

Liturgy restored, or modified rapture

The Pope has acted to restore the wider use of the Tridentine latin Mass. Traditionalists can hardly be other than pleased, though nothing can undo the human distress and injury of nearly forty years of deprivation, and it remains uncertain whether a wider permission will translate into a ready availability for all who prefer the Tridentine rite. Too much has already been lost, not least a widespread acquaintance with latin and the rite itself. Wider availability does not have the same meaning as the former unquestioned acceptance of the rite. But that is not the only issue.

The Tridentine rite was not, perhaps, the best possible form of the predominant Western liturgy at the time when it became normative and ossified. Maybe it is a good liturgy (though any scholar aware of the loss of the Intercessions in that liturgy will note one major defect). Certainly it is a better liturgy than the reformed versions, whether of 16th century protestantism or of the later 20th century Gadarene rush for the new. It is easy to understand the defensive motives of Trent for imposing a normative liturgy (after all, the Church of England did exactly the same). But an ossified liturgy will always be a second best.

For (ignoring the concessions made to other ancient rites and the practical non-acceptance of Trent in many places) the Tridentine liturgy was the imposition for the first time of a single unalterable text everywhere in the Roman obedience. This could only have happened as a result of printing (when Charlemagne sought to have a normative liturgy in his own domains, he failed not least because no process could secure stable copying of manuscripts). Nobody in the first millennium of the Western liturgy had expected total stability. Granted that there was stability in the text of the Eucharistic Prayer itself, this did not even extend to the Prefaces. Outside the Prayer, feasts were adopted and dropped, lessons and chant varied, ceremonies were multiplied and sometimes purged. There were elements of similarity between places and times, but also elements of dissimilarity. And this did not seem to be a problem.

To go back to Trent (with the sad exception of Holy Week) is not then a restoration which ends the problem. It is restoration to an unnatural state. To be fair, many of those who have longed for the latin Mass have not wanted pure Trent, but such modifications as were current in the first half of the twentieth century. Chant had been "restored" on the basis of the Solesmes researches (as if chant had ever been stable). Lay participation (for instance in singing some texts) had been encouraged, which might be a means to or an alternative to worship. Vernacular readings might follow the liturgical latin readings. Sermons became common. Frequent communion had been encouraged. It may fairly be said that the immediately pre-Vatican II mass was very unlike that said by the Curé d'Ars - let alone that envisaged by the fathers of Trent. To restore that mass is to risk ossifying what was at the time part of a development.

Liturgy is normally, and was until Trent in the West, a natural growth within the life of the Church, indeed a vital expression of that life. That development was stopped in the sixteenth century, rather artificially allowed to resume in some limited ways (more or less consistent with the unchanging Tridentine text) in the first half of the twentieth century, and, so far as the old Western rite is concerned, has been stopped again. Yes, restoration is the first project. But it is only a beginning. Somehow (and it is much harder after the follies which have accompanied the modern liturgy whether or not they were what Vatican II intended) we will have to get back to that greater flexibility which allows development. But there are problems.

Printing is a problem, but we cannot prevent texts from being printed. It is unfortunate that the piety of following the liturgy in one's own copy developed, for it is a major impediment to worship. But restoration only makes such copies more necessary, at least briefly. Tactically, the best long-term policy is the unlit church, the flimsy pamphlet copy which soon decays and the use of memory. Literacy is not a prerequisite for baptism!

Another problem is the substitution of intellectual appreciation for worship. It cannot be stressed too strongly that church is a place of worship, only incidentally a house of study. The church in which only graduates feel at home must have erred. We do not read the scriptures in church to inform the congregation, but as an act of worship directed to God (who does not need sound systems!) A sermon is not a lecture (and still less are the intercessions).

Another problem is the tyranny of scholarship. One alternative to the ossification of the 1950s liturgy would seem to be a return to older forms (with an intellectual model of an original perfection which was subsequently corrupted). But this is not appropriate. In some respects better older forms can be found, but that is simply to ossify another form. I do not think there was an original perfection, simply a process of change, sometimes for the better, sometimes not, in which it was all too likely that one good would be at the expense of another good. The liturgy of all the perfections will certainly be too long to use! It would be a mistake to abandon scholarly insights - but the implementation of the "latest liturgical theory" is still a mistake even if it is, occasionally, a true theory. And however much scholarship we may bring to the liturgy, still the church is not a re-enactment society like the Sealed Knot.

The greatest problem is fear, for many of the faithful believe they have been led astray or deserted; many dream of an unchangeable liturgy, sometimes linked with unchangeable doctrine and authority (and may seek it in Orthodoxy if they are not granted it by Rome). In truth, such unchangeability is not available as demanded and we should not give false impressions, however much we believe that much greater stability is possible and proper.

In the short term, we indeed wish a widespread availability of the ancient Western rite for all those who wish to celebrate it, whether as clergy or laity. In the short term, restoration is the only sensible project, the more so as it is clear that the "reformed" liturgies of the second half of the twentieth century (in all the churches) have achieved virtually nothing that was promised for them. But the reasons why liturgical change is normal and not always for the worse remain. The corrupt following (or perhaps the following) of Vatican II has been a disaster - but the reasons why the liturgy should have been allowed to change with the changing church (provided it remained faithful) are compelling. There is a Christian duty to provide a better way forward for many who cannot go back as well as a duty to restore.

How does all this affect Anglican continuers? In England, we have the same problem of an ossified official liturgy followed by disastrous late twentieth century "reformation". We have the special situation that the anglo-catholic tradition did experiment with selective restoration of older usages, some of which were genuine. Because almost every usage that tradition suggested might be thought illegal yet the bishops did not have much power to prevent it, there were few constraints. Anglo-catholicism as practised (it often pretended to be following authority, but the basis of that authority was obscure) had the opportunity to change, to grow, to make mistakes and to abandon them. Then in the period of change came ossification again for those who rejected the changes. Many, or course, preferred to assimilate to modern Roman usages rather than adopt the even worse changes of the state religion.

Now we do not expect to be generally celebrating in Latin in accordance with Trent, not least because the anglo-catholic tradition generally used a wider range of sources such as Sarum and Malines. But it used them mostly by translating them into its own liturgical language. It is one thing to like latin as a medium of worship; it is another to imagine it privileged above every other liturgical language (let alone obligatory). All that needs to be said is that latin is one instance among many of the nearly universal preference (even in Protestantism, and common in non-Christian religions) for a special language for worship, since ordinary language will not suffice. We do accept that the evils of the English reformation did leave us a tolerable liturgical language which we have every reason to continue. Yet we too have to be aware that the culture of liturgical english has largely been lost; for most of our future converts it will not be a restoration but a new discovery. This is also true for many in the Roman obedience, who will encounter latin for the first time.

It is not therefore the case that we should restore and freeze a particular implementation of that very indeterminate (and variable) book, the English Missal, any more than a particular distortion of that very artificial Act of Parliament, the 1662 Prayer Book, just because the Pope has given the old rite a new legitimacy. Certainly, our stance in favour of continuity and the organic growth of liturgy, and against the neophiliac liturgies of the later twentieth century, has been vindicated. But *appropriate* change remains normal in the life of the faithful church, and always will in this dispensation.

On 21 July 2007 the latin Canon was sung at Letchworth as an act of thanksgiving. This was not in accordance with Trent, which requires that most of the Canon be inaudible!