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Redeemably Awful: The Challenges of the Extraordinary Form

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Redeemably Awful: The Challenges of the Extraordinary Form

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I have nothing against the Extraordinary Form. While I believe that the current liturgical books of the Ordinary Form as renewed after Vatican II are a better expression of the Catholic Faith and Tradition, I am in no way offended by people who want to use the older 1962 editions of the liturgical books. In my opinion the Extraordinary Form is like my grandfather's Morris Minor, it was a beautiful car and I can well understand those who like vintage cars and are willing to invest the time, talent and treasure to keep them on the road, but for my purposes (as well as for the vast majority of people) the Toyota Yaris Hybrid that I drive is a more practical fit today.

I make no bones of the fact that I personally consider the liturgical rites as expressed in the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite to be far superior for current liturgical celebrations than the same rites as expressed in the Extraordinary Form. Indeed, the whole point of this series of articles is to encourage us to celebrate the current liturgical rites in a worthy manner. But in no way do I want to demean the Church's heritage. The multiplicity of different expressions of the Roman Rite between Trent and Vatican II nourished the spiritual lives of countless millions of Christians and accompanied the evangelization of vast territories of the Americas, Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Pacific.

Many people do not appreciate that these rites changed dramatically in the centuries between Trent and Vatican II. While the ritual books themselves that had been prepared after Trent were not revised, the way they were celebrated and the experience of Catholics differed radically in different times and place. Styles such as the Baroque and liturgical movements such as the Jesuit's reworking of church architecture so that everyone in the church could see the high altar, had a huge effect on people's lived experience of the liturgy. Additionally, papal initiatives, such

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as Pius X's promotion of frequent Communion, were to change popular participation in the liturgy.¹

Although the liturgical books revised by Pius V offered different liturgical possibilities and had been implemented in various ways, by the time Vatican II came it was clear that these books needed to be revised. The young Joseph Ratzinger was to comment in his journal of the Council that "the liturgy had become a rigid, fixed and firmly encrusted system ... out of touch with genuine piety... [where the people] were united with the priest only by being in the same church with him."² John XXIII decided to follow the example of Pius V at the Council of Trent. He asked the bishops at the Council to agree on some principles of liturgical reform that were to be carried out by a commission appointed by the pope after the Council. The overwhelming majority of the world's bishops were in favour of the liturgical renewal and virtually all parishers in the world were happy to adopt the new liturgical books.

However, given that the Catholic Church comprises of countless souls throughout the world, nobody should be surprised that some people did not like the newer rites. For many reasons some people preferred the old rite. Undoubtedly some of the initial support for the Tridentine books came from strange sources. In 1971 Pope Paul VI granted what was known as the Agatha Christie Indult to Cardinal Heenan of Westminster which allowed the continued use of the Tridentine rite after the current Missal was published. This was in response to a petition published in the *Times* of London by a group of cultural figures, the most prominent of whom was the Anglican Agatha Christie. This petition stated that it had no interest in the Tridentine form of the liturgy as a "religious or spiritual experience" of Catholics. They asked for the Tridentine Mass to be preserved as a *cultural* object, given that it had inspired many works of artists, composers and authors.

Other groups had more *spiritual* motives, such as the French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and the Society of St. Pius X which formally broke with the Catholic Church in 1988. A rejection of the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite was not the only reason that

1 For a history of the liturgy in this time period, see James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today*. 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003). For more on Pius X's reform, see Joseph Dougherty, *From Altar-Throne to Table: The Campaign for Frequent Holy Communion in the Catholic Church* (Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).

2 Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966, new edition 2009), 131-132. In fairness to Ratzinger, while he has never renounced the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, in more recent years he said that he wasn't able to foresee the negative side of the liturgical movement that almost destroyed it from within. See, Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 57.

they left the Church, but it did contribute to their leaving and is perhaps the most recognizable characteristic of their movement. The Vatican is still trying to reintegrate the movement into the Church with a clear desire for unity and making every allowance possible for them. Sometimes these efforts give a higher profile to the group than they might otherwise deserve. In fact, they are a tiny splinter group when compared to the Catholic Church. Vatican reporter John Allen has pointed out that “the Society of St. Pius X claims a global following of around 1 million, which, if true, would represent .01 percent of the full Catholic population of 1.2 billion.”³

As well as these more exotic movements, some Catholics have maintained *both* communion with the Catholic Church and a love of the Tridentine liturgy. These were particularly encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI’s 2007 *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*. This gave permission for priests to celebrate using the 1962 edition of the *Roman Missal* and other associated liturgical books. In the years since 2007 many groups within the Church have started using these older books. Many other Catholics have criticized this and there have even been petitions addressed to Pope Francis asking him to rescind the permission to use the older books.

I will never sign such a petition. I have no problem with people whose spirituality is helped by the older forms. My belief is that the Catholic Church is big enough to have liturgical variations. Indeed we must promote as many different liturgical options and styles as is practical, hoping to attract as many people as possible to the Church. If a liturgical form is in communion with the great Catholic tradition and those who use it hold to the Catholic Faith, then I am more than happy to have them in the Church.

In real terms those who have spoken with their feet and are going to Masses celebrated in the Extraordinary Form within the Catholic Church are probably not far off the 0.01% of the Lefebvrians. Numerically they pose no possible threat to other Catholics. In general, they gather in small communities and put a lot of work into the liturgy. The pre-Conciliar liturgies are extremely difficult to celebrate properly. If a group of Catholics are willing to spend time and effort to form a Gregorian schola and to raise the money to fund the old style vestments and other liturgical paraphernalia, I say more power to them. I am happy to see any group in the Church fostering *meaningful* liturgical celebrations. Indeed rather than persecuting these lovers of the Extraordinary Form, I think they should be encouraged.

3 John Allen, Jr., “Why détente between Rome and traditionalists was always a pipe dream,” March 19, 2015 available at <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/03/why-detente-between-rome-and-traditionalists-was-always-a-pipe-dream/>

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However, my support has two important *caveats* (and I would share these concerns about any other group that has a particular liturgical style). Firstly, there is no room for any group in the Church to make a gnostic claim to be the only true Catholics or that somehow or other they are more Catholic than anyone else. Liturgical diversity is a wonderful thing but no particular liturgical rite or tradition can contain the whole Christian mystery. However, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, “diversity must not damage unity. It must express only fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs that the Church has received from Christ, and to hierarchical communion” (1206).

The other caveat I have is the related tendency to try to “correct” the Ordinary Form by adopting elements of the Extraordinary Form and incorporating them into the current form of the Eucharistic liturgy. This is often called the ‘*reform of the reform.*’ Indeed, some high ranking bishops and cardinals (particularly those who work in the Roman Curia and have no pastoral responsibilities) have promoted this ‘reform.’ In particular, a speech that Cardinal Sarah gave in London in July 2016 was ‘incorrectly interpreted, as if [it was] intended to announce new indications different to those given so far in the liturgical rules and in the words of the Pope regarding ... the ordinary rite of the Mass.’ Pope Francis summoned the Cardinal to the Vatican to discuss the confusion that followed his speech and the Vatican released a statement lamenting the confusion and stating how Pope Francis and Cardinal Sarah agreed that ‘it is better to avoid using the expression ‘reform of the reform’ with reference to the liturgy, given that it may at times give rise to error.’⁴

CONCLUSION

There is a lot we can learn from the followers of the Extraordinary Form. We ought to imitate their love of the liturgy and their commitment to its celebration. We ought to study the Ordinary Form with the same zeal, but be wary of throwing stones at other Catholics who celebrate an approved form of the liturgy in Communion with the Successor of Peter. There is plenty of craziness among followers of the Ordinary Form to occupy our concerns. Indeed, often when we see a news report of a liturgy in Ireland’s secular press it is because a priest performed some bizarre stunt during the liturgy. Over the last few months we have seen a priest processing down the aisle after Christmas Mass on

4 The text of the Holy See Press Office Communiqué can be found at <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/07/11/0515/01177.html#en>

an electric scooter that he received from Santa Clause for being a good boy. We have seen a priest playing the anthem for Liverpool as the closing hymn of the Mass on the day after they won the Premier League and telling supporters of rival teams to ‘suck this up.’ We are no strangers to priests performing strange rituals during Wedding celebrations, usurping the normal prominence of the Bride (not to mention Jesus Christ’s role at the centre of every Sacrament). All of this is in some vain quest for relevance, forgetting that the Church and her Gospel are the most relevant thing in all of human history. There is more to liturgy than saying the black and doing the red, but this is the bare minimum that a celebrant must follow. We ought to seek to remove the log from our own eyes before attempting to remove the splinter from the eyes of those who legitimately use the Extraordinary Form.

Christian Hope. What do we hope for in this strange time of lockdown? Hope is a strange Christian attitude, but incredibly important. It places us between the now and the not-yet. Can you remember all the way back to Pre-Virus, when we had never heard of Corona (or Zoom, for that matter)? Do you recall how simple things were then, in contrast to this extraordinary moment when it is suddenly no longer possible to plan, and all we can do is live one day at a time? So “hope” is what gets us through the darkness; and it is not the same as being “optimistic”. Our source of hope is not the gloomy insight that “things can’t possibly get any worse; so they must get better”. Rather it is the entirely cheerful certainty that God has raised Jesus from the dead, so everything is all right, no matter how dark things may appear.

- Matthew Betts (ed.), *God in the Time of Covid-19* (Kent: Carmelite Charitable Trust) p. 35.