

“We are surely on the wrong path . . .”

Comments of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to Peter Seewald concerning the liturgy.

“In our form of the liturgy there is a tendency that, in my opinion, is false, namely, the complete ‘inculturation’ of the liturgy into the contemporary world. The liturgy is thus supposed to be shortened; and everything that is supposedly unintelligible should be removed from it; it should, basically, be transported down to an even ‘flatter’ language. But this is a thoroughgoing misunderstanding of the the essence of the liturgy and of the liturgical celebration. For in the liturgy one doesn't grasp what's going on in a simply rational way, as I understand a lecture, for example, but in a manifold way, with all the senses, and by being drawn into a celebration that isn't invented by some commission but that, as it were, comes to me from the depths of the millennia and, ultimately, of eternity.

When Judaism lost the temple, it clung to the synagogal feasts and rites and was held together by celebrating the great holy days as rites of the believing household. There is a certain form of shared life in the rites, in which what counts is not pure surface intelligibility but what expresses the great continuity of the history of faith that, as it were, presents itself as an authority that does not come the individual. The priest in fact, not a showmaster who invents something new and skillfully communicates it. On the contrary, he can entirely lack any talents of a showmaster, because he represents something completely different, and it doesn't depend on him. Of course, intelligibility is also an element of the liturgy, and for this reason the Word of God must be well read, interpreted, and explained. But there are other ways of understanding in addition to the intelligibility of the word. Above all, it is not something that new commissions think up again and again. When that happens, the liturgy becomes something we construct, whether the commissions meet in Rome, Trier or Paris. Instead of this, liturgy must really have great continuity, protected from what is arbitrary, in which I really meet the millennia and through them eternity and am raised up into a communion of celebration that is something other than what commissions or liturgy committees devise.

[Reactivating the old rite in order to work against this leveling (Gleichmacherei) and dymystification] alone would not be a solution. I am of the opinion, to be sure, that the old rite should be granted much more generously to all those who desire it. It's impossible to see what could be dangerous or unacceptable about that. A community is calling its very being into question when it suddenly declares that what until now was its holiest and highest possession is strictly forbidden and when it makes the longing for it seem downright indecent. Can it be trusted any more about anything else? Won't it proscribe tomorrow what it prescribes today? But a simple return to the old way would not, as I have said, be a solution. Our culture has changed so radically in the last thirty years that a liturgy celebrated exclusively in Latin would bring with it an experience of foreignness that many could not cope wit. What we need is a new liturgical education, especially of priests. It must once again become clear that liturgical scholarship doesn't exist in order to produce constantly new models, though that may be all right for the auto industry. It exists in order to introduce us into feast and celebration, to make man capable of the mystery. Here we ought to learn not just from the Eastern Church but from all the religions of the world, which all know that liturgy is someting other than invention of texts and rites, that it lives precisely from what is beyond manipulation. Young people have a very strong sense of this. Centers in which the liturgy is celebrated reverently and nobly without nonsense attract, even if one doesn't understand every word. We need such centers to set an example. Unfortunately, in Germany tolerance for bizarre tinkering is almost unlimited, whereas tolerance for the old liturgy is practically nonexistent. We are surely on the wrong path in that regard.”

Ratzinger, Joseph Card., Salt of the Earth

The Church at the End of the Mellennium

An Interview with Peter Seewald

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