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The time has come for a middle-way Mass

In the 1990s Jeremy de Satgé appealed for a liturgy that combined the best elements of old and new. Today, he sees the dream becoming reality

by Jeremy de Satgé

In 1991 I took part in a series of informal discussions with a few like-minded Catholics regarding various aspects of the Church and with a particular emphasis on the liturgy. It had only been three years since the excommunication of Archbishop Lefebvre and we felt this schism to be a scandal; and that perhaps it was time to review the changes that had been made to the Mass following Vatican II – a Reform of the Reform – as an attempt to re-establishing unity between those with such divergent views as to how Mass should be celebrated.

The result of our discussions was a short paper that outlined our conclusions, covering areas such as attitudes towards other denominations, evangelisation, church architecture and the celebration of Mass. We considered our approach to be a “middle way” between the old and the new; and so we borrowed Newman’s phrase “via media” for the purpose. In our paper we included some practical suggestions as to how Mass might be celebrated.

The paper was sent to the Bishops of England and Wales and other interested parties, including the then Cardinal Ratzinger. Most did not respond, but there followed a fairly interesting correspondence with a handful of them. One or two merely concentrated on something we wrote that they didn’t agree with and, in so doing, rather missed the bigger picture. The most interesting comment came from the retired Bishop of Menevia (now deceased) Langton Fox who wrote that in his experience “more priests say Mass in the New Rite with greater dignity and reverence than they used in the older rite”. Liturgical abuse was clearly something not just attributable to the Novus Ordo.

For whatever reason, the time and tide were not right to address these matters then – and there was no obvious interest or leadership from Rome on the matter either. We toyed with the idea of starting a movement to help achieve our aims, but felt this was too difficult to implement and perhaps unnecessary as there already existed other organisations with similar aims, such as the Association for Latin Liturgy.

Following the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (“The Sacrament of Charity”) and subsequent *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum* the tide has now quite clearly turned. Recently I looked again at what we wrote in 1991 and the subsequent correspondence. It is perhaps not surprising that many of our suggestions are now commonplace and do not seem nearly so reactionary as they did then; though I am not presuming that what we wrote has had any particular influence on the present.

Now that Pope Benedict wants Catholics to absorb the richness of the extraordinary form of Mass (formerly known colloquially as “Tridentine”) there is every possibility that this will influence the celebration of the ordinary form as well. But this is not necessarily a one-way process and I should like to suggest that the ordinary form might also influence the extraordinary.

In recent conversations with two priests who regularly celebrate the extraordinary form Mass and reading an article by a third, I have been pleasantly surprised at how their approach to celebrating the old Mass is not totally set in a 1962 time warp; and how there may be pastoral reasons for adapting the way the extraordinary form is celebrated in certain circumstances, such as in schools.

Here, then, are a few suggestions as to how the two forms of Mass might influence each other, firstly with the extraordinary influencing the ordinary:

- Greater use of Latin, both sung and spoken, particularly for the Responses, Proper of the Mass (Introit, Gradual etc), Eucharistic Prayer and the Ordinary of the Mass (Kyrie, Gloria etc).
- More room for silence and reflection in the Mass – particularly post-Communion.
- Where the architecture of a sanctuary allows, experiment with the priest saying Mass *ad orientem* at least for a more solemn celebration.
- Priests should avoid punctuating the Mass with words of their own and supplementary homilies.
- Encourage the faithful to receive Communion while kneeling (if the architecture permits this) and on the tongue.
- Only use lay Eucharistic ministers in extremis.

Here are some ways the ordinary could influence the extraordinary:

- Let the Prayers at the Foot of the Altar be optional – perhaps only including them during a Sung Mass where the Introit and Kyrie cover the action.
- Let the faithful hear the priest at all other times during the Mass (*Participatio actuosa*).
- Encourage the faithful to respond to all Responses audibly (*Dialogue Mass*).
- Let the faithful join in with all parts of the Ordinary of the Mass (whether spoken or sung) and the Lord’s Prayer.
- Allow the readings to be in the vernacular.

- Most importantly of all, incorporate the post-Vatican II calendar, including new Feasts, as mentioned in the Motu Proprio.

Now, I should emphasise that these are my suggestions only, the list is not exhaustive and I appreciate that they may not be to everyone's taste. I offer these thoughts as a contribution to the process in which we might show the world a greater deal of unity amongst ourselves in our liturgical action. I also believe that this approach would help show that, however Mass is celebrated, the spirit of Vatican II has been fully recognised, appreciated and understood.

Finally, on the subject of the liturgical calendar, may I ask our dear bishops to review their decision to transfer the Feasts of Our Lord to the nearest Sunday? I have yet to meet a catholic who approves of these feasts being transferred. Indeed, may I ask their Lordships to review the whole idea of the transference of feasts altogether?

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