

Catechism on the Liturgy I, 5

C.

2. Liturgical beauty

a. People enter the Church by two doors: the door of the intelligence and the door of beauty. The first is open to scholars and intellectuals. The second is open to anyone. “It is necessary to lose the illusion that the truth can communicate itself fruitfully without that splendor that is of one nature with it and which is called beauty.” (Henri Charlier) The Church in her mystery needs an earthly epiphany (a Greek word meaning “manifestation”) accessible to all – from a child to a senior. This is why the church building itself should be majestic, the liturgy splendid and the music sweet. When a group of Japanese tourists visits Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, they are entranced to watch Solemn Vespers. Beauty has opened its doors to them. Notre Dame Cathedral and the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas are products of the same era, but how many have read the *Summa*? How many even can?

b. The beauty of the liturgy can be called the splendor of the truth (philosophers distinguish five kinds of beauty, and splendor is a shining forth, a compelling beauty of power). To

the small and to the great the beauty of the chant or the polyphony, of the texts, candles, vestments and dignity of bearing – all these exercise an influence on the soul, which it touches directly even before the soul perceives the influence. But this is a very delicate art, and we rightly fear activists who meddle with it in order to render it more exciting or interesting. “The liturgy is not a show, a spectacle requiring brilliant producers and talented actors. The life of the liturgy does not consist in pleasant surprises and attractive ideas but in solemn repetitions.” (Cardinal Ratzinger)

c. What is the solemnity to which the Cardinal refers? First, it is a behavior opposed to sentimentality and the domination of emotion. When the priest faces the people for Mass, it is particularly difficult for him to keep his emotions from dominating the liturgy. If he is sad, this becomes burdensome and a distraction to the one who is experiencing joy. If he is in a particularly happy mood, then this is burdensome and distracting to the one who needs to mourn. Solemnity expresses the supernatural; it is a

certain loftiness to raise us out of the everyday, and it is not bound to this or that emotion.

d. But the priest must be on guard that solemnity does not degenerate into pomposity and affectation. Adornment succeeds especially when it is almost forgotten, but accusations of triumphalism are an insult to the poor who love to see greatness exalted. “There is no trace of triumphalism in the solemnity with which the Church expresses the glory of God, the joy of the faith, the victory of truth and light over error and darkness. The richness of the liturgy is not the richness of some priestly caste: it is the richness of all, including the poor, who in fact desire it and are by no means scandalized by it.” (Cardinal Ratzinger)

Here is a story of the conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who, while still a pagan, wanted to worship the one God, and so listened to Moslems, Jews and Greeks, each of whom came to show him their religion. He sent a delegation of ten men to go and see with their own eyes how each of the groups practiced their liturgy. When they returned, they told their prince: “First we visited the Bulgarians and saw how they worshipped in their mosques; they stand upright

without a belt; they bow, they sit down, looking all around like men possessed, and there is no joy among them, but an awful sadness and stench. Their religion is not good...It was then that we went to Greece and they led us to the place where they worship their God. From that moment on we did not know if we were in heaven or on earth; there is no other sight like it here below, and there is nothing of such beauty. We simply cannot describe it; all we know is that it is there that God lives amongst men; and their worship is more marvelous than in the other countries.” (The Chronicles of Nestor) Vladimir converted, and that is how Christianity was brought to the Ukraine.

The Greeks had put on their best vestments, enlisted the help of their best choir, and chose the best priests to sing the liturgy. We can't do that each day in the parish! But we can strive to approximate that solemnity, even at a Low Mass.