

The Freed Mass, the Formless Society and the Second Front

By Dr. John Rao



Last month, standing in front of the Church of St. Agnes in New York City, I ran into a fellow traditionalist to whom I expressed my joy over the motu proprio. “Well, if you are hopeful about it”, she responded, then it really must mean something!”

That comment upset me a great deal, because I always believed that the Church---as the Bride of Christ---would eventually come back to her senses regarding the liturgy. When I look over my past writings, I see that I have regularly argued that Catholics, justly outraged and horrified by contemporary evils though they were, should nevertheless maintain their calm and patience amidst all the turmoil. For the lesson of previous historical crises seemed to be that ecclesiastical disasters generally were set right, and that hopes for a change for the better were sometimes even rewarded during the lifetime of those who had witnessed the beginnings of a particular nightmare.

So why my acquaintance’s surprise that I thought that something good had actually happened? Who knows? Perhaps that shock came from an unjustifiable equation of my truly deep alarm over the dangers emanating from our political and social order with hopelessness regarding the internal constitution and vigor of Catholicism. This equation would not be unusual, given the fact that for many of our fellow believers, doubts about the beneficence of our way of life is tantamount to lack of faith in the divine promise given by Christ to His Church.

Thankfully, Catholicism and the spirit behind the American system are not consubstantial. And it is precisely because I place such profound hopes in the former that I wish to drive home the utter hopelessness of faith in the latter. As far as I am concerned, the encouragement of alarm regarding the guiding principles of our political and social realm is the sine qua non for allowing the great promise of the motu proprio to have its full impact.

Allow me for just a moment to explore this future promise, moving beyond the old hopes that Pope Benedict’s document satisfied in order to identify some sound new ones. I think that I can do this with reasonable conviction. For what we were given in Summorum Pontificum was more than “just” freedom for the Mass. What we obtained was more than a “mere” recognition of the justice that was owed to that traditional liturgy after its unprecedented savaging. What we were blessed with in this document was the beginning of a return to an historically identifiable, truly pastoral language boding well for the recovery of the full Catholic vision of the need to restore all things in Christ.

The Church abandoned her familiar linguistic territory to move into a strange rhetorical jungle in the 1960's. She entered it as an amateur and seriously misled explorer, destined to be pounced upon and manipulated by the savage inhabitants who knew their way around the place and how to wield its tongue effectively. This rhetorical jungle is an Hegelian zoo where the True, the Good and the Beautiful are said to be in constant flux, destined for redefinition by the irresistible demands of the ever-changing democratic spirit of the times. But the perennially fluid spirit of those times, disguised as democratic through repetition of glib mantras by time-serving Word Merchants in search of big time bucks, has always, in reality, meant whatever the strongest individual and group fantasies and self-interests have decided the popular will ought to be.

In entering this rhetorical Heart of Darkness the Church invited Apocalypse Now. Everything that was most essential to her supernatural and historical reality could be declared "surpassed" by the requirements of a new age with a "higher consciousness"---i.e., the latest desires of the ideology-and-money-driven powers-that-be. The discarding of any given doctrine and custom logically brought with it the need for crushing other related ones. All of the traditional arguments that could be logically and theologically mobilized to defend the embattled patrimony were condemned by the new, esoteric rhetoric as meaningless and absurd, since the structure of familiar rational and theological discourse had also been "surpassed" along the same Hegelian lines. A "fresh" dialectic was now the norm, one that a sane Catholic mind could not understand and master, since it ran totally counter to the teaching of philosophical realism, traditional theology, historical experience and the testimony of one's very eyes and ears. If a normal believer did try to use this distorted logic and speech, he became trapped in confusions and in contradictions, opening himself up to the ridicule of the experts in jungle argumentation. Anyone seeking an historical example of the bewilderment and madness such a predicament can cause should look to the pathetic mumblings of King Louis XVI, forced to defend his actions as a monarch and as a Catholic in the hostile idiom of a Rousseau, a Danton and a Robespierre. The horror, the horror, indeed.

But the *motu proprio's* focus on spiritual and legal respect for Tradition has once again placed the pastoral rhetoric of the Church back in recognizable Catholic and, one ought to emphasize, classical Socratic territory. It has pulled the basic speech of the Body of Christ out of the rhetorical Heart of Darkness. It has had the audacity to speak of history and of real sociological evidence---such as the number of young people attending the traditional mass. It has had the courage to place justice above the arbitrary and hypocritical will of the strong and their smooth-talking, spirit-

interpreting agents. If I can make an analogy, it has once again deployed the Catholic past behind the people and the pope, so that all may face the real problems of life as one unified force---just as the traditional mass places congregation behind the priest in one unified act of worship of the Triune God.

Yes, there is a bit of “invented history” in the motu proprio’s discussion of the reason for our forty years’ wandering in the desert. From what I remember, Paul VI did not merely fail to anticipate the strength of attachment to the Traditional Mass. Rather, he was enthusiastically committed to a liturgical revolution which he knew and expressly indicated would offend pious people. He himself supported a vision of history whose very essence would require unending future changes to suit new manifestations of the insatiable “spirit of the times”. Full respect for the historical record---something one can find in Michael Davies’ books on the subject---would not only require noting such truths. It would also demand admission of the fact that even if the old rite were never legally abrogated, the authorities did everything in their power to make the laity believe that it had been, and that those who did not accept this reality were disobedient obscurantists.

Still, these are the games that institutions, including divine institutions with a human side, regularly play. The rediscovery by the Church of her proper pathway after a vacation in Never Never Land is generally a messy, halting, and not fully honest affair. It almost never takes place in one, clean, action-packed, cinema-like scene. Very frequently, embarrassment and prudence lead her to seek to save appearances by ignoring or misrepresenting what really happened during past nightmares that she sincerely winces over now and wishes to forget. An article that I wrote several years ago for Seattle Catholic explored this psychological state in some detail in relation to the overcoming of the horrors of the Great Western Schism.

Historical game-playing, painful though it can be, is a minor blemish on the flesh of Summorum Pontificum compared to the significance of its return to traditional forms and familiar words in its pastoral language. The potential number of glorious consequences stemming from such a remarkable and courageous recovery of a rhetoric pronounced irrevocably dead by the powerful of this world is great. Under the guidance of this form of speech, Catholics could find themselves logically led not from one fanciful and destructive change to another, but from the rehabilitation of one rooted and helpful tradition to the next. This could have the magnificent effect of exposing the jungle rhetoricians who have dominated the Church for the past forty years, now forced to deal once again with a rhetoric based on tradition, history and realism, for the bullies and manipulators of “the democratic spirit of the times” that they really are. It could transform them into pathetic figures stumbling to justify their

Hegelian thoughts and actions in a realm whose lingua franca was once more an understandable Catholic idiom. And it could result, eventually, in the full clarification of the historical record, with the analysis of men like Michael Davies shown to be correct and finally given their proper place of honour.

Yes, all this could take effect, quite naturally, if the Church could be left to her own devices. Unfortunately, this valley of tears is not the best of all possible worlds, and, as a result, the Church will not be left to work out her future relying on her own internal strengths. She has to contend with the impact on her life of an outside political and social order whose dominant spirit is intensely hostile to her very survival (much less her revival); an environment which the tradition the Church is now engaged in recovering teaches her must itself be transformed in Christ.

Allow me to specify the problem with the dominant spirit of that outside world by first calling attention to a magnificent gathering that I attended at the Church of Our Saviour in New York City on September 9th. A number of groups and individuals were involved in preparing this event, including the Society of St. Hugh of Cluny, dedicated to implementation of the *motu proprio*, the superb Saint Gregory Society of New Haven, which has done so much for the cause of good church music for many years already, and one of the sharpest traditionalists in the whole of the movement, Mr. Stuart Chessman. It began with a Solemn High Traditional Mass, which made me think what the joy over the Resurrection of the Dead might be like, given that I saw in attendance practically everyone whom I have known to be involved in the struggle for the liturgy over the past forty years. Following the Mass, Fr. Uwe Michael Lang, author of *Turning Towards the Lord*, a scholarly discussion of orientation in worship, gave a brief and deeply insightful presentation on *Summorum Pontificum*. He did this in the context of introducing Mr. Martin Mosebach, a highly-renowned German man of letters, whose defense of the traditional liturgy, *Heresy of Formlessness*, has just recently won his nation's highest literary award. Mr. Mosebach then read selections from his book and answered questions from the packed audience in the church undercroft.

The evils---the heresy---of a committed, evangelical formlessness in the liturgy is Mr. Mosebach's chief theme, and one which he develops in an extremely readable and extraordinarily valuable manner. Formlessness can never assure the proper worship of God. Form and beauty, Mr. Mosebach explains, are not suspect, aesthetic "extras" in establishing man's correct relationship to his Creator. They are an essential element in identifying and maintaining that relationship, and pointing the way to a myriad of other theological and natural truths while doing so. Hence, Mr. Mosebach's delight

in the return of the Traditional Mass, which reveals such a profound respect for form and beauty developed organically through the ages.

Our political and social order thrives on formlessness and sees in any attempt to establish forms and norms with claims to transcendent and universal significance a dagger aimed at its heart. Formlessness is at the very essence of that fanatical pluralism whose gospel of liberty and toleration places endless searching and endless flux above civilization and culture building of all kinds. Some of our pluralist masters actually believe in the value of this formless emptiness. Some give lip service to it because of the fact that its “doctrineless doctrines” serve their self-interests, keeping at bay that interference with their materialist, property-accumulating enterprises which form, meaning, morality and culture building authorities have always brought along with them.

Formless pluralism, joyfully open to the acceptance of everything except that which has real substantive structure and content, knows that Catholicism is its chief enemy--John Locke, one of its most important founders, said as much already at the beginning of the eighteenth century. While the false but potent religion of Islam does also present this empty beast a problem today, a revived Roman Catholicism must always remain its most formidable and fearful foe. Hence its need to nip any Catholic rediscovery and recommitment to the fullness of its forms and its faith in the proverbial bud. Hence its mobilization of all of the myths and the images that it has successfully used over the years of its dominance in order to try to frighten people away from the “evil” consequences of a Catholicism with real bite. Hence, to take but one obvious example, the equation of the return of the Traditional Mass with antisemitism, Hitler, the Second World War, genocide and probably high cholesterol as well.

If nothing drastic happens politically or socially, the formless pluralist world outside will probably not take drastic action to halt the forward advance of the form-filled Traditional Mass. It does not take the incalculable effect of grace seriously. It does not focus its attention on possible changes in the hearts of spiritually and intellectually curious individuals. It knows that most Catholics, under normal conditions, are as co-opted by the system and tired out from the increasing work demanded of them to survive within it. It knows that so long as some sort of stability remains, many of those who might be attracted to the Traditional Mass would be content with what could be labeled Romano-Anglicanism, a clubhouse Catholicism, happy with its possession of a decent liturgy, but unmoved by the idea of transforming all things in Christ. That prognostication seems to be borne out by the arguments and behavior of Catholic libertarians and conservatives, for whom the formless emptiness

of the political and social order, at least with respect to economics and warfare, appear to be sacred.

But what if the situation changes drastically from one moment to the next? Due to yet another disastrous war or an economic collapse? History abounds with illustrations of such things happening practically overnight. No one in Paris, Berlin, London and Vienna on July 28th, 1914 imagined that he would be sleeping in a tent praying madly for his life a couple of weeks later. Under such conditions, the appeal of the different, form-and-substance-filled Traditional Mass and the idea of Christ as king of man and society might very easily grow as swiftly as militant Islam has done. Masses of men and women, and not just astute individuals would then be touched by the Gospel message. At that point our desperate, evangelical, pluralist masters would rapidly display their true colors more viciously, and their willingness to use violent means to render the promise of the *motu proprio* for the full restoration of the Catholic vision meaningless would become crystal clear. So would their ability to count on help from disgruntled Catholic rhetoricians from the Heart of Darkness.

Michael Davies' hopes for help from Cardinal Ratzinger seem to me to have been amply justified by the facts. Further hope for the cause of the Church is also valid. Still, the tradition of that Church in which we place our legitimate hope tells us that we must treat the political and social conditions in which she carries out her mission seriously. If the spirit behind those conditions is a bad one; if it emasculates Catholic action under "normal" circumstances and seeks to crush it entirely under desperate ones, hopes placed in its beneficence are a recipe for disaster.

Victory on the liturgical front must be followed up by intensification of the hunt for victory on a Second Front; the Front fighting for political and social transformation in Christ. Does battle on this Second Front seem practically impossible at the moment? Well, then, why not try, at least, to make a theoretical, personal break with subservience to and praise of formless pluralism as an idea? Momentary practical impotence does not require embrace and active collaboration with the enemy. And an intellectual and spiritual break with a "doctrineless doctrine" that hates and kills the Catholic vision makes a more powerful and irritating statement to its supporters than one might think. Once you experience what happens when your preferential option for a form-filled order of things becomes known to the people around you you will see exactly what I mean.