



Why the Old Mass is beautiful

Commentary by Robert Moynihan, *Inside the Vatican Magazine*
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Redempti ab ipso adorabunt Deum verum ex ipsius ritu, doctorina, et institutione, usque ad mundi consummationem ("Those redeemed by Jesus Christ will adore the true God according to His Own rite, teaching, and institution, up until the end of the world.") -- St. Robert Cardinal Bellarmine

When I was a child, I asked my father, a professor of English literature and specialist in British poetry who he thought was the greatest poet of all time. "Shakespeare? Dante? Virgil? William Butler Yeats? Who?" I asked. He replied: "Asking which poet is 'the greatest' is a bit like asking a father who among his children he loves the most. It's an unanswerable question. But, for spiritual and emotional depth, for grandeur and lyric beauty, no poet surpasses... King David... no poetry, the Psalms."

I was recently at a Mass in Rome celebrated by Father Jean-Marie Charles-Roux, 90 (we interviewed him in September 2004, p. 41). The Mass was celebrated according to the old rite, in Latin. Now, Father Charles-Roux, with his thin back turned toward us and his head bent low over the altar in prayer, was almost inaudible, even from just 15 feet away. I could barely keep track of where he was in the Mass. And so, yes, his Mass was a bit confusing. And yet, the Mass he celebrated had a spiritual and emotional depth, a tragic grandeur, a lyric beauty, which simply surpasses the new liturgy.

The old liturgy is filled with King David - the great poet of our race. It is filled with dramatic tension, as the priest sets out to "go up" to the altar, then senses his unworthiness, then asks God to forgive his sin and cleanse him, then approaches the altar. It is filled with the Trinity, with the drama of sacrifice, and, especially in the Last Gospel, with the divinity of Christ. Our forefathers in the faith, Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sistus, Cornelius, are recalled by name.

The new Mass is, in comparison, the pedantic classroom exercise of dusty scholars. In the new Mass of Paul VI, the soaring beauty of the old Mass has simply vanished.

What am I saying here? Am I making a theological argument? No. Am I making a liturgical argument? No. Am I making an argument about sacramental validity? No. Then what am I doing? I am making an argument about beauty. I am expressing an esthetic judgment: that the old Mass is more poetic, more "Davidic," more beautiful, than the new Mass.

Some will disagree with me. For example, I had a conversation the other day with Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, the Vatican's "foreign minister," and asked him what he thought of the old and new liturgies. The new Mass is better, he replied firmly. But he did not say it was more poetic; he said it was more "coherent," dropping some repetitions, tightening transitions.

His view is shared by many in the Vatican today.

But I am not persuaded. Some men's minds may find a certain joy in the linear simplicity of the new Mass, feel their souls drawn to that "reasonableness." My heart is stirred, my soul touched, by David's poetry.

The first Psalm recited is Psalm 42, "Judica me" ("Judge me"), written by David while fleeing for his life from his son Absalom. He desired to return to the tabernacle at Jerusalem where he could pray to God.

As soon as the Western liturgies were arranged in definite forms, the entrance was always accompanied by the chant of a Psalm. The Liber Pontificalis ascribes this antiphonal chant to Pope Celestine I (422-32): "He ordered that the psalms of David be sung antiphonally by all before the Sacrifice." And so we pray, with David - a man whose son is seeking to kill him - "Why do I go about in sadness, while the enemy afflicts me? Send forth Thy light and Thy truth: for they have led me and brought me to Thy holy mount, and into Thy tabernacles... I shall yet praise Thee upon the harp, O God, my God. Why art thou sad, O my soul, and why dost thou disquiet me?"

And he pleads: Domine, exaudi orationem meam" ("O Lord, hear my prayer"), "et clamor meus ad te veniat" ("and let my cry come unto Thee"). The priest then ascends the altar, silently.

Later, the priest recites another Psalm: "I will wash my hands among the innocent...I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house and the place where dwells Thy glory." Sublime words.

The Italian priest Gianni Baget Bozzo, for many years a close collaborator of Cardinal Giuseppe Siri of Genoa (who was four times almost elected Pope), in a 1998 article entitled "Why the Latin Mass is Not a Rite for Nostalgics Only," set forth some strong arguments in favor of the "old Mass."

"The traditional Catholic Mass, which dates back 1,800 years, is called the Mass of St. Pius V because it was this Pope who codified its authentic text," he wrote. "But those who are interested in the Mass of St. Pius V today are not attracted by the Latin alone, but rather by the text of that Mass, independent of the language." It's not just the Latin and the Gregorian chant that are at issue, but the very content of the Mass, Bozzo argues.

"The post-conciliar reformed Mass is a different thing from the traditional Mass," he says. "It is certainly orthodox, but it does not have the mystical spiritual quality of the ancient Mass. The old Mass has a personal tone. The earthly celebrant is the priest, who feels himself to be a sinner who, as such, asks forgiveness..."

"The entire old Mass is dominated by the proclamation of the real presence (not metaphorical or symbolic) of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. The kisses of the altar express a form of tenderness. There are great things in the Mass of St. Pius V that are not found in the Mass of Paul VI. The Mass of Paul VI is marked by an affective sterility... It is a cold Mass, to which guitars are added as an extraneous sound, with words without doctrine and music sometimes devoid of beauty. If the custom of celebrating the old Mass should flourish once again among Catholics, even if only alongside the monopoly, rigorously imposed, of the reformed liturgy, it would be a good thing," Bozzo sums up. "The Council recognized the religious freedom of non-believers and multiplied liturgical forms. Can there not be freedom in the post-conciliar Church to celebrate the Mass of the Tradition?"

All Catholics who would like to attend Mass according to the old rite should have that freedom.

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