

The Culture and Heritage of the Classical Roman Rite

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INTRODUCTION

As Vice President of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, I am sometimes regarded as something of an ecclesiastical “fine-art consultant” who might otherwise work for a company such as Sotheby’s or Christies. Whilst it is true that our Dicastery must and indeed rightly does concern itself with the fine arts that Catholic tradition has bequeathed to the Church throughout the world, and whilst it is certainly true that we are concerned to promote wise stewardship of this heritage throughout the universal Church, our work is not that of supervising or training museum curators. For we are profoundly concerned about the cultural heritage of the Church. The question of culture, specifically Christian culture, is at the heart of our activity.

PREMISES

What is culture? We are, perhaps, given to placing our concept of “culture” within the context of multiculturalism – itself a significant feature of modern Western society – and to thinking that culture is simply a matter of the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behaviour of a particular nation or people, something which affords diversity and enrichment in modern societies. With such a concept, Christian culture can frequently be relegated to the relativistic position of one peculiar set of practices amongst others. Any claim of a specific, let alone of a unique, content can be lost.

But we need to elevate our concept of “culture.” Whilst in English the word “cult” has taken on a predominantly pejorative meaning, we must remember that “culture” finds its source in the Latin *cultus*, that is, in the life of cult, of worship. Culture and *cultus* are inseparable. It is above all in the worship of a people that their culture can be found. Contemporary society knows this fact only too well. In the cult of the film star, of the politician, and most clearly in that of the sports team (with its attendant chant, vesture and ritual acts), we see the sometimes questionable values and beliefs of secular society

clearly enunciated, if not indeed worshipped. Secular culture relies on these acts of worship.

Similarly, though in a distinct manner, as Catholics, we too rely on our *cultus*, our worship. Our dependence upon it is not only to enunciate our belief in an educative or formative sense, but it is in fact essential to our Christian life in order to join us sacramentally with him whom we worship and to nourish the life of grace in the soul. The life of the Christian is marked by worship, it is immersed in the divine *cultus*. This is precisely the point made by Pope St Pius X in his seminal *Motu Proprio Tra le sollecitudini* of 22 November 1903 when he spoke of the “active participation in the holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” being the “indispensable fount” of “the true Christian spirit.”

Thus, in Christian cult we encounter Christ himself. In Christian culture – in all its historical and geographical diversity – we savour the privileged fruits of this encounter with Christ. Christian culture is the tangible witness to the work of God the Holy Spirit in the lives of countless men and women who have known the truth, goodness and beauty of the incarnate One, and who have placed their love, their skill, their all, at the foot of his altar.

The life of the Christian cannot be lived without such *cultus*. And it cannot therefore be a-cultural any more than it can be un-incarnational, for our Blessed Lord, himself standing in the magnificent tradition of Jewish cult, established the Church with ritual acts which he underlined with that divine command of which St Paul speaks: “hoc facite in meam commemorationem” (cf. 1 Cor 11:24).

The doing of Christian cult, the following of this command of the Lord himself, throughout the centuries, is what we call the liturgical tradition of the Church. That tradition of the Church’s public worship (guiding and informing private prayer) – which is living and therefore cannot be frozen at any one moment in history – is at the heart of Christian culture. The splendid publications of Professor Eamon Duffy of the University of Cambridge bear eloquent testimony to this, most recently his book *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240-1570* (Yale, 2006). Professor Duffy’s earlier and most renowned work *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale, 1992) underlined in an indisputable way the place of the tangible, physical expressions of Christian cult in the life of faith in his compelling account of the destructive dismantling of this cultural synthesis that was the English Reformation.

Our concern for the cultural heritage of the Church is, therefore, concern for the life of the Christian in this world who lives in hope of everlasting life in the next. Cultural “goods,” be they ritual or

material, are signs of the redemption of this world by Christ; they are sacramentals, which occupy a privileged place in the economy of salvation.

Earlier, I said that the Church's liturgical tradition is necessarily a living thing. It has developed in history and it shall no doubt continue so to do – organically, of course, in continuity with received tradition. We may also say that culture is necessarily a living reality. Legitimate liturgical plurality and development may be seen in the many rites of the Catholic Church. Even within the Latin rite there are diverse and at times inspired new ways of rendering true worship to the one incarnate Word: I am thinking of the different but nevertheless incontestable beauty of the great forms of Western ecclesiastical architecture, from the noble Romanesque churches of the first millennium, to the soaring heights of the Gothic, and of the confident celebration of the Catholic faith that is the Baroque. One could draw analogous examples from the great treasury of sacred music that the sacred liturgy has inspired throughout the centuries.

Yet today, we are acutely conscious of the fact that all has not been well in recent decades in respect of the cultural life of the Latin rite of the Catholic Church. Western society has been suffering from a profound cultural crisis for some time and this has impacted on the Church. Indeed, our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI himself, as Cardinal Ratzinger, expressed on a number of occasions his profound concern for the crisis in the *cultus* of the Church that we have experienced in the decades following the Second Vatican Council, from the “fabrication” of new rites, to the banalization of ecclesiastical music and the unprecedented re-ordering of the spatial arrangements of churches (see *The Ratzinger Report* [Ignatius, 1985], *The Feast of Faith* [Ignatius, 1986], *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [Ignatius, 2000]).

It is possible to say that, in recent decades, much of the cultural heritage of the Church – from venerable rites to the many goods employed in their service – has been endangered by an ideology of novelty that has misunderstood if not rejected the profound respect for the tradition that genuine creativity in continuity with tradition had always understood. This of course, has not simply left us with an impoverished cultural experience in our churches. Most crucially, any impoverishment of the sacramentals themselves carries with it the danger of weakening the very encounter with the incarnate Lord which these rites and ritual things facilitate. We creatures of flesh and blood ordinarily require these cultural goods in order to enter into the life of grace and to persevere in it until the end. They serve to raise our minds and hearts to Almighty God, and to lead us into that encounter from which we receive grace. Devaluing or dismissing

them may have – indeed has had – an adverse effect on the life of faith of many in recent times.

This, of course, is why Cardinal Ratzinger wrote so clearly about such matters before his election to the Apostolic See. And it is why, as Pope Benedict XVI, he has underlined the importance of the sacred liturgy in all its attendant aspects throughout his pontificate. The Holy Father would not have had to say in his “Letter to the Bishops” accompanying *Summorum pontificum* (7 July 2007) that “it behoves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church’s faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place,” if indeed these riches had not - at least in some way - been endangered in contemporary times.

The principle underlying the concerns of Cardinal Ratzinger and the actions of Pope Benedict XVI was articulated by the Holy Father in his programmatic discourse to the Roman Curia of 22 December 2005, where he explained the principle of reform in continuity, not discontinuity or rupture:

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture....” On the other, there is the “hermeneutic of reform,” of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God. The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church.

This principle, I submit, is central in appreciating the culture and heritage of the classical Roman Rite and in any discussion of the place of that culture and heritage in the life of the Church today and tomorrow.

APPLICATIONS

I should like, then, to look at some aspects of this question in the light of the Holy Father’s principle of reform in continuity, not rupture.

In his letter to the bishops accompanying *Summorum pontificum*, Pope Benedict stated that “what earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful.” The Holy Father was speaking specifically about the older form of the liturgy of the Roman Rite – and I wish to assert something about the value of its culture and heritage – but I wish also to note that this illustration of the principle of continuity, that “what earlier generations held as

sacred, remains sacred and great for us too,” has a wider application in considering the whole cultural heritage of the Church.

In her complex study *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1998), the Anglican Cambridge scholar Catherine Pickstock describes the medieval Roman Rite in the following way:

Its recommencements, invocations, permeations, and significations are situated within a construal of language as that which both signifies and provokes a beneficent mystery which is not wholly other from the sign, although it cannot be exhausted by the sign. Instead, the theological sign includes and repeats the mystery it receives and to which it is offered, and as such, it reveals the nature of that divine mystery as gift, relationality, and perpetuity. Such a sign is not a terminal product which stops at its own signification. Instead, its signification is a redemptive sacrifice which is offered in the hope of further offerings, offered to and as the gift of repetition. The sign disseminates the tradition into which it is born, for it is configured as a history, a ritual, a liturgy, a narrative, a desire and a community. Such a wealth of signification bespeaks the sign which is also a person, and a people, a body which is dispersed through time as gift, peace, and the possibility of a future (p. 267).

Whilst not seeking to endorse all of Dr Pickstock’s conclusions, I do think that her hymn to that cultural synthesis that is the Roman liturgy as it has developed and been handed on in tradition is eloquent indeed. She understands well that the rites are more than merely customary ways of acting. She is clear that they cannot readily be disentangled from the identity of a people, indeed from their theological identity, from the very redemptive action of Almighty God in their Christian lives.

Dr Pickstock holds forth the classical Roman Rite as a model liturgical synthesis in the medieval period. Whilst she is critical of the liturgical reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council, it is because they were “not radical enough” (p. 171; see also p. 176), and not because they jettisoned the former liturgical order. Hers is not a position of reform in continuity, and it is here we must part company with her insightful work.

For the liturgy Dr Pickstock holds up as a model is today no museum exhibit that more-enlightened times has carefully preserved behind glass in a controlled climate for the admiration of the curious or for the careful dissection of the scholar. It remains a living tradition. It is “sacred and great” for us too. It is capable of doing, indeed

it does, all that of which Dr Pickstock says it was capable in former times, and more, for men and women of the twenty-first century.

Following the indult of the Congregation for Divine Worship *Quattuor abhinc annos* of 3 October 1984, issued at the direction of the late Pope John Paul II, granting the faculty of allowing the celebration of Mass according to the *Missale Romanum* of 1962 under specific conditions, sceptics commented that such celebrations, where they were allowed, would attract older generations nostalgic for the past, or merely curious younger ones. Such critics could not conceive that the older liturgical rites would or even could, when freed from the pretence of having been abrogated (as the Holy Father has definitively established in *Summorum pontificum*), not only speak to younger generations who had never really known them, but indeed inspire such young people to live the Catholic faith in the modern world with commitment, self-sacrifice and at times even heroism. One needs to look no further than at the numerous young communities founded in the past twenty or so years, full of good vocations, at whose heart is the classical liturgical tradition of the Church, for evidence of its vitality even in – especially in – the twenty-first century. For these young people have found that the classical liturgy offers a vital connection with the culture and heritage of the Church – something that many of the older generations had certainly known, perhaps without feeling the need to articulate it except when it was suddenly forbidden.

But this is not a phenomenon that is confined to the young. I too have found that my vocation as a monk and as a priest have been renewed through a greater appreciation of the riches of liturgical tradition, facilitated in my case through the ongoing study of St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Dom Guéranger's *Liturgical Year* and the writings of Msgr Klaus Gamber. These writers helped immerse me in the rich culture and heritage of the Church that one experiences in her sacred liturgy as developed in Tradition. I too – someone who had been a busy and relatively successful priest for some twenty years – found that pearl of great price that so many young people have found in recent decades. Talking with many priests, I have been astonished at how many have had similar experiences: to come to know and to celebrate the classical rites informs one's faith and identity as a priest, as one called to be *alter Christus*. After such an encounter, one can never be the same again.

But I want to make an important point here. Such an awakening is not about “me,” nor is it about my finding “my” particular spirituality or favourite style of worship. No; is not so individualistic or subjective an experience. Coming into contact with and beginning to appreciate and savour the riches of the culture and heritage of the

classical Roman Rite is a profoundly ecclesial experience. I am no longer doing my own thing in accordance with the many styles and possibilities on offer. Rather, I take my place in the continuity of the bi-millennial tradition of the Church's worship, at one with the Fathers and the saints, and in turn faithfully seek to hand on what I have received.

The modern liturgy should stand in that same tradition and should be celebrated accordingly. But we know only too well, that in recent decades the modern liturgy has often not been offered as something in continuity with tradition, but as something radically new, different from "what we did before Vatican II," as the saying goes. And this explains why today young people who have never known the older rites, and priests who have never celebrated them, discover something radically new and fresh in the older form of the Roman Rite. Where they have persevered in tilling the arid ground of rupture, they come to rejoice in the fertile soil of continuity.

This is why it is not only good that the classical liturgy may freely be celebrated, but that it is important that it should be celebrated widely. As the former Prefect of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei," Darío Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos, himself said, "the Holy Father wants the ancient use of the Mass to become a normal occurrence in the liturgical life of the Church so that all of Christ's faithful – young and old – can become familiar with the older rites and draw from their tangible beauty and transcendence" (Address to the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, 14 June 2008). For these rites, as well as themselves drawing people closer to Christ, also act as a prophetic witness to Catholic culture in a way that, to use Holy Father's words, can be "mutually enriching" for the modern rites.

I am referring, of course, to the reform of the reform. In doing so I do not wish to cause any alarm. I am not aware of any intention on the part of the Holy Father or of the Holy See to visit upon the older liturgical books any of the controversial reforms that followed the Second Vatican Council. The Holy Father is clear, however, that some development of these rites is possible, even desirable (he has spoken of enriching the prefaces of the missal, and of the addition of new saints). We cannot pretend that the organic development of the liturgy must halt in 1962 or 1955 or in any other year. We cannot prevent God the Holy Spirit from inspiring further enrichment of the rite in the future any more than we can lament his doing so in the past. But we do not need to fear: the classical liturgy is "safe," as it were. It was not abrogated and it will not be abrogated.

What I am asserting is the need to revisit the modern liturgical books and ask the question: Are they an example of reform in conti-

nunity? And we must ask: Is how we experience their use in pastoral situations faithful to the Church's liturgical tradition? Or are there modern practices that need to be reconnected with the culture and heritage of the Roman Rite as developed in history?

Some may object to talk of a reform of the reform, preferring to concern themselves with the promotion and study of the classical liturgy. But this, too, is contributing not only to the study of the ancient rites, but also to the liturgical renewal of the wider Church. The classical rites cannot thus contribute if they are not celebrated – one does not hide a lamp under a bushel (cf. Mt 5:15) – and one cannot draw fully from the riches of the tradition if these riches are not studied and articulated in ways that bring forth from them things both old and new (cf. Mt 13:52) for the benefit of the whole Church of today and of tomorrow.

For the ritual heritage of the Church bespeaks a culture of worship which the egocentric modern man of the twenty-first century profoundly and urgently needs to rediscover. It places Almighty God and his incarnate Son at the centre of all of our endeavours, not my desires or concerns. It humbles me, a finite individual, before the majesty of him who is without beginning or end, and teaches me what it is to worship. It initiates me into that sonship and brotherhood through which I come to rejoice in sharing in the Divine Life. It teaches me both how to kneel in adoration and how to rise and walk in the world as a disciple and as an apostle.

This, without doubt, is why our beloved Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has undertaken a reform of the ceremonial of papal liturgies. He takes great care personally to celebrate the modern liturgy in continuity with tradition, drawing from the rich culture and heritage of the Church. Perhaps the simplest and yet most profound feature of his reform – which can be imitated anywhere – is his placing of the crucifix once again at the centre of the altar. This simple restoration, in my opinion, represents the fundamental orientation that has given rise to the great heritage of Christian ritual throughout the centuries: the worship of Almighty God and his incarnate Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. The sacred liturgy is not a merely human assembly; it is the worship of Almighty God. That is why – as we have re-learned from the Holy Father's example when he has celebrated Mass in the Sistine Chapel – it is not at all inappropriate today, in the modern rites, to use the beautiful East-facing altars in our churches that our heritage has bequeathed to us.

So too, we also learn from the example of the Pope, that older vestments and vessels – crafted with skill and love by previous generations and so generously offered to the Church by now often unknown

benefactors – also have their place in the sacred liturgy of our time. For these tangible aspects of our culture and heritage remain, today, sacramentals created out of love for and worship of Almighty God. These dispositions deserve honour and respect, for even in these material elements of our liturgical tradition, we can apply the dictum of our Holy Father which I quoted earlier: “What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behoves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church’s faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place.” What, then, earlier generations held as worthy and beautiful cannot but be useful, indeed worthy and good in the sacred liturgy today. And it most certainly behoves all of us to preserve these material riches which have developed in the Church’s faith and prayer, so imbued as they are with the love and worship of Almighty God, and to give them their proper place in the rites of the feasts and seasons of the Church’s year today and tomorrow.

If we understand this, we come to realise how inappropriate are the criticisms that some have levelled against the Holy Father for using liturgical items that recent decades had locked up in museums. Continuity does not sweep aside all that came before and replace it all of a sudden with stark new creations. It treats such goods with veneration and respect, allowing them to take their rightful place as servants of the beauty and dignity of our worship. It must also be added that the Holy Father is by no means an archaeologist: his liturgical example encompasses the use of new vessels and vestments: worthy oblations of artists of the twenty-first century, which themselves contribute to the liturgical heritage of the Church in continuity with her tradition.

There is another element of the culture and heritage of the classical Roman Rite that is crucial for the modern liturgy: its utter clarity on the ritual nature of liturgical rites. This may appear self-evident, but it is a truth that has too often been forgotten. Rites involve ritual: certain ways of behaving which are conducive to establishing and expressing the dispositions that are fundamental to the very nature of our encounter with the Risen One in the sacred liturgy. Standing, sitting, kneeling, genuflecting, prostrating, bowing, holding my hands joined, swinging a thurible, processing, singing, striking my breast, signing myself with the sign of the cross: all these external acts – somewhat curious in themselves – which come to us from centuries of Christian (and in some cases even pre-Christian) culture, are elements of our ritual heritage. To ignore or to displace them is to risk dysfunction in

that intimate relationship between body and soul, between act and intention, which is fundamental to Christian worship.

This is why the Holy Father has written about the *ars celebrandi*, which he calls “the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness.” Pope Benedict teaches us that this is “the best way to ensure [the] *actuosa participatio*” of the People of God. “Indeed,” he says, “for two thousand years this way of celebrating has sustained the faith life of all believers” (Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* [22 February 2007] §38). This emphasis on the *ars celebrandi* rightly understood seeks once again to place the plenitude of our liturgical culture and heritage at the centre of modern man’s search for God.

Here, too, the Holy Father teaches by his personal example. As the celebrant of the liturgy it is clear that – in spite of the personal attention that people afford him due to his office – he strives to be the servant of the liturgy and not its proprietor. And in a simple yet undoubtedly crucial restoration – that of distributing Holy Communion to communicants kneeling at papal Masses – Pope Benedict has said once and for that all traditional ritual gestures and postures retain their value.

The same principle can be applied to the Church’s treasury of sacred music and indeed of sacred architecture. This rich heritage which has lifted up countless hearts and minds to the contemplation of Almighty God over centuries has validity today, and whilst it is certainly living and capable of development through authentic enrichment, it is by no means to be jettisoned because it originated before a particular date. One only needs to recall the explicit but widely ignored call of the Second Vatican Council for Gregorian chant to “be given pride of place in liturgical services” to understand how much work needs to be done in reconnecting much modern practice with the Church’s heritage (see the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* [4 December 1963] §116).

In all of this work, be it in reforming the reform or in ensuring the worthy and solemn celebration of the *usus antiquior* – the classical Roman Rite – the role, indeed the vocation, of the Christian artist is essential. For whilst we have a very rich heritage from which to draw, we cannot trade exclusively on the capital of the past. We urgently need men and women who know the culture and heritage of the classical Roman Rite, indeed who live in continuity with that tradition, to place their God-given gifts at the service of enriching that heritage. One word of caution: whilst many men and women of great artistic skill exist in the world, and whilst they frequently offer the Church meritorious fruits of their labours, we must look first, I think, for the artist who knows and lives the cult of the Church. For

how can there be true development in continuity where the tradition is not known, loved and lived in the first place?

In raising the reform of the reform I do not wish to devalue the study of what one might call the “bigger questions” that arise when considering the liturgical reform in the light of a hermeneutic of reform in continuity, not of rupture. Such academic work is important, if not crucial. What I am seeking to do, however, is to assert that the reform of the reform has an immediate importance, for whilst, most felicitously, the older rites are now increasingly celebrated, there are still many, many faithful Catholics for whom the modern rites are their usual manner of worship, and they too should experience and benefit from the great culture and heritage of the Roman Rite.

At this juncture in the history of the Church, I think it is most important to cultivate the virtues of patience and charity. Yes, recent decades have seen some things transpire which have eroded and damaged the precious heritage handed on to us by our forebears, and for that, where appropriate, we must do penance. In justice, we must also make restitution in so far as this is possible. But that restitution will take time and will rightly incur criticism if it is made hastily or without charity to all concerned.

CONCLUSION

The English priest, Dr Adrian Fortescue, writing almost one hundred years ago, said of the classical Roman Rite:

Essentially the Missal of Pius V. is the Gregorian Sacramentary; that again is formed from the Gelasian book, which depends upon the Leonine collection. We find the prayers of our Canon in the treatise *de Sacramentis* and allusions to it in the IVth century. So our Mass goes back, without essential change, to the age when it first developed out of the oldest liturgy of all. It is still redolent of that liturgy, of the days when Cæsar ruled the world and thought he could stamp out the faith of Christ, when our fathers met together before dawn and sang a hymn to Christ as to a God.... [T]here is not in Christendom another rite so venerable as ours. (*The Mass* [Longmans, Green and Co., 1912], p. 213).

This is the magnificent heritage that Tradition bequeaths to us in all its truth, goodness and beauty, in order that we might live according to Christ’s commands in this world and live forever with him in the next. But how can one live a good Christian life if the sacred liturgy is ugly? How can we, bodily creatures of flesh and blood, human persons for whom affectivity is fundamental, come to draw from the

“indispensable fount” of “the true Christian spirit,” if the wellspring is not clear, and – at a human level – far from attracts?

United in our understanding of the indispensable role of the *cultus* in Christian life, we must do all that we can – each of us according to our gifts – to move forward, with and under Peter, reconciling where there has been rupture, repairing where there has been damage, building upon the foundations of our forebears, that, by the fruits of our Christian lives, all that is true, beautiful and good in the cultural heritage of the Church will shine forth for the people of our day and for those of future generations, for our salvation and for the salvation of the whole world.

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