

Staying the Course, VII

When the bomb was dropped on the faithful that the Rite of St. Gregory was to be abolished back in 1971, what was what was the justification given for it? How were the faithful catechized on this? The answer is simple – a very ultramontane referencing to the pope was used to explain everything. I mean everything; the nuns taking off the habit, the monks buying TV sets, Friday abstinence dumped, the chapel veil done away with, and so on. "This is the will, the direction that the Third Person of the Trinity is taking the Church, and we know this because it is ratified by the pope" the faithful were told. Some of you have heard that word, "ultramontane," but for those not familiar with it a short explanation is in order.

Its origins are in the middle ages, so that when a non-Italian was elected pope, he was called *papa ultramontano* – a pope beyond the mountains – namely the Italian alps. It went through several usages until the 19c with the advent of the First Vatican Council. In July of 1870, that Council issued a dogmatic constitution called *Pastor Aeternus*, which defined four doctrines of the Catholic Faith that had existed from the beginning of the Church but not in a defined manner. The doctrines were 1) The Apostolic Primacy being conferred on St. Peter; 2) The perpetuity of this primacy passed down through the Roman pontiffs; 3) The meaning and power of the papal primacy; and 4) The doctrine of Papal Infallibility. Here is one quote from that council.

We teach and declare that, by divine ordinance, the Roman Church possesses a pre-eminence of ordinary power over every other Church, and that this jurisdictional power of the Roman Pontiff is both episcopal and immediate. Both clergy and faithful, of whatever rite and dignity, both singly and collectively, are bound to submit to this power by the duty of hierarchical subordination and true obedience, and this not only in matters concerning faith and morals, but also in those which regard the discipline and government of the Church throughout the world.

It would take a whole course on Ecclesiology to unpack all that is in that definition, but for now, suffice it to say that the way this was received varied throughout the Church, from much enthusiasm to much apprehension. The apprehension came especially from the fact that the council was stopped by the Franco-Prussian War, and the work of fleshing out the doctrines was left undone.

Those who were in favor of a strong papacy and a centralized government of the Church became known as ultramontane. Yet there were degrees of this. But an extreme ultramontaniam was quite strong in the Church, and by 1971 everything was interpreted in this light. To put it more simply, when I was in seminary in the 70's, we were told over and over that "You can't go against the pope; you've got to be with the pope." Well, sure, yes. Those who desired orthodoxy knew this, but what did that mean in practice? It largely meant in those days that "You cannot disagree with the pope. You cannot criticize the pope. You cannot question the pope. You can pray, pay and obey." And that was about it. Now I have to say, that that *is* a Catholic position to take. But it is at the same time a position that if taken, would never lead to the recovery of the traditional Mass, and it put the faithful in the terrible bind of being between a rock and hard place; the rock was the papacy and the hard place being the Mass. So what were they to do? What could they have done to get the Mass back, if even to merely question the pope's decisions was tantamount to heterodoxy?

That is an interesting story, one which could fill books and has. You've heard much of it I'm sure; the role of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre for example – a very holy bishop who started the Society of St. Pius X. But like many very holy people he made his mistakes. You have the role of groups such as the International Society Una Voce, headed for so many years by the wise and holy Dr. Eric de Saventhem, and they made their mistakes. You had the research being done by Msgr. Klaus Gamber, or Cardinal Josef Ratzinger. Then you had individuals who discovered the old Mass on their own, like me.

I had to write a paper in liturgy class my first year in seminary theology in 1980. We were told to compare the Presentation of the Gifts in the new rite with the Offertory of the old rite, and of course were supposed to come to the conclusion that it was a good thing to get rid of that old offertory. But when I read the texts, I thought to myself "I don't know what rocket scientist thought this was an improvement, but I beg to differ." I got an A+ on that paper, but the professor who almost never gave A's for anything wrote a two page single-spaced letter blasting me with dire warnings about not being with the Holy Spirit.

But I stuck to my guns, for as Cardinal Newman once said, "Once you've seen a ghost, you can't pretend like you never saw him." And in a similar fashion when many of the faithful saw the nuns disappearing and the brothers disappearing and vocations going down and Catholic schools closing and an entire flood of disorder and decay, many just could not pretend that these were good fruits, and doubted this was the work of the Holy Ghost. Put all the changes together since Vatican II, and you see a growth in three areas only: Lay liturgical ministers, permanent deacons and annulments. That's it. So it was that many of the faithful wanted to be with the pope – that is, under his jurisdiction – but be free to tell the truth; free to say that something is wrong.

And the Church allows this. In the document *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, we read that the faithful have a duty to give *obsequium religiosum* (religious submission) of will and intellect to certain teachings of the Magisterium. The council taught that the bishops speak in the name of Christ, and submission must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, so that his judgments are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will.

Aye, there's the rub. How do you know if something is of the authentic magisterium? Well, one way is by clarity. Is the teaching clear? Is the mind of the pope clear on this or that point? Is it in harmony with previous teaching? If so, the council does not allow for dissent, but does allow for the withholding of assent. And what does this mean practically speaking?

It means that when His Holiness Pope Francis declared that the death penalty is inadmissible, it was pointed out to him that his statement contradicted the catechism, so he simply changed the catechism; problem solved. Or was it? At the last conference of the US bishops, one of the prelates asked what the word inadmissible meant in regard to the pope's statement, and Bishop Barron who was tasked with relating this to the bishops referred to it as "eloquent ambiguity." Well if something is ambiguous, then it lacks clarity. And if I don't know what I'm supposed to give my assent to, then I may in good conscience withhold it.

And you can know – though it takes some research to determine this – that for something to be an authentic teaching of the Magisterium it must have been taught *semper et ubique* – always and everywhere. If a teaching is recent and you can't find where it was throughout Church history, then withhold your assent, bending over backwards to respond with charity, until "all things are made clear in the law court of Christ," as St. Paul said.

But at the same time holding fast to what has been taught always and everywhere, thus fulfilling what St. Paul taught us in the Epistle to the Ephesians, 4: "Until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ: That henceforth we be no more children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...But doing the truth in charity, we may in all things grow up in him who is the head, even Christ."