

# Sermon at a Latin Mass

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*Profert de thesauro suo nova et vetera:*  
'he bringeth from his treasure new things  
and old'. (Matt. XIII 52).

We have come together tonight, not only from different Christian traditions, but from different areas of thought in our own Church. We have come together to celebrate Mass, the holy mysteries in which, as Our Lord commanded, we shew forth his death and rejoice in him, our risen Saviour. But we have come together, for all our differences, in another way too. We have assembled here to celebrate Mass in a tongue that links us with a remote past older than Christianity itself, and in a form that was for centuries a distinguishing mark of the ancient church of the West. Our ceremony tonight would have been recognised at once by Pascal, by Thomas More, by Cuthbert Tunstall; and, with almost equal ease, by Bede, by Cuthbert, by Gregory. Yet in order that you should join in and recognise the ceremony yourselves, you have needed to assemble from many parts to this place—almost as a new *gens lucifuga* in its catacomb. It is this paradox that has prompted the reflexions I offer you.

Liturgy—the *leitourgia*, the public work of worship—bears on itself the marks of time and of ages that are past. Examples are easily found. Just as the outstretched hands of the priest recall the frescos depicting the earliest Christians, so his hands folded in prayer are reminiscent of a later age, and of the medieval gesture of homage. In action and posture, in phrase and word, in the very artefacts of worship, the course of our history, as Christians and as men, has left its mark. That this human, temporal mark has been left upon the activity in which we supremely seek communion with what lies beyond humanity and time, with our Eternal Father, dooms all forms of liturgy to inadequacy. If it is only through time that time is conquered, those who conquer cannot hope to escape unhurt from so inevitable and so unending a struggle. Liturgy displays, in its clearest and sometimes in its most painful form, the tension and unease which are the lot of those who have passed over from death to life, but who also bear about in themselves the dying of the Lord Jesus. In other words, if the liturgy shews forth the death of the Lord, it also shews forth—for better, for worse—the life of the Church that is his body. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*—‘the rule of prayer is the rule of belief’—is a time-honoured phrase that points to this relationship. We do not have an abstractly conceived scheme of dogma, which is then given picturesque expression in liturgy; nor do we have a liturgy which

eludes any attempt to articulate the beliefs it embodies. We have the living Church, its preaching by word and deed, and its worship, with the strengths and weaknesses of a living thing. The strengths and weaknesses will be detectable in all the Church does. In every age, the Church must obey Christ's command to teach all nations; in every age, she must try to speak the words of salvation so that men may hear them. The results will be necessarily touched by time and its limitations, and by the changes time brings, nor have we any right to be surprised at that. Life, we are told, involves some tension between an organism and its environment; inertness is not life; if the life of the Church demands in each age reflection and re-assessment, we cannot expect the liturgy to be insulated from those processes.

Assertions of the sort are reasonable, but they can never wholly satisfy: they obscure the real points at issue. We can agree that inertness is not life, and we can accept the need for reflection and re-assessment. Disagreement begins when we are asked to apply the assertions to practice: to decide what is inertia, and what is stability; what is re-assessment and what is failure of nerve. I offer here no resolution of the disagreement, but—to show how difficult the resolution may be—I offer a homely parable.

Some years ago there was a Russian trade-fair in London. A newspaper reporter went to one stall that displayed produce from the state of Georgia—a part of the world which makes large quantities of drinkable but quite undistinguished wine. Seeing many bottles of 'Georgian Champagne' there, the reporter asked the salesman what years were vintage years for it. The answer he got was brusquely dismissive: 'In Georgia, all years are vintage years'.

The Georgian fallacy, if we may so call it, is connatural to our own time. That the quantity of excellence is limited; that legislation cannot produce good things to order; that effort and enthusiasm may end in failure; that one age, one time, one culture may be enviably and inequitably at ease with treasures that others lack: those are not truths that find ready acceptance today. Truths, however, have a way of pressing themselves on our attention, and it is surely in language itself, man's greatest artefact, that the pressure has become most palpable. We are there being forced to acknowledge that licence gives no guarantee against banality and tedium, that poverty and vulgarity cannot be disguised forever, that—in a sense unsuspected perhaps by the author of the phrase—the limits of our language do indeed display the limits of our world. And if the limits of our language do this, so much more clearly and so much more embarrassingly do the limits of our liturgy and of its language.

It is easy enough for most of you here tonight to agree in reprobating the Georgian fallacy in liturgical matters. Allow me to suggest that the moral to be drawn from present discontents is more complex and comes nearer home. If we grant that liturgy must have roots in the past, that it is bound to have been conditioned by circumstances of time and of history, then we must also grant that development in liturgy must

respect the inner logic of what is there to be developed; we must acknowledge that plans for such development will call for tact, for knowledge, and—let us not hesitate to say it—for luck. Set aside for one moment the matter of liturgical language, and consider two recent and contrasting examples of such development: the restored Easter Vigil, and the recently revised marriage service. In one, I would suggest, a series of changes and reshapings, inspired by trial and error among other things, has yielded a rite that, do we but use it as we should, proclaims the Risen Christ as the ‘Holy Saturday Service’ never could and never did. In the other, we have had the sudden sweeping away of old associations and the imposition of a piece of drab, prefabricated meanness. In the face of this, who shall deny that legislation is not enough? And that it can no more produce good liturgy of itself than it can produce happiness?

Who indeed? Yet it is just here that the moral begins to come nearer home. The religious tradition associated with our Mass this evening—how ready was it to acknowledge the inner strength and logic of worship, and the limits of what can be achieved by decree? Surely it is no accident that Pius XII, the culmination and paradigm of the old order, found fault in his encyclical on the liturgy with the phrase I quoted earlier: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. For him, to say that the rule of prayer was the rule of belief was inadequate; in its place he would put *lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi*—‘let the rule of belief determine the rule of worship’. That the new phrase, besides being cacophonous, missed the point, does not need to be laboured here. Pius can at least be given credit for having seen that the papal autocracy he favoured was ill at ease with a view of liturgy as an independent and valid expression of the faith we have inherited.

We can go further. Confronted with what the new order has produced in the liturgy, some are appalled; more, including many of those who are happy with the new rite, feel uncomfortable with some of its manifestations. My own concern tonight is to ask some questions of you, among whom reservations about the changes are likely to be strongest, and admiration for the old order greatest. What zeal was shown by the old order in our own country for dignity in worship? How likely was that zeal to arise, given the pattern of training received by priests? How was the liturgy of the Mass complemented by other services? What efforts were made to see that, when English was used in such services, it was an English that respected the history and structure of our own tongue? You know the answers all too well; it is worth remembering what they are when you deplore the English of our present predicament.

We can go further still, and bring the moral still nearer home. In all the changes there have been, how much has there been a change of heart? The uneasiness of Pius with one phrase, and his preference for another—has the uneasiness been resolved, the preference altered? In the last few days I had had occasion to look over instructions and official documents on worship, emanating over the last dozen or more years from a variety of sources. They make melancholy reading. The dialogue Mass, we are told, was previously tolerated and is now encouraged; or

comments on the new liturgy are requested—by the end of next week; or outlines are circulated of instructions as to what the changes mean; and, time and again, the pattern emerges of a uniform expectancy of authority to intervene, so that a uniform practice, translation and the rest may be uniformly imposed. We are to pass—if I may put a notorious phrase to another use—from one state of certainty to another.

I do not want to make debating-points on a topic where anything in cold print is liable to look silly. Nor do I speak as one opposed to what has happened. I am not a member of the Society to which many of you belong; I argued for the changes; I welcomed them; I am happy with them. But there are questions that do need putting. Must it all be as wooden as that? Is legislation for uniformity the be-all and end-all of the matter? The latest change, as you know, is that all English-speaking peoples (whatever that means) should have to use one form of responses at Mass, a form apparently imposed by Rome without even the pretence of asking the leave of those affected by the innovation. Lament all this pattern of behaviour and I shall lament it with you. But the moral I have drawn is that you should not deceive yourselves. The principle of Roman autocracy on which it is all based, and the correlated parrot-cry of 'loyalty to the Holy See', have nothing of innovation about them: they are of the very essence of the pattern of worship you favour, and which we are celebrating tonight.

To give a programme of action would be inapposite here, even if I had one to offer. Let me rather conclude by giving some points of a general character which are, I think, useful if we want to put our problem in a wider setting. The first takes up an earlier remark that liturgy is, among other things, an embodiment of the life of the Church. If it mirrors the strengths and the weaknesses in the Body of Christ, liturgy is more than just a symptom or index; it can be an active means of strengthening and of renewing. In other words, concern for liturgy is never concern for simply liturgy; it has, and ought to have, further consequences. The second point touches the form this concern should take. It was Aristotle who insisted that in the moral judgments of practical life we cannot use only a standard rule; we need prudence—*phronesis*—to assess the exigencies of a particular case, and how the rule should be applied to it. The Church needs *phronesis* in its worship, if it needs it anywhere, for there are so many competing exigencies that call for respect. There must be a link between liturgy and the daily life whence it draws the signs it uses; and there must be a distance liturgy keeps from life, if it is not to be dissipated into nothing more than life. There is the call of the community, where we must love for Christ's sake; and there is the call of prayer, where we open ourselves to God's word through Christ, and worship God, the highest act we can perform. You cannot reconcile these exigencies once for all, with a liturgy of St Procrustes. You cannot legislate *phronesis* into existence, it is just not that kind of thing. What you can do is legislate in such a way that certain kinds of disaster are averted. For instance, mistakes are not to be deemed irremediable because uniformity is in question. International commissions, and international politics, and international

formulae, are to be judged as baleful to the making of good liturgy as they are to the brewing of good beer. Most of all, a Catholic variety, in the original sense of that word, is to be seen as a fitting attribute for worship in a Church which, over the centuries, has at times both preserved the heritage of the past and moved boldly in the present. Which brings me to the third and last of these concluding points. The past is not an encumbrance to be discarded; the past is not an idol to be worshipped; the past is an inheritance to be understood and evaluated. We need in its presence, not only the boldness of those who have to face life now, but also a saving humility; and if this seems to encourage an uncritical attitude to what has been, we should recall that any autocracy, of whatever sort, always seeks to manipulate the past, to weaken the challenge it can make, and if need be to destroy it. A slave might be defined as one who lives on a diet of orders in a pastless present. This is a hard lesson to learn, and old and new dispensations alike in the Church have been and are slow to learn it. But then the world is slow to learn it, as we all know to our cost. Is there not a need here for teaching by practice that the example of our Church might give? *Profert de thesauro suo nova et vetera.*