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The State of the Liturgy

by Jeremy de Satgé

It is now 40 years since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, from which stemmed many Church reforms, including the reform of the liturgy and, in particular, the Mass. During the intervening years there has been a great deal of criticism of the reforms generally, coupled with much misunderstanding of what the Council fathers were trying to achieve. The criticism of the changes to the Mass have even resulted in a schism, the existence of which can only be described as a scandal.

The past three and a half decades can therefore rightly be described as a difficult period of change and the time would seem right to make a reappraisal of the reforms, to see whether they truly live up to the expectations of Vatican II and to check whether or not “the baby has been thrown out with the bath water” following the initial excitement of implementing the reforms to the Mass. Currently, there seems to be some action on the part of the Congregation for Worship in Rome on the matter, which should only be encouraged.

It is first worth pointing out that the vast majority of the faithful have accepted the reforms in good faith and many have embraced them warmly. There is a small but loud minority, however, who have not. Regular Mass attendance has dropped dramatically since the 1950s and many of the traditionalists or “Tridentinists” would claim that this was largely due to the suppression of the Tridentine Rite. I know of a number of people who found the changes to the Mass so difficult to accept that they eventually fell away from the Faith. The cynic might say that this is in itself no reason to stop going to Mass and that, perhaps, their faith could not have been that strong in the first place. Interestingly, the obligation to attend Mass has remained unaltered, so there must be other socio-economic and psychological reasons why so many have fallen by the wayside.

It must be true to say that the changes to the Mass were dramatic and crudely implemented and many would argue that there really was no need to declare a *Novus Ordo* (new order) for the Mass. The relaxation of rubrics for the celebration of the Mass has made it much less formal and arguably thereby less aspiring than it used to be. I believe that almost all of the reforms could have been introduced gently over the years without all the fuss - although presumably this would have resulted in many more updates to the Missal. Changes such as the introduction of the Dialogue Mass (whereby the congregation participates audibly rather than silently) had already been introduced before the Council. The use of the vernacular, particularly for the scripture readings and bidding prayers, could have been easily introduced as an option. The prayers at the foot of the altar and the last Gospel could have been made optional. Indeed, it would have been relatively easy to introduce a Low, High and Solemn Mass with Sung and Spoken options within the same rite.

In England, the loudest lobby for the old mass is the Latin Mass Society, a wealthy organisation that benefits from many legacies, thereby empowering it to advertise. This organisation is entirely devoted to restoring the Tridentine Rite and there is an assumed criticism of the whole of Vatican II. The organisation therefore looks back rather than forward. Details of the LMS can be found from its web site at <http://www.latin-mass-society.org>.

A far saner organisation, in my view, is the Association for Latin Liturgy, which unfortunately is much less well known. The ALL was formed as a breakaway group from the LMS in 1969 at the point that the LMS decided to devote all its energies on promoting the Tridentine Rite. The ALL promotes the use of Latin for the new liturgy and has an impressive list of publications to its name. Details of the ALL can be found from its web site at www.Latin-Liturgy.org.uk.

In one sense the Latin Mass Society has been extraordinarily successful, as since the Indult of 1984 the Tridentine Mass has been allowed once again, where it is approved by a bishop. I cannot help feeling that this can only be a temporary solution and I would question the wisdom of having two rites co-existing. This hardly does anything for the visible unity of the Church and we now have a situation where we have the "ultra-Catholic" who will only attend the Tridentine Mass and considers the Novus Ordo to be invalid, if not heretical! I been stopped by acquaintances outside churches in the past and advised not to go to a particular Mass (the new Mass) because it is not the true Mass. This may just be a lunatic fringe but it is worrying. There is also the question of the liturgical calendar. Those attending the Tridentine Rite of Mass are using the pre-conciliar calendar and here again the sense of unity between Catholics is lost - the prayer of the Church thus being divided.

When it comes to music in the liturgy, there is huge interest, as the Editor's post bag gave evidence following my article on "Why Catholics won't sing" which appeared in The Catholic Herald last July. Opinions on liturgical music vary considerably, with strongly held convictions. As I wrote, the difficulty in Britain is that there is no real tradition of good quality church musicianship in the Roman Catholic community since the restoration of Catholicism in 1850 - unlike the Church of England.

Vatican II's document concerning the liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, addresses the issue of music for the liturgy head on, and stresses the need for composers to write new quality music, based on the tradition of the Church, and for choirs to be "diligently promoted". Good parish church choirs are few and far between and there would seem to be little interest or even inertia on the part of most priests and bishops on the subject. Far more should be done in seminaries to teach future priests of the importance of music for worship. There are a few Catholic music publishers, the best known of which must be Kevin Mayhew Ltd (<http://www.kevinmayhew.com>). I was very impressed by CanticaNOVA Publications, based in the USA, who I came across recently. Their web site has a full e-commerce facility as well (<http://www.canticanova.com>). The Music Makers, of which I am a founding partner, also specialises in producing new and innovative pieces of liturgical music, with a particular emphasis on music that is not too difficult for amateur parish choirs (<http://www.themusicmakers.org>).

Lastly, it is all very well for composers and publishers to publish new works of music but, without decent church choirs to perform them, there seems little point. The call of Sacrosanctum Concilium for higher institutes of sacred music to be formed to help train church musicians has largely not been answered. I was therefore particularly pleased to hear recently of a new initiative being introduced by the North & Midlands School of Music, which is offering a Service Music Diploma for Clergy & Lay Leaders of Worship. The syllabus seems to be very well thought out and the course offers students the opportunity of gaining a recognized qualification in the planning and management of church music and worship. This course is still in its infancy. Details may be found at <http://www.nmsm.org.uk>.

I hope that the above thoughts may stimulate debate in this important area of the Church's life so that we may be unified in our worship of Almighty God within His Church.