



THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY

A Juggler on a Tightrope

Benedict XVI and the “Tridentine” Question

By Rev. Thomas M. Kocik

For more than a year now, it has been rumored that Pope Benedict XVI intends to give carte blanche permission for the celebration of the pre-Vatican II form of Mass (referred to by many as the “Tridentine” or “classical” Roman liturgy), alongside the present-day rite. Such an initiative, whatever form it may take, would have immediate and long-term benefits to the Church, though it would also have its difficulties. My purpose in this essay is to consider those potential benefits while taking into account the relevant theoretical and pastoral issues that are undoubtedly on the pontiff’s mind.

To begin with, a papal decree granting wider use of the Tridentine Mass would be aimed at reconciling the Society of St. Pius X and other schismatic traditionalist groups who have long opposed the reforms enacted in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Not that reconciliation would occur overnight, as Pope Benedict well knows. Before that can happen, deep disagreements over the meaning and authority of Vatican II must first be resolved. Traditionalists can take comfort from Benedict’s repeated assertion that the Council needs to be understood in continuity with the Church’s entire Tradition, but they must also accept the Magisterium up to and including the pontificate of Benedict XVI as the authoritative guardian of Tradition. A wholesale restoration of the old rite would surely be an incentive, but much more than the liturgy is at issue.

That being duly noted, I believe a papal initiative broadening the availability of the pre-conciliar liturgy would have at least one immediate benefit, namely, the resurgence of the Roman Rite itself. As provocative as that may seem, I become more convinced of it the more I analyze the current rite as a whole, not with an eye to its alleged deficiencies compared to its predecessor, but precisely as a liturgy, that is, as an organically developed and continually developing pattern of worship. The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, enunciated principles by which a general restoration (“*instauratio*”) of the existing Roman Rite was to be carried out, chief among which was the promotion of the “full, conscious, and active participation” by the faithful in liturgical celebrations (art. 14). The commission charged by Pope Paul VI with implementing the reform, the Consilium, by its own admission, went beyond what the Council fathers envisioned, securing papal authorization for liturgical books that substantially added to, subtracted from, and restructured the traditional rite.¹ The prime example was the new Order of Mass (*Novus Ordo Missæ*), featuring three newly composed Eucharistic Prayers, promulgated by Paul VI in 1969 and published the following year in a new official (or “typical”) edition of the Roman Missal. Then there was the drastic reordering of the Church’s liturgical calendar. Accordingly, the question

arises as to whether the “new Mass” of Paul VI is an organic development of what preceded it (as Vatican II wanted) or is, rather, a new rite.

The German liturgical scholar Monsignor Klaus Gamber contended that the Consilium concocted a new rite with elements harvested from the traditional rite.² “We must now contemplate at our feet,” he lamented, “the ruins, not of the Tridentine Mass, but of the ancient Roman Rite.” It follows that if the historic Roman Mass is to flourish within the Church’s visible communion, every priest must be free to use the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal (the last of the pre-conciliar editions). To allow that, said Gamber, would be “a simple gesture of pluralism and inclusiveness.”

What is the position of Benedict XVI on the continuity/discontinuity debate? Either conflicted or evolved, it would seem. In *The Feast of Faith* (Ignatius Press, 1986), the former Cardinal Ratzinger defended the Missal of Paul VI as “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.” Yet in his preface to the French edition of Gamber’s book, he said what can only be construed as an endorsement of the traditionalist rupture thesis: “We abandoned the organic, living process of growth and development over the centuries, and replaced it—as in a man-

ufacturing process—with a fabrication, a banal on-the-spot product.” In the first instance, he contended (as did Paul VI) that the rite imposed after Vatican II is simply a renewal of the Roman Rite, on a par with all previous revisions. In the second instance, he all but said that the Roman Rite was displaced in 1969. The contradiction owes largely to the lack of precise criteria by which one can judge which elements of our liturgical heritage must be kept in order to maintain continuity with Tradition. Absent those criteria, the notion of continuity remains vague and subjective.

Likewise noteworthy was the address given by the future Benedict XVI to the participants of a July 2001 conference at the French abbey of Fontgombault,³ in which he opined that the 1962 Missal “is one of the treasures of the Church, and ought therefore to be preserved in the Church.” Considering that none of the popes who amended the Tridentine Missal (from Clement VIII in 1604 to Blessed John XXIII in 1962) advised retaining the previous versions, it seems odd that Ratzinger should call for the preservation of the 1962 Missal—unless, of course, it represents for him a venerable tradition that has been lost and deserves to be recovered. On the same occasion, he mused: “If there used to be the Dominican rite, if there used to be—and, in fact, there still is—the Milanese rite, then why not likewise the rite, shall we say, ‘of Saint Pius V?’” The Pian appellation is significant. Because the 1962 Missal is not identical with the Missal promulgated by Pope St. Pius V in 1570 at the behest of the Council of Trent, it cannot be regarded as the Missal “of Pius V” or the “Tridentine” Missal without the necessary clarifications. By evoking Pius V, Ratzinger affirmed the substantial continuity between the Missal of 1962 and that of 1570, thereby inviting the inference that the *Novus Ordo* is, quite literally, of a different order. In fairness, however, I must note that Ratzinger in this instance justified the use of the old Missal as a means of countering the notion (held by extremists on both the left and the right) that Vatican II was a decisive break with the

past. He did not speak of preserving the Roman Rite *per se*, and in fact insisted that both the 1962 and 1970 Missals are “Missals of the Church, and belong to the Church which remains the same as ever.” Then again, that is not the same as saying that both Missals are Missals of the Church’s ancient and long-lived Roman Rite.

In view of all this ambiguity, I expect the Pope will not explicitly engage the controversy over renewal versus rupture but will instead frame his permission in terms of a healthy liturgical plurality. The 1962 Missal is the last representative of a particular stream of tradition within the family of the Roman liturgy, a tradition going back in its



essential features to the fourth century and now commonly (albeit misleadingly) termed “Tridentine”. The modern rite contains elements from that tradition, but departs from it enough to represent another type of liturgy. By expanding the use of the 1962 Missal and the other liturgical books in force on the eve of the Council, Benedict would in effect be restoring the classical Roman Rite.

A third benefit I envision is the facilita-

tion of a “reform of the reform”. The post-conciliar liturgical reform did indeed yield good fruits for the Church, especially a stronger sense of corporate worship and the adoption of vernacular Scripture readings. Driven by the recovered ideal of the whole Church as the body of Christ, the Consilium restored to the people their proper place in the liturgical books, saying or singing the responses and prayers of various kinds that belong to them. Additionally, the reformers introduced a rich fare of biblical readings, clarified the structure of the various sacramental rites, simplified the classification of feasts, and recovered the ideal of Baptism-Confirmation-Eucharist (in that order) as the threefold process of Christian initiation. All of these changes reflect the Council’s fundamental liturgical commitments.

At the same time, and whatever one’s theological perspective or personal tastes, there is no denying that many of the liturgical changes of recent decades have been more in the nature of a revolution than a reform. Starting with the obvious: no sooner had Vatican II ended than, in Latin-rite churches the world over, altars were positioned in front of existing altars (where the original altars were not demolished, that is) so that the celebrant could face the people at Mass, despite the fact that the Council fathers said nothing about this practice. The Consilium allowed but did not prescribe “Mass facing the people”, and the rubrics of the Pauline Missal (the third typical edition of which was published in 2002) assume that the celebrant and people are facing the same direction, towards the altar.⁴ Additionally, the Council opened the door for the use of vernacular languages while decreeing that the faithful should be able to sing certain parts of the Mass in Latin. Yet by 1970, just a short time after the Council ended, there were very few parishes offering Mass in Latin. Much has changed since then: the minor orders and subdiaconate were abolished, Communion in the hand was restored (after a millennium of desuetude), laypersons now routinely

administer Communion (despite their status as extraordinary ministers), and females may now be altar servers. Many of these changes are the result of papal concessions to the liturgical “progressives” (often working in seminaries or on the liturgical commissions of various episcopal conferences) who actively undermined the official restriction or prohibition of these practices. These concessions, let it be said frankly, betrayed those who had obeyed the norms, shattering any confidence on their part that the Church knows her own mind where liturgical discipline is concerned. Much of what has been done to the liturgy in the name of “reform” has undermined a good deal of Catholic doctrine concerning the Real Presence, the sacrificial nature of the Mass, the ministerial priesthood, and the role of the laity. No Catholic who appreciates the bond between what the Church believes (*lex credendi*) and how the Church worships (*lex orandi*) can be insensitive to the current state of affairs.

What, then, would a reform of the reform entail? And how does the classical Roman liturgy figure into it? Judging from the many books and articles written on the subject, a new liturgical reform would involve, among other measures, a judicious retrieval of elements of the tradition that were unwisely and unwarrantedly abandoned after Vatican II, coupled with the elimination of those aspects of the post-conciliar rite which sober reappraisal and the wisdom of hindsight judge to have corroded a correct notion of the liturgy. The ultimate aim, as Ratzinger put it, is a liturgical “reconciliation”. Both the pre-conciliar and modern liturgical books enshrine, in different ways and with different emphases, theological and liturgical principles necessary for a Catholic (and catholic) understanding of worship. That is why I believe their coexistence can goad a true renewal, particularly when conditions are favorable to cross-fertilization. In this age of casualness, improvisation, and excessive “horizontalism” in worship, the classical rite can remind us what it means to worship the triune God in “spirit and truth” (John

4:23). Most people who frequent the Tridentine Mass do so not in protest against Vatican II, but because it conveys and fosters a pronounced sense of the sacred and transcendent. Granted, the modern Roman liturgy can be celebrated in a dignified and prayerful fashion, with artistic splendor and traditional ceremonial, but often it is not. Consequently, many Catholics flee to the old rite in order to escape the innovative banalities of too many *Novus Ordo* Masses. This is not to suggest that the pre-conciliar liturgy cannot be badly celebrated, or that it is the apex of liturgical history. The liturgy is not a museum piece but is, rather, the prime expression of the Church’s living Tradition of believing, teaching, and praying; for this reason, Ratzinger has no qualms in suggesting, for example, that the Prefaces of the Pauline Missal be added to the 1962 Missal. By the same token, he has stated that a reform of the reform refers not to the 1962 Missal but to the current one. So where does that leave the old Missal? Even if it is not the point of departure for a new liturgical movement, it remains a lighthouse to guide the modern rite in a more traditional direction.

To sum up, allowing a wider and freer use of the classical liturgy could help the Church in three ways. First, it would open a door to reconciliation with breakaway traditionalists. Second, it would reclaim for the Church at large certain Catholic perspectives and values that are often lacking in modern worship. Third, it would greatly expand the opportunity for Catholics to experience a rite with which they must be familiar in order to understand the liturgical aims of Vatican II and to have a standard of worship for “reforming the reform”. Now let us consider the mechanisms by which the Holy Father might do this.

One possibility is the creation of a personal prelatore, which is a kind of diocese without boundaries. By “personal” is meant that the jurisdiction of its bishop is not limited to a region but includes everyone who belongs to it. The first (and, to this day, only) personal prelatore, *Opus Dei*, was created by Pope John Paul II in 1982. Its

prelate reports directly to the pope and its clergy are incardinated for the service of the prelatore.

Another possibility is a universal apostolic administration. Essentially a parallel diocese, an apostolic administration operates independently of the local bishop. It differs in this regard from a personal prelatore, whose members are, like all Catholics, also responsible to the bishop of the local Church where they live and work. John Paul II erected the Personal Apostolic Administration of St. John Mary Vianney in 2002 to serve as an ecclesial home for reconciled schismatic traditionalists in the Brazilian diocese of Campos. Bishop Fernando Rifan, its current head, is entitled to ordain and incardinate priests and to establish seminaries. By permission of the Holy See, any Catholic may be inscribed into the Association, even if he or she resides outside the Campos diocese. What is more, any priest may offer the Tridentine Mass in the Administration’s churches, so long as he obtains the prelate’s permission. Naturally, the question to ask is whether the Campos model can be applied to the whole Church.

Either a personal prelatore or a worldwide apostolic administration would be a spiritual haven for traditionalists, freeing them from the authority of unsympathetic, if not hostile, bishops and placing them under the care of more-solicitous shepherds. All too often, Catholics who prefer the classical rite are treated like lepers by ecclesiastical officials, despite John Paul II’s acknowledgment, in his 1988 apostolic letter *Ecclesia Dei*, of their “rightful aspirations”. Indult Masses are routinely scheduled at times and places intended to discourage their attendance. More painfully, it is not uncommon for bishops to appoint unsympathetic priests to offer the traditional Mass, bringing their disdain for liturgical formality and strict rubric with them, and berating the congregation for their unwillingness to “get with it”. Some bishops, insistent on pouring new wine into old wineskins, make their permission for the classical rite contingent upon the use of girl

altar servers or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.⁵ The sad fact that a normal parish life is virtually impossible for many traditionalists who wish to stay within the Church makes laughable the oft-heard caveat that erecting an ecclesial structure for traditionalists would effectively ghettoize them.

Alternatively, Benedict could grant a general indult enabling all priests to celebrate Mass publicly according to the 1962 Missal without having to obtain permission of their bishops or superiors, thereby leaving priests and parishes to decide which rite to use. This approach has the advantage of introducing (or reintroducing) the classical rite into the mainstream of Church life, thereby multiplying the opportunities for younger Catholics to experience both forms of worship and see for themselves what was lost and what was gained in the reform initiated by Vatican II. On the downside, a universal indult would open a Pandora's Box of practical difficulties. What happens, for example, when a bishop forbids his priests, or a pastor his assistants, to celebrate the Eucharist according to the 1962 Missal? Assuming Benedict grants no veto power over the indult (which is unlikely to happen, since an indult is, by definition, an exception to a general rule), should these priests stand their legal ground and offer the classical Roman Mass regardless? I shudder to imagine the ensuing ugliness.

Even if we leave aside the problems of a house divided, there would be more to consider than simply which Missal to use. In older churches whose architectural integrity has been preserved, there is the question of which altar to choose: the original "high" altar (with or without a tabernacle on it), or the forwardly placed altar-table? Opting for the high altar would mean ignoring the altar-table or temporarily removing it, neither of which seems desirable. If, on the other hand, preference is given to the altar-table, and assuming the celebration would be facing "east" (the typical orientation for the traditional Mass), there would have to be adequate floor space in front of the altar (that is, on the "people's" side) to enable the celebrant and ministers to move about

freely, which often is not the case. Granted, the problem is artificial and thus avoidable, since there should be only one altar in the sanctuary to begin with.⁶ Likewise the question of orientation, since the modern rite of Mass can be celebrated *ad orientem*. Ideally, the same altar would be used for both rites, with the priest and congregation on the same side of it, but that is not the reality we all know. And let us not forget the inevitable challenge of maintaining two liturgical calendars side by side.

Quite possibly, Benedict XVI has something in mind other than the mechanisms we have considered. Whatever the case, it will have its pros and cons, and we can be sure he is weighing them carefully. As if that were not enough of a challenge, he will have to explain how the Church is well served by reinstating the classical liturgy while avoiding the impression of disavowing the work of Vatican II or Paul VI. In other words, the Pope is juggling his options while walking a political tightrope. This, I am convinced, explains the long wait for the much-discussed *motu proprio*. Every term, every phrase, every jot and tittle in Benedict's emancipation proclamation—if and when it comes—will matter. For now, however, one thing is sure: His Holiness views the "Tridentine question" against a broader horizon, namely, a more satisfactory and stable liturgical life for all the faithful. And that is something only a catholic Church, and none of her partisans alone, can achieve.

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References

1 See Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy, 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990). Father (later Archbishop) Bugnini was general secretary of the Consilium from 1964 until its abolition in 1969, whereupon he was appointed secre-

tary of the new Congregation for Divine Worship (1969–75).

2 Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background*, trans. Klaus D. Grimm (San Juan Capistrano, CA: Una Voce Press, 1993). More recently, see László Dobszay, *The Bugnini-Liturgy and the Reform of the Reform* (Front Royal, VA: Catholic Church Music Associates, 2003).

3 Alcuin Reid, O.S.B., ed., *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy with Cardinal Ratzinger* (Farnborough, Eng.: St. Michael's Abbey Press, 2003), 145–53.

4 This position is also termed *ad orientem*, "towards the east", towards the rising sun, towards the risen and returning Christ. For an exhaustive treatment, see U. M. Lang, *Turning towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

5 I know of one occasion—a Tridentine Low Mass—when a permanent deacon assisted the celebrant in distributing communion, using the formula from the *Novus Ordo* (in English, no less). Not surprisingly, this provoked upset. Immediately after communion, the pastor (who was not the celebrant), obviously having anticipated protest, emerged from the sacristy to announce that deacons are in Holy Orders and, as such, are ordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Whoever has a problem with that, he added, was not welcome back. Never mind that there were fewer than fifty communicants, thus obviating the need for help. More to the point, deacons were extraordinary ministers of Communion until the reforms of Paul VI. So, the use of a deacon in this instance, while licit, was somewhat anomalous—and, I suspect, calculated to ruffle feathers; otherwise, why did the pastor not assist?

6 "The principle of there being only one altar [*unicità dell' altare*] is theologically more important than the practice of celebrating facing the people" (Lang, 124, translating Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Editoriale: Pregare 'ad orientem versus'", *Notitiae* 29 [1993]: 249).