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# The FURROW

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The Paul VI  
Roman Missal  
at 50:  
*'Redeemably  
Awful'*

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# The Paul VI Roman Missal at 50: *'Redeemably Awful'*

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Some momentous events have clear anniversaries, others are more difficult to pin down. The adoption of the current form of the Roman Missal, promulgated by Pope St. Paul VI, belongs to the second category. While there are multiple possible dates that could be chosen, such as the adoption of the new *ordo missae* (1969), the publication of Latin typical edition (1970) or of the first full English translation (1973), we are now at a distance of about fifty years since the adoption of the current missal and thus at an opportune time to take a few moments and examine the results. Therefore, I have decided to write a series of uncomfortable articles to help us take stock of the manner in which the liturgy is celebrated in many Irish parishes. My premise is that there is still a lot of work that we need to do to bring our liturgies into line with the vision of a liturgy that facilitates the active participation of the faithful as proposed by the Council. Indeed, taking inspiration from a speech of the recently-departed American liturgist I entitle the series "redeemably awful,"<sup>1</sup> as I believe that many of our liturgies leave a lot to be desired, but on the other hand many of the issues can be resolved by simply celebrating the liturgical rites as they were designed to be celebrated.

In 1963, during the Second Vatican Council, the world's bishops decided that:

'The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as also the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved.

For this purpose the rites are to be simplified, due care being

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1 Robert Taft, "Response to the Berakah Award: Anamnesis" in *Beyond East and West. Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Rome: P.I.O. Press, 1997), 303.

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taken to preserve their substance; elements which, with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage, are now to be discarded; other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the vigour which they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary (Sacrosanctum Concilium 50).’

Almost immediately a team working under the direction of Pope St. Paul VI began working on a new edition of the Roman Missal that would update it in light of the contemporary needs of the Church and with the ultimate goal of facilitating the active participation of every member of the People of God in the Eucharist.

### A SUCCESS STORY?

Many people would consider the current Missal to be a success story (perhaps only noting some issues with its latest translation). Whatever else the Church should be doing today, they say, we needn’t worry too much about liturgy. In Church circles liturgists are more often considered the butt of jokes than as prophets that can offer a solution to the many challenges facing the church.

However, I would contend that there is a massive problem in the *manner* that the celebration of the Mass is carried out in the typical Irish parish. The root of many of our contemporary problems is in the fact that we did not take the liturgical reforms seriously. We have domesticated the Eucharist. St. Ephrem the Syrian uses the image of fire when speaking of the Eucharist (Hymn *De Fide* 10). But all too often we have turned this blazing fire into a night light!

We can see how serious the Eucharist ought to be from a story from the early Irish Church. In the early 800’s Tírechán tells the story of how Patrick initiated the two daughters of King Loíguire. After their Baptism they asked Patrick to receive Communion. “Give us the sacrament so that we may see the Son, our bridegroom,” they begged. Then the instant that Patrick gave them the Eucharist they “fell asleep in death.”<sup>2</sup> These early Irish princesses understood how important the Eucharist was, receiving it was more important than their very lives.

The Eucharist is perhaps the most important thing in this world. But the sacrament is not something magical. It needs to be accompanied by faith, understanding and an openness to receiving its grace. While it is certain that most of what happens in

2 Tírechán 3.26 in Ludwig Bieler, ed., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*. With a contribution by Fergus Kelly. *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Vol. 10 (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 144-145.

## THE PAUL VI ROMAN MISSAL AT 50: 'REDEEMABLY AWFUL

the Eucharist is beyond our control, there remains something that we have a lot of influence over, the manner of its celebration. An infinity of grace is given each time the Sacrament is celebrated. Yet our poor souls can only receive a small amount of the grace that is so generously imparted. There are many facets that contribute to the worthiness of the individual liturgical participant. Yet one vital insight of the twentieth century's Liturgical Movement is that the grace given by the sacraments is not enough in and off itself. We cannot leave everything to sacramental grace. But the manner of the celebration of the sacraments can help the participants to appropriate more of the grace given. This is how the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* puts it:

'The pastoral effectiveness of a celebration will be greatly increased if the texts of the readings, the prayers, and the liturgical songs correspond as closely as possible to the needs, spiritual preparation, and culture of those taking part. This is achieved by appropriate use of the wide options described below.

The priest, therefore, in planning the celebration of Mass, should have in mind the common spiritual good of the people of God, rather than his own inclinations. He should, moreover, remember that the selection of different parts is to be made in agreement with those who have some role in the celebration, including the faithful, in regard to the parts that more directly pertain to each.

Since, indeed, a variety of options is provided for the different parts of the Mass, it is necessary for the deacon, the lectors, the psalmist, the cantor, the commentator, and the choir to be completely sure before the celebration about those texts for which each is responsible is to be used and that nothing be improvised. Harmonious planning and carrying out of the rites will be of great assistance in disposing the faithful to participate in the Eucharist' (#352).

## THE MANNER OF CELEBRATION

The understanding that the manner of celebration, or *ars celebrandi* as it is often called, can have such importance is often overlooked. This is one of the main areas that we have to work at. If we can improve the way we celebrate, then our liturgies will be more effective and will help people more. And here I propose that the most important step we can take is to celebrate the liturgical rites in the manner that they were designed to be celebrated. It is not the case that the current *Roman Missal* is simply unfit for purpose.

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We do not have to somehow or other invent some way to make it relevant. In a similar vein it is not that we have to put brackets around the last fifty years and go back to the “old Mass” (or more properly the Extraordinary Form). Our current problems can’t be blamed on Vatican II. In fact, I would propose that the numbers of people still frequenting our parishes are *because of* the reforms of the Council and not *in spite of* them. The Church today cannot look simply towards Trent or some hypothetical Vatican III, we need to live in the present. However, in my opinion, the key intuition of the liturgical movement that was active in the Church before the Council is often forgotten today. Although from a strict theological point of view grace is always given if the bare minimum has been reached and a sacrament is validly celebrated. Yet if the liturgy is celebrated well and the various liturgical signs are given their proper importance and the liturgy is done well, then the celebration of the liturgy in and of itself can help the members of the assembly to appropriate more of the sacramental grace. Obviously this not the only factor involved in the appropriation of grace, but generally the other factors (such as the interior disposition of the soul or the personal holiness of the person in question) is not obvious and is usually hidden from those involved in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy in a given parish. This means that while we cannot enter the internal forum of someone’s soul to better prepare them to participate in the liturgy, our manner of celebration remains perhaps the most important forum for us to help our assemblies to meet the saving grace of Christ.

This article serves as the introduction to a new series on how to improve our celebration of the Eucharist. I will cover such topics as the centrality of the altar, the role of the different liturgical ministers and the manner in which music ought to be integrated into our celebrations, starting *next month* with an article on the importance of the *altar*. While I hope nobody will be offended, these articles will not be self-congratulatory. My goal is not to tell readers that everything is “grand” and that we are in a much better place than once upon a time. My contention is that the Sunday liturgies in many of our parishes are, to put it bluntly, awful. This series aims to annoy readers and get under your skin as a form of liturgical examination of conscience. Those among us who are priests need to answer the simple question, “If I wasn’t a priest would I go to a Sunday Mass like the one in my parish?” Or to phrase it in a different way, why do less than one quarter of our young people attend Mass on a weekly basis?

I do not pretend to have a vast experience. Many readers will remember the pre-Conciliar liturgy. I was born in 1972 and I have only experienced the current Missal. I was formed in the United

States where I spent the first thirteen years of my priestly ministry. I returned to Ireland seven years ago. I have studied the liturgy in depth and have written academic articles and books on it. However, most of my ministry has been in the context of seminary formation (even though I have always helped out on Sundays in different parishes from the South Bronx to South Armagh) and I have had the privilege of teaching future priests how to preside over the Eucharistic Liturgy and helping them develop an *ars celebrandi*. I propose over the coming months to write this series as a sort of examination of conscience. I strongly believe in the liturgical renewal that was undertaken under the guidance of Pope St. Paul VI. I believe that while the current parochial situation may be awful, it is *redeemable* and that the current liturgical books are the best option for our time and place. Perhaps I have a tendency to be melodramatic, but allow me to finish this introduction by making my own the words of Alexander Schmemmann, the great Orthodox liturgical theologian:

'It suddenly became clear to me that ultimately, deeply, deeply, there is a demonic fight in our Church with the Eucharist—and it is not by chance! Without putting the Eucharist at the very center, the church is a 'religious phenomenon,' but not the Church of Christ, the pillar and bulwark of the Truth (1 Timothy 3:15). The whole history of the Church has been marked by pious attempts to reduce the Eucharist, to make it 'safe,' to dilute it in piety, to reduce it to fasting and preparation, to tear it away from the church (ecclesiology), from the world (cosmology, history), from the Kingdom (eschatology). And it became clear to me that if I had a vocation, it is here, in the fight for the Eucharist, against this reduction, against the de-churching of the Church—which happened through clericalization on one hand, and through worldliness on the other.'<sup>3</sup>

3 Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973-1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 2000), 310.