

By their fruits ye shall know them

Six theses on the state of the Roman Liturgy following the reform by Pope Paul VI

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1. The rupture with tradition

Paul VI's reform of the Mass following the Second Vatican Council represents a unique event in the history of the Church. Never before had the Church forbidden an old rite, never before had she, as Cardinal Ratzinger has stated, put a "fabricated rite" in the place of a traditional one. The defining rite of the Western Church prior to 1968 is in no measure "Tridentine", i.e. the creation of the Council Of Trent, as many would erroneously have it, but can, in its essentials, be traced back to Gregory the Great. It was the rite of the Pope and the City of Rome, declared binding for the Universal Church when, in the wake of the Reformation, heretical elements had come to infiltrate many parochial rites. The Council of Trent had, however, made this old rite the subject of intense investigation. Accordingly, it recognised that this rite contained no unimportant or negligible elements: everything in it was minutely interwoven and intricately connected. The liturgy was a living organism from which parts could not be removed or substituted like building blocks without damaging the whole. This organism was nothing other than an icon of the Incarnation. Just as in all other ancient religions, the Christian ritual also had the task of making present the deity; the old Mass involved the presence of God Incarnate who, in the Sacrament, once again became flesh, was born, died and rose from the dead. According to the oldest theological sources, which survive unbroken in Orthodoxy, it was not the Last Supper of Maundy Thursday, but primarily the sacrifice on the Cross which was present in the Mass.

When, shortly before its demise, the ideology of secularisation had penetrated the Church in various guises, and concepts such as sin, guilt, sacrifice and salvation had come to resemble the barbaric-atavistic residue of a religion which caused only embarrassment in sophisticated society, the traditional Sacrament was reinterpreted as being a peace-bringing commemorative breaking of bread by the congregation. There has been an irresolvable contradiction in the Church ever since: Papal doctrine incessantly promulgates the traditional view of the Eucharistic Sacrament, whilst common practice, which always carries more weight than teachings, has more or less departed from the centuries-old position and created an entirely new mentality among the faithful. If the papal Magisterium is derelict in its duty to Church history as a whole by the continuing failure to enforce its doctrine as the practice of the Universal Church, the destructive results of this contradiction will soon come to bear.

2. The New Mass is not the Mass of the Second Vatican Council

The post-Conciliar liturgical reform cannot make the claim to be based on the Liturgical Constitution of the Second Vatican Council. What the Council Fathers envisaged when they passed this Constitution is wholly unambiguous. First and foremost they demanded caution when revising liturgical books. They prohibited any alteration of the Liturgy which promised no "assured gains". They confirmed the binding character of Latin as the language of worship and permitted the use of vulgar tongues only in extraordinary pastoral circumstances. Foremost in their minds were the overseas missions, although it is precisely these non-European cultures which have no

problem whatsoever with the notion of a ritual language. They wished to have the Reading and the Gospel in the local language, the omission of the Psalm 'Iudica' and the St. John Prologue at the end of the Mass. They wished no further "unnecessary repetitions". Above all, this meant that the priest was no longer to quietly say the Gloria and Creed by himself whilst the congregation sang or said it aloud, but rather that he should say these prayers together with the congregation.

John XXIII revised the missal in keeping with these ideas and, in 1965, issued a missal which reflected the will of the Council Fathers. The deviations were minimal: there had been no interference with the actual ritual act at all. The Mass of today, or better, the Masses, for there is no longer a binding version, would have stood no chance of being accepted by the Council Fathers. The path taken from the sacrificial rite offered before God to the congregation-oriented meal generally encountered today was not wished for by the Council Fathers. The most important elements of today's Mass practice, as in the celebration of the Mass facing the congregation and not with priest and congregation uniformly facing East and the dispensing of Communion in the hand and not in the mouth, are not even integral parts of the Mass reform of Paul VI. They were wrested from Rome in disobedience to the instructions of the missal. The paradoxical result is the fact that a mass celebrated according to the old missal is considerably closer to the wishes of the Council Fathers than a mass of the 'Novus Ordo', even on the rare occasions when the celebration is dignified and in keeping with the instructions of the missal.

3. The aim of the reform was not consolidation, but rather rescission, of discipline

Every ecclesiastical reform of the past had sought to re-establish discipline, thus halting the decline in Church order. The claim that the Church was an "ecclesia semper reformanda" referred to the simple human fact that burdens are gladly discarded and rules ground down. The monastic reforms of Cluny and Citeaux, those of the Carmelite Order and the reform of the Council of Trent are associated with a return to a more austere regime, a tightening of the reigns, a return to religious radicality, to the re-establishment of a spiritual discipline gone astray.

The post-Conciliar liturgical reform is the first reform in Church history which did not aim to re-establish form, but instead sought its dissolution, abrogation and relativisation. Today, every form of liturgical order is de facto at the individual's discretion. Confession has been largely abolished. Obligatory fasting has been reduced to two days in the year, eucharistic fasting is simply no longer required. Liturgical music and liturgical art are no longer subject to order. The criterion for any form of liturgy today is solely what is "acceptable" and "accessible". The list of liturgical rules of conduct which the modern churchgoer no longer "accepts" is a long one. Kneeling is completely out of the question; ritual language is not accessible; Mass times must be convenient; passages from the Scripture which are somehow unsettling or harsh are done away with. When churchgoers claim that the liturgy is "not relevant to them", that they "don't feel involved in the liturgy", that the liturgy "doesn't speak to them", the reaction of theologians is always retreat; the parish priest who takes on the liturgy committee of his parish council can expect no protection from his bishop, only the charge of not being accommodating enough, of not being duly subservient. The reform of the liturgy has absolutely nothing in common with religious reform in the old sense of the word. It resembles the hectic special-offer and closing-down-sale mentality of a department store desperate to attract customers.

4. The pastoral reform of the Mass has failed according to its own criteria.

Paul VI's reform of the Mass places the emphasis not on the adoration of God, but on the placation, chatechising, manipulation, and even entertainment of the congregation. The priest stands facing the congregation, like the presenter of a television programme; when he says prayers, the actual addressee, even if he appears to address God, is the congregation, in whom he wishes to kindle religious feelings and to spiritually guide. Just as good educationalists strive to have their pupils involved in the lessons, the congregation is incorporated into the sacred actions as if their interest would otherwise wane. When the priest does something, he likes to explain it beforehand. Some priests have been known to deliver four or five homilies during the Mass. At the Our Father he asks the people to join hands, the adults standing there in their pews as if at school. At the Sign of Peace the priest leaves the altar to shake hands at a curiously late juncture, since they have all been together for quite some time. In between, women and children can read something aloud, often texts which they have thought up themselves. The supervisory priest-come-uncle then sits down modestly at the side, pretending to listen sincerely.

The motives given for the reform of the Mass are pastoral ones. The claim is made that the exodus of the faithful from the Church was to be prevented. "Pastoral" in this sense, constantly gauging the reaction of the congregation during prayers, the old Mass certainly was not. The old rite was often celebrated even without the presence of the faithful, 'in conspectu angelorum'. Despite this fact, although not 'performed' for the congregation but rather attended by the faithful who gave thanks for the grace of being present, the old Mass preserved the Faith in a manner unsurpassed today. Whoever attended Mass knew that he was witness to the presence of Christ. The way Mass is conducted today no longer guarantees this handing-down of the Faith. Entire generations of young people have since come of age who no longer know what a sacrament is, who no longer know the Credo and the Pater Noster off by heart. This, however, is the result of a pastorally oriented reform of the Mass, a pastorally oriented reform of the Mass which has emptied the churches. It can thus be said that the reform of the Mass has failed according to its own criteria. This unique break with our whole religious tradition has neither kept people in the Church, nor has it handed on the Deposit of Faith to those who remained.

5. The reform of the Mass does not stand up to detailed scrutiny

The justifications for the reform of the Mass are contradictory. Too many birds were to be killed with one stone. 'Modernisation' was to take place, but with the intention of adhering to Early-Christian practices. Pius XII had already seen the threat posed by 'archeologism', the temptation to force the results of 'scientific' research upon the 'lex orandi', the law of prayer. The results of scientific research have a habit of becoming obsolete within a few generations; today's state-of-the-art insight is old hat twenty years later. Academics claimed to have proof that the Early Christians celebrated the Eucharist at a table, with the priest facing and looking at the congregation. Exhaustive study by Klaus Gamber has now confirmed that the Church has, from earliest recorded times onwards, worshiped the resurrected Christ by facing East towards the rising sun. Since Gamber's research, what was once celebrated as scientific certainty is now suspected of being ideology.

The same applies to receiving Communion in the hand, the proud badge of the much-vaunted “enlightened Christian”. True, in the first centuries Communion was dispensed onto the hand, but the accompanying signs of reverence far surpassed the kneeling receipt of the Sacrament which later became customary: the communicant removed his shoes and laid a cloth over his hands in order not to come in contact with the transubstantiated Christ, the discipline of penance was austere. Occasionally, sinners could be denied the Sacraments for years on end. A Reformed Protestant told me that in his youth the Minister had refused the Lord’s Supper to those who had quarrels with their neighbours. This was a veritable remnant of Christian practices in the first century. Of course, the liturgical archaeologists wanted no truck with such severity. Early-Christian practice was only of interest as long as it served to support sacrilege and profanity. A special animosity was reserved for mediaeval scholasticism. Scholastic sacramental teachings were dismissed as obsolete. If they could be used to denigrate the Old Mass, however, their arguments were brought forth at once. The Offertory prayers of the old Rite were among its most beautiful parts. In the attempt to suppress the sacrificial character of the Mass, these prayers, an important link to the Byzantine Liturgy, had to disappear. With its philosophical-juristic exactness, the same obsolete scholasticism was then just the right thing to prove how the Offertory prayers unduly pre-empted the result of the Consecration. They were replaced by a medieval Jewish prayer-before-meals which underlined the supper character of the Mass and simply no longer mentioned the sacrifice. The ecumenical argument weighed in only when the Mass was to be desanctified. The order of Readings common to both Catholics and Protestants, an important joint possession which had survived the Reformation, was frivolously sacrificed to make way for the introduction of new perikopae from which all harshness had been excised. Not one single argument put forward in favour of the instructions in the new missal would withstand scrutiny in the light of Tradition.

6. The reform of the Mass has borne fatal fruits

The reform of the Mass has engendered in Catholics a deeply anti-religious self-mindedness. The Christian ritual is now no longer a gift of grace to be received in kneeling reverence, but a commodity examined with ill-disposed caution, spurned more often than not. The hitherto hermetically sealed mysteries of the Mass had to accommodate the muddle of opinions. What was previously revered as a semblance of the celestial is now recognised as being constructed and arranged, and what has been arranged can also be rearranged. Then there is simply no end to the rearranging. Curiously enough, the more the Mass is tinkered with, the less one can warm to it. Nowadays, parish councils and churchgoers speak of the Mass in the way insiders from the Civic Theatre speak of the new, half-cocked Chekhov production. In the now closely-knit Catholic milieu there is liturgical shoptalk. Unimaginable in the atmosphere of the new mass is a prayer which actually stems from the Greek Orthodox Liturgy but which consummately expresses the spirit of the old Latin Liturgy: “Count us worthy to partake of your heavenly and fearful Mysteries at this sacred and spiritual Table with a pure conscience, for forgiveness of sins and pardon of offences, for communion of the Holy Spirit, for inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven and for boldness before you; not for judgment or condemnation.”

Fearful - this a latter-day liturgy committee would not tolerate. The Saviour is not to be greeted with head bowed, but in the reclining comfort of an armchair. If God did indeed become Man, he simply ought to take a course in modern diction in order that his People might better understand him.

One really has to have seen how such an honours-degree Catholic, who has strayed into one of the few Old Masses still celebrated, stretches out his hand at Communion in order to ensure that the Host is laid on his hand and not on his tongue. He is perfectly entitled to do so and is lying in wait for any priest who dares to deny him this right. "By their fruits ye shall know them" also applies to the results of the reform of the Mass, or better still: by their mini-fruits. I know that the clock of history cannot be turned back. Preservation is harder than destruction. But I do believe that if, here and there, the Old Mass is tolerated, is celebrated, it can represent a corrective for the current situation.

Translated from the German by Philip Savage