

ALFONS STICKLER: FAITHFUL SON OF DON BOSCO

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CARDINAL Alfons Maria Stickler, S.D.B., former Cardinal Librarian and Archivist of the Catholic Church and the oldest member of the College of Cardinals, passed away in the Vatican on December 12.

Cardinal Stickler was a dedicated priest, an accomplished scholar, a fearless pursuer of the truth and, in his quiet way, a great Church leader. After his retirement from the Vatican Library in 1988, he became a powerful force in the movement to return the Traditional Latin Mass to its proper place in the Church.

Last March, on the seventieth anniversary of Cardinal Stickler's ordination to the priesthood, Pope Benedict praised him for his "humble and true zeal for the good of the Church." And, in a more personal vein, went on to say "In my time as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for many years I lived in a neighbouring apartment and have come to know your kind humanity and priestly love and devotion."

Early days

Cardinal Stickler was born on August 23, 1910 in Neunkirchen, in lower Austria. to staunchly Catholic parents, Mikeal Stickler and Teresa Schachner.¹ He was the second eldest of twelve children. His father was a bookbinder, a fact of some significance given Cardinal Stickler's later career as head of the Vatican Library,

There were no secondary school in Neunkirchen. So after the young Stickler completed primary school, his uncle, a priest, decided to send the lad to the Salesian school in Vienna. It was there, Cardinal Stickler said subsequently, that his vocation to the priesthood began to mature.

In 1927, he entered the Salesian novitiate in Enseldorf, Germany and the next year on the Feast of the Assumption made his first profession. He studied philosophy and then theology, first in Germany and later in Austria, Turin, and Rome. He was ordained to the priesthood on March 27, 1937. He then went on to study canon law, at the Pontifical Athenaeum of S. Apollinare and later at the Pontifical Lateran University, earning his doctorate in 1940 and eventually becoming an

expert on the history of canon law.

Cardinal Stickler taught at the Salesian University as Professor of Canon Law and Church Legal History for eight years. In 1950, he had published the first of a planned three-volume history of canon law. He was never to complete the other two. He got pulled into a series of administrative positions, one after another, each more prestigious and time consuming than the last. "I never sought after any position," he said subsequently, "[T]his was an obedience before which I bowed as a consummate fact."²

Vatican II *peritus*

In 1953, he became Dean of the Canon Law Faculty and in 1958 Rector of the University, a position that he held for the next eight years. From 1962 to 1965, he also served as a *peritus*, or expert, at the Second Vatican Council for three separate commissions. In his capacity as rector of the Salesian University, he was part of the commission directed by the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities. He was asked in addition to serve on the Commission for the Clergy and, because of his expertise in canon law, as *peritus* for the Commission for the Liturgy.

From the close of the Council until 1968, Cardinal Stickler was president of the newly founded Pontifical Institute of Higher Latin Studies. Then in 1971, he was appointed Prefect of the Vatican Library a position of considerable importance that had been filled by scholars of the calibre of Mgr. Achille Ratti, who later became Pope Pius XI, and the Jesuit Franz Ehrle before that.

On All Saints Day 1983, Pope John Paul II consecrated him bishop in the Sistine Chapel and on May 25, 1985 raised him to the rank of Cardinal and named him Cardinal Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Catholic Church. All told, Cardinal Stickler directed the Vatican Library in one major administrative capacity or another for 18 years. During that time, he organised major scholarly conferences, edited scholarly volumes and perhaps most importantly oversaw extensive modernisation and extension of the library and archives to better accommodate its rich collection

of manuscripts, printed books, engravings, and very valuable coin collection. Under his leadership, a great nuclear bomb proof bunker was built, in which the most important treasures of the library, including the *Codex Vaticanus*, are stored.

After his retirement in July 1988, Cardinal Stickler assumed, as it were, a new persona. He became, in the words of one blogger, “a one-man rally for the return of the West's ancient liturgy ... the standard bearer for those in the Roman Church disaffected by the liturgical insanity which swept through its temples like a cyclone in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.”³

The interesting question is what made this bookish man take on this very public and seemingly unaccustomed role. He himself said that retirement gave him the time to do so. While true, I suspect, that there is more to the story.⁴ Retirement, I believe, also provided him with a degree of freedom of another sort. Post-Vatican II there has been a quite nasty cultural war going on in the Church. Anyone, questioning the zeitgeist – clergy in particular – had to beware. After retirement, Cardinal Stickler, became immune to much of this. He could be laughed at or ignored, but he could speak his mind without fear that the institution he headed and the people associated with it would suffer as a result.

Crucial commission

Important in another way, I suspect, were both his scholarly background and his work as *peritus* for the Commission on the Liturgy at Vatican II. As an historian of canon law, he was not only well equipped to evaluate the post-Vatican II changes in the liturgy but was also very aware of the key part that organic growth has played in the development of the liturgy as also the law. And as a *peritus*, he knew the details of the debates surrounding the Vatican II documents.

What quite possibly played some further part in Cardinal Stickler's decision to take up the cause of the Traditional Latin Mass was his work on the commission of nine cardinals that Pope John Paul II appointed in 1986 to study its legal status. The questions that group was charged to answer were whether the Traditional Mass had actually been suppressed by Pope Paul VI and whether any priest on his own had the right to celebrate this Mass. According to Cardinal Stickler, eight of the nine voted “no” on the first count and all nine “yes” on the second. It is not difficult to imagine that the contrast between the status of the

Traditional Mass *de jure* and *de facto* – its near-total ban by bishops worldwide – struck a very discordant note to a man who had dedicated so much of his life to the serious study of the law.

In any event, Cardinal Stickler became active as a writer and a speaker on the subject of the liturgy. Most important, he journeyed throughout Europe and to the United States to celebrate the Traditional Mass, always, however, as he has pointed out with the local bishop's permission.

Two of Cardinal Stickler's articles that are still very much must reading for anyone concerned about the liturgy appeared in *Latin Mass Magazine* and are readily available on line. The first, "The Attractiveness of the Tridentine Mass," (Stickler, 1995) evaluates the post-Vatican II liturgy in light of the documents of the Council of Trent. Cardinal Stickler finds it wanting on a number of important ways. He concludes:

Summarizing our reflections, we can say the theological attractiveness of the Tridentine Mass corresponds with the theological incorrectness of the Vatican [II] Mass. For this reason the *Christi Fidelis* of the theological tradition should continue to manifest, in the spirit of obedience to legitimate superiors, the legitimate desire and pastoral preference for the Tridentine Mass.

The second “Recollections of a Vatican II *Peritus*,” (Stickler, 1999) compares the actual post-Vatican II liturgy with what the Council fathers had intended. Cardinal Stickler writes by way of introduction that:

You can understand my astonishment when I found that the final edition of the new Roman Missal in many ways did not correspond to the Conciliar texts that I knew so well, and that it contained much that broadened, changed or even was directly contrary to the Council's provisions. Since I knew precisely the entire proceeding of the Council, from the often very lengthy discussions and the processing of the *modi* up to the repeated votes leading to the final formulations, as well as the texts that included the precise regulations for the implementation of the desired reform, you can imagine my amazement, my growing displeasure, indeed my indignation, especially regarding specific contradictions and changes that would necessarily have lasting consequences.

He goes on in that article to detail the disparities between the two, citing the Vatican II documents where relevant.

Despite the serious nature of these discussions, Cardinal Stickler's delightfully wry sense of humour on occasion peeks through. In this vein, I cannot resist quoting the following passage from the latter of the two articles (Stickler, 1999):

That blunders could be made in the new readings, above all in the choice of their introductory and concluding words, is exemplified by Klaus Gamber's note on the end of the reading on the first Sunday in Lent of the Reading Cycle for Year A, which speaks of the consequences of Original Sin: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Whereupon the people, performing their duty of lively and active participation, must answer: "Thanks be to God."

Mass in St. Patrick's

My wife Judy and I were privileged to see Cardinal Stickler in action two times. The first was on the evening of Sunday May 12, 1996 at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York City where he celebrated a truly memorable solemn pontifical Mass .

It was the second Sunday in May – Mothers' Day in the United States. I had asked Judy what she wanted for Mothers' Day and she had replied "An early dinner with the family and then to Mass at St. Patrick's. Our two sons were away, but our three daughters, who then ranged in age from eight to 25, answered the call.

St. Patrick's holds roughly 4000 people and it was completely packed, with several hundred more standing outside. While people came from all over, it was largely a New York crowd, drawn from different races and ethnic groups and of all ages. They came streaming in as just as the evening *novus ordo* Mass was getting over and in less than five minutes the cathedral was full.

A half hour later, Cardinal Stickler a diminutive man – tiny actually – with a ruddy, almost cherubic face entered in procession wearing a traditional 30-foot long *capa magna* in procession. He was preceded by the Knights of Malta and Knights of Columbus in full dress and was greeted by the choir and orchestra with the stirring strains of Bruckner's *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus*. I saw more than a few tear-stained faces in the congregation. Judy and I and the girls spotted our own priest, Mgr. James Asip, in the procession, a man who, had he lived in more propitious times, might very well also have worn the red biretta.

The music was outstanding – Mozart's Coronation Mass coupled with Gregorian chant .

As I described it a year later in this *Review* (Lothian, 1998):

It [was] a media event. The *New York Times* devoted front-page coverage to the Mass that morning. Six New York City television stations showed taped excerpts that night. Newspaper accounts, including one in the *Times*, followed the next day. There was a story here and the secular media, to their credit, realised it. The Mass was beautiful, which captured their attention straight off. It also was the first such Mass at St. Patrick's in 35 years.

Sadly, it also has been the last such Mass in that beautiful church.

Insistence on obedience

Two years later, in October 1998, Judy and I again saw Cardinal Stickler. This time in Rome. The occasion was the tenth-anniversary celebration of the founding of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter and of the *motu proprio Ecclesia Dei Adflicta* that Pope John Paul II issued in an attempt to loosen the restrictions on the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass. Cardinal Stickler together with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger hosted a scholarly conference on the liturgy in which both chaired sessions and spoke.⁵ Three to four hundred attendees had initially been expected. A few weeks prior to the event, it had become apparent that ten times that number of pilgrims, or more, were likely to show up. Cardinal Ratzinger, I have been told, had to scramble a bit but did manage to book the grand ballroom of a hotel on the outskirts of the city that was big enough to accommodate the large crowd. It probably seated close to 2500, and by the second of the two conference sessions was filled to overflowing, with laity and clergy that had got word of the event and come from across the globe.

Cardinal Stickler's presentation was devoted to strategies for the expansion of permission for the celebration of the Traditional Mass. He suggested several approaches, including convincing Bishops that sound doctrine and sound liturgy go hand in hand, or in the Latin phrase *lex orandi lex credendi*. He insisted, however, that in pursuing such strategies we be the most obedient of Catholics, because the Mass cannot exist outside the Church.

The next day, Sunday October 26, 1998, Cardinal Stickler celebrated a solemn pontifical Mass, this time in the lovely sixteenth-century

Jesuit church of S. Ignazio. Like St. Patrick's, S. Ignazio is a large church and like St. Patrick's two years earlier, it was standing room only well before Mass began.

The procession into church was truly remarkable – Cardinal Stickler together with deacon and subdeacon, the hierarchy represented by Bishop James Timlin of Scranton Pennsylvania and by Dom F. Gérard Calvet, abbot of the monastery of St. Madeleine in le Barroux, France, followed by literally hundreds of priests and seminarians in cassock and surplice along with Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans in their habits. The monks from le Barroux and a lay French choir sang the propers for the Feast of Christ the King (*Dignus est agnus*) and the choir and congregation alternated on the common, *Missa VIII (De Angelis)*.

Cardinal Stickler again had made a powerful statement. Afterwards so many people who had been present at the Mass lingered in the piazza to savour the moment that no traffic could pass. When Cardinal Stickler came out of the church to leave for home he was strongly and gratefully cheered by all present.

This vibrant little man with the winsome smile, like the Fr. Murphy of song, had swept through the land like a mighty storm. Many were not amused.

Holy Father's tribute

Pope Benedict's homily at the funeral Mass that he celebrated for Cardinal Stickler is worth quoting in some detail and pondering:

[Cardinal Stickler] chose as his episcopal motto: "Omnia et in omnibus Christus", and as he was approaching the end of his life, he explained how these words guided his every choice and decision. "At the root of my activities", he wrote a few years ago, "there has always been the ideal of faith and Christian life that is focused on Christ the Redeemer and then Founder of the Church. All my efforts and studies have served in particular to deepen religious knowledge with full fidelity to the Pope". And he added: "As a Salesian, I follow the three ideals passed on by Don Bosco: love for the Eucharist, devotion to Our Lady, and fidelity to the Holy Father."

He was well aware that loving Christ means loving his Church, which is always holy, as he noted in his spiritual testament, "despite the weakness, at times even scandalous, of us, her representatives and members, in the past and in the present". He knew the opposition and challenges that Christians have

to contend with in our age and concluded that only true love for Christ can make them sufficiently courageous and persevering in defending the truth of the Catholic faith.

In his regard, how often must Cardinal Alfons Maria Stickler have read and meditated upon the Gospel passage which has also been proclaimed today at our gathering! The Evangelist Matthew, who will accompany us throughout this liturgical year, adds to the eight Beatitudes that introduce the Sermon on the Mount another which says: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account", and ends: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven" (Mt 5: 11-12). All of us, dear brothers and sisters, who have been called by Baptism to follow and serve Jesus, know that we cannot and must not expect applause and recognition on this earth. The true reward of the faithful disciple is "in Heaven": it is Christ himself. Let us never forget this truth! Let us never give in to the temptation to seek human success and support, rather than counting only and always on the One who came into the world to save us and who redeemed us on the Cross! Whatever service God may call us to in his vineyard, may it always be enlivened by humble adherence to his will! That this was dear Cardinal Stickler's approach to the whole of human life, despite human frailty and weakness, is apparent from his spiritual testament, in which he noted: "My whole life was a plan, and an achievement superior to my strength to which I could do no more than consent - often not even fully evaluating the cause. Thus, my entire life was and is a work of Divine Providence".

Cardinal Stickler kept his head when all about him were losing theirs. He did so graciously and out of dedication to the Word. He provided countless Catholics with the hope that a better day would dawn.

FOOTNOTES

1. The biographical details are taken from Dias, 1987 and The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church website of Salvatore Miranda.
2. Dias, (1987, p. 12).
3. Ad Orientem blog, December 14, 2007.
4. Stickler, 1992.
5. This discussion draws on Lowry's (1998) account.

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