

‘The Same Again Please’

Perhaps the following passages from The Master's 1962 essay "The Same Again, Please" (pp. 602-609 of *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*) will be of interest. It was written just as Vatican II was getting underway, and he hoped that it might have some influence on the English-speaking bishop. It appeared in America in Wm F. Buckley's journal *The National Review*.

I speak for no one but myself, but I believe I am fairly typical of English Catholics. The fact that I was brought up in another society does not embarrass me. I have been a Catholic for thirty-two of what are technically known as my 'years of reason'; longer, I think, than many of the progressives; moreover, I think that a large proportion of European Catholics, despite their baptisms and first communions, are in fact 'converts' in the sense that there came to them at some stage of adolescence or maturity the moment of private decision between acceptance and rejection of the Church's claims.

I believe that I am typical of that middle rank of the Church, far from her leaders, much farther from her saints; distinct, too, from the doubting, defiant, despairing souls who perform so conspicuously in contemporary fiction and drama. We take little part, except where our personal sympathies are aroused, in the public life of the Church, in her countless pious and benevolent institutions. We hold the creeds, we attempt to observe the moral law, we go to Mass on days of obligation and glance rather often at the vernacular translations of the Latin, we contribute to the support of the clergy. We seldom have any direct contact with the hierarchy. We go to some inconvenience to educate our children in our faith. We hope to die fortified by the last rites. In every age we have formed the main body of 'the faithful' and we believe that it was for us, as much as for the saints and for the notorious sinners, that the Church was founded. . .

The questions for discussion (at the Council) are a matter of speculation to all outside the inner circle but there is a persistent rumour that changes may be made in the liturgy. I lately heard the sermon of an enthusiastic, newly ordained priest who spoke of a 'great wind' that was to blow through us, sweeping away the irrelevant accretions of centuries and revealing the Mass in its pristine, apostolic simplicity; and as I considered his congregation, closely packed parishioners of a small country town, of whom I regarded myself as a typical member, I thought how little his aspirations corresponded with ours.

Certainly none of us had ambitions to usurp his pulpit. There is talk in northern Europe and the United States of lay theologians. Certainly a number of studious men have read deeply in theology and are free with their opinions, but I know of none whose judgment I would prefer to that of the simplest parish priest. Sharp minds may explore the subtlest verbal problems, but in the long routine of the seminary and the life spent with the Offices of the Church the truth is most likely to emerge. It is worth observing that in the two periods when laymen took the most active part in theological controversy, those of Pascal and Acton, the laymen were in the wrong.

Still less did we aspire to usurp his place at the altar. 'The Priesthood of the Laity' is a cant phrase of the decade and abhorrent to those of us who have met it. We claim no equality with our priests, whose personal failings and inferiorities (where they exist) serve only to emphasize the mystery of their unique calling. Anything in costume or manner or social habit that tends to disguise that mystery is something leading us away from the sources of devotion. The failure of the French 'worker priests' is fresh in our memories. A man who grudges a special and higher position to another is very far from being a Christian.

As the service proceeded in its familiar way I wondered how many of us wanted to see any change. The church is rather dark. The priest stood rather far away. His voice was not clear and the language he spoke was

not that of everyday use. This was the Mass for whose restoration the Elizabethan martyrs had gone to the scaffold. St Augustine, St Thomas a Becket, St Thomas More, Challoner and Newman would have been perfectly at their ease among us; were, in fact, present there with us. Perhaps few of us consciously considered this, but their presence and that of all the saints silently supported us. Their presence would not have been more palpable had we been making the responses aloud in the modern fashion.

It is not, I think, by a mere etymological confusion that the majority of English-speaking people believe that 'venerable' means 'old'. There is a deep-lying connection in the human heart between worship and age. But the new fashion is for something bright and loud and practical. It has been set by a strange alliance between archaeologists absorbed in their speculations on the rites of the second century, and modernists who wish to give the Church the character of our own deplorable epoch. In combination they call themselves 'liturgists' . . .

During the last few years we have experienced the triumph of the 'liturgists' in the new arrangement of the services for the end of Holy Week and for Easter. For centuries these had been enriched by devotions which were dear to the laity — the anticipation of the morning office of Tenebrae, the vigil at the Altar of Repose, the Mass of the Presanctified. It was not how the Christians of the second century observed the season. It was the organic growth of the needs of the people. Not all Catholics were able to avail themselves of the services but hundreds did, going to live in or near the monastic houses and making an annual retreat which began with Tenebrae on Wednesday afternoon and ended about midday on Saturday with the anticipated Easter Mass. During those three days time was conveniently apportioned between the rites of the Church and the discourses of the priest taking the retreat, with little temptation to distraction. Now nothing happens before Thursday evening. All Friday morning is empty. There is an hour or so in church on Friday

afternoon. All Saturday is quite blank until late at night. The Easter Mass is sung at midnight to a weary congregation who are constrained to 'renew their baptismal vows' in the vernacular and later repair to bed. The significance of Easter as a feast of dawn is quite lost, as is the unique character of Christmas as the Holy Night. I have noticed in the monastery I frequent a marked falling-off in the number of retreatants since the innovations, or, as the liturgists would prefer to call them, the restorations. It may well be that these services are nearer to the practice of primitive Christianity, but the Church rejoices in the development of dogma; why does it not also admit the development of liturgy?

There is a party among the hierarchy who wish to make superficial but startling changes in the Mass in order to make it more widely intelligible. The nature of the Mass is so profoundly mysterious that the most acute and holy men are continually discovering further nuances of significance. It is not a peculiarity of the Roman Church that much which happens at the altar is in varying degrees obscure to most of the worshippers. It is in fact the mark of all the historic, apostolic churches. In some the liturgy is in a dead language such as Ge'ez or Syriac; in others in Byzantine Greek or Slavonic which differs greatly from the current speech of the people. . .

I think it is highly doubtful whether the average churchgoer either needs or desires to have complete intellectual, verbal comprehension of all that is said. He has come to worship, often dumbly and effectively. In most of the historic churches the act of consecration takes place behind curtains or doors. The idea of crowding round the priest and watching all he does is quite alien there. It cannot be pure coincidence that so many independent bodies should all have evolved in just the same way. Awe is the natural predisposition to prayer. When young theologians talk, as they do, of Holy Communion as a 'social meal' they find little response in the hearts or minds of their less sophisticated brothers.

No doubt there are certain clerical minds to whom the behaviour of the laity at Mass seems shockingly unregimented. We are assembled in obedience to the law of the Church. The priest performs his function in exact conformity to rule. But we — what are we up to? Some of us are following the missal, turning the pages adroitly to introits and extra collects, silently speaking all that the liturgists would like us to utter aloud and in unison. Some are saying the rosary. Some are wrestling with refractory children. Some are rapt in prayer. Some are thinking of all manner of irrelevant things until intermittently called to attention by the bell. There is no apparent togetherness'. Only in heaven are we recognizable as the united body we are. It is easy to see why some clergy would like us to show more consciousness of one another, more evidence of taking part in a social 'group activity'. Ideally, they are right but that is to presuppose a very much deeper spiritual life in private than most of us have achieved.

If, like monks and nuns, we arose from long hours of meditation and solitary prayer for an occasional excursion into social solidarity in the public recitation of the office, we should, unquestionably, be leading the full Christian life to which we are dedicated. But that is not the case. Most of us, I think, are rather perfunctory and curt in our morning and evening prayers. The time we spend in church — little enough — is what we set aside for renewing in our various ways our neglected contact with God. It is not how it should be, but it is, I think, how it has always been for the majority of us and the Church in wisdom and charity has always taken care of the second-rate. . .