

Pope Benedict and the Liturgy

REDEEMING CULTURE



John Haas

Pope Benedict XVI. Vicar of Christ. Supreme Pontiff. Successor to St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles. Bishop of Rome. Archbishop of the Roman Province. Primate of Italy and the Adjacent Lands. Patriarch of the Western Church. Servant of the Servants of God.

But that is all he is.

As Cardinal Ratzinger he acknowledged the crisis the Church is facing today and was quite direct about what he considered to be one of its principal causes. "I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy . . ." The restoration of the liturgy, then, must surely be one of the principal tasks Benedict will have to take on immediately.

One of the facts which is so dismaying about the disarray of the liturgy in our day is the extent to which the so-called liturgical reformers simply ignored Council and Popes. If one actually reads the document of the Second Vatican Council on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, one is astonished at the degree to which the actual celebration of the Mass has departed from what the Popes and the Council Fathers intended.

The Demise of Latin

Take, for instance, the use of Latin. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy stated:

... the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites. But since the use of the mother tongue ... may frequently be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This extension will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants.... It is for the competent territorial authority ... to decide whether ... the vernacular language is to be used...²

Yet the directives of the Council were simply ignored. Archbishop R. J. Dwyer, who participated in the Council, wrote in 1973: "Who dreamed . . . that within a few years, far less than a decade, the Latin past of the Church would be all but expunged, that it would be reduced to a memory fading into the middle distance? The thought of it would have horrified us, but it seemed so far beyond the realm of the possible as to be ridiculous."³

Cardinal Ratzinger reminded his readers of the words of the Council in his *Feast of Faith*: ". . . it had been said that the language of the Latin Rite was to remain Latin, although suitable scope was to be given to the vernacular. Today we might ask: Is there a Latin Rite at all any more?"⁴

This observation was made by a man who was a Cardinal of the Church. Even he appeared powerless over what had taken place. It seemed he could only bemoan its loss, even in Rome.

If even in the great liturgical celebrations in Rome, no one can sing the Kyrie or the Sanctus any more, no one knows what Gloria means, then a cultural loss has become a loss of what we share in common. To that extent I should say that the Liturgy of the Word should always be in the mother tongue,

but there ought nonetheless to be a basic stock of Latin elements that would bind us together.⁵

To have lost familiarity with Latin is to endure a profound "cultural loss". To lose our common familiarity with Latin is to be deprived of the sense of community which that universal language always bestowed on believers of the most divergent linguistic, ethnic or national backgrounds. Benedict XVI's increased use of Latin is already in evidence. Whether that can be extended to the liturgical celebrations in parish churches, and once again bind Catholics around the world remains to be seen.

The Rupture of a Living Tradition

Benedict XVI has always insisted that the Mass is a gift from God. It does not belong to us. It was given us by God and must under His Spirit develop and grow organically. However, this did not occur after the Council; there was an abrupt departure from the Latin rite. This distressed Cardinal Ratzinger greatly. In the introduction to a book on the Roman liturgy, he wrote: "[I]n the place of the liturgy as the fruit of development came fabricated liturgy. We abandoned the organic, living process of growth and development over centuries and replaced it, as in a manufacturing process, with a fabrication, a banal on-the-spot product."⁶ It is startling when a Prince of the Church speaks so baldly, but Ratzinger could barely contain his disdain for what was done with the Mass. Of liturgy committees he wrote: "To most people the liturgy seems to be rather something for the individual congregation to arrange. Core groups make up their own 'liturgies' from week to week, with an enthusiasm which is as amazing as it is misplaced."⁷

And Cardinal Ratzinger indicated many times his awareness of what the faithful had

to suffer, expressing both his dismay and his disdain. He speaks of priests addressing the congregation at the beginning of Mass with “all those tasteless and banal forms of greeting – which many congregations endure with polite stoicism.”⁸ But in his insistence on the holy Mass as a gift from God, and in his insistence on the necessity of recovering a sense of the sacred in its celebration, he cautioned traditionalists against trying to turn the Mass promulgated by the Council of Trent into their own possession. He clearly could understand their longing for the beauty of the Mass as it had been celebrated, but he did not want to see them falling into the same errors that the so-called reformers had, i.e., that the Mass was theirs to change – or to guard against any change.

He wrote: “In fact there is no such thing as a Tridentine liturgy, and until 1965 the phrase would have meant nothing to anyone. The Council of Trent did not ‘make’ a liturgy.”⁹ He goes on: “We must say to the ‘Tridentines’ that the Church’s liturgy is alive, like the Church herself, and is thus always involved in a process of maturing which exhibits greater and lesser changes.”¹⁰

Despite the abuses, Cardinal Ratzinger had expressed his appreciation for much of the changes. Yet he has also made his mind clear. “In my view, a new edition [of the rite] will need to make it quite clear that the so-called Missal of Paul VI is nothing other than a renewed form of the same Missal to which Pius X, Urban VIII, Pius V and their predecessors have contributed, right from the Church’s earliest history. It is of the essence of the Church that she should be aware of her unbroken continuity throughout the history of faith. . . .” It seems, however, that this could not be achieved without restoring elements to the universal celebration of the Mass which were lost after the Council, not least of which would be the use of Latin.

Music

Benedict XVI is known as a lover of classical music. The first quiet time he was able to find after his election as Supreme Pontiff,

he chose to spend with his piano playing his beloved Mozart. There were anecdotes that he was not pleased with the type of music which had been arranged for World Youth Day in Cologne but he could hardly have changed it with his election coming so close to the event. However, he has described “Rock” music as “the expression of elemental passions, and at rock festivals it assumes a cultic character, a form of worship, in fact, in opposition to Christian worship.” Cardinal Ratzinger did not hesitate to speak his mind with regard to decline in the music of the liturgy since the Council.

The place to begin with a brief consideration of music in the restoration of the liturgy would be with the Council itself. The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy stated:

The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as proper to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.¹¹

Cardinal Ratzinger, who was an expert consultant (*peritus*), at the Council always embraced this position. He wrote in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: “In the West, in the form of Gregorian chant, the inherited tradition of psalm-singing was developed to a new sublimity and purity, which set a permanent standard for sacred music, music for the liturgy of the Church.”¹²

However, today, not only does one not find Gregorian chant being given pride of place in the worship life of the Church. One cannot even *find* it!

Benedict sees liturgy and music inextricably linked: “. . . one cannot speak of liturgy without also talking about the music of worship. Where liturgy deteriorates, the *musica sacra* also deteriorates, and where liturgy is correctly understood and lived, there good church music also grows.”¹³

Benedict XVI will certainly be open to new musical expressions of the faith within the liturgy. While one hopes that Gregorian chant will be frequently used as particularly suited to the Latin rite, even in

local parishes, there will certainly be ample opportunity for other musical forms. In many places Ratzinger has spoken of his appreciation for the liturgical music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Palestrina. He spoke of “that gladness of heart that Haydn said came upon him when he set liturgical texts to music.” But the music to which he will be disposed will be “sober” and “reasonable”; it will be, as he once put it, the music of Apollon and not Dionysius.

Cardinal Ratzinger always insisted that liturgical music must be subordinated to the word. Not just any word, but the Word incarnate. It must lift the mind and the heart to union with Him who is the one through whom the Cosmos was created and by whom it was redeemed and must not play upon the emotions or base passions. “Thus the relation of liturgical music to logos means, first of all, simply its relation to words. That is why singing in the liturgy has priority over instrumental music, though it does not in any way exclude it. It goes without saying that the biblical and liturgical texts are the normative words from which liturgical music has to take its bearings. This does not rule out the continuing creation of ‘new songs’, but instead inspires them and assures them of a firm grounding in God’s love for mankind and his work of redemption.”¹⁴

Praying to the East

Apart from the disappearance of Latin in the celebration of Mass, probably nothing seems more expressive of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council than the establishment of the “free-standing” altar and the priest facing the people during the liturgy. Therefore, it may come as a surprise to some that this change was never mentioned in any of the documents of the Council and was never directed by any official Vatican documents. Yet it happened globally with great rapidity – and usually at great cost, emotional and financial, to local congregations..

There are few developments in worship since the Council that appear to have dis-

mayerd Cardinal Ratzinger more than this moving forward of the altar. His opposition to it was not simply a matter of taste, although the assault upon the architectural integrity of many magnificent churches was deplorable. Cardinal Ratzinger objected to it on solid theological grounds. The new positioning of the altar visually put an emphasis on the Mass as meal rather than eucharistic sacrifice. It drew attention away from Jesus Christ and focused it instead on the person of the priest. Finally it drew attention away from the cosmic and historical character of Christ's redemption. In other words, it radically altered the character of Catholic worship.

The change even contributed to a diminished perception of the priest as one offering sacrifice to God – if this understanding of the true nature of the priest was not lost entirely. The priest came to be seen as a group leader at a public assembly. As Cardinal Ratzinger remarked with some disdain: "Now the priest – the 'presider', as they now prefer to call him – becomes the real point of reference for the whole liturgy. Everything depends on him. We have to see him, to respond to him, to be involved in what he is doing. His creativity sustains the whole thing."¹⁵

Ratzinger saw an almost narcissistic quality to the new style of worship brought about by moving the altar. The early Christians all faced the altar with the priest. "They did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim People of God they set off for the *Oriens* [the East], for the Christ who comes to meet us."¹⁶ Elsewhere he asks rhetorically: "Are we today really hopelessly huddled in our own little circle? Is it not important, precisely today, to pray with the whole of creation. . . to find room for the dimension of the future, for hope in the Lord who is to come again . . .?"¹⁷

Even to refer to the priest as now "facing the people" in the "new" liturgy rather than "turning his back on the people" as in the "old" liturgy shows the extent to which misunderstanding has spread throughout

the Church because of this change. It is not a matter of facing the wall or facing the people in worship. It must be a matter of always facing Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness who has risen in the East. When the priest leads the people in prayer by facing the altar, he is praying *ad orientem*, he is "oriented", he is facing East. "Looking at the priest has no importance," Ratzinger insisted. "What matters is looking together at the Lord."¹⁸

With the radical change in the liturgical life of the Church resulting from moving the altar, there was a rupture in the tradition of the prayer of the people of God reaching back even beyond the founding of the Church. Cardinal Ratzinger makes this point by referring to the work of the great liturgical historian, Louis Bouyer.

The synagogue, in its shrine of the Torah, contains a kind of Ark of the Covenant, which means it is the place of a kind of "real presence". . . And so the Ark points beyond itself, to the one place of its presence that God chose for himself – the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. This Holy of Holies, as Boyer puts it, remained the "ultimate focus of the synagogal worship". "Thus have all the synagogues, at the time of Our Lord and since that time, been oriented". The rabbi and the people gaze at the "Ark of the Covenant", and in so doing, they orient themselves toward Jerusalem, turn themselves toward the Holy of Holies in the Temple as the place of God's presence for his people.¹⁹

As noted, Ratzinger points out that the early Christians, following this precedent, also prayed *ad orientem*. But the place of God's presence on earth was no longer the Holy of Holies but the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ Himself. Christians continued to face East, not simply because Jesus was the fulfilment of Temple worship and Himself came to replace the Temple, but because praying eastward had a cosmic sig-

nificance as well.

Psalm 19 is seen as a psalm about Christ when it says: "[The sun] comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber. . . ." Ratzinger writes: "Christians interpret it in terms of Christ, who is the living Word, the eternal Logos, and thus the true light of history, who came forth in Bethlehem from the bridal chamber of the Virgin Mother and now pours out his light on all the world. The east supersedes the Jerusalem Temple as a symbol. . . . In the early Church, prayer toward the east was regarded as an apostolic tradition."²⁰ This orienting of our prayer not only links us to the early Church, it also looks to the end of time. "Praying toward the east means going to meet the coming Christ."²¹

Cardinal Ratzinger had always pointed out the error of those who looked upon Christianity as a historical religion in opposition to the cosmic religions of those who worshipped nature. Ratzinger often made it clear that Christianity was cosmic as well as historical, and this truth of Christianity was illustrated in part by the congregation praying *ad orientem*.

For Benedict XVI, facing east when we pray has considerable historical, cosmic, christological and eschatological significance. He even speaks of it as "essential" to proper worship. "A common turning to the east during the Eucharistic prayer remains essential. This is not a case of something accidental, but of what is essential."²² He has such passionate convictions about this, it would be quite surprising if steps were not taken to restore the eastward position in prayer. Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: ". . . wherever possible, we should definitely take up again the apostolic tradition of facing the east, both in the building of churches and in the celebration of the liturgy."²³

A Monumental Challenge

Elements of Catholic worship which Cardinal Ratzinger considered essential have been lost sight of for decades now. Benedict will want to restore them but he must face the realities of the Church he has

been chosen by God to lead. In 1992 the Congregation for Divine Worship lamented that abuses had virtually become the norm. "The malformations born in the first years of the application still endure, and gradually, as new generations follow one another could almost become the rule."²⁴

The liturgy as it is currently celebrated in most places is not what the Council called for. Cardinal Ratzinger was quite candid about this in his *Feast of Faith*: "In part it is simply a fact that the Council was pushed aside." As were Popes.

Pius XII warned against liturgical abuses in his encyclical *Mediator Dei*:

The desire to restore everything indiscriminately to its ancient condition is neither wise nor praiseworthy. It would be wrong, for example, to want the altar restored to its ancient form of a table; to want black eliminated from liturgical colors, and pictures and statues eliminated from our churches; to require crucifixes that do not represent the bitter sufferings of the divine Redeemer; to condemn polyphonic chants. . .

Of course what the Pope cautioned against is exactly what happened. It is almost as though he had given the iconoclasts a list of targets!

The Council Fathers were convinced, by all accounts, that their expressed wishes would be carried out in the reform of the liturgy. Regrettably, however, there were failures of will and of discipline on the part of those who were entrusted by God with the stewardship of His sacred mysteries for the benefit of the People of God. We can hope that those days are over. Nonetheless, Pope Benedict XVI is faced with some obstacles which appear insurmountable. If he cannot surmount them, he will have to find some way to circumnavigate them. He must be sensitive to what have become settled customs as he restores important elements of worship. As he himself has said, "Nothing is more harmful to the liturgy than a constant activism, even if it seems to be for the sake of

genuine renewal."²⁵ Surely, however, a number of initiatives can be taken for the restoration of the liturgy which would not be unsettling to the People of God.

Latin was never entirely lost and can be expanded or reintroduced. There is no reason why the faithful should not be able to sing once again the Gloria, the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei using the ancient chants. This is already done in a number of places. It seems that this is a minimal thing which can be done immediately. Furthermore, there is the hope that inappropriate "Dionysian" music appealing to the emotions and passions and destructive of contemplation will be, frankly, forbidden.

The matter of praying to the East is more difficult to implement. Its restoration, however, should provide a period of rich instruction in its significance which would lead to a deeper understanding by Catholics of the person of Christ, the nature of the Church and our place in a redeemed cosmos. There are still churches which preserved the altar *ad orientem*. There are other churches with free-standing altars which would nonetheless allow the priest to lead the people in prayer *ad orientem*. Where it is structurally possible to pray "facing east", it is certainly the mind of Benedict XVI that this be done as soon as feasible. Where it cannot be done because of the architecture of the church other means can be used to effect this.

Cardinal Ratzinger suggested the crucifix on the altar could become the "east". "Where a direct common turning toward the east is not possible, the cross can serve as the interior 'east' of the faith. It should stand in the middle of the altar and be the common point of focus for both priest and praying community."

Ratzinger had even prepared himself for the objection that this would obstruct the view of the priest. "Moving the altar cross to the side to give an uninterrupted view of the priest is something I regard as one of the truly absurd phenomena of recent decades. Is the cross disruptive during Mass? Is the priest more important than the Lord? This mistake

should be corrected as quickly as possible; it can be done without further rebuilding."²⁶

As important elements of the liturgy are reintroduced, it will have to be done in ways which do not appear to be novel (even if they are ancient!). The next synod of bishops is dealing with the Eucharist. This is where the critically important work of restoring to the Mass those elements which will again more clearly manifest its nature as sacrifice and sacred mystery.

It is surely not inappropriately pious to think that God's providence had chosen Benedict XVI to preside over this critically important synod on the eucharist to begin the necessary work of a sound restoration. Benedict XVI may be only the Pope – but he is the Pope, the Vicar of Christ and Successor to Peter!

References

- 1 *Milestones* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), p. 148.
- 2 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 36: 1-3.
- 3 *Twin Circle*, October 26, 1973.
- 4 *Feast of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).
- 5 *God and the World*, 418
- 6 (Introduction to *La Reforme Liturgique en question* by Msgr. Klaus Gamber (Le Barroux: Éditions Sainte-Madeleine), 1992, p. 8.
- 7 *Feast of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), p. 84.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 9 *Ibid.*,
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 11 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 116.
- 12 *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 146.
- 13 *A New Song for the Lord*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p. 137.
- 14 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 149.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 67-8.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 24 *Notitiae*, 315, vol. 28 (1992), pp. 625-628.
- 25 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 83.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 84.