

The Requiem Mass, I

this, unless we admit ourselves to be helpless in the movement of a deterministic march, is possible at any time. In brief, one does not require a particular standpoint to comprehend the timeless. Let us remember all the while that the very notion of eternal verities is repugnant to the modern temper.

So if you are here at this conference, it is likely that you are not bound by endless details or the prison of time and matter, but rather you seek the truth of things at the center, and the very notion of eternal verities is not repugnant to you, but rather it is delicious. And I doubt I need spend much time if any, trying to persuade you that the very notion of eternal verities may be found in the Rite of St. Gregory the Great. Technicians of the liturgy may bristle at the phrase which the French usually call the old Mass; they call it *La Messe de Toujours* – the Mass of all times, or the Mass of always, or the immemorial Mass. But I like that moniker. I find it accurate.

Another thing which ought be said at the outset is to criticize the architects of the New Mass, in so far as they were impious. When Plato wrote in the *Laws*, "Let parents, then, bequeath to their children not riches, but the spirit of reverence..." he was writing in a tradition of western education which insists that children must be taught to despise what is despicable, to laugh at what is ridiculous, to admire what is admirable, and to respect what is venerable.

The opposite of veneration for what our ancestors strove to hand down to us is of course impiety. And it is significant that when Plato discusses the nature of piety and impiety, he chooses a young man, Euthyphro, who is bent on patricide. He is a youth filled with arrogant knowledge and certain that he understands "what is

dear to the gods." He has come to Athens in order to prosecute his father for murder. Socrates is struck by this and begins to question him as he does. The conclusion is reached that Euthyphro has no right, out of his partial and immature knowledge, to proceed against an ancient relationship.

But the architects of the *Novus Ordo* did proceed against an ancient relationship, and with a vengeance. The desire of Archbishop Annibale Bugnini to even remove the Sign of the Cross from the Mass ought to make us shudder. They had a partial and immature knowledge of liturgy, according to Fr. Louis Bouyer, who was on the original commission that decided these things. The operative approach to things liturgical was a scientized, clinical approach, but Bouyer thought it was never scientific enough. And as to relying on the historical critical approach to theology; be it Redaction Criticism or Form Criticism or whatever...I strongly believe that many of their conclusions were based on a hypothesis which was founded on a theory which was founded on a guess. But I digress.

Why this animus against the past? Using Weaver again,

Most modern people appear to resent the past and seek to deny its substance for either of two reasons: 1) it confuses them, or 2) it inhibits them. If it confuses them, they have not thought enough about it; if it inhibits them, we should look with a curious eye upon whatever schemes they have afoot. Imagination enables us to know that people of past generations lived and had their being amid circumstances just as solid as those surrounding us. And piety accepts them, their words and deeds, as part of the total reality, not to be ignored in any summing-up of experience.

You will be relieved to hear that I speak to you today not as an expert on the liturgy, or as a liturgist, given that a working definition of a liturgist is someone God sends to any community which is not being actively persecuted.

Instead, I am speaking at the invitation of Fr. McElwee, and as an amateur, which is a French word that means "lover." I love the Rite of St. Gregory, and I love talking about it to anyone who will listen, but wish to change slightly the title assigned to me. The title was supposed to be *The Poetry, Music and Beauty of the Traditional Roman Mass*, to the *The Poetry, Music and Beauty of the Traditional Roman Requiem Mass*.

But before speaking specifically about the Mass, I wish to address briefly a grudge in our times against things traditional, using a remarkable little book called *Ideas Have Consequences*, by Richard Weaver. Listen for a moment to what he says about this.

Whoever argues for a restoration of values is sooner or later met with the objection that one cannot return, or as the phrase is likely to be, "you can't turn the clock back." by thus assuming that we are prisoners of the moment, the objection well reveals the philosophic position of modernism. The believer in truth, on the other hand, is bound to maintain that the things of highest value are not affected by the passage of time; otherwise the very concept of truth becomes impossible. In declaring that we wish to recover lost ideals and values, we are looking toward an ontological realm which is timeless. Only the sheerest relativism insists that passing time renders unattainable one ideal while forcing upon us another. Therefore those who say

we can have the integration we wish, and those who say we cannot, differ in their ideas of ultimate reality, for the latter are positing the primacy of time and of matter.

This wisdom may be applied I believe, to the decisions regarding the sacred liturgy which were in vogue – or rather at the boiling point – in the 1960's. "The Church must find a language to speak to modern man" said the experts. "Modern man" was never defined except in the negative, as someone who is unable to understand the past, and someone who was a product of the Enlightenment, i.e., someone who could not stomach mystery. All must be explained, all must be understood immediately, down with Latin.

But this was an error, and Weaver was right. "The things of the highest value are not affected by the passage of time." So I speak to you as someone who looks toward an ontological realm which is timeless. Weaver continues:

Now the return which the idealists propose is not a voyage backward through time but a return to center, which must be conceived metaphysically or theologically. They are seeking the one which endures and not the many which change and pass, and this search can be only described as looking for the truth. They are making the ancient affirmation that there is a center of things, and they point out that every feature of modern disintegration is a flight from this toward periphery. It is expressible, also, as a movement from unity to individualism. In proportion as man approaches the outer rim, he becomes lost in details, and the more he is preoccupied with details, the less he can understand them. A recovery of understanding as such, and