

Staying the Course, VI

On December 5, 1971, the First Sunday of Advent of that year, an announcement was read – or was supposed to be read – from every single pulpit in the Universal Church. The wording varied somewhat, but the message was the same, as was reported in a leading Catholic newspaper in England and Wales called *The Universe*. "The Mass in the old rite is now forbidden. From this Sunday, the first in Advent, it is forbidden to offer mass in the Tridentine rite anywhere in the world."

I hope to God that you will never hear such an announcement. I hope to God that those present who did hear that announcement would never hear it again. Please God, never again.

I wasn't there. I've only heard what that Sunday was like from others. The word *stunned* does not sufficiently describe how this was received by many. I can recall Mrs. McDaniels, our next door Catholic neighbor telling my mom of this news that she was sad down to her bones, and that it just didn't feel like church anymore. Yet there were others both lay and clerical, who received the announcement with unfettered glee. Most just sat silently wondering what it all meant.

This announcement was preceded by a conference given by Pope St. Paul VI on November 26, just a few days before, to explain the announcement to come. But if the audience was expecting clarity, they were in for a surprise. He said, "We ask you to turn your minds once more to the liturgical innovation of the new rite of the Mass." Up to this point most pronouncements had to do with the renewal of tradition, a greater fidelity to tradition in the classic Roman Rite. The faithful were repeatedly assured that there was no innovation but rather a rediscovery and implementation of tradition going back to the original sources. But here the Pope said this was liturgical innovation, a position of which even the Concilium I spoke of earlier had taken great steps to avoid.

The confusion went deeper when he said that "A *new* rite of the Mass; a change in a venerable tradition that has gone on for centuries. This is something that affects our hereditary religious patrimony, which seemed to enjoy the privilege of being untouchable and settled." So the venerable tradition has got to go. Our so it seemed. Because he continues by saying that "It is at such a moment as this that we get a better understanding of the value of historical tradition and the communion of saints."

Thus, by abandoning tradition we will have more authentic tradition. By suppressing tradition we will engender tradition.

He then admits that not all will appreciate this. "We shall become aware, perhaps with some feeling of annoyance that the ceremonies at the altar are no longer being carried out with the same words and gestures to which we were accustomed – perhaps so much accustomed that we no longer took any notice of them." All were confused by this. It is as if he says that we will appreciate the older gestures and words by not using them ever again – but this was possibly quite true – given that absence makes the heart grow fonder.

He admits further that what the faithful will experience is novel and inconvenient, and will affect the piety of the faithful. But this will be good since, "this will draw them out of their customary personal devotions or their usual torpor." This begs the question of course, because if we *are* drawn out of our torpor does it mean we can return to our tradition with fresh eyes and eager hearts? Well, no, the question is thoroughly begged. No return was seen as possible.

To understand what he said, and to attempt to put it in a good light, we need some background. The fact is that all over the Church there were problems in the celebration of the traditional Mass. Here are a few examples. I know of a church in Kentucky where the priest could offer a Sunday low Mass with a sermon in 30 minutes. In other words, by slopping his way through the Mass with mispronounced Latin and careless, curtailed movements at a breakneck pace just to get through it, he got it down to 30 minutes. Most of the faithful at his parish were appreciative of the speed because this enabled them to spend more time with well, anything or anyone besides God. The torpor then, of the priest and of the laity that the pope spoke of, was indeed a problem. The folks at that parish had one concern when they heard the announcement, and that is whether the new Mass would be longer. It wasn't. Father was happy to be done with the old Mass because he could celebrate the new Mass on Sunday with a sermon in 25 minutes. So the faithful there thought the whole thing was an improvement. They gained five minutes.

I know another parish where there the students at the parish school learned how to sing the Requiem Mass because that's what they did five days a week all year long. Why was this done? It is connected to the seminary formation of the old days. I looked the course catalogues of a major U.S. seminary from the years 1943-1950. There was no course on the sacred liturgy. The study of the liturgy was instead incorporated into a single moral theology course. Which may strike you as odd – as well it should – but the study was quite simple; the liturgy was studied by the aspect of rubrics, and moral questions about what the minimum amount of singing could be done in order for the priest to receive the greater stipend for a sung Mass.

Combine this with the fact that Pope St. Paul VI never went to seminary. He was from a noble and wealthy family which arranged for private tutors to come in for his studies. Thus, his formation was essentially a low Mass seven days a week. He had no real experience or formation in solemnity, in Gregorian chant or in Sacred Polyphony. So those things didn't mean all that much to him. And this by the way was similar to Pope St. John Paul II, who had no formation in solemnity either.

Therefore it should not surprise us that these popes and many, many clergy had little attachment to the traditional Mass. In fact, they enthusiastically welcomed its demise, since their experience of it was so wanting, so lacking in majesty, splendor and beauty. These are human things to be sure, but without them we are usually left with mere function; a low Mass mentality which is utterly contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

The Ven. Pope Pius XII wrote in his encyclical *Musicae Sacrae* of 1955, "It is the duty of all those who whom Christ the Lord has entrusted the task of guarding and dispensing the Church's riches to preserve this precious treasure of Gregorian chant and to impart it generously to the Christian people." And before him, Pope St. Pius X wrote in 1903 "Special efforts are to be made to restore the use of the Gregorian chant by the people, so that the faithful may again take a more active part in the ecclesiastical offices, as was the case in ancient times."

There must be a hundred different teachings from popes and councils that all say the same or similar things. We ignore this teaching at the peril of losing the Mass again. And this ignoring, this rejection of the teaching of the Church may be seen in this parish. We have parishioners who have swallowed entirely the low Mass mentality; parishioners who are not forming their children in the sacred music of the Church, who never take them to the high Mass, and who, even at the 830 AM Mass where there is the singing of just two hymns, make no effort, no attempt to sing at all.

Heaven knows that there are reasons that someone doesn't sing. Maybe the hymnal is too heavy to pick up. Maybe because of work they just can't come to a high Mass. Maybe they have a cold. Maybe the Nuggets are playing the Broncos. But maybe some just don't care if we keep the traditional Mass, and can get along just fine without it. God forbid.

But one thing is clear – the demise of the Rite of St. Gregory in 1971 must not be blamed on just the Pope, and the hierarchy – the laity too participated in the demise by enthusiastically assisting it, or by sheepishly accepting it, or worst of all, by just quitting, giving up, and walking away. Upwards to 22 million walked away. We can do better. We must do better this time. I think our salvation is at stake.