

SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION

Beloved,

On this Sunday when most of the Roman Church at least in America is celebrating the mystery of the Ascension, and historically known as the Sunday after the Ascension which we celebrated in conjunction with the Biblical indication of the mystery having taken place 40 days after the resurrection, I would like to return to something I mentioned Thursday day evening. I will use the thoughts of Pope Benedict to illustrate, at least in part what I am going to say. This is going to concern what constitutes authentic liturgy, upon which subject in this context I must necessarily place great limitations.

In Acts 1:11 we hear angels speaking to the Apostles staring into the skies into which the Lord had just ascended: *“Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye there gazing into heaven? This Jesus, Who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come as you have seen him going into heaven.”*

Taking this scriptural passage so pertinent to the Easter season and the great mystery of the Ascension which we are celebrating, I would like to speak to you of the historical basis for Mass celebrated – to use an expression rather indicative of gross ignorance – of Mass celebrated, so-called, *“with the priest’s back to the people.”*

If Christ be God and Scripture divine, then we do well to examine not the deceptions of modern men and the manufactured ideas of a world divorced from its roots. Rather should we, in humility, return to that apt phrase which has happily fallen more than few times from the pen of “Go to Joseph,” our Pope, Benedict XVI. I want to bring to you some considerations regarding the position of the Christian altar by employing Pope Benedict’s “asceticism of the truth.” *How*

have the remarks of the angels of the Ascension found explicit expression throughout 20 centuries of true Christian faith? That is, until brushed away these past few decades in the west by a cloud of ignorance as dark as its fruits ruinous to authentic Christian faith and practice?

When the Church has celebrated the holy Mass, century upon century as she has done in her historical rites, she has explicitly marked her longing for the Lord's imminent return. This expectation was a vivid hallmark of the urgency of apostolic belief: it was the seedbed of martyrdom. Nowadays, who gives it a second thought?

We know from Scriptural passages other than those speaking of the Ascension that the Lord is not only to come again, but will do so in order to judge the living and the dead. Therefore, we understand, in considering His departure, to what *end* the angels say that He Who had just left our world will return to it in the way He went: He is going to come back to this present world from the realms of inaccessible light into which He departed. Scripture also records that His return will be heralded by the Sign of the Cross in the heavens and will be seen by all. That *all* is the living and the dead: everyone, each of which will either cower in terror or radiate with joy – for the Lord's Second Coming will bear directly upon the backlogged conduct of every person born into creation. At that dread advent there will be no room for liberal whining about supposed rights on the one hand nor the shrill indignation of intolerant self-righteousness on the other.

This Second Coming is a dogmatic truth of Catholic faith. Do we ever think of it? Do we long for it? Yet for two thousand years the Church has kept this vigil, watching throughout this "little while," for the return of her Spouse. This watching has not been effected by papal decrees nor

theological seminars but *visually manifest* through the principal font, the principal source, of our Christian life. And what is that?

In an age where mystery is overturned in favor of absolute transparency and symbols abandoned by an ascendancy of the superficial, it is necessary that we look at something delivered to us from another age: the liturgy handed down to us from *history* – not retouched productions imposed by a now dated “relevance” from the late 1960’s, rationalist, and eventually a misguided child of Descartes and what followed him in modern philosophical spheres.

To really understand the liturgy one must turn to the historical – the *venerable* – rites of ancient Christian worship, rites ever ancient, ever new.

Let us look at what we are actually “doing” in church this morning. Let us look at a Mass liturgy whose principles and broad patterns are shared by the whole history of Christianity, east and west; one rite among several whose origins are traced to an era when going to church was not viewed as an obligation – a rather unpleasant one at that – needing to be resolved in the shortest time possible to get on with other things by which the Lord’s day is secularized rather than sanctified.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of all Christian life. It is in enacting the liturgy – not just reading its words or studying documents about its content, but our active presence within the living context of its liturgical celebration – it is in the *ritual expression of the Mass* that the Church has marked its long vigil for the Lord’s return. For holy Mass celebrated in its classic forms – you pick the rite for in this regard they are all the same – until the errors of Martin Luther every Eucharistic rite in Christendom *always* placed the faithful behind the priest, who together, face the altar

surmounted by the Holy Cross – not a crucifix; not a tabernacle, but the *Cross*. The whole is construed in such manner as to face East, the very Heavens into which the Lord ascended, the heavens from which the angels tell us we are to expect His imminent return.

While fulfilling the precepts of charity as commanded by the Lord Jesus, ever has His Church – the faithful – gathered again and again to celebrate these Paschal Mysteries, the Mass. In so doing the faithful have expressed their belief in the Second Coming as many times by “turning towards the Lord” in the framework of their liturgical action.

Here we have a classic example of the didactic role of ritual so rather completely overturned by the modern phenomenon of what Pope Benedict calls manufactured liturgy-by-committee. Authentic worship speaks very, very often *without* words; it speaks to the heart by the integrity of its signs, symbols, gestures, actions, perfumes, lights, color, grace and glory.

Today Catholics may well ask, “How, in the *actions* of the liturgy, do we “turn towards the Lord”? Modern Catholics *especially* need to rediscover that what is “done in church” is not a rational conceptualization but the formal rendering of hearts’ worship of God. In theology this is known as *latria* – adoration given to God as to a god: God as Master, Savior, Sanctifier – *and to that God Who will come to judge our fidelity to Him*

Thus, authentic worship is not a modern product of preconceived ideas. Catholic worship is, by nature and necessity, the rich, harmonious fruit of 20 centuries of continuity in faith. It is the product of God’s grace acting through men. Its symbols from the various ages are superabundantly rich in content even if modern men have been produced by social conditions too shallow to know how

to read them any longer. The Church's received forms of worship are divine gifts to us from the past – not old baggage to be jettisoned at will.

In 1992, our former Pope, Pope Benedict XVI, managed to outrage the entire liturgical establishment by endorsing the posthumous work of the New Mass's leading – and outstandingly qualified, and unrepentant – critic.

The-then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a preface to Monsignor Klaus Gamber's book, *La Reforme Liturgique en Question*, (here is the English version of the same; neither edition was printed by any respectable neo-conservative press. But later Ratzinger was made Pope, wasn't he?)

One of the things most sharply criticized by Monsignor Gamber is the practical attack carried out on the *Catholic faith itself* by the unhistorical and anti-liturgical introduction of the so-called "Mass Facing the People." This seemingly shocking assertion, so abrasive to enthusiasts over the new, is an example of the "asceticism of the truth," so beloved by Pope Benedict XVI.

Beloved, what *we* are doing this morning is in deepest conformity with the continuity of all Christian tradition, east and west, with a basis in scripture itself.

The primary and central function of the Eucharistic liturgy has been served at all times, in all places, and in every rite by the traditional *orientation* of the people, priest, altar and cross in a single, telescopic, cosmological ordering. This is entirely the case, notwithstanding archeological interpretations which run against the *absolutely universal* liturgical practices from the time of the Apostles, unbroken (in Catholicism) until the second decade of the 20th century.¹ Fundamental to its liturgical significance is that

¹ Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, 138. "We can show with certainty that there has never been, neither in the Eastern nor the Western Church, a celebration *versus populum* (facing the people); rather the direction of prayer has always been towards the East,

this *orientation* is an harmonious expression of human psychology and the natural ordering of all the hierarchical values operative in worship.² Its *liturgical* reason is the vivid expression of Christian belief in Christ's Second Coming.

And so with these very few reflections I wish to recall us to the center of our faith and what it is that we do each time we are at Mass. Christ through us, each according to his rightful role, priest, clergy, faithful, celebrates the totality of His Paschal mystery. We, that is the Church, proclaims and lays claim to the *pleroma*, the fullness of Christ: His Incarnation, life, death, resurrection and return to the Father in glory. By doing so we give the Trinity that glory which is its due. We pray for ourselves and the needs of the world, we are fed by the divine Manna, that heavenly reality foreshadowed by the Manna of the Israelites wandering in the desert – itself a symbol of us lost in sin. We are brought to the threshold of glory in the mysteries to which we give voice and action. And by our very postures, standing as the church Militant, we are marching to the Judgment seat of Christ, turned to the East, waiting for him to come back in the same way we have seen Him go. God grant that we live according to all these graces, and that He, our Victor King, will find us still gazing into the heavens when He comes to bring us back to himself, for judgement, and by our humility to share in the radiance of that place to which He has so gloriously ascended.

conversi ad Dominum (turned toward the Lord).”

² It is also significant that through the eastward celebration of the classic rites of the Church the personality of the celebrant disappears from public view as is suitable to the role of *alter Christus*. This is especially true when the priest conducts himself in an unhurried manner, carrying out his actions sensitively, submissive to the rubrics and ethos of the rite in use. The abuse of this last principle is at the root of much hostility directed to the older Latin liturgy. The remembrance of some priest's hurried inattentiveness or outright abusive treatment of the former liturgical directives is *often* confused with what is intrinsic to the rite itself. An entire liturgical patrimony can hardly be reasonably dismissed on the grounds that it was ignorantly abused. Such abuses revealed the “loss of meaning from within” that had already been ingrained into the Latin clergy long before the post-conciliar changes took place. They indicate loss of a *cosmological* understanding of what liturgy is in the first place. That was replaced long ago by a post-scholastic minimalism that contented itself with sacramental “validity” and its “effects”. This is what the authentic liturgical movement sought to redress. (cf. Gamber, 12.)

No less important is the truth that in the historical forms of liturgical celebration, the communal element has never been absent in any rite of the Church. Inducing the congregation to respond and sing – that is to restore your rightful role in liturgical action - did not require the wholesale reordering of ancient rites themselves. Integrating the faithful into the liturgical action requires priests who are actually knowledgeable and interested enough in their rites to educate the faithful in carrying out their proper role in worship. This had been taught and well on the road to realization in the Roman Rite for more than a hundred years, promoted by every Pope during that same time frame in conjunction with the ancient, received forms of the liturgy. It was given further impetus by Pius XII and Vatican II. Despite the near universal disappearance of Latin, the faithful *still* do not sing or respond in many instances.

In his book, *A New Song for the Lord*, Pope Benedict XVI rightly puts the Church on guard against false expertise:

“With all due respect for the eminent liturgist, his opinion shows that even experts can be wide of the mark. First of all, mistrust is always in order when a large part of the living history [i.e. tradition] has to be thrown onto the garbage dump of discarded misunderstandings. This is all the more true of Christian liturgy, which lives from the continuity and inner unity of the history of religious prayer.”

The Pope (Benedict) continues by saying that the popular notion regarding who gets to change the liturgy is no longer recognized as belonging to specialists or central authority, “but that in the end every “community” wants to be given its own liturgy. But when the liturgy is something that everyone makes by himself, then it no longer gives us that which is its true quality: an encounter with mystery, which

is not our product, but the origin and source of our life. Dramatically urgent for the life of the Church is a renewal of the liturgical conscience, a liturgical reconciliation, that turns to knowing again the unity of the history of the liturgy . . .”

In his laudatory preface to the book of the late liturgical scholar, Monsignor Klaus Gamber, our former Pope noted that, “what is needed in the Church today is a new liturgical movement [which seeks to] rediscover the living center, of penetrating into the tissue of the liturgy itself, into its concrete realization, so that its accomplishment derive from its own substance. The liturgical reform, in its concrete realization, has distanced itself more and more from this origin. The result has not been an animation but a devastation.”

Pope Benedict goes on to say that Monsignor Gamber should be a “father” to such a new movement, one that would reflect the Council’s right intentions (which Gamber embraced), and a continuation of the movement which bogus liturgists thought ended with Pope Pius XII’s November, 1947, landmark encyclical on the liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, highly praised by Pope John Paul II in November of 1997.

In looking at the actual changes that have utterly swept the traditional Mass Liturgy of Saint Gregory the Great from the churches of the Roman rite one sees at once the breach between the *principles* laid down in *Mediator Dei* and the *praxis* of the actual reform following the Council called by our former Pope a “devastation”.

The contrast is most strikingly manifest by comparing the condemnation of Paragraph 62 in *Mediator Dei* to the actual state of affairs in the Roman Rite today:

“It is neither wise nor laudable to reduce everything to antiquity by every possible device. Thus to cite some

instances, one would be straying from the straight path were he to wish the altar restored to its primitive table form; were he to want black excluded as a color for the liturgical vestments; were he to forbid the use of sacred images and statues in churches, were he to order the crucifix so designed that the divine Redeemer's body shows no trace of His cruel sufferings; and lastly were he to disdain and reject polyphonic music or singing in parts even where it conforms to regulations issued by the Holy See.

As for altars "being restored to their primitive table form", Pope Benedict remarks, page 142 in his book *Feast of Faith*:

"Not only had the awareness of the liturgy's cosmic orientation been lost, but there was also little understanding of the significance of the image of the cross as a point of reference for the Christian liturgy. Hence the eastward orientation of the celebration became meaningless, and people could begin to speak of the priest celebrating Mass 'facing the wall' or imagine that he was celebrating toward the tabernacle. This misunderstanding alone can explain the sweeping triumph of the new celebration facing the people, a change which has taken place without any mandate . . . All this would have been inconceivable if it had not been preceded by a prior loss of meaning from within.³ Monsignor Gamber rightly insists that Mass "facing the people" is by far the most radical change in the Roman liturgy.⁴ More than any other it has effected a deep psychological shift in the understanding of the purpose of worship and its impact on its participants, moving almost everything from a *theocentric* to an *anthropocentric* focus. The former is insisted upon by Pius XII in *Mediator Dei*: "Let

³ Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 142.

⁴ Cf. Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy*, "Celebrating Mass *Versus Populum*: Liturgical and Sociological Aspects", 78-89; and "Part II: On the Building of Churches and Facing East in Prayer", 117-184.

everything be theocentric...if we really wish to direct everything to the glory of God...”⁵⁶

In rejecting the right principles articulated in *Mediator Dei*, its directive wisdom has been eliminated from the life of the Church as well. With enthusiasm for the very thing *Mediator Dei* forbids, the nearly universal intrusion of Mass celebrated so that the priest intentionally looks at the congregation has led to the following: Pope Benedict XVI:

“The general view [regarding this new practice] is totally determined by the strongly felt community character of the Eucharistic celebration, in which the priest and people face each other in a dialog relationship. This does express *one* aspect of the Eucharist. But the danger is that it can make the congregation into a closed circle which is no longer aware of the explosive Trinitarian dynamism which gives the Eucharist its greatness.”⁷

Incredibly, the universal adoption of a condemned practice prescribed ordered by Conciliar directive nor any rubric in the typical edition of the reformed *Missale Romanum* is rooted in ignorance of the liturgical, cosmological, eschatological and psychological meanings of its historical antecedent – all freely conceded by the man who had become our Pope. The one suggested meaning for its adoption is entirely *secondary* to the intrinsic nature of liturgical action, and, in virtue of its constitutive dynamic, the practice can not help *but* withdraw attention from the theocentricity of worship, its *primary* function.

Little wonder that Pope Benedict XVI said in his autobiography, *La Mia Vita*, that “the ecclesial crisis in which we find ourselves today depends in a great part on the

⁵ *Mediator Dei*, 33.

⁶ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960), 51.

⁷ Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith*, 142.

collapse of the liturgy.” The liturgical reform has been a disaster – for those man enough to deal with the “asceticism of truth”.

I will close by quoting an article from an Anglican journal of all places. It was written in 1975 when the Episcopal Church was gearing up for its self-destruction over the ordination of women - now they have an openly homosexual bishop in Concord, New Hampshire – what next? The article speaks volumes on the utter confusion heaped into Christianity by the broad-based 1960’s madness for liturgical change

“In Christianity prayer and worship have always been directed towards the east from the earliest of times and churches came to be constructed facing east or “oriented.” This had nothing to do with sun worship. The Ascension of Christ took place on the Mount of Olives, to the east of Jerusalem. So it was believed that his Perusia or Second Coming, which was very vivid in the minds of the early Christians, would be heralded from the east. Turning to the east meant turning towards the glorified Christ who would appear in the east at His Perusia since He had ascended into the east: “This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Beloved, this dogma of our faith is professed every time we go to Mass – or at least used to be before the liturgy was savaged. Let me insist on this point: the reason we go to Mass is to worship God and subject ourselves to His saving grace. The liturgy is Christ’s gift to us, His Church. It is sacrosanct. We should study it: its history, its sense, its mysteries, its layers, and this we should do fervently. We should know our Mass Rite *faithfully*, sing it *devoutly*, and receive Our Lord Who deigns to come to us through it in profoundest *humility*. Indeed, because the Lord Jesus will

come again to judge our fidelity to *Him*. This I believe with all my heart and soul as a man and a priest.

I beg you to listen to Christ while venerating the *wisdom* of Holy Church. For she mediates the divine life of grace principally through this most august Sacrifice and Sacrament, product of 2,000 years' wisdom and Holy Tradition.

We will let a Protestant have the last word today for the article concludes: "It should be made clear that the historical evidence for "Mass Facing the People" has not been carefully examined" [Indeed Monsignor Gamber whose work was thoroughly endorsed by the former Pope demonstrates it as an historical falsification] "and that [Mass Facing the People's] precipitous adoption coincides with a seriously diminished belief in the Second Coming of Christ in the minds of many today. But we must ask ourselves, as God has revealed in Luke 18:8, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man shall come again, will He find faith on the earth?"

Beloved, the issue of a liturgical restoration is not merely some obscure argument between rubricists. It is the backbone on which hangs our faith and salvation.