

EDITORIAL

LITURGICAL CHANGES REALLY HAVE ALTERED BELIEFS

The liturgy is clearly a key concern of Pope Benedict's papacy. We saw it in a major way last summer with the issuance of the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* removing the restrictions on the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass. And we have seen it in a number of smaller, yet still quite significant, actions since – Pope Benedict's appointment of a new, tradition-minded, papal Master of Ceremonies and his recent celebration of Mass *ad orientem* in the Sistine Chapel being cases in point.

Two factors seem to underlie Pope Benedict's focus on the liturgy. The first is his belief that the principal focus of the liturgy should be on God and not, as has too often become the case, on the assembled congregation. The second is his recognition of the strong links between the liturgy and Catholics' beliefs.

Over the last forty years those beliefs have changed. A major – though not the only – reason is the change in the liturgy that began immediately following the Second Vatican Council and that has continued *de facto*, if not *de jure*, ever since. We learn about our religion several ways. The first, of course, is from our parents, both from their instruction and, perhaps even more important, their example. The second is via formal study – the catechism at an early age and theology later on. The third is from the liturgy itself. The late Cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler, about whom there is more in this issue, put the matter succinctly:

From the very beginning of the Church, faith and liturgy have been intimately connected. ... Pope Celestine I wrote to the bishops of Gaul in 422: *Legem Credendi, lex statuit supplicandi* — the law of praying determines the law of believing. This has subsequently been commonly expressed by the phrase, *lex orandi, lex credendi* [the law of prayer is the law of belief].

Until Vatican II, the liturgy at any point in time had always been the product of organic growth. It

changed slowly and thus embodied the thinking of the Church through the ages. As such, it was an important source of data on what the Church believed. St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica* turned repeatedly to the liturgy for such information. Pope Benedict, in his encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, used the traditional rite of baptism in the same way.

The Mass of Paul VI is a valid Mass. It is, however, a break from the Traditional Mass in many important ways. One is its entirely different aura, something that is regularly remarked upon by young people who never knew the Old Mass and have recently discovered it. In the Traditional Mass, there is the common turning of Priest and congregation toward the Lord, the silent canon with its time for contemplation and the deeper sense of participation that it affords, the many genuflections and other symbolic actions of the priest, the chant in the sung Masses and the incense. These are externals but they are powerful teachers in their own right.

Just as important is the difference in the basic theological emphasis of the two. From the time of the Church Fathers on the nature of the Eucharist as both sacrifice and meal has been recognised by the Church. The Council of Trent defined it as dogma. In the Traditional Mass, this sacrificial nature of the Eucharist is writ large while in the New Mass it is obscured.

We see the difference both in the Mass prayers themselves and in the very location in which the two Masses are usually celebrated, the high altar – the age-old site of sacrifice – in the Traditional Mass and a table-like altar – a place for a meal – in the New Mass.

Pope Benedict in his earlier writings decried this shift in emphasis, so too did Pope John Paul II. He wrote his encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, he stated, to “help to banish the dark clouds of unacceptable doctrine and practice, so that the Eucharist will continue to shine forth in all its radiant mystery.” He cites as such the “extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery” that “[s]tripped of its sacrificial meaning ... is

celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet.”

Mass attendance, as we have documented in this *Review*, has declined catastrophically in most Western countries over the past four decades. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Catholics do not make it to Mass. This was not at all the case prior to Vatican II.

In most countries, those declines followed quickly on the heels of the changes in the liturgy that the Consilium, the group headed by Archbishop Bugnini, rammed through following the close of the Council, changes that Cardinal Stickler has cogently argued ran very much counter to the recommendations of the Council itself.

We have argued that the Mass attendance declines were in large part a reaction to those changes. Faulty catechesis, heterodox theology and factors operating in the world at large doubtless have added to the problem both directly and indirectly through their effects on liturgical practice.

But the fact remains that the liturgy has changed and in many places markedly so. It is our great teacher, both via symbol and via word. If the symbols are jettisoned and the words are altered, as happened with the introduction of the new liturgy and as has continued *pari passu* as each new theological fad has come to the fore, belief will be altered. And if the Mass is reduced to “simply a fraternal banquet,” to use Pope John Paul’s phrase, it ought not be the least bit surprising that some, and perhaps even many, Catholics will take it lightly.

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