

Homily Preached by the Very Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskas, Ph.D., S.T.D., for the patronal feast of the St. Gregory Foundation for Latin Liturgy, on Sunday, 7 September 1997, at the Church of the Holy Innocents in New York City

Public perversity, political corruption, the breakdown of the family, massive ignorance and illiteracy, abortion-on-demand and even infanticide, divorce and remarriage on a grand scale, lack of civic virtue, a booming pornography industry, the total collapse of a culture and a civilization. What a depressing scenario to be painted for New York at the close of the twentieth century! Except for the fact that it's not New York that I was intending to describe; it was Rome when a humble monk was elected her Bishop. Gregory loved Rome with every fiber of his being, and it caused him immense anguish to envision the demise of the Eternal City. By nature shy, Pope Gregory didn't know how to proceed, but the Holy Spirit gave him ample inspiration as for he embarked on a plan of action to take his beloved Rome back from the brink. So successful was he that he received a nick-name which graces his tombstone: "God's consul."

Gregory's program was really quite simple: To return to the people of Rome a sense of sin and a sense of the sacred. He was indefatigable in pursuing both goals. His writing and preaching on the moral life were insightful and engaging; he also enlisted the assistance of his fellow-monks to raise the moral level of what had become a sewer of debauchery, not only by the words of their lips but by the witness of their lives. At the very same time, this great Pope endeavored to return to his clergy and laity alike the lost sense of the sacred. He understood in his time what his successor of fourteen centuries later has stressed in our time: "A very close and organic bond exists between the renewal of the Liturgy and the renewal of the whole life of the Church. The Church not only acts but also expresses herself in the Liturgy and draws from the Liturgy the strength for her life."⁰

⁰Pope John Paul II, *Dominicæ Cenæ*, n. 13.

This sensibility he cultivated in a variety of ways – all dealing with the Sacred Liturgy – from the composition of numerous Mass formularies which eventually found their way into the Sacramentary which bears his name, to the founding of a school of sacred music, to the standardization of the Roman Canon which still reflects his noble touch. He realized that while he re-taught basic ethical principles which would restore to the City an appreciation of the good and the true, he also had to give them an experience of the beautiful, and that most especially within the context of Christian worship. Gregory wanted to raise up again that marvelous Roman civilization which laxity and decadence had destroyed, the culture which had produced a statesman like Cicero, a poet like Virgil, a general like Caesar. Culture, however, has always needed cult, in the sense of ritual. And so, he made the reform and renewal of the Liturgy a top priority. Gregory's plan worked – from the dung-heap of a desiccated, lifeless city, Gregory's Church built a civilization which even the most cynical must acknowledge as a culture to be admired and envied. The Middle Ages, the Age of Faith, was born; Rome, Phoenix-like, rose from the ashes and proved herself to be eternal.

The picture I painted of sixth-century Rome at the outset could indeed apply to contemporary Rome – or New York, or Paris, or Tokyo, or a host of other places where the spirit of the so-called Enlightenment has pulled down God from altars and there enthroned man. And the trade-off has been every bit as disastrous for us as it was for old Rome. The program of St. Gregory the Great was successful for him; I do not think it wishful thinking to suggest it might have something to offer for us as well.

As the St. Gregory Foundation for Latin Liturgy honors its patron today, perhaps we can take stock of what we can do in our own small way to re-build that civilization of love and faith and culture for which he had laid the groundwork in those very dark and dismal times of his.

What can we do to enhance the worship life of the Church as we bid adieu to this most awful of centuries? Allow me to take a look at the situation and offer a few recommendations.

If it is true that the Church is never more the Church than when she gathers to celebrate the Sacred Liturgy and if Pope John Paul II is correct in asserting that “man cannot live without adoring,” how important it is for us to have our symbols in place. Surely, that is what the great ones of the liturgical movement of the early part of this century had in mind, as did Pope Pius XII. This coming November, coincidentally, will mark the fiftieth anniversary of his landmark encyclical on the Sacred Liturgy, known as *Mediator Dei*. As I reread that document recently, certain words kept popping up with amazing regularity: awe, mystery, august, majesty, wonder, adoration. And that brought me to think of words which people often use fifty years later to characterize the worship life of the Church. I hear words like: banal, pedestrian, utilitarian, narcissistic, skeptical, Puritan, disorienting. What happened to the vision of an Odo Casel, a Josef Jungmann, a Louis Bouyer, or even a Pius XII? A cursory reading of Vatican II’s *Sacrosanctum Concilium* would reveal nothing to justify the trivialization of the Liturgy which has undoubtedly occurred. While people of good will can and do disagree about the what and the why and the how of the liturgical reform which followed, it has become increasingly obvious to me that had we heeded the advice of Pope Pius, we would not have found ourselves awash in words and silliness and bereft of so much of the sense of the sacred.

In *Mediator Dei*, the Holy Father warned against a kind of liturgical archaicism which hankers after particular practices simply because they were done in the Early Church. He cautions against tinkering with Liturgy. Already in 1947, he sensed problems on the horizon when he wrote: “We observe with considerable anxiety and some misgiving, that . . . certain enthusiasts, over-eager in their search for novelty, are straying beyond the path of sound doctrine

and prudence.” He went on: “Not seldom, in fact, they interlard their plans and hopes for a revival of the Sacred Liturgy with principles which compromise this holiest of causes in theory or practice, and sometimes even taint it with errors touching Catholic faith and ascetical doctrine.”² He expressed considerable dismay over efforts to eliminate Latin from the Church’s Liturgy, apparently being done by some priests with no ecclesiastical approval. He likewise condemned notions of the Eucharistic Sacrifice which talked about the “concelebration” of priests and people in such wise as to hint at no qualitative difference between the priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood. Now, truth be told, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council reiterated every single one of Pius’s concerns.³ And our present Holy Father has likewise spoken bluntly about “erroneous applications” of conciliar mandates⁴ and about “outlandish innovations.”⁵ So, what happened?

We all know Pope John XXIII’s famous image of “opening the windows” of the Church. An astute person once observed that the only problem was that opening one’s window in Sotto il Monte in nineteenth-century Bergamo did not bring the same hazards as doing so in the second half of the twentieth century in Rome, New York, or any other metropolis, for that matter. In other words, a type of heady, romantic world-view took over where a cooler, more rational approach would have been more helpful.

I would maintain that short of Cardinal Ratzinger’s “reform of the reform,” there is still a considerable amount that we can and should be doing to ameliorate the situation as we work to recapture a spirit of mystery. Is it any accident that immediately following the Consecration the

²*Mediator Dei*, n. 8.

³On novelty, see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 23; on Latin, see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 36; on the ministerial priesthood, see *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 10-11.

⁴Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter on the 25th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Sacred Liturgy,” n. 13, 4 December 1988.

⁵*Ibid.*, n. 11.

priest refers to the Eucharistic Species precisely as the “*mysterium fidei*”? Many of the proposals I shall make need no ecumenical council or ecclesiastical endorsement; indeed, many of them are already called for but roundly ignored.

We need reverence. Make a conscious decision to genuflect whenever coming into or leaving the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, as well as before receiving Holy Communion. St. Francis penned these lines to his followers seven centuries ago: “I beg you to show the greatest possible reverence and honor for the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ through ‘whom all things, whether on the earth or in the heavens,’ have been brought to peace and reconciled with Almighty God.”⁶ If it was good for the twelfth century, it should be good for the twentieth and the twenty-first. As James Hitchcock has so wisely observed, “a deliberate iconoclasm or a deliberate casualness in Liturgy, insofar as these come to be accepted, signal the death of the sacred.”⁷ Isn’t this exactly what Eamon Duffy documented so strikingly about the Protestant Reformation in England in his magisterial work, *The Stripping of the Altars*?

We need beauty. Beautiful vestments, vessels and places of worship. Once again, St. Francis – the saint of holy poverty, remember – had this attitude, recorded by one of his early biographers: “He wished at one time to send his brothers through the world with precious pyxes, so that wherever they should see the price of our redemption [that is the Holy Eucharist] kept in an unbecoming manner, they should place it in the very best place.” And in his own Testament, the little man of Assisi wrote; Above everything else, I want this most holy Sacrament to be honored and venerated and reserved in places which are richly ornamented.”⁸ While the Council surely called for what is simple, Cardinal Ratzinger is certainly correct when he reminds us, “but

⁶Benedict J. Groeschel and James Monti, *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1997), 123.

⁷*The Recovery of the Sacred* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 169.

⁸Groeschel, 123 f.

that is not the same as being cheap.”⁹ The preeminent theologian of beauty, we might say, was

Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who rhapsodized on this notion thus:

Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past – whether he admits it or not – can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.¹⁰

Which is to say, that beauty here below allows us, in the gracious words of Michael Gaudoin-Parker, “to pierce through the crust of our commonplace experiences,”¹¹ to gain at least a glimpse of the glory and splendor of God. We also need a very special kind of beauty – good music. How can we forget that it was not erudite theological debate which won St. Augustine’s mind and heart? The sweet chants he heard outside St. Ambrose’s cathedral did the job; it was the “singing Church”¹² which brought him and countless millions of others down the centuries into the communion of saints. St. Thomas Aquinas saw this clearly when he taught that liturgical music had a most important mission: *ad provocandum alios ad laudem Dei* [to stimulate others to the praise of God].¹³ Cardinal Ratzinger has aptly summarized the musical development since the Council as that “grim impoverishment which follows when beauty for its own sake is banished from the Church and all is subordinated to the principle of ‘utility’.”¹⁴ With what result? Most congregations, he says with grim accuracy, “endure [it all] with polite stoicism.”¹⁵

⁹*Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 122.

¹⁰Hans Urs Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), Volume I, 18.

¹¹Michael L. Gaudoin-Parker, *Heart in Pilgrimage: Meditating Christian Spirituality in the Light of the Eucharistic Prayer* (New York: Alba House, 1994), 88.

¹²*Confessions*, IX 6, 14.

¹³*Summa Theologica*, q 91 a 1 ad 2.

¹⁴*Feast of Faith*, 100.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 85.

What a damning analysis, yet how sadly true. Mahatma Gandhi spoke of the three modes of being found in the cosmos: The fish who live in the sea and are silent; the animals who inhabit the earth scream and shout; the birds who soar through the heavens sing. He spelled it out in this way: Silence is proper to the sea, shouting to the earth, and singing to the heavens. Man, by nature, ought to participate in all three, yet what so many would-be liturgists have done to our worship is to eliminate silence and to proscribe good, uplifting music, so that contemporary worshippers are left with little to do but scream!¹⁶

We need Liturgy to remind us of our finitude and of the sublime nature of our God.

That is, we must be helped to appreciate the surpassing transcendence of God, the totally Other, Who nonetheless deigned to approach us in the mystery of the Incarnation and continues to do so in the Church's sacramental life. Already in 1962, Louis Bouyer felt compelled to highlight this truth:

The Incarnation therefore does not efface or render useless or outmoded the primitive notion of the sacred – of a domain “set apart,” as the word indicates, in the life of man to belong wholly to God and God alone. How could it do this without abolishing even man's sense of God as of a being distinct from man, independent of him, but sovereign alike over him and all things?¹⁷

The excessive “horizontalism” of much of what passes for Liturgy today requires the corrective of a heavy dose of “verticalism.” The anthropocentrism or “man-centeredness” of the sixties and seventies has devolved even further into anthropomorphism, whereby man is not only the measure of all reality but when divine categories elude us or displease us, we presume to change the divine plan to things to conform to our own desires. Of course, this is not a completely modern temptation; Voltaire remarked, tongue-in-cheek, that “God made man in His own image

16Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 127.

17“Two Temptations,” *Worship*, XXXVII, 1 (December 1962), 18.

and likeness – and man has never ceased to return the compliment!” “Creating” liturgies out of whole cloth or “theme-setting” projects simply add fuel to the fire. True Liturgy is given and received, not concocted.

We need to re-learn the meaning of symbol and ritual. Years ago, Father Hugo Rahner [the brother of Karl Rahner] wrote a book on this topic; it was called *Man at Play*, and its basic point was quite uncomplicated but also most profound, namely, that when we humans engage in symbolic and ritual activity, what we do is not practical, pragmatic or quantifiable. A good rite serves as what Mary Douglas refers to as a “condensed symbol,” that is, “a timeless act which sum[s] up the whole moral spiritual existence of the participant, which join[s] God and man in profound unity.”¹⁸ The great Lutheran sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, already three decades ago in his *The Sacred Canopy*, pointed out that rituals are reminders of deeply held convictions and, furthermore, that both the convictions and the rituals rely on a subculture to create and sustain them.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Clifford Geertz in that same time-frame noted that “religious symbols provide a cosmic guarantee” to human beings, not only to comprehend their world, but also “to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions, which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure the world.”²⁰ Yes, symbols help us “endure the world.” In other words, without them, life is flattened out and can often become over-bearing and oppressive. So, in a certain sense, Liturgy does have some actual “pay back.”

We need Latin. Only the most reactionary person would argue for a return to a whole Latin Liturgy. Pius XII fifty years ago saw some merit in a limited use of the vernacular; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* operated with the same mind-set. But no one – not even the most

¹⁸Hitchcock, 132.

¹⁹Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967).

²⁰Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” *The Religious Situation*: ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston, 1968), 659.

wide-eyed liberal in the mid-sixties ever imagined that Latin would just disappear from our liturgical landscape within our own lifetimes. How did this happen? In characteristically blunt style, Cardinal Ratzinger gives the answer: “. . . it is simply a fact that the Council was pushed aside. . . . it had 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?’ Certainly there is no awareness of it.”²¹

Pope Pius argued that the loss of Latin would endanger the catholicity and unity of the Church, but also leave her easy prey for deviations from the doctrines enshrined in those sacral texts.²² Professor Hitchcock once more offers a sober assessment: “The association of the Latin language with the timeless, mysterious, and traditional aspects of worship is so profound that no fully adequate translation of it into the vernacular is possible.”²³ Does that mean a wholesale return to Latin overnight? No, that would be as pastorally insensitive as was the nearly overnight banishment of Latin from our lives. It will require patience and prudence to reintroduce the Church’s language gradually but effectively: A *Sanctus* here, a *Credo* there; a Renaissance motet here, an *Agnus Dei* there. And experience shows that when such practices are introduced, the *vox populi* always asks for more! Our St. Gregory Foundation is a catalyst and support for just such efforts.

Today’s First Reading brings us into the Temple as eyewitnesses to Isaiah’s call, amid clouds of incense and the Seraphim chanting the *Sanctus*. Perceiving, even dimly, the holiness and majesty of God in so glorious a liturgical setting, Isaiah gained strength to respond affirmatively and enthusiastically to his vocation. When St. Paul attempts to explain the essence of the apostolic call to the Corinthians, he uses that lovely phrase, *dispensatores mysteriorum*

²¹*Feast of Faith*, 84.

²²*Mediator Dei*, n. 60.

²³Hitchcock, 147.

Dei, stewards of the mysteries of God. As stewards, they must be trustworthy, for they have been entrusted with the Church's greatest treasure – the Sacred Liturgy. The weak and sinful Simon Peter is asked today by Our Lord if he truly loves Him. Hearing his response, the Lord commissions him to feed and tend His sheep – a task accomplished in an unparalleled fashion in and through the Church's life of worship.

Our holy patron learned these great lessons in the school of monasticism and then taught them to the whole Church. Father Gaudoin-Parker summarizes St. Gregory's contribution in this way:

Pope Gregory played his part in offering something nobler and more beautiful to civilization than the out-worn *Pax Romana* could provide in sustaining the old order, which was collapsing both because of the threat of the Barbarians and its own decadence. He strove to inculcate the spirit of Christian worship which requires service and sacrifice – characteristic features of the Eucharist in the Roman Canon [which bears his imprint]. Worship celebrates and brings about freedom from fear, peace and harmony. This great Pope taught Europe to look to God for true peace and to sing His praise as the Liberator of the Whole World.²⁴

Traditionally, man at prayer has always sought to fulfill the Latin adage, *Quantum potes tantum aude* [Dare to do as much as you can]. Gregory the Great proved himself in this way to be a true *homo religiosus*. In like manner, by his lively example and with the help of his powerful intercession, may we seek to do the same – as much as we can to renew the Church at prayer, that form of the Church which is as close as she can get to Heaven while remaining on this earth.

Sancte Gregori, ora pro nobis.

²⁴Gaudoin-Parker, 75.