

Sacred Liturgy for God's glory and our sanctification

In our survey of dogmas of Catholic Faith, we last looked at Christ's real presence in the Eucharist and the Mass as the Sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages. Today we'll reflect on some liturgical practices flowing from our Eucharistic faith.

A great charter of recent times for our Eucharistic life is Pope John Paul's final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia [EE]* (2003). After highlighting 'positive signs of Eucharistic faith and love', he lamented that 'alongside these lights, there are also shadows. In some places the practice of Eucharistic adoration has been almost completely abandoned. In various parts of the Church abuses have occurred, leading to confusion with regard to sound faith and Catholic doctrine concerning this wonderful sacrament. At times one encounters an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. Stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet.' (EE 10)

Because the Mass makes Calvary sacramentally present, it necessarily has a certain solemnity: a Eucharistic celebration is joyful, but can never be 'casual'. The Pope explained: 'Though the idea of a "banquet" naturally suggests familiarity, the Church has never yielded to the temptation to trivialise this "intimacy" with her Spouse by forgetting that he is also her Lord and that the "banquet" always remains a sacrificial banquet marked by the blood shed on Golgotha. The Eucharistic Banquet is truly a "sacred" banquet, in which the simplicity of the signs conceals the unfathomable holiness of God.' (EE 48)

And on occasions, besides solemnity and reverence there is also grandeur, leading us to humbly bow before God's majesty. Liturgical beauty should reflect divine beauty. Pope Francis proclaimed in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 'The Church evangelises and is herself evangelised through the beauty of the liturgy.' (24) Again, St John Paul II: 'Like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, the Church has feared no extravagance, devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist.' (EE 48) 'The faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also in outward forms meant to evoke and emphasise the grandeur of the event being celebrated.' (EE 49)

Vatican II affirmed that liturgical regulation depends solely on the Church's authority, so 'no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the Liturgy on his own authority'. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 22; cf. Canon 846.1) Thus, liturgical obedience is crucial. 'I consider it my duty', St John Paul said, 'to appeal urgently that the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist be observed with great fidelity...Liturgy is never anyone's private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated... Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church...No one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness...' (EE 52)

Just in recent weeks Pope Francis re-stated the binding force of Church law: 'The Church has established from apostolic times laws and rules of conduct that down the centuries took shape as a cohesive body of binding norms safeguarding the unity of God's People. Bishops are responsible for ensuring that these rules be obeyed...' (*Pascite Gregem Dei*)

True, a Church law, depending on its importance, may be set aside in exceptional circumstances when its observance would actually be harmful or impractical, such that the lawgiver himself would surely not want the letter of the law to be followed if he knew the circumstances. (If reasonably possible, a dispensation by Church authority should be sought.) Absolute rigidity in human laws is not the mind of the Church. St Thomas Aquinas explained this principle, called *epikeia* (ST Ia-IIae 96, 6; IIa-IIae 120, 1), and we see it in Jesus' own example. However, this doesn't mean that laws can be set aside just because 'it seems good to us to do so'. The normal presumption, also deriving from Jesus, is that obedience to Church law is obedience to God.

It's good that the laity be aware of these things – I've often heard stories from priests of unjust criticisms because of their fidelity to liturgical law and to their ordination oaths. Conversely, we shouldn't lightly judge that a priest is breaking liturgical law; the law itself contains options and exceptions of which not everyone is aware. However, as St John Paul explained, 'especially in the years following the post-conciliar liturgical reform, as a result of a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation there have been a number of abuses which have been a source of suffering for many. A certain reaction against "formalism" [led some to consider] the "forms" chosen by the Church's great liturgical tradition and her Magisterium as non-binding and to introduce unauthorised innovations which are often completely inappropriate.' (EE 52)

To resolve this crisis of disobedience to liturgical law and distortion of the Sacred Liturgy, Pope John Paul ordered the publication of the document *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), which he commanded 'to be observed immediately by all concerned'. In 186 sections, liturgical abuses are detailed and denounced, among which 32 abuses are specifically named as grave matters (172-73); other violations also are 'not to be considered of little account, but are to be numbered among the other abuses to be carefully avoided and corrected.' (174)

A few statements of its principles: 'It is not possible to be silent about the abuses, even quite grave ones, against the nature of the Liturgy and the Sacraments as well as the tradition and the authority of the Church, which in our day not infrequently plague liturgical celebrations...In some places the perpetration of liturgical abuses has become almost habitual, a fact which obviously cannot be allowed and must cease.' (4)

Such actions 'deprive Christ's faithful of their patrimony and their heritage...They introduce elements of distortion and disharmony into the very celebration of the Eucharist...The result is uncertainty in matters of doctrine, perplexity and scandal on the part of the People of God...' (11) 'It is the right of all of Christ's faithful that the Liturgy...should truly be as the Church wishes.' (12) (Really, violations of these rights of the faithful would manifest the vice of clericalism, with the priest treating the Liturgy as if his own property.) 'Not infrequently, abuses are rooted in a false understanding of liberty. Yet God has not granted us in Christ an illusory liberty by which we may do what we wish, but a liberty by which we may do that which is fitting and right.' (7)

'The reprobated practice by which Priests, Deacons or the faithful here and there alter or vary at will the texts of the Sacred Liturgy that they are charged to pronounce, must cease.' (59)

'Let everyone do all that is in their power to ensure that the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist will be protected from any and every irreverence or distortion and that all abuses be thoroughly corrected. This is a most serious duty incumbent upon each and every one.' (183)

In the years since, the culture of liturgical fidelity has grown. As this continues, the Church's vision of right worship of the God of infinite majesty will be fulfilled.