Church has undergone an astonishing deformation. The *Novus Ordo*, and the controversy which has swirled around it for the past three decades, has a deeper significance than merely consternation over liturgical change. What reason did the Pope give for these dramatic and novel changes?

The most revealing document is the address of Pope Paul VI to a general audience of 26 November 1969. After lamenting the loss of the “beauty, power of Latin”, the Pope notes that :

“We are parting with the speech of Christian centuries; we are becoming like profane intruders in the literary precincts of Sacred utterance. We will lose a great part of that stupendous and incomparable artistic and spiritual thing, the Gregorian Chant. We have reason, indeed, for regret almost for bewilderment. What can we put in place of that language of the angels? We are giving up something of peerless worth. But why? What is more precious than the loftiest of our Church's values? The answer will seem banal, almost prosaic. Yet it is a good answer, because it is human, because it is apostolic.

Understanding of prayer is worth more than the silken garments in which it is royally dressed. Participation by the people is worth more—particularly by modern people, so fond of plain language which is easily understood and converted into everyday speech. If the divine Latin language kept us apart from the children, from youth, from the world of labor and affairs, if it were a dark screen, not a clean window, would it be right for the fishers of souls to retain it as the language of prayer?”

This is very sad and, most unfortunately, misguided, a fact which has become more apparent with each passing year. Paul VI declares the need to sacrifice the trans-historical, trans-cultural liturgy to the present needs (so perceived) of the historical moment. This revolutionary idea is in no way concealed by the Pope, even though it is rationalized as an apostolic necessity. Those who recall the times prior to Vatican II and those who have extensively read of them will recall that the great Fr. Faber's expression “The Mass of the Ages” was not merely a figure of speech. From childhood on it was made clear to all that this was the unchanging, immemorial Mass and that fact was the *anchor of the faith*. How often did we boast to non-Catholics that you could go anywhere in the world and the Mass would be exactly the same? How often were we exhorted to assist the work of the missionaries as they brought the saving sacraments of the Universal Church to the whole world? Our task was to

shape the whole world into the image of Christ the King of All Nations. The Roman Rite of Mass, the heart of Catholic life, was to shape the world

Now to this claim that the Mass is the effective cause of the ethos of Western Civilization, some have countered: Is not the Roman Rite itself a mere cultural form? Is not the Roman church an historical phenomenon? What is so special about Latin? What is so special about Rome? We now often hear of the need for “Inculturation”: accompanied by the charge that the traditional Mass is an effort to “Europeanize” the rest of the world. Such criticisms reflect a purely naturalistic way of thinking about the Mass, as if it were merely an instrument for achieving the ends of men, rather than the supernatural ends of God. Those who deny the particular status of the Roman Rite also typically deny the exclusive salvific powers of Christianity itself. This attitude (traceable to the French enlightenment and referred to as the “Scandal of particularity”) Alas, for the critics, this is precisely how God willed the salvation of the world.

The Jews were the chosen people, chosen to bear the first five covenants. In refusing the sixth, the new and eternal covenant, the Catholic Church became God's chosen people-chosen to bring the whole world into the new covenant. With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD the stage was set for Rome to become the “New Jerusalem”.

This expression is not a rhetorical flourish. The church fathers (And St. Thomas as well) affirm this point. The new Covenant supersedes the old. Latin replaces Hebrew as the sacred language. The sacred nature of Latin is clearly recognized in the earlier quotation from Paul VI. Then why does the Pope abandon the sacred language and liturgy? Because the needs of modern culture are said to require it. The immemorial Mass is no longer the vanguard of the new and eternal covenant, but is to be adapted as the voice of the historical moment. And with that the whole of Christianity becomes the plaything of history. Christ is not the King of all nations, but must sit at the round table of ecumenical gatherings as just the head of another denomination. The Roman Rite is not the “Mass of the Ages” and the Catholic Church is not the one true church.

Well then, what kind of liturgy shall we have in the new world? Romano Amerio answers this question:

“The new rite as actually celebrated, has been influenced by theological schools of thought that weaken the special ontological status of the ordained priest that attempt to enlarge the role of the people of God in worship at the expense of the sacred

functions of the priest, that make the meeting of the people more important than the act of consecration, and that promote the subjectivization and thus the instability of the whole of Christian worship. In this view, the essence of divine worship is no longer the unchanging sacrament, and a consequently unchanging worship, but rather a changing set of human feelings that demand expression, and that stamp upon the liturgy the mentality and customs of different peoples.”

The main thesis of this article is that the traditional liturgy effects an objective, transcendent, eternal truth in history, giving western Culture its special character. But as Amerio points out, the old liturgical form is replaced by one which de-emphasizes the objective, the theological, the transcendent, and replaces it with the psychological, the anthropological, the subjective, and the feelings, wants and needs of the community.

This of course is the fitting liturgy for post-modernist man. How may we briefly describe the post-modernist/post Christian culture? Prof. Stephen Block puts it this way:

What is to be done? First and foremost, the continued restoration of the old Mass as the first step in countering the subjectivism and relativism of post-modernism. This in turn, will put us back on the pathway to a robust sense of reality - Death, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory and the urgency of salvation.

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