

Growing Up in the (Modern) Liturgical Movement

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My earliest memories are of singing – everything from Negro spirituals and Disney tunes to Baptist hymns and patriotic songs. Music was always part of our home, as was religion, but in a way in which it all seemed perfectly normal and never showy. Growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, I was raised close to Bob Jones University, not surprisingly, as a fundamentalist Baptist. My father was the devout one, my mother much more of the Emily Dickinson “some keep the Sabbath going to church/I keep it staying at home” type. Sunday School was my favourite time of week, as we memorized the King James Version of the Bible and I learned to speak to God in Jacobean English and sing little songs about Jesus. But, always the inquisitive child, I wondered whether there was anything else out there beyond my own experience of the world. I loved astronomy, and tried mightily hard to imagine what eternity and what infinity were like. In other words, I searched for all of the omni- adjectives of God, as far as my childlike imagination could handle.

I never really liked the Gospels; the adventure stories in the Historical Books and Prophets fired my mind up, but one day, having heard that there was such a thing as Palm Sunday, I broke off a crape myrtle branch in my front yard and waved it in the air and imagined myself at the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. I was eight years old, and I had discovered that the human spirit had the need to re-enact in some way the events of salvation history. My parents just thought that I was an over-imaginative child,

and were content to see me also planning conquests of empires from the trees around the house.

But the empires I would conquer were almost purely intellectual ones: I loved languages and music and art and my insatiable curiosity made me wonder why other people were different. I spent a lot of time in the public library, which to me was as special as the Library of Alexandria, and I pored over tome after tome of wisdom from the ages. I studied Buddhism very seriously, as well as Judaism. But where was Jesus? Where could He be found? And if He could, did I really want to meet Him?

I was baptized at the precocious, for Baptists, age of eight, but my questions about who this Jesus was went unanswered as I continued to fabricate my own creeds and rites. Finally, I happened upon a great discovery: the *Book of Common Prayer*. What is a Liturgical Calendar? What was Holy Thursday? I realized, to the deflation of my then eleven-year old ego, that I had not indeed invented Palm Sunday, and I was entranced by the notion of a little book of prayer, common prayer. I saved all of my allowance for weeks to buy a nice leather bound version that I read over and over again. But in the meantime I had also discovered that the Catholics had a Bible with more books in it, and as I turned my all-encompassing voracious appetite to Catholicism, I discovered that there was a Church out there which believed things that I thought I was the only person in the world believed!

Not to recount the details of my conversion process, but at the age of twelve, I entered a Catholic Church for the very first time, St Mary's, Greenville, which I am now happy to serve as Parochial Vicar. It blew me away: this was the House of God! I did not know what a tabernacle was, but I knew that God lived here as surely as He was present in the Shekinah Cloud of Glory and in the Temple, if not more. I was deposited in the

choir loft so I could see everything, and I knew that I was home. The liturgy had enchanted me, and, reading the Articles of Religion in my *Book of Common Prayer*, I decided to abandon the half-way house of Anglicanism and enter the Church of All Ages.

I had been to mass twice and was in the pews singing lustily. I had not noticed that the thronged church was relatively silent, and my teenage baritone voice must have carried much too far, since the Organist asked me to begin to sing in the Choir. But I wasn't even a Catholic, I was too young. It didn't matter. And so I embarked on the great journey of singing Gregorian chant, English hymns, Victorian era polyphony, as well as the great composers. And in due time, I became a Catholic on a Holy Thursday night, and wept my way through my First Holy Week as if it were the greatest week of my life, which it was.

St Mary's at the time was a pretty standard parish. Not a hotbed of zeal, but not totally tired, either. The old English monsignor with his stately presence lent an austere air to the liturgy in a church, but I discovered, much to my distaste, that there were other parishes which did things a little more on the "contemporary" side of things. I entered high school and continued to live and breathe liturgy and music. I went to a chant conference at a Trappist abbey, and one morning, stumbled onto a monk celebrating the Missal of 1962, which I had read about but never seen. The next day, I served my first Latin Mass, and concentrated my energies on learning more about the classical Roman rite.

But pastors come and go, and an Irish monsignor came who was very much "with it." The people loved him, but I began to hate going to Mass. Altar girls came in, pop music, an air of informality. I had become a Catholic because of what I believed, but before my eyes I began to see a liturgy which increasingly did not reflect my belief. I

would go to the least offensive early morning mass and then off to the Anglicans or the Orthodox for liturgy, but my heart could never accept the sad situation of things. My first Holy Thursday I cried tears of joy for being welcomed into the Roman Church and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. A few Holy Thursdays later would find me in front of the Repository weeping tears of rage after having fought with the priest over endless liturgical abuses. I became more and more upset, and began to drift into the Lefebvrist logic of things as I knelt in the back of a church during a Life Teen Mass, reciting my Tridentine breviary as kids my age cavorted around the altar being relevant and cool. I was very disheartened.

But there was an older lady who went to Daily Mass at St Mary's who used to keep tabs on me. She realized my distress, especially as I went to Mass to receive the sacraments even as I thought around me, "Nobody cares about God, the Church, the Mass," and ignored what was going on around me with some form of liturgy repellent, an old missal, the rosary, anything to distract me from the endless abuses and more common boredom of it all. I was approaching college, and had won a scholarship to study philosophy at Catholic University of America, but she said I should go where her kids went, Christendom College.

I was not sold on the idea. As a graduate of the International Baccalaureate program, I was expected to go to an Ivy League school, or at least a respectable place. Who had ever heard of a college that most people could not even pronounce? But I knew that there was certain Fr Robert Skeris there, whose articles I had devoured in the journal *Sacred Music*. And I was told by the people there that here at last was a place where my liturgical spirituality could be developed.

I had no idea how much! I arrived at Christendom in 1995 a mess: my public school education and background had left me far more liberal than I had ever realized, but I had accepted by that point the extreme Lefebvrist analysis of the crisis in the Church. But then again, my experience had been so limited. And so I came to a school where the Mass was chanted every day in Latin, and other college students with great piety and devotion lived their faith in full consonance with the tradition. I began to study Gregorian chant and polyphony of the *scuola romana* and sing it on a daily basis. I had a place where All Night Adoration started with a Holy Hour of motets and ancient prayers and litanies on First Friday and stretched all the way to a procession in honour of the Blessed Virgin the next morning.

Fr Skeris was responsible for much of that. This was a man who, had the Church not undergone a revolution, might have been a prince of the Church. But he was nonetheless one for me and his adoring fans at the College. His was an understated, scholarly, manly piety, never showy, effete, or radical. But when he took the pulpit or the lectern in church or in the aula, he imparted to us the living tradition of the liturgy. He demanded nothing less than the best, and not one's personal best, but *the* best. His students were fanatically devoted to this man who introduced us to the way of liturgical and musical perfection.

The college was divided between the traditionalists and the reform of the reformers, and even had its own smattering of uncomfortable charismatics, but what fed it during those years was the liturgy. Amidst my classical languages and philosophy, I studied anything and everything liturgical as if my very life depended on it. Pius Parsch, Ildefons Herwegen, Odo Casel, Romano Guardini, Prosper Gueranger: they all became friends to us and alive for us just as much as Plato, Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas.

My interest in the classical Roman rite led to a fateful decision to get in a car with seven guys and ride up to the Seminary of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter in Scranton, Pennsylvania, for my first Easter Triduum in the Old Rite. All at once I was exposed to the riches of the Roman liturgy all at its zenith: the tonus *Wigratzbadiensis* for the Genesis reading at the Vigil, the Mozarabic Lamentations for *Tenebrae*, watching before the tabernacle in the seminary chapel reading Francois Mauriac's *Holy Thursday*, and Solemn High Mass on Easter Sunday. We kept going back, and word of our experiences got around so that, four years later, I led over seventy kids to the seminary then in the hands of the Society of St John. My enthrallment with the traditional Roman liturgy was complete.

It was during my time at Christendom, hanging around with so many priests and religious and other young men and women in discernment, that I began to mature the idea of a vocation to the priesthood, but I had no idea what to do. I had become enflamed with the ideals of the classical liturgical movement, I had spent much of my time among Catholics attached to the Latin and Eastern rites, so much so that I felt just more at home among the Melkites and the Russians than I did when I went home to Greenville. I had a great interest in the Canons Regular of Premontre, or Norbertines, and my interest in liturgy was paralleled only by that of monastic and canonical spirituality and theology. Fr Skeris suggested that I contact Fr Frank Phillips, who was pastor of St John Cantius in Chicago.

The time that I spent with Fr Phillips was amazing. I was able to see the ideals of the Liturgical Movement, not as nice goals presented in a classroom and lived in an academic community, but incarnate in the living reality of a parish brought back from the dead by the power of a life-giving liturgy. As he began, at the request of Cardinal

George, a community of canons, I rejoiced at the ability to share in a tradition which had been lovingly handed down from Martin Hellriegel to Fr Phillips and then to myself. I began to see myself as just that – an heir to something very precious and beautiful, and I realized that my draughts at the spring of the Liturgical Movement were forming me into a person very different than most young Catholics today.

I had grandiose ideas of myself as a modern apostle of liturgy, beauty, sacred music, and theology, but no idea where to go. Two days after my college graduation, I got on a plane and walked the traditional pilgrimage from Paris to Chartres. Pentecost Sunday in the middle of a *bois* outside of Chartres, with a tent for a baldachin over the altar, I assisted at Solemn High Mass with Latin Rite youth from all over the world. I never felt as connected to the entire Catholic world and all of its glorious history as in that moment. As the soft rain mingled with the strains of heavily French-accented chant, we knelt in the mud as scouts with yellow and white umbrellas accompanied the priests holding ciboria to distribute the King of Kings to those of us sinking in the muck holding white linen cloths, waiting to receive onto our tongues the Saviour of the World. But never had I felt so far away from Greenville, from that church where I first believed in and received the Real Presence. I needed to be in Europe, in Catholic Christendom.

I moved to Rome after that and entered the Monastic Experience at the priory of *Sedes Sapientiae* under the direction of Fr Cassian Folsom, OSB, who at that time was Pro-President of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute. The community now resides in the birthplace of St Benedict, the town of Norcia nestled in the hills of Umbria, but at that time roughed it in an apartment on the Aventine close to Sant'Anselmo. The excitement of learning to use the *Antiphonale Monasticum*, the joy at singing the Office and Mass all day long in Latin and chant, the wonder at speaking Italian, made up for the brutal Roman

heat, noise and chaos. But as I spent my days raking leaves and washing dishes and yawning my way through Matins, I realised that my monastic dreams were only the product of an overly Romantic notion of things, a notion far from the sturdy meat given to me by Fr Skeris and Fr Philips. But South Carolina, with its haughty Protestants, with its unrefined provincialism, with its tepid Catholicism, repelled me. Twenty-one years old and the heir to so much, and nowhere to go. I went on retreat at Le Barroux, and there, amidst the beauty of monastic life, the scent of lavender and the buzz of busy bees distracting me from my prayers in the Provencal piece of heaven on earth, I had to admit that the monastic way was not mine.

I returned to Rome to set up shop, no less disavowed of my Romantic notions, confident that I was embarking on a great adventure in the heart of the true Christendom. But, as my circle of Italophile classicist and archeologist friends noticed, Rome “sucks the liturgy out you,” and I was reminded of Adrian Fortescue’s scathing asides at the Roman scene. Heretofore I had been in a world which really was, to borrow from Waugh’s Charles Ryder, “insular and medieval.” I had accepted the Pugin dogma of Catholic liturgy and life without question, and the existential struggle between Catholic identity and Protestant iconoclasm had marked my soul so that the Baroque and neo-classical splendour of the Eternal City failed to elicit in me any response.

But I did have my “conversion to the Baroque,” and I found myself for the first time adopted by a circle of high-powered intellectuals and aesthetes for whom Rome was their very life and blood, and who pined for the very rigorous Catholic education I had received even as I coveted their knowledge and culture. I frequented Low Mass at the Gesù e Maria, meeting the Institute of Christ the King, served High Masses at S. Gregorio dei Muratori, and spent hours at all of the Eastern rite colleges in the City. I did study, at

Santa Croce, where I was introduced to Opus Dei and to its piety, which was so refreshingly unpolemical and Eucharistic. I went to papal masses and important Jubilee events, and volunteering at the US Bishops' Office for Visitors to the Vatican, I was able to take advantage of all that the Jubilee Year was to offer. Midnight Mass and the Te Deum with the Pope, surviving Y2K in St Peter's Square, the whole course of events in that sacred year.

During Advent of that year, I made my way to the famous Abbey of Sant'Antimo, where a group of French canons had taken over a Carolingian Romanesque church in Tuscany. I was despondent at this point: what was I to do? I have never been so cold in my life, as my teeth chattered through the O Antiphons in that austere church which the simple purple vestments coloured. But my spiritual father, Fra Davide, took me in front of the tabernacle and told me, "the most important thing is for you to become a priest, and when you go back to Rome, that will become clear."

I returned to Rome and ended up meeting the newly consecrated Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina, Robert Baker. At the end of our meeting, he asked me to come home to my diocese to study for the priesthood. Was this the door through which my destiny invited? Did it mean the end of my dalliance with things East and (old) West? Did it mean going back to what I had scorned and feared? Or was it Providence? Was I to forever relinquish the dream to do something beautiful for God by helping to restore the Liturgical Movement?

Some weeks later a young priest from the diocese, Fr Jay Scott Newman, found me in my office; the Bishop had sent him to receive my answer to the invitation. I spent an agonising hour in the Church of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix round the corner from Trevi Fountain, before I turned in my application, convinced that I could not

cross back over the Atlantic to where I had already burned too many bridges with my youthful zeal.

Scarcely back in the diocese, having crucified my ambitions for what seemed to be the Will of God, I was assigned to become the twenty-third American to ever go to the Pope's seminary for the diocese of Rome, the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary at St John Lateran. My liturgical education had to take a back seat to my formation as a priest, lived in an environment in which the Liturgical Movement had never taken hold. Exteriorly, the seminary preserved much of the old Tridentine seminary discipline, and the rigidly hierarchical traditions of the oldest seminary in the world were scrupulously followed. But any form of singularity was ruthlessly expunged, and I learned very quickly that the survival of my vocation depended on conformity to a Roman way of doing things which did not admit of multicultural, or any other exceptions. My classes at the Gregorian were a disappointment after the vibrant orthodoxy of Christendom, and the lack of enthusiasm of the Italians for anything which I loved was excruciating. I had little possibility to keep up my contacts "over the wall" as I lived a rarified existence in an Italian seminary. For the Italians, I was too American and too conservative, for the Americans, I was too Italian and too unconventional.

When I came to the Roman Seminary in 2000, we still had mass *ad orientem* with a low tabernacle on the altar so that mass could be celebrated in the 1965 modern church on either side. We still had Latin and chant, badly done, but there was the idea that the pope's seminary had to be the best at anything. Our intimate involvement both with the Diocese of Rome in the parishes and in the Vatican at special liturgies meant that we had a special view of what was going on. The idea was to form us in everything from what had then become high basilica liturgy to youth masses, and we were expected to conform

accordingly. I remember sneaking in a copy of Ratzinger's *Spirit of the Liturgy* in the dustjacket of an encyclical of Paul VI on peace and justice to Adoration so I wouldn't be singled out for being one of those detested *lefebvriani*, which had become a tag for anyone who didn't think with the system.

But my being the only American singled me out plenty, and I soon formed lasting bonds with other right-praising men in the seminary. Covert late-night chapter meetings filled with readings of Baldeschi and Menghini, drooling over old chant texts and battling it out at the refectory table with our opponents merited us heavy manual labour as our punishment. The seminary had two cliques, the *freschi*, the "fresh" who were those more interested in things liturgical and beautiful, and the *skert*, from a Pugliese word for "reject", who were totally uninterested in those things. And the orthodoxy-heterodoxy meter spanned both groups. But the *Capitolo*, consciously modeled on the Chapters of the Roman Basilica and the Curia, sought to rise above the cliques as a group of clerics fully Roman, fully traditional, fully spiritual in motivation. I was christened Ratzinger, and my title was Prefect of the Holy Office, of course, and we had everything from the Patriarch of Venice to the Macebearer of the Lateran Basilica. The superiors always assigned the grunt work to us, and we never complained about the fact that the seminary would have been run into the ground if it weren't for our slave labour.

As I spent thirty hours a week in the kitchen amidst all of the other duties, the other like-minded men and I sang those banned polyphonic motets from Perosi and operarias from Rossini as the *macchina* which did the dishes for a community of 200 drowned out the din of loud Roman seminarians. I had the chance to explore what the Roman basilica liturgy was really like, what it was like, what it should be like. The Roman scene was fascinating even if it was depressing: the old and the new coexisted with no attempt

at a *Gestalt*. I was trained in the old school of Italian bishops, whose sense of propriety and tradition mixed with familiarity and ease so contrasted to the stuffy bureaucratic behaviour of so many American bishops. St Peter's and the Lateran became home, such that the gossip between the *ceremonieri* of the papal corps and the Basilicas was as important to the seminarians as the announcement of Episcopal appointments. Walking into the sacristy of St Peter's and knowing the kids from the pre-Seminary of St Pius X who served the morning masses, having the ironic experience of serving as MC to Archbishop Marini during an English Mass at Santa Susanna, and the incessant round of important liturgies, made my Roman education a memorable one, even as I pined for the day when I too could celebrate the Divine Mysteries with all of the sufferings of Tiresias and the piety of Padre Pio.

I used my vacation times for liturgical traveling: a glorious Easter in the Stefansdom in Vienna, with its delightful conversations with Cardinal Schonborn in his chapel; a quiet Christmas at the monastery of St Joseph in Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, with the Christmas Proclamation burned into my memory as it was sung by an incense-swathed monk in cope behind a grille; Holy Week at Gricigliano and Wigratzbad; singing the Silos tones for the Lamentations before the Guido Reni altarpiece at the Church of Santissima Trinitá dei Pellegrini.

During the summers, I would return to South Carolina and began to give a class every summer called *The Vision Glorious: The Theology and History of Sacred Art and Music*. It changed every year, but was still very much appreciated by the faithful, many of whom had never heard that there was a real theology behind the way liturgy is celebrated. My first summer was particularly memorable, because it was then that Fr Newman became the Pastor of my parish in Greenville. Scarcely had the old pastor driven out of

the parking lot, Fr Newman moved the tabernacle to the central axis of the church and the man known as “the Colonel” by some of his Roman friends began to whip the parish into shape. I constantly heard of the great things going on in Greenville: orthodox preaching, good music, beautiful liturgy. Fr Newman closed the church down and did an expensive but needed restoration as St Mary’s was awakened from a deep sleep and came alive. I came home from the Roman Seminary to find young men interested in vocations and the spiritual life, and a sanctuary resplendent with young men and boys who really loved Our LORD and the sacred liturgy. My time there was brief each vacation, but what a transformation, in such a short time.

Meanwhile my seminary formation proceeded apace, and, submerged into the Roman world, I began to develop a much more critical stance towards what many of the Americans were saying about Rome and the liturgy. There was so much hope, so much expectation that “Rome would just do something,” but as the names and places in the Roman Curia became for me more than just names and places, I realized the extent to which the great hope was much too premature. Guys in the seminary who were my age who had received their First Communions at a communion rail during a Latin Mass in Puglia in the early 1990s, who had worn cassock, biretta and surplice in a minor seminary in the mid 1990s in Calabria, who had been raised amidst the galaxy of Italian processions, devotions and traditions in the late 1990s in Bergamo, entered the New millennium with the idea that *antico* was a disease and the Church had to be *moderno* to survive. The superiors played a constant tug of war between the alumni of every generation, diocesan officials and parish priests, Curial officials and the desire to be a house of formation for the clergy of Rome. What it meant in practice is a schizophrenia which led to guitar masses with Latin chants in a modern chapel where the tabernacle

moved constantly and where the solemnity of the feast was still measured on how glitzy the Roman chasuble and how high the lace of the celebrant's alb.

One of the standards of classical art theory is that it is *form* which is indispensable to the beauty of an object. But in the parishes in the city of Rome, in the basilicas, in the seminary, form of any kind was snuffed out by competing ideologies, and as they competed, I struggled along to preserve and hand down some of what I had received. Relegated to singing chant alone in my room when the superiors were away, studying liturgical texts at cafes with friends and clandestinely meeting with men of spiritual caliber in the city, it was a trying time. But it was nonetheless rewarding. I came to love the Christmas Novena at St Mary Major, seeking out the *Regem venturum Dominum* in the gallery of the Sistine Chapel there before running back to the seminary for Vespers. I came to look forward to the Novena of the Immaculate Conception with its haunting *Tota pulchra es, Maria*; to the Feast of the Presentation as we sang the *Lumen ad revelationem gentium* as we processed through the halls and cortile of the seminary; and most of all to the grand feast of Our Lady of Confidence, *la Fiducia*, which was the most elaborately prepared and celebrated *patrocinium* in the Urbs, on the Saturday before Quinquagesima.

The preparation for that feast alone made the seminary worth it. Weeks of polishing great candelabra, unfurling rugs, arranging flowers, singing practices for the yearly Oratorio, the excited expectation for the annual visit of the Holy Father to his seminary. But it gave me an insight into how the Latin cultures, devoid of a liturgical spirituality and bereft of any sign of liturgical movement, could pour inexhaustible resources into the slightest details of terribly complicated ceremonial actions, all for Our LORD in the Blessed Sacrament, for the Madonna under her various jealously guarded titles, and for patron saints of every stripe and colour. To see how Italian men who never

went to mass at all would banter about who had the better Madonnina, how the priests of Vieste cooked omelettes in the sacristy for the faithful on the feast of St George while they were attending the Archbishop's Mass, how the pious ladies of the Roman *borgata* still said their rosary during mass in concrete bunkers while younger clergy clad in jeans and washed out grey clerical shirts used slide projectors: it left a lasting impression upon me. I was sad that in America, so Protestantised and secularised, such spectacles were impossible, but I was also sad that so much of it was without its real center in faith in Jesus Christ and Him Crucified, of how devotion had degenerated into prosaic folklore.

I had other opportunities though, which lifted my spirits. I had met several of the Fathers of the London Oratory during my time in Rome, and had visited their church many a time when I was asked to be liturgical deacon for Holy Week in 2005. I finally got to see the most famous Oratory in the world from the inside, of how a community of priests totally informed by the spirit of its founders continued a living tradition without ever having missed a beat. My nervousness at the Solemn Mass on Palm Sunday, as I struggled to hold the Father's cope, take my biretta and his while holding a palm which must have been genetically engineered to be larger than the tallest palm tree in the world melted away as I learned the Brompton Road way of doing things, and I was enchanted by a liturgy which was part of a whole with an entire Christian way of life. Picking the brains of the Oratorian *ceremonieri*, seeing how for them the refectory was an extension of the sanctuary and how liturgical reverence extended to every part of their private and public life, by the time I mounted Faber's pulpitum (he and I were born on the same day, June 28, the Vigil of Ss. Peter and Paul!) for the *Exultet*, I felt as much at home there as anywhere in the Christian world.

As I prepared to leave Rome after seven years, I was apprehensive. Italy had been my home in a way far more than South Carolina or Virginia had ever been. Could I live without the safety net of my network of friends, without my strolls through the great artistic feats of civilization on a daily basis, without the reminder of a once great Christian culture, to return to Dixie, which, for all of its glorious history, was so marred with evangelical fundamentalism, with a growing but infant Catholic Church? But it was the Will of God, and so I came back to South Carolina to find tremendous happiness as a priest.

I no longer spend my time perusing ancient liturgical texts and back copies of *Liturgical Arts Magazine*. There are too many people calling on me to hear their confessions and receive spiritual direction. I no longer debate obscure points of Baldeschi and Fortescue with masters of ceremonies around Europe, but the boys in my sacristy hang on every word of the priest which encourages them to serve with dignity and devotion. I no longer aspire to be a liturgical scholar and spend my days singing Palestrina and the *Graduale Romanum*. I am instead teaching my school children how to make the Mass the center of their lives and how to sing to the glory of God. I feared that entering diocesan priesthood would somehow curtail all of my dreams of living an authentically Christian and liturgical life. But if the goal of any liturgical movement is to awaken in the hearts of the faithful the Christian mysteries, then my modest work as a parochial vicar back in the church where I first encountered Christ the Eucharistic King is already doing that. And the one being transformed is me, more and more into Christ. And isn't that the point of the liturgy anyway? Christ!