A Short Essay on the Reform of the Liturgy

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In order to gain an understanding of any mediaeval liturgical text, but especially the Roman Rite, which was the central liturgical text for the Latin West, it is essential to realise that the liturgy of the Middle Ages, unike the liturgy of today, was embedded in a culture which was ritual in character. The world of commerce, for example, was sacralised through its management by the economic guilds, whose liturgical basis ensured that production was perpetually crossed out by being offered in worship.[1] This was a time when the Offertory gifts were not disconnected from the produce of everyday life; indeed, the category itself of 'everyday life' was perforce a thoroughly *liturgical* category.[2] For the community was not seen as a *given*, existing prior to, or in separation from, its reception of the Eucharist. Rather, the community as such was seen as flowing from eternity through the sacraments. The historian John Bossy has shown this by stressing the sacramental nature of all social bonds in the mediaeval period.[3] Supremely, the Church as 'body of Christ' was ceaselessly recreated through receiving the *gift* of the Eucharistic body of Christ.

Because of this reciprocal link between life and liturgy, any liturgical reform must take into account the fact that the liturgy which it seeks to revise is as much, or more a cultural and ethical phenomenon, as a textual one. Now, criticisms of liturgical reform, such as those implicit in what I have just said, are often dismissed as conservative or nostalgic. But, as I shall show, because the Vatican II reforms of the mediaeval Roman Rite failed to take into account the cultural assumptions which lay implicit within the text, their 'reforms' were themselves to a certain extent imbued with an entirely more sinister conservatism. For they failed to challenge those structures of the modern secular world which are wholly inimical to liturgical purpose: those structures, indeed, which perpetuate a separation of everyday life from liturgical enactment. So, the criticisms of the Vatican II revisions of the mediaeval Roman Rite contained within this essay, far from enlisting a conservative horror at change, issue from a belief that its revisions were simply *not radical*

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enough. A successful liturgical revision would have to involve a revolutionary re-invention of language and practice which would challenge the structures of our modern world, and only thereby restore real language and action as liturgy.[4]

The disposition of early to middle twentieth century liturgical historiography has tended to assume that the text of the Roman Rite, which reached more or less its mature form in the Italian Mass Books of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, represents a corruption of an 'original liturgy', a debasement of what went before. Because of this, they tend to allude rather mysteriously to earlier times when things were different, times when there apparently was no intrusive *Kyrie*, no Preface, no *Hanc igitur*, not even a *Pater Noster*; and they then invoke such supposedly pure liturgies as Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* and Justin Martyr's *Apology*, texts which are now almost universally regarded as treatises *on* liturgy, rather than actual living liturgical texts.[5] It is for this reason that to reconstruct the origins of the Latin Mass using the scholarship of such esteemed liturgists as Joseph Jungmann and Theodor Klauser is sometimes rather an awkward matter. One has instead to turn to other disciplines in order to derive an adequate understanding of these early times, of the nature of ritual in Antiquity, and of the character of early theological reflection.

What precisely were the criticisms levelled by Jungmann and others against the Roman liturgy of the Middle Ages?

In an attempt to interrupt the drift towards decadence characteristic of the liturgical practice of the seventeenth century, the Vatican II reformers extolled the spare forms of the so-called "simple eucharistic rite" of the primitive Church. Jungmann writes that "In contrast to the smooth-flowing eucharistic prayer recorded by Hippolytus, the Roman canon, with its separate members and steps, and its broken-up lists of saints, presents a picture of great complexity".[6] Echoing these sentiments, Louis Bouyer spoke of the "retinue of prefaces" and "incongruous veneer" of which the ancient Eucharist needed to be "divested".[7] In contrast to the Hippolytan ideal which for the reformers most embodied the antique structure of the 'simple primitive meal', they complained that the Roman Rite of the Middle Ages was overburdened by an empty secular rhetoric of repetitions; its "loosely arranged" succession of oblations, prayers of intercession, petitions, and citation of apostles and martyrs, plus its random and ceaseless recommencements testified to its contamination by haphazard and decadent accretions. The mediaeval Latin liturgy seemed to consist in disorientating ambiguous overlappings between the stages of advance towards the altar of God, and a lack of clarity in the identification of the worshipper and the priest. Its repeated rites of

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purification and pitiful requests for mercy and assistance apparently laid a morbid and all too Augustinian emphasis on the worshipper's guilt, whereas the reformers favoured a recovery of the Greek Fathers' stress on deification and the glorification of the cosmos. The Roman humiliation of the worshipper before God, together with the inclusion of various ceremonial accretions, confirmed their suspicion that the Rite contained interpolation from secular court ceremonial and emperor worship, betokening a dubious politicization of the Eucharist.[8]

However, it is possible to argue that the Vatican II reformers overstated the case against the Roman Rite. This is not to deny, however, most of their case against later mediaeval and early modern liturgical practice and theology. One must, indeed, fervently join forces with such scholars as Henri de Lubac, Michel de Certeau, John Bossy and others who critically identify the drift towards individualistic devotional practices, and the rise in emphasis on liturgical spectacle—such as the displaying of the Sacraments and the decrease in the practice of lay communication.[9] Perhaps the most negative theological alteration which precipitated a significant impoverishment of liturgical theology, as well as encouraging the centralisation of clerical administration and aggrandisement of the role of the priest over against the laity, was the gradual loss of the ancient three-fold understanding of the theological 'body', documented in de Lubac's book, *Corpus Mysticism*.[10] This simplification of the understanding of the ancient co-mingling of the historical body of Jesus, the sacramental body, and the ecclesial body, so crucial for the understanding of transubstantiation as an *ecclesial event*, was immediately responsible for the rise of two equally culpable readings of that doctrine, as either an extrinsicist "miracle" performed solely by the Celebrant, or as an empty symbol. Both interpretations gave rise to a literalist concern with what the Eucharist "is", as an isolated phenomenon, and a tendency to think of that Sacrament in terms of demonstrable presence and verification.[11] However, the increasing over-emphasis on the visible and legible, on the role of priests as privileged operators of sacramental authority, and the rise of uniformity in liturgical practice, though *anticipated* in the later mediaeval period, are as much, or more appropriately attributable to the early modern period, not just to the formalizations which took place at the Council of Trent, but other cultural changes, such as the invention of the printing press,[12] and the concomitant spatialization of European thought in the early Renaissance.[13]

It is therefore arguable that the Vatican II reformers were reading back into the middle ages developments which, although incipiently present from around the tenth century, primarily belonged to a later

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period. Moreover, those impugned features of the liturgy which *were* indigenous to the Roman Rite can themselves be defended.

First, there are Klauser's and Vaggagini's criticisms that the Roman Rite is haphazardly structured and contains many uneconomic repetitions and recommencements. There are innumerable examples of this in the Rite. One can think for example of the opening versicle, beginning *"Introibo ad altare Dei"*, which is repeated several times throughout the Rite; or else of the larger structural re-beginnings, such as the repeated requests for purification;[14] or, one can mention, the diverse and reciprocal movements of offering within the Consecration. However, rather than bearing witness to a debasement of pure Liturgy, these features could be seen as signs of the *oral* provenance of the Rite. In this context they appear as definitive elements of a fluid structure typical of speech rather than a compartmentalised and formalised structure characteristic of writing. In a similar fashion, one could account for the repeated requests for purification as signs of an underlying *apophaticism* which betokens our constitutive distance from God, rather than our sinfulness or humiliation. According to such a perspective, the haphazard structure of the Rite can be seen as predicated upon the need for a constant re-beginning of liturgy because the true eschatological liturgy is in time endlessly postponed. A consideration of the requests for purification should sufficiently illustrate my point. The first explicit request for purification is the *"Confiteor"* which, to be sure, follows on from a recitation of Psalm 42, which contains many repeated requests for assistance.[15] After the Confession and Absolution, we ask twice to be recreated in a short antiphonal section which concludes with a dialogic exchange of the Spirit between the Priest and the Ministers: *"Dominus Vobiscum./ Et cum spiritu tuo"*. An exchange of this exalted kind would seem to suggest a successful attainment of purification. But as soon as we arrive at this state of purity, sufficient to bless one another in this way, we must again repeat our request for purification, in an oration which recommences yet again our journey to God: *"Aufer a nobis, quæsumus Domine, iniquitates nostras: ut ad Sancta sanctorum puris mereamur mentibus introire"* The purity of this place towards which we travel, this Holy of Holies, is so extremely, and so transcendently and contagiously pure, that our very journeying *towards* it becomes continuous with an *act* of purification. But there is an ambiguity about this liturgical destination which underlines the apophatic reasoning behind these re-beginnings, which is, as this prayer demonstrates, that in order to pray for purification sufficient to enter the sanctuary—which is the only place where prayer *can* be offered felicitously—we must already be *within* that inner sanctuary in a state of impossible purity. The prayer just cited,

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therefore, can be read as a prayer that we might be able to pray, and the liturgy as a whole can be read not as a simple unilinear journey from A to B, but as an expectant work, the hope that there might be a liturgy. Indeed, the earliest sections of the Rite, the Fore-Mass, seem principally to consist in prayers for the removal of hindrances to prayer: the thwarting of enemies impeding the pilgrim's path, the sending of light and truth, the request that God heed our prayer, and the request to be able to enter the locus of prayer. Furthermore, this request is followed by an invocation not only of Christ, but of many other helpers, "*per merita Sanctorum tuorum*", appealing in the name of the Saints' contagion of merit to effect further purification. This repetition of Christ's saving action in the ninefold turns of the *Kyrie* seems at first to have consummated all preceding requests for purification, for at the beginning of the *Gloria*, with the words "*GLORIA in excelsis Deo*", we *seem* finally to have reached the beginning of doxology and to have attained angelic status, but by means of a scarcely perceptible transition between two clauses, which hinges upon the double signification of the word "*Domine*" [Father/Son], our exaltation slips from doxology ("*Domine Deus, rex cælestis, Deus Pater omnipotens*") to abasement before Christ ("*Domine Fili unigenite, Iesu Christe. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris. Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis*"). This slippage reminds us of two related aspects of the nature of doxology. First, it recalls our lapsed condition, according to which, we can only *impersonate* angelic voices; and secondly, even this impersonation cannot be sustained for more than a few clauses, before we must again request renewal.[16]

The same dialectic of exaltation and subsidence or self-abasement continues throughout the Rite, illustrating not only the difficulty of worship, but also the ambiguous nature of its various 'stages'. As we have seen from the repeated acts of purification, the liturgical advance was not construed as unicursal or spatially appropriable according to a geographical or purely earthly negotiation of space, but as stuttering and polyphonal: the space through which we travel is not purely a matter of *lateral* and uniform advance.

Using similar tools of structural analysis, one can also mount a defence of the Roman Rite regarding its multiplicity of genre and ambiguous portrayal of the worshipping self, described severally as disorientating and incoherent by the reformers. Again, examples of both of these related phenomena abound. Whilst, in a sense, it is true that the multiplicity of genres and ambiguity of identity in and of the Rite do lend the liturgical journey a fluid and organic structure, these need not be seen as an evacuation of coherence or as a dissolution into subjective discontinuity on the part of the worshipper. One
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example of the ambiguity of the worshipper's identification is the prevalent trope throughout the Rite of impersonation which I have already mentioned to be at work in the opening phrase of the *Gloria*. Its use points to a protean ontology whereby impersonation *precedes* our 'authentic' voice, thus decentring any construal of the self as autonomous or self-present, or in full command of his liturgical enactment.

I would similarly wish to defend the multiplicity of genre in the Rite. It is indeed noticeable that, in contrast to many other modes of discourse in the Middle Ages, the Roman Rite deploys a polyphonic texture of voices and poetic positions, through a constant play of modulations from narrative, to dialogue, antiphon, apostrophe, doxology, oration, invocation, citation, supplementation, repetition, and entreaty or petition. Now, it is just too easy to write off this complexity as both incoherent and unnecessary. There is an alternative perspective which might understand this manifold genre as disarming in advance any authoritarian or strategic voice of command. Indeed, God Himself speaks in many guises and cannot be isolated as a singular or identifiable origin. There is a possible further motivation, for which the methods of Formalist criticism can prove illuminating. The constant play of poetic difference and alteration of vocal positions can be situated within the overall casting of liturgy as an *expectant* work, the hope that there might be a liturgy. Does not this explain the worshipper's manifold attempt to be heard by God, or fear of his own vocal and doxological inadequacy? Perhaps it is no accident that the worshipper's uncertain voice so frequently lapses into despondency: "quare me repulisti?", "*quare tristis incedo dum affligit me inimicus?*", "*redime me et miserere mei*?". The play of genres could therefore be interpreted as a device of "defamiliarization", a favourite Formalist category, referring to a technique used to sustain the worshipper's own concentration.[17] These features underline my earlier diagnosis of the repetitive structure of the Rite as situated within an overall apophaticism, so characteristic of mediaeval theology. The lapses into vocal crisis, and perpetual shifting of genre, are symptoms of the impossibility of the worshipper's task, and are manifested in a kind of liturgical stammer. Hence the obscuration caused by repeated beginnings, shifting personae, oblique calls, cries to be heard ["Domine exaudi orationem meam./ Et clamor meus ad te veniat".], recommenced purifications, and petitions for assistance echo the same "slow tongue" of Moses, the "unclean lips" of Isaiah, the demur of Jeremiah, and the mutism of Ezekiel.[18] The liturgical modes of exhaustive supplementation, preface, and petition are a response to, and an expression of, the crisis of liturgical utterance, which the Roman Rite made no attempt to

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conceal. It testifies to the magnitude of the worshipper's task: to mingle his voice with that of the supernumerary seraphim.

Other criticisms of the Roman Rite can be addressed by a deeper attention to social and political history than was undertaken by Klauser, Jungmann and the others. For example, the accusation of politicisation through incorporation of aspects of court ceremonial might perhaps be modified, given a re-examination of the historical understanding of such courtly ceremonial, of the precise understanding of the role of the emperor, and of the structure of society implied by it. It is certainly true that mediaeval Popes and bishops adopted elements of court ceremonial and vestments, but if such aspects of the ritual are examined within a larger context, it can be seen that the argument that the liturgy was contaminated by politics is misleading. In the middle ages, the monarchs were not absolute monarchs and were themselves included within the liturgical congregation. Because they too had to obey divine justice, any borrowing of court ceremonial by the ritual cannot be seen as an *unambiguous* manifestation of secularisation or centralization.[19] Indeed, mirroring the monarch's own deferral to God, the Celebrant's position was an ambiguous one, shifting between being on the side of the congregation to being on the side of God. He was not simply 'above' the congregation, but had to request the *assistance* of the bystanders, and was subject to a permutation of identity which, as I have suggested, is integral to a liturgical characterisation of the worshipping self. Moreover, God Himself, far from being 'over against' the congregation in the Rite, is represented as ambiguously 'positioned' in relation both to humanity and within the Trinity.

This ambiguity of structure seems to mirror the decentred ordering of mediaeval society, for in that period there was no absolute centre of sovereignty on an immanent level. According to a model in which there is only one centre of sovereignty (a model which could be used to describe the absolutist political structure of the early modern and baroque periods),[20] there can only be a connection with the transcendent at that central point, so that everything beneath that point is effectively secularized. However, according to the decentred and organic structure of mediaeval society, every social group was formed by worship. This is illustrated, as I have mentioned, most especially by the importance of the economic guilds, discussed at length and from varying perspectives in the work of Eamon Duffy, John Bossy, Otto Gierke, and Antony Black. Whilst one might at first suppose that a sacred society would have only one invested sacred centre or 'site', it is to the contrary clear that a Christian society has many centres because, (as manifest in the theology of the Roman Rite), the true sacred centre is unplaceable and lies beyond place
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itself, in God. Thus, any drift to one centre on earth causes a concomitant loss of focus on God, and whilst it is *not* clear that such a drift can be seen in the liturgy of the mediaeval Roman Rite, nor in much of what we know about mediaeval liturgical practice, it is certainly evident in the development of liturgical practice in subsequent times, from the late middle ages onwards.

A further perspective must be adopted when considering the criticism that the "simple primitive meal" of antiquity had been overburdened, and ultimately lost, by the Roman Rite. A more historico-anthropological perspective would find much that is questionable in the assumptions which provoke this criticism. The revisers' notion that the primitive eucharistic rite was originally a simple agape meal which served as a pre-linguistic frame for the Eucharistic ritual was interpreted by the reformers in such a way as to lay stress on the link between the Eucharist and everyday life as an ordinary feast shared in common. This was an important correcting of an imbalance; however, it failed to realize that this original context can also be read the opposite way round. That is to say, this context implies that every meal should only occur as a ritual feast, thus pulling everyday life towards a ritual mode just as much as vice-versa. The community which prepared and enjoyed the feast was itself only bestowed in and through the liturgical celebration. Thus, the meal could be seen as a communal activity which took place only because it was embedded in liturgical life, rather than as a liturgical form additional or subordinate to the meal, in the form of a linguistic elaboration.

Finally, in conclusion, I would like to suggest that the reform of the liturgy instigated by Vatican II was itself not adequate to its theology, for example, the work of De Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, and the influence of the restored Thomism of Etienne Gilson. In being too eager to find secularization in any forms of repetition or apophatic re-beginnings which it associated with a decadent epoch, the liturgical revisers of Vatican II chose as a liturgical paradigm a text which, as being more of a treatise *on* liturgy than a liturgy itself, would in the end prove misleading for the programme of liturgical recovery. Moreover, in rejecting the features of multiple repetition, complexity of genre, instability of the worshipping subject, and continued interruption of progress by renewed prayers of penitence, under the assumption that these were secular interpolations, they ironically perpetuated certain features of the truly secularizing modern epoch. For example, they imposed such anachronistic structural concepts as "argument", "linear order", "segmentation", "discrete stages", and the notion of "new information" outside "linguistic redundancy" or repetition, on a text

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whose provenance and theological context is wholly oral and apophatic, set within a passionate order of language which calls in order to be calling, or in hope of further calling (and not for any instrumental purpose).[21] They reacted by simplifying the advance towards the altar of God to a defined structure, of which J.D. Chrichton boasts: "Nothing could be simpler, nothing nearer to the eucharist of the primitive Church";[22] they ironed-out the liturgical stammer and constant re-beginning; they simplified the narrative and generic strategy of the liturgy in conformity with recognisably secular structures, and rendered simple, constant and self-present the identity of the worshipper. There are other implications which I could add to this list, but, above all, the liturgical reformers of Vatican II failed to realize that one cannot simply 'return' to an earlier form, because the earlier liturgies only existed as part of a culture which was itself ritual (ecclesial-sacramental-historical) in character.

A genuine liturgical reform, therefore, would either have to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity, or, that being impossible, devise a liturgy that *refused* to be enculturated in our modern habits of thought and speech. Such enculturation, one would have to realise, can only be appropriate for a society that is itself, as a whole, subordinate to liturgical offering. But in *our* society, any 'equivalent' of the liturgies before the period of Baroque decadence correctly refused by Vatican II, would have not only to register internally the need 'to pray that there might be prayer'—by restoring a liturgical 'stammer', and oral spontaneity and 'confusion'—but also the need to pray that we again begin to live, to speak, to associate, in a liturgical, which is to say truly human and creaturely fashion. It would have more actively to challenge us through the shock of a *defamiliarizing* language, to live only to worship, and to be in community only as recipients of the gift of the body of Christ.

1   Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*, (London: Methuen, 1984); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 141–154.

2   Catherine Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming in 1997), Ch. 4.

3   John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*, (O.U.P., 1985) especially Chs 1–5.

4   Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis, passim*.

5   Joseph Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), Chs 18, 23; idem., *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, tr. Francis A. Brunner, (London: Burns and Oates, 1951); Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer*, tr. Charles Underhill Quinn, (Indiana: Notre Dame, 1968), Chs 11–13; *Constitution on the Liturgy*, tr. Fr Clifford Howell S.J., (Cirencester: Whitegate

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Publications, 1963); J.D. Crichton, *Christian Celebration: The Mass, The Sacraments, The Prayer of the Church,* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971/1979); Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy,* tr. John Halliburton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965); Dom Cyprian Vagaggini, *The Canon of the Mass and Liturgical Reform,* (London, 1967).

6   Jungmann, *The Mass,* p.37.

7   Bouyer, *Eucharist,* p.443.

8   As well as the references in n.5 above, see Aidan Nichols,O.P., *Looking At the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), p.84 n. 44.

9   Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars,* pp.95–107; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* , (C.U.P., 1991), pp.51–65

10 Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et L'Eglise au Moyen-Age* , (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1949); see also Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable,* tr. Michael B. Smith, (Chicago University Press, 1992), pp.82-85; Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis,* pp.151–160; Otto Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age,* tr. Frederic William Maitland, (C.U.P., 1900), pp.30–34.

11 de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum,* pp.120–130 and *passim.*

12 See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe,* (C.U.P., 1979) 2 vols.

13 Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis,* ch.2

14 Bernard Botte and Christine Mohrmann, *L'Ordinaire de la Messe,* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1953), p.58

15 *L'Ordinaire,* p.60-62

16 See further Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis,* Ch.4

17 Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 1979), p.32

18 Herbert Marks, *"On Prophetic Stammering"*, in ed. Regina Schwartz, *The Book and the Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 60–80

19 Gierke, *Political Theories,* 30–34, 63

20 Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha* ed. Johann P. Sommerville, (C.U.P., 1991); Ernst Kantorowicz, "Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and Its Late mediaeval Origins" in *Harvard Theological Review,* 48 (1955) 65–91.

21 See Pickstock, *The Sacred Polis,* Ch 4; On attempts to disentangle the Roman Rite, see for example Ralph A. Keifer, "The Unity of the Roman Canon: An examination of its unique structure", *Studia Liturgica,* 11. 1 (1976), 39-58; Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy;* M.J. Connolly, "The Tridentine *Canon Missæ* as Framework for a Liturgical Narrative", in ed. Andrej Kodjak et al, *The Structural Analysis of Narrative Texts,* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavika Publications, 1980), 24-30. But see Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite,* II. 106, and Geoffrey G. Willis, "Some Problems in the Early History of the Roman Canon Missae", in eds *A Voice For All Time: Essays on the Liturgy of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council,* (Bristol: Association for Latin Liturgy, 1994), 157–167, on the typographical intensification of the Canon.

22 J.D.Crichton, *Christian Celebration,* I. 68

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