

What the Traditional Latin Mass Can Teach the World

By Michael P. Foley

In his 1983 book *The Restoration of Christian Culture*, Professor John Senior makes the astonishing claim that Christian culture “is essentially the Mass. That is not my or anyone's opinion or theory or wish,” he continues, “but the central fact of two thousand years of history. Christendom, what secularists call Western Civilization, is the Mass and paraphernalia which protect and facilitate it.”¹ Senior goes on to describe the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as emanating outwards to all aspects of life. What is done on a stone altar inspires the construction of a beautiful church. The church inspires a garden and clerics to tend the church and the people who flock to it. Next to the church and the garden is built a cemetery for those who died as faithful servants of what is done on that altar; and around the church-grounds people build their houses and sow their fields, until a community is formed. That community needs laws, and the laws cannot help but be influenced by the sense of justice that radiates from the center of its citizens' lives. And before you know it, you have a Christian world built around the Mass.

What Senior calls the “central fact of two thousand years” can indeed be confirmed in the history of some towns and cities in Europe, the most famous of which is Munich, Germany, which honors the Benedictine abbey that led to its creation with its very name, Munchen or Munich being German for “monk.” It can also be confirmed in the great historic impact of the Mass on human culture, from art to architecture, from classical music to jazz, and even, believe it or not, from Japanese tempura to American tobacco auctioneering. And fittingly, it is being reenacted by several of John Senior's former students who converted to Catholicism and became traditionalist Benedictine monks. At the invitation of the local bishop, they founded Clear Creek Monastery in a remote corner of Oklahoma over ten years ago, and already neighboring lands are being bought and developed by lay Catholics

as the monks build a Romanesque church they wish to last a thousand years. If you want to see how Christianity invented Europe, take a trip to rural Oklahoma.

But what about today? What impact does the Mass, particularly the extraordinary form of the Mass, have on the world outside it? I wish I knew. I would love to know how the Catholic Church and civic society will be affected by the Holy Father's Summorum Pontificum in the coming years, decades, and centuries; but I do not. What I can at least point out is the lessons that both Catholics and non-Catholics alike could learn from the *usus antiquior* if they wanted to.² I will choose three such lessons, all of which flow in one way or another from the central advantage of the old Mass: the absolute clarity with which it worships God in the Eucharist. And all three concern the paradoxical arts of human happiness. These three lessons concern: patriotism and political involvement, mortification of the flesh, and the relationship between men and women.

Proper Patriotism

The first lesson that can be learned from the old Mass concerns the nature of proper patriotism and political involvement. Although the Introductory Prayers or Prayers at the Foot of the Altar are an excellent means of preparing both the priest and the people for participation in the Paschal mystery of Our Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension, they also contain a curious political dimension. The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, or the Byzantine Rite, begins with a glorious proclamation: "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and forever." The traditional form of the Roman Rite, by contrast, roughly begins with Psalm 42, which opens with a rather disconcerting plea: "Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy; deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man." It is believed by some that Psalm 42 reflects the sentiments of King David when he had been driven from Jerusalem by the revolt of his son Absalom and longed to return to the Holy Tabernacle.³ Whereas

the Byzantine Rite begins right from the start in a mystical immersion in the heavenly, the Tridentine Rite begins with a distance between the believer and the heavenly. The Byzantine Rite begins with a note of arrival; the Tridentine with the note of exile and political alienation.

This may come as a surprise to those who associate the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite with a particular political stance, be it French monarchism, American Neo-Confederacy, or even libertarianism. Robert Moynihan, the editor of *Inside the Vatican Magazine*, raised this very issue two weeks ago when he wrote:

- The old Mass is seen by many -- both by some who defend it and by some who denounce it as the “standard” of a type of belief and culture which has been in crisis for some 200 years and more, exemplified in that (in many ways corrupt) “ancien regime” which was overthrown with such brutality by the French Revolution in the 1790s.⁴

But Moynihan goes on to deny this association, emphatically stating that “the old Mass was never this. It never was the standard of a limited human culture. Never.” On the contrary, Moynihan claims, the *usus antiquior* is what Martin Mosebach says it is: a school of spirituality that favors, not this or that political regime, but “an attitude of solemnity, of humble piety.” It facilitates not elitism but “a contemplative 'waiting' for 'theophany'—for the appearance, here and now, in space and time, of the divine, of the Lord, of God.”⁵

Moynihan's position about the transpolitical character of the old Mass finds support in the Prayers at the Foot of the Altar. Psalm 42 first began to appear in the Latin rites of the Church around the tenth century, where it was most often recited by the priest as he processed up to the altar. It was fixed in its current place and time by the Missal of Pope St. Pius V in 1570.⁶

Isn't it interesting that the use of this Psalm in Mass, this Psalm which draws a sharp contrast between the sacred justice of God and the injustice of the political

realm, was codified at a time when Christendom was still very much vibrant? It is surprising to see talk about an “unholy nation” during the days when there was a close alliance between altar and throne, when kings were crowned by Popes and bishops and expected to promote the true religion. But this talk alerts us to a profound truth: that not even the rule of Catholic monarchs or an established religion cannot compensate for or eradicate the inherent deficiencies of political life, that there are and always have been two cities, as St. Augustine famously formulates it, the city of God and the earthly city, and that these two cities will exist side-by-side in tension with each other until the end of time and the creation of a new Heaven and a new earth. Catholic thought speaks of the “social” kingship of Christ the King, which we will be celebrating next Sunday, but it does not speak of His “political” kingship to make clear that it is not endorsing theocracy or Byzantine caesaropapism or any one form of government over another. Christ's social reign is a reign that should extend into every nation, every culture, every citizens, every law, and all the arts, and this can happen in any number of political regimes, from monarchy to democracy, but it can never happen perfectly.

Simply put, the Introductory Prayers of the Tridentine rite teach us to avoid hyper-political idolatry on the one hand and anti-political irresponsibility on the other. Regarding political idolatry, the priest's recitation of Psalm 42 reminds us that the sacred mysteries of our Faith are not to be confused with any one particular political arrangement. There is a lesson here for everyone across the political spectrum. To the defendant of the ancient regime, there is a reminder that that Christ and His Church do not necessarily think that monarchy should be returned or promoted everywhere and at all times. To those on the Left, there is the warning that a centralized State can never become a utopian replacement of the Kingdom of God, that it will never be able to execute as well as those corporal works of mercy and social services that are the province of the Church.

And even to certain defendants of small-government democracy, there is a warning. More and more American conservatives, for example, have come to speak of belief in “American exceptionalism” as the one true shibboleth as to whether you or not you are a true conservative or a true patriot. The notion of exceptionalism varies from speaker to speaker, but it generally involves the conviction that God or providence has singularly blessed the United States to be a beacon of freedom to the rest of the world, that America has a unique role to play in the world, and that no other nation has been granted this privilege.

I am sympathetic with what is behind this recent movement, namely, an attempt to expose a lack of patriotism in the ideology of the Left. Nevertheless, treating patriotism and exceptionalism as synonymous is simply false. Patriotism, as one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence opined, is like affection for one's family.⁷ It is an instinctive love, not an ideology. In the words of Chesterton, “men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her.”⁸ More to the point, any doctrine of exceptionalism claiming that democracy is the only form of government of which God approves or that America has a divine mission to spread its “values” to the rest of the world whether the world likes it or not slides into what Pope Leo XIII called the heresy of “Americanism,” and it is not something that an American Catholic patriot can approve. And to subscribe to Abraham Lincoln's assertion that the United States “is the last, best hope of earth” is, as Thomas Storck rightly points out, “as ridiculous as it is blasphemous.”⁹

But if the old Mass guards us against hyper-political idolatry, it also guards us against anti-political withdrawal. Christ's social kingship means that the Catholic religion can never be seen as a purely private matter with no impact on the public forum; it cannot be put under a bushel. Catholics have a duty to improve their country and their government through civic virtue and involvement. Our hope is in

God, the joy of our youth, as the Psalmist reminds us, and with that hope we will try to make the unholy nation in which live a little less unholy in a prudent and responsible manner.

Self-Denial

The 1962 Missal also gives sound practical guidance on living happily, even in the midst of an unholy and consumerist nation, through a mortification of the flesh. One of the significant differences between the old and new forms of the Roman Missal is that in 1970, almost all of the references to the faithful practicing asceticism and disdaining worldly allurements were either removed from the prayers and prefaces of the Missal or demoted to optional status.¹⁰

No doubt this development is one that many would cheer. Ever since Friedrich Nietzsche accused Christianity of being hostile to life and down on the body, secular progressives and even many Christians have come to fear Christianity as something dour and repressive. And, of course, we have all met Christians—be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant—who fit the stereotype of a puritanical killjoy, the kind of person who mistakes prudery for modesty, priggishness for morality, and bitterness for seriousness. It is such folk that no doubt led St. Theresa of Avila to pray, “Lord, save us from sour-pussed saints.”

But this pinched negativity is not an accurate reflection of the purpose or character of Christian asceticism. St. Hildegard of Bingen, who just a couple of weeks ago was proclaimed a Doctor of Church by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, defines contempt for the world as “the radiance of life.” How can contempt be a form of radiance? By disenchanting us of false enticements, by enabling us to see through the vanity of worldly acclaim and worldly gain so that we can begin living our lives in light of the things that really matter. Chastising our flesh and holding in low regard the promises of the world encourage the virtue of self-restraint, which is key to happiness. In the words of the great Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn:” If you

will permit me to share a personal observation: We can only experience true spiritual satisfaction not in seizing, but in refusing to seize. In other words: in self-limitation.”¹¹ “It is difficult to bring ourselves to sacrifice and self-denial, because in political, public and private life we have long since dropped the golden key of self-restraint to the ocean floor. But self-limitation is the fundamental and wisest aim of a man who has obtained his freedom.”¹²

Solzhenitsyn's remark about “true spiritual satisfaction” hints at the secret behind mortification of the flesh, namely, that rather than being life-denying, it is life-affirming.¹³ This is a paradoxical truth of which the traditional Roman Rite, in conformity to the Gospels, is well aware.¹⁴ I will give only two examples from the old Mass, although I could give many more. First, the Preface for Lent refers to Christ as He “who, by bodily fasting, curb[s] vices, elevate[s] the mind, and bestow[s] virtue and reward.”¹⁵ Bodily fasting, the Church proclaims, is not an end unto itself, but a cooperation with Christ our Divine Physician that 1) curbs or squeezes out (comprimere) the bad; and (2) replaces the bad with the good of an elevated mind and a rewarding and virtuous life.

This same affirmation is present in the Collect for the Saturday of the Second Week of Lent:

- Grant, we beseech you, O Lord, a saving power to our fasts; that the chastisement of the flesh, which we have taken upon us, may pass over into a liveliness of our souls. Through our Lord.¹⁶

The word here for “chastisement” in Latin is *castigatio*, which can also mean pruning,¹⁷ and the word here for “liveliness” is actually *vegetatio*. Why does a gardener prune his plants? Because he hates them? Because he wants to punish them for growing? Or is it because he wants them to flourish, for he knows that the secret of making them more fruitful and productive is to trim them? (Looking around this lush land of yours, I imagine you are all familiar with the concept of loving pruning.)

The same is true of Catholic mortification, which stems not from a suspicion of the body or a hatred of the physical but a realization that like certain plants, bodily appetites require a dexterous “pruning” that leads to a “growth spurt” and blossoming of the soul. In other words, the traditional Roman rite understands the paradox expressed in the motto of the renowned Benedictine motherhouse, the Abbey of Monte Cassino, which flourished over many centuries despite an astonishing number of natural disasters and human depredations. That motto is *Succisa virescit*—“Cut down, it grows green.”¹⁸

Of course, little of this is understood in our contemporary, consumerist society, even by Catholics themselves, most of whom are using a Missal, as I have already said, that is mostly silent about this important practice. And so, I submit that they have something to learn from the 1962 Missal.

Men and Women

The third lesson we can all learn from the traditional Latin Mass is something about the nature of men and women, particularly in their relation to the sacred. Contrary to our somewhat sloppy everyday vocabulary, the terms “holy” and “sacred” are not synonymous. To be holy is to be filled with and transformed by the breath of the Holy Spirit, whereas to be sacred is to be consecrated for special use. The opposite of “holy” is “wicked,” but the opposite of “sacred” is “profane,” a word that literally means “outside the temple” and has no necessarily negative connotations.

Both men and women are equally called to holiness and equally capable of attaining it by the sanctifying grace of God. But both sexes do not necessarily stand in the same relation to the sacred. One way of describing this difference is by saying that while men are called to be protectors or keepers of the sacred, women are called to be a particular embodiment or symbol of the sacred. Alice Von Hildebrand, for

instance, writes eloquently on how the female body is sacred in a way that a man's isn't, for every woman is a veiled tabernacle.

This distinction between holiness and sacredness explains how the same St. Paul who declares that there is “neither male nor female” in Christ (Gal 3:28) can also prescribe very different kinds of comportment for men and women in liturgical worship regarding headdress, lectoring, etc. (1 Cor 1 1:3-12, 14:34-35). Contrary to popular historicist readings, Paul's writings are not contradictory “products of their age” but a practical instantiation of the perennial distinction between holy and sacred. And this distinction also explains why people holding sacred offices are not necessarily holy. Just ask all the bad popes writhing in Dante's *Inferno*.

How is all this present in the traditional Latin Mass? Chiefly through the nature of the Sacrifice and through the all-male ministers who assist at it in the sanctuary, and through the traditional sacred architecture that was influenced by the old Mass. Every Mass is both a participation in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb between Christ and His Church and a mini-Incarnation, a re-actualization of the great event that took place when the “yes” of the Blessed Virgin Mary ratified the divine initiative and made God really present in her womb. The sanctuary in which the Mass takes place is therefore like the womb of the Blessed Virgin and a symbol of Christ's Bride the Church, which is why the traditional configuration of a church sanctuary and its furniture are womblike. The demarcating border of the altar rail, for example, draws from the “enclosed garden” imagery in the Song of Songs (4: 15), a traditional image of maidenhood.¹⁹

The sanctuary, in other words, is feminine, while the priest and his ministers are masculine in order to create a nuptial image of Christ and His Church. This is obvious in the case of the priest, the indispensable stand-in for the Divine Groom. And although it is not absolutely essential to the validity of the sacrament, it is highly appropriate that this Groom be surrounded by groomsmen and not bridesmaids, for

their maleness serves as an additional icon of the nuptial embrace between Christ and His Church.

It is often claimed, and rightly so, that having only altar boys serve at Mass is good for vocations to the priesthood, but I would go one step further: it is good for all men, even those without such a vocation, because it teaches boys and men a respect for the sacred and for the feminine, and it teaches them to be, like St. Joseph, a selfless guardian and protector of the sacred and the feminine. In other words, it teaches them chivalry.

Further, this male custodianship of the sacred is linked to sacrifice. Although offering oneself as a sacrifice is equally incumbent on both sexes (Rom 12: 1), men are the only ones in the Bible who offer physical immolations. Scripture doesn't say why, but we may hazard a guess. Men after the Fall are the violent sex, more likely to have recourse to bloodshed as a means of obtaining what it wants. While this does not deny that women can also be violent, it does explain the causes of war, the population of our prisons, and the consumer demographic of video-game players.

God's strategy appears to have been to channel the postlapsarian male's propensity for violence away from murder toward animal sacrifice as a way of helping him recognize his devious impulses and repent. "God in his seeming bloodthirstiness, "Patrick Downey writes in his superb *Desperately Wicked*, "is actually more concerned with curing us of our own." This strategy culminates in the New Covenant, when its High Priest, rather than committing violence, allows Himself to be victimized by it. God's final solution to the problem of man's deicidal heart is to give him exactly what he wants.

But the Cross is a true sacrifice, as is the sacrifice of the altar which represents it. Thus, it remains linked not only to the darkness of the human heart but to the specific problem of male violence. Serving on the altar is actually a healthy form of humiliation for men and boys, for it constitutes a confession of their wicked hearts;

God's restriction of sacrifice to males in the Tabernacle, Temple, and beyond is a back-handed compliment.

Since I keep sounding a political note today, it might be objected that this kind of lesson does not fit into our democratic and egalitarian society, to say nothing of a growing androgyny in our social identities. But it is precisely this situation that makes our witness to genuine manliness and genuine womanhood all the more urgent. The last thing our culture needs is more Yes Men bowing before the gender idols of the age; it needs Dutch uncles informed by a loftier view of things. Borrowing a distinction from Martin Luther King Jr., Catholics need to be a thermostat setting the temperature rather than a thermometer reflecting it. An allmale liturgical ministry is an effective way of preaching the Good News about the higher meaning, so tragically overlooked now, of the noninterchangeable dignity of our sexual natures.

Conclusion

We began our talk today with the assertion that Christian culture is the Mass, and that the lessons and preoccupations of the Mass have the power to radiate outwards to affect all aspects of our lives, private and public. This radiance led during the Middle Ages to the transformation of Western civilization and to much of Western and even some Eastern culture as we know it. But today, that civilization and those cultures are in a state of unprecedented crisis, and the Mass, either in the old form or the new, is no longer heeded as it was once—a fact which says more about the faith of our current generation than it does about the Mass per se. I do not know if the men and women of the twenty-first century will ever return to the old Mass and to its lessons, but if they will do, they will find a surprise. In something old they will find something new, a God who rejuvenates, or as Psalm 42 puts it, gives joy to our youth. What concrete shape that rejuvenation would take in this post-modern age is beyond my powers of prognostication, but I can say that although

it won't be identical to what we have had in the past (nothing ever is), it will be beautiful. Thank you.

References

1. Ibid., 16-17
2. When I speak of the traditional Latin Mass, I am referring not only to all of the 1962 Roman Missal but to the disciplinary practices, such as fasting that accompanied it—even though, technically speaking, these are not a part of the Missal.
3. Gehr, 353.
4. “Letter #28: The Old Mass Returns to St. Peters” in the Moynihan Report, 12 October 2012, http://moynihanreport.itvworking.com/liturgy/letter-28-the-old-mass-returns-to-stpeters?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=letter-28-the-old-mass-returns-to-st-peters.
5. Ibid.
6. Jungmann, 199-201.
7. Benjamin Rush: “Patriotism is as much a virtue as justice and is as necessary for the support of societies as natural affection is for the support of families.” Although Rush's first statement about patriotism and justice is dubious, his comparison of patriotism and familial affection strikes me as solid.
8. Orthodoxy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1908/1995), 73.
9. <http://www.cfmpl.org/blog/2012/07/03/varieties-american-exceptionalism/>.
10. Daniel G. Van Slyke, “Despicere mundum et terrena: A Spiritual and Liturgical Motif in the Missale Romanum,” XXX. and Pristas.
11. “The Liechtenstein Address.”
12. Ibid.
13. This is not a uniquely Christian insight. The Roman philosopher Cicero advised his son that 'the body must be trained and so disciplined that it can obey the

dictates of judgment and reason in attending to business and in enduring toil.”
Cicero, *De officiis* I .23.79.

14. see Mark XXXX.

15. This Preface is made optional in the 1970/2002 Missal.

16. Da, quaesumus, Domine, nostris effectum jejuniis salutarem: ut castigatio carnis assumpta ad nostrarum vegetationem transeat animarum. Per Dominum. *Missale Romanum editio princeps* (1570), eds Manlio Sodi and Achille Maria Triacca, *Monumenta Liturgica Concilii Tridentini* 2 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998) 794, p. 103. See *Missale Romanum anno 1962 promulgatum* reprinted with an introduction by Cuthbert Johnson and Anthony Ward, eds, *Bibliotheca “Ephemerides Liturgicae” — Subsidia Liturgica Quarreriensia Supplementa 2* (Rome: Centro Liturgico Vincenziano [henceforth C.L.V.] — Edizioni Liturgiche, 1994), 595, p. 88. It appears likewise in the 1474 edition of the Roman Missal: *Missalis Romani editio princeps Mediolani anno 1474 prelis mandata*, reprinted with an introduction by Anthony Ward and Cuthbert Johnson, eds, *Bibliotheca “Ephemerides Liturgicae” — Subsidia Liturgica Quarreriensia Supplementa 3* (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni Liturgiche, 1996), 536, p. 74.

17. Pliny, for example, uses *castigatio* for pruning (Pliny, *Naturalis Historiae* 17.22.35 (*Naturalis Historiae libri XXXVII ex editione. Gabrielis Brotier* [London: A.J. Valpy, A.M., 1826 henceforth Brotier], 5:2730) as well as for the practice of exposing the roots of unproductive olive trees to the cold winter: after describing the latter, he remarks, *eaque castigatione proficiunt—*”and they flourish by castigation.” (*Naturalis Historiae* 17.28.47 (Brotier 5:2777).)

18. The motto is reputed to be a favorite of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

19. For more on this crucial point, see Jacob Michael's outstanding “Women at the Altar.”