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The Mass Reduced to a Show

By Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

A Young priest recently told me: "Today we need a new liturgical movement". He was expressing a desire, these days, only deliberately superficial souls would ignore.

What matters to that priest is not the conquest of new, bolder liberties. For, where is the liberty that we have yet to arrogate ourselves? That priest understood that we need a new beginning born from deep within the liturgy, as liturgical movement intended . . .

In its practical materialization, liturgical reform has moved further away from this origin. The result was not re-animation but devastation.

On the one hand, we have a liturgy which has degenerated so that it has become a show which, with momentary success for the group of liturgical fabricators, strives to render religion interesting in the wake of the frivolities of fashion and seductive moral maxims.

Consequently, the trend is the increasingly marked retreat of those who do not look to the liturgy for a spiritual show-master but for the encounter with the living God in whose presence all the "doing" becomes insignificant since only this encounter is able to guarantee us access to the true richness of being.

On the other hand, there is the conservation of ritual forms whose greatness is always moving but which, when pushed to extremes, manifests an obstinate isolationism and leaves, ultimately, a mark of sadness.

There is no doubt that between these two poles there are priests and parishioners who celebrate the new liturgy with respect and solemnity. But they, too, are made to feel doubtful by the contradiction of the two extremes and, in the final analysis, the lack of unity within the Church makes their faith seem - and wrongly so in most cases - just their own personal version of neo-conservatism.

Therefore, a new spiritual impulse is necessary so that the liturgy becomes a community activity of the Church for us once again and to remove it from the will of parish priests and their liturgical teams.

There can be no "fabricating" a liturgical movement of this kind, just as there can be no "fabricating" something which is alive. But a contribution can be made to its development by seeking to re-assimilate the spirit of the liturgy and by defending publicity that which was received.

The new beginning needs "fathers" who would serve as models, who would not content themselves with just showing the way . . . It is difficult to express in just a few words what is important in this diatribe of liturgists and what is not. But perhaps what I have to say will be of use. J.A. Jungman, one of the truly great liturgists of our century, offered his definition of the liturgy of his time, as it was intended in the West, and he represented it in terms of historical research. He described it as "liturgy which is the fruit of development".

This is probably in contrast with the Eastern notion which does not see liturgy as developing or growing in history but as the reflection of eternal liturgy whose light, through the sacred celebration, illumines our changing times with its unchanging beauty and greatness. Both conceptions are legitimate and by definition they are not irreconcilable.

What happened after the Council was totally different: in the place of liturgy as the fruit of development came fabricated liturgy.

We left the living process of growth and development to enter the realm of fabrication. There was no longer a desire to continue developing and maturing, as the centuries passed and so this was replaced - as if it were a technical production - with a construction, a banal on-the-spot product.

- Christian Order, March 1993, pages 162-163.