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## The Lament of a Liturgical Loner

(This article by Fr Hugh Somerville-Knapman OSB first appeared in the blog, Dominus mihi adjutor (Hughosb.wordpress.com) and subsequently expanded as an article in the Catholic Herald. It has been posted on the Apropos website: [www.apropos.org.uk](http://www.apropos.org.uk) )

Monks live liturgy. "Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (*Rule of St Benedict 43:3*) our holy father St Benedict bids us. The Divine Office and the Mass punctuate and structure our day, uniting our lives with Christ's sacrifice of perfect praise in his Body and Blood on the Cross. This union is what gives the monk's life its truest and deepest value. A monk with no taste for liturgy is akin to a bird who fears to fly: things can only be difficult and frustrating. So if some of us monks seem to be endlessly focusing on liturgy, you might cut us some slack. For us, the liturgy is the privileged way to live in Christ's Body, a privilege which necessarily imposes demands on our daily living outside the liturgy. These demands we spare no effort to meet faithfully, though we so often fail.

### **An explosive issue**

If liturgy was a live issue before the Council of 1962-65, it has become in the wake of that Council an explosive issue. Liturgy seems never to be at rest. For some, the Council gave a licence to change comprehensively the performance of the Church's liturgy, and the change has been unrelenting. For others the changes were unjustifiable, unconscionable even, and they reject them outright. For others still, liturgy has been something to be coped with, an unavoidable battlefield on which they try to find shelter in some compromise that acknowledges the reality of change and seeks somehow to keep it organically connected to the Tradition of the Church. Few have been satisfied.

We might ask ourselves: where is my foxhole, my bunker, my bastion, on this battlefield? So much of my reading the past year or more has shown my foxhole to be filling with mud, slowly but ever more surely. It is not a tenable position in the long-term. Two things that have brought that conclusion home with a whack in recent days. One is an article by Fr Thomas Kocik at the [New Liturgical Movement](#). Fr Kocik is one of the leading lights of the *Reform of the Reform* movement, which sought to modify the reformed liturgy imposed in the wake of the Council by realigning it with both the actual teachings of the Council Fathers and with the rich liturgical tradition that had developed gradually and organically from the times of the primitive Church to the 20th century. Fr Kocik cites Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI as a prime example of a Reformer of the Reform, who proceeded

*not only by his teaching and personal liturgical example but also by legislation. He accentuated the liturgy's beauty, promoted the liturgical and musical treasures of the Western Church (including of course the usus antiquior of the Roman rite), and introduced more tangible continuity with tradition in the manner of papal celebrations (e.g., the 'Benedictine' altar arrangement, offering Mass ad orientem in the Sistine and other papal chapels, administering Holy Communion to the faithful on their tongues as they knelt).*

But Fr Kocik is throwing up his hands in surrender. The Reform of the Reform cannot be done. It is impossible. He finds that

*the ‘reform of the reform’ is not realizable because the material discontinuity between the two forms of the Roman rite presently in use is much broader and much deeper than I had first imagined.*

Things are so far advanced now that it is necessary to go back to the beginning (or rather, to 1963) and start afresh on the basis of the Council’s actual, explicit, written teaching in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

*[T]he road to achieving a sustainable future for the traditional Roman rite—and to achieving the liturgical vision of Vatican II, which ordered the moderate adaptation of that rite, not its destruction—is the beautiful and proper celebration, in an increasing number of locations, of the Extraordinary Form, with every effort to promote the core principle (properly understood) of “full, conscious and active participation” of the faithful (SC 14).*

The other thing that has sobered me up was a video embedded at [Catholicism Pure & Simple](#). It compares the old and the new Masses in the act of their celebration. It is a little weighted in one direction: the sole example of the post-conciliar Mass is a portly late-middle-aged priest with some annoying American habits (and please, it is not only American priests who can have annoying liturgical habits, I know) who is set against more than one youthful and much slimmer celebrant of the Mass of 1962. The young guys are indeed examples of “best practice” of the preconciliar liturgy, though perhaps many ordinary Catholics back then did not always receive best practice. The older, new-Mass man, is not what you would call an example of best practice; though he is by no means the worst, and perpetrates none of the more spectacular abuses that could so easily have been found on Youtube.

The video, however, put a living face to the theories and principles of the liturgy that have been at issue. And they left me torn, almost asunder. Why?

Both had aspects that did not attract. The new-Mass man was a little too cavalier in his bearing and demeanour before the most sacred things the Church has in its gift. The loud munching on the Host and the long swig of the Chalice both jar. The music was dire in its banality. The poor man felt a constant need to inject meaningfulness into the words he pronounced, even when they were addressed to God and not to the people. He fiddled around with the traditional formulas (eg “...in Jesus’ name, who reigns gently with You...”) in order to be relevant, or caring, or creative, or whatever. He gave out Communion like it was corn chips and not his God.

Yet, it is hard not to conclude that the structure and the rubrics of the new Mass lend themselves to such a practice and attitude. If you remove so many of the sacralizing elements of a ritual, of course it is going to end up secularized. Rather arbitrarily included after the Council among the “useless repetitions” the same Council had deprecated, nearly all the signs of the cross and genuflections and kissings of the altar were removed from the Mass. To one not formed under the old Mass, these gestures can appear to be fussy and pedantic and almost obsessive. They seem to cry out for some rationalization. But is such a principle appropriate to the

symbolic and sacred ritual of the Mass? Are time-and-motion principles suited to something that should take us out of time and out of ourselves?

It is this same unfamiliarity with the old Mass that can make it seem quite alien. Even with my theoretical knowledge of it, it can still throw me to watch it. While I have no beef with the idea of rubrics in liturgy (for one thing, they spare the faithful too much of the priest's *ego*), the old Mass can seem dizzyingly rubrical: where exactly the Missal sits on the altar, the depth and direction of bows, the placement of the paten, and the like. It does not come naturally to me. Mind you, should it?

That said, a solemn and formal liturgy does feel right. A solemn, chant-filled new Mass is wonderful. Even the vernacular does not normally worry me, and in fact I have rarely said a Mass in Latin (apart from singing daily the parts of the Mass in Latin). The ritualized movement, if not overplayed, makes sense. One hides, subsumes, oneself into it. Using the little logic that God has given me, it is apparent that in the old Mass this submission and surrender to ritual is taken to the next level. It is hard to object to it in terms of liturgical logic.

Here probably comes the nub of the issue: the new Mass has the inherent quality that it allows the celebrant to take over. He is "president" (an awful word in liturgy), and too easily he becomes star of the show. I have seen regularly the pressure that some priests unconsciously feel to be creative, to say something relevant or meaningful, to be constantly babbling. Being in the vernacular allows the priest to dominate the Mass, in a way that is near impossible in Latin. In the vernacular he can interject and extemporize at will. There is the modern plague of the opening mini-sermon telling you what the readings are going to be about (cannot the people understand vernacular readings for themselves?!). Then there are the myriad changes and "improvements" that some priests feel that they must impose (must the people be patronized so?). The most dangerous thing of all, perhaps, for the priest is facing the people. Now, everyone's eyes are on him and not on God and his Christ, who will return from the East. Instead of priest and people together facing God they face each other, a closed and often self-satisfied circle. Many a priest will recite the Eucharistic Prayer with his eyes on the people, and so inevitably end up talking to the people, even showing them the Host as he pronounces "Take this all of you...", talking to the Father, but looking to the people.

In other words, there is a disjunction between what we are taught happens at Mass and what seems so often to be happening. There is an incongruence between the words and the actions. It is possible to do the new Mass properly; but the new Mass seems to have the inherent flaw that it is so easy to do improperly.

Then there is the dazzling array of options and variations now available: options for penitential rites, for readings, for Eucharistic Prayers. More is not always better. The more the range of options, the less is it possible to have ritual in the truest sense of the word. The new lectionary has many flaws, not least that it swamps people with chunks of scripture, often out of their context, and too much for people to assimilate in any deep way. Priests either have to retrain themselves as amateur scripture scholars or waffle about some experience they have had or some story that comes to mind to illustrate the easiest point that can be mined from the readings. And not a few end up talking about themselves. Scripture is wonderful, and we should all be spending time with it in some systematic way each day. But Mass is not a scripture class. Nor should it ever be

one. The Word serves the Sacrifice which is the real reason we have gathered: to unite ourselves to Christ's perfect worship of the Father on the Cross. Anything else is secondary in the Mass.

So this priest is left dazed and disquieted, and feeling rather alone in it all.

It is clear that so many of the young are abandoning the liturgical practice of the Faith, and who can blame them if all they were to get is Fr Superstar and pop muzak they would never want to hear outside of church, and clearly do not want to hear inside either. Why would they come if they are talked down to like children, and are never challenged with hard truths that will give them quality of life? How often do priests confront them, challenge them on things like sex before marriage, pornography, alcohol abuse? Children thrive on challenge, and youth can handle hard truths as long they can see they are not being talked down to but called upwards. If we do not tell them, then we are complicit if they go astray for lack of guidance. And we should all remember our Lord's warning regarding those who lead his little ones astray. And when was the last time a priest mentioned hell as a reality, and a real prospect for grave and unrepentant sinners?

Communion in the hand is too often an awful spectacle. The Sacred Host – Jesus Christ no less! – is handled and fingered and self-administered in a way that does not seem congruent with what we believe the Host actually is. How I respect the goodly number at our abbey Mass who receive the Host in the throne of their hands and then raise that throne straight to their mouths, not a finger in play. They are usually converts who have made an often painful decision to submit to the Saviour in the Host. But Communion in the hand was a concession that has become the rule, and it can really jar.

Just as many youth are just leaving the churches to an ageing generation who are usually either faithful no matter the cost or who find some sort of forum for self-expression in creative liturgy, so too a healthy number of young are also finding their way into church where the Mass is celebrated properly, with dignity, with a clear sense of worship of God and not a tacky public meeting led by a dominant self-appointed few; and in fact where very often the Mass being offered is the old Mass. They participate actively enough, not by doing things but by losing themselves in the mystery. It resonates with them, it makes sense, and it challenges them, takes them out of themselves towards God.

So is there no hope for the new Mass? Is the solution for our many dying parishes to return to the Mass of 1962 and then try for a renewal of the Mass that is more consistent with what the Council Fathers actually mandated? We certainly cannot rule out the old Mass – it is the Mass that admirably served the Church for well over a millennium, for which saints thrilled and martyrs died, which so firmly directs our gaze to God and from ourselves. It is authentic worship.

That said, the Council Fathers were neither stupid nor total dupes. They were on to something. I look at some of the interim Missals that emerged towards the end of the Council and just after and see what we might have had. One Eucharistic prayer, in Latin (since it is addressed to God, and he does speak Latin!) with readings in English, facing east but with more streamlined (and not gutted) rubrics; no vast array of options for this, that and whatnot but some apposite offerings for seasons and certain days. In those missals we were seeing the fledgling emerge before, seemingly inexplicably, a cuckoo took over the nest: a new and totally different Mass,

constructed by a committee according to their personal theories of what in liturgical antiquity was to be revived (and which often, we know now, never really existed in the form asserted. Eucharistic Prayer 2 is supposedly Hippolytus' canon, but if you read the original it differs markedly from this rudely brief composition we now have. It's just one example. Mass facing the people is another. Communion in the hand is yet another). Alcuin Reid gives some insight into that committee which composed the new liturgy in the wake of the Council, [here](#) and [here](#).

So there is life beyond the old Mass, but we will need the old Mass around to inform a renewed liturgical practice and spirituality. Surely the new Mass can be saved, though it requires surgery. The revised Missal of 2012 was a step in the right direction, giving us a vernacular more suited to worship. Yes, it can be clunky, but better that than simplistically banal. But as Fr Z often says, if you do not like the translation you can always go back to the original – Latin. Moreover, maybe I need to learn the old Mass to know what I am talking about in more than abstract theory, to give it a chance. After all, I have given the new Mass over 40 years of undivided attention. Moreover, perhaps the Missal of 1965/67 which is the subject of the *Agatha Christie* indult should be given another, longer and better chance than the paltry few years it was allowed.

One thing seems sure: without a wholesale renewal of liturgical practice and spirituality the New Evangelization will remain just another expensive white-elephant of a programme. And priests will remain faced with the temptation to entertain and be creative in worship, and in so doing seriously undermine that worship. Without authentic worship the faithful, especially the young, will not be truly challenged to live with integrity, treating their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, and their neighbours as Christs in disguise.

It is a daunting task, and if the Church is relying on me then all may be lost. There are many places where such a renewal is already underway, or where the desire for a true renewal is brimming up. Many priests and people are discovering the liberation of a more God-centred liturgy, and its child, a more surely God-centred life. Many other priests and faithful feel the same I am certain.