

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

As we begin to structure our “one and the same Catholic Mass” according to different liturgical sensitivities, we need a basic understanding from which to operate. This is my explanation of that basic understanding.

The Tridentine Latin Mass in which I was raised did a magnificent job of communicating the transcendental, “Other-worldly” dimension of our God. The Latin language, spoken only by priest and servers, the prayers said “in secret,” the restriction of all ministry to the priest, the prohibition of women in the sanctuary, the silence enjoined on all in the church, communion on the tongue, even the Gregorian chant, usually done by a specially trained choir---all of this communicated that we were in sacred space, constituted by the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, and, temporarily, on the altar. In a way, the Tridentine Mass aimed at worship, the way our Friday adoration of the Blessed Sacrament does.

But those who taught us that this is the way the Mass had always been or would always be, were unaware of what sixty years of research by liturgical experts had discovered---that the Greek word “liturgy” means work of (all) the people, and that the Mass had been celebrated in a much more participatory manner in earlier centuries of the Church.

What that Tridentine Mass lacked (the reason why it had to be reformed at Vatican II) was the full, conscious, and active participation of the laity. Vatican II restored the vernacular, not just so we could directly understand God’s word, but so that we might proclaim the Word and speak the responses which make the liturgy our work. The Eucharistic prayer was restructured so that we might better remember (*anamnesis*) the action of Jesus making the sacrifice of Calvary present in the offering, transubstantiation, and communion of the bread and the wine. The new (actually, old) Canons now also include a more formal *epiclesis*, the calling down of the Spirit on the community and on the elements of bread and wine, so that the transforming action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is highlighted in the Mass. Communion in the hand enables us to approach the reality spoken of in 1 John 11, “That [Word] which...we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have...*handled*...” And finally, new music was needed, so that we, like every century in the Church’s history, might sing our praises to God in our own rhythms and idioms. The reformed Mass is not about adoration, but about Christ’s work in transforming us to be His presence in our world. There is awe also in this.

Thus, what we are aiming at in today’s liturgy is a synthesis of these two themes which must be present at every Mass---the transcendence of God to be adored, and the joyful celebration of our sinful modern selves even now being transformed into the presence of God in our world.

In my experience of St. Mary, the balance is still tipped in favor of the Transcendent Mystery. For example, after the Consecration of the Host, the rubrics say, “He [the priest] shows the consecrated host to the people.” While I am holding up the host, I notice that a fair percentage of the congregation have their eyes cast down out of reverence, not seeing what the Church wants me to show them. It is this same reverence, I believe, that lies behind our preference for the Latin melodies of Gregorian chant, or the sonorous strains of old favorites like “Holy God we praise Thy Name.” But if these preferences are rigidly maintained, the community loses

the joyful lilt of “Sing a New Song unto the Lord,” “Let the heavens Rejoice,” melodies and rhythms which stir the soul, and are often more appropriately accompanied by piano or guitar, percussion, and strings. I grieve that so few of you have heard Joe Wise’s Communion hymn “Jesus in our Hands,” in my opinion the most insightful and prayerful Eucharistic hymn since Thomas Aquinas.

What I understand the Church to be saying (and certainly Pope John Paul II exemplified this in his liturgies throughout the world) is that we must have a good balance between both awesome reverence and celebratory joy. But young and old, Anglos and Hispanics, “conservatives” and “liberals” understand the perfect balance in their own ways. A good parish provides opportunities for major groups to find the liturgical style which speaks to them and enables them to celebrate in their own way---some quietly, some more exuberantly. The only thing not acceptable is to attend Mass passively, or, worse, to ignore the Mass by saying the Rosary while the sacrifice of Christ for us is being re-enacted in our presence, or by conversing with one another while God is speaking to us in the liturgy.

In an urban parish, where parishioners are a ten minute drive from their church, it is easier to say, “the 8:15 Mass will be tipped towards quiet reverence, the 10:45 towards exuberance.” It is a slight adjustment in time. But when people need to drive fifty minutes to get to Mass, making the 8:15 Mass their Mass means that they must get up at 6:30 on a Sunday morning. It is possible: martyrs have suffered greater indignities for their Lord. But people generally tell the pastor that this schedule is not the martyrdom they prefer!

There are other difficulties, like collecting a different set of musicians for each Mass, learning new music, etc. But other parishes have managed all of this, and I know that we can too. More to the point, I believe that we will all participate more whole-heartedly if we have three different tonalities so that we can all feel at home with the liturgical style we prefer.

We intend all changes to be gradual and we hope to explain why we are doing these “new” things (some of them as old as the fourth century). As we embark upon these changes, I as pastor can guarantee two things: 1) Each Mass will have its own balance between transforming celebration and reverent worship. These elements are non-negotiable. 2) We will all be happier when the music and the celebration make the Mass ours.

So then, with reverence and charity towards all, let us begin.

Fr. John