

A LETTER TO HANS KÜNG

I presume that you, Father Küng, would be the first to admit that *The Mass of the Future* (Sign, Sept., 1963) involves far too much schematic pigeonholing to be entirely accurate. Still, even in so short an article one sees little reason for so many superficial observations. I trust that calling attention to these will not be construed as detrimental to the things you say which demand hearty concurrence.

First of all, this matter of tradition. You aver, and perhaps correctly, that far too many people identify it with "what happened in our younger days." But then you proceed, throughout your article, to identify tradition only with what happens to suit your case. That is, there is no legitimate tradition except that which held when the Mass was "simple and flexible." Beyond that, as we shall see, you do violence to the very tradition which you purport to uphold. This brings up the whole matter of "romantic" reconstruction. Any reconstruction is going to be romantic if you want to make romantic a dirty word. In reconstructing the liturgy, even to a vital contemporary form, I fear one cannot avoid being "romantic"—whether you are talking about Gueranger, Parsch, the Council, or Küng.

Secondly, I would suggest that not a few liturgical scholars would disagree with the following simple assertions:

- a) that even in the "simple and flexible" period the language of the liturgy was the *vernacular* of the period.
- b) that the obvious reason why silent prayers were added to the Mass was that the people no longer understood Latin. It may have been one reason.
- c) that the bishop was dressed in the clothes of a Roman citizen, and stood at a table facing the people. The matter of facing the people may have held in most of the Roman Basilicas, but only there; and in any case, the celebrant took that position because he wanted to face the east, not especially in order to face the congregation. Furthermore, he was so surrounded by clergy, and the people off in the transepts, that nobody saw very much anyhow; and it was only after the oblation that he went to the altar. The ancient service was no kind of preprandial cocktail party. It was already highly formalized, as were the Jewish ritual elements which form the background of the Christian Eucharist.

- d) that “Lift up your hearts” is a correct translation—it is decidedly “our.” The whole matter of your insertion of a translation of Hippolytus is problematical. It is so far from certain that it represents the Roman tradition that it should not be made the basis of a popularization.
- e) that the faithful *took* the consecrated bread in their open hands. They received it, perhaps on top of an underlying communion cloth.
- f) It is true that the essential outlines of the early Mass were fixed. It is not exactly true to say that each priest or bishop used his one discretion in shaping the liturgy. Such improvisation as there was was kept within lines quite as fixed, both textually and musically, as the “essential” outlines.
- g) that “it would have struck the early Christians as completely absurd to be present at a meal without eating, or to receive the Eucharist either before Mass or before the Eucharistic Prayer was over.” Whenever the consecrated was taken home, as sometimes surely happened, there was only a question of consuming the species of bread.
- h) that the matter of concelebration in the early Church is to be taken for granted. As late as the era of St. Francis there was surely one community sacrifice, regardless of the number of priest-friars present. But there is no certain evidence that even in the early Church this practice constituted a sacramental concelebration. The likelihood is that the priests were just standing at their proper places around the altar, assisting at the sacrifice. The sacramental concelebration which we are accustomed to during the Rite or Ordination is a quite late medieval introduction. It will be interesting to see whether the Council expands or contracts the concept of concelebration brought into the Instruction of 1958.
- i) under the caption “long and complicated,” that a whole set of ceremonies was borrowed from the Roman-Byzantine Court Ceremonial. This is a favorite charge of reformist-popularizers. The fact is that the borrowing was relatively insignificant. To aver that this borrowing included heathen practices—genuflections, bowing, kissing, incense, and candles—borders on the silly. Such practices are preeminently biblical. It may be true that some of them coincided with heathen practices and that the early

Christians therefore temporarily eschewed them. But the minute they no longer lived in fear of a *communicatio* with the pagan milieu, they promptly adopted, and quite properly, the Jewish tradition which included these precise practices. In this connection, I cannot help but think of Chesterton's monumental common sense chapter on "The World St. Francis Found," or his saying: "Water itself has been washed. Fire itself has been purified as by fire . . . Man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature-worship, and can return to nature."

- j) that the solemnizations of the liturgy which accompanied the borrowing from court ceremonial resulted in a more artistic form of chant that replaced the earlier, more simple singing of the people. This is something more than bordering on the silly. One need only refer to the half-century old studies of Peter Wagner, or to the current works of Willi Apel and Eric Werner.
- k) under the caption, "far away and silent," that the priest no longer faced the people, but a wall. He didn't face a wall. He faced a magnificent altar—what had been, biblically, the Holy of Holies; what is regarded in Eastern rites even today as a symbol of St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews, where one, taken from among men, is delegated to take forward the burden of human kind. He faced the magnificent Advent concept of the Oriens. If I am not mistaken, there is still some legislation, or at least a hallowed tradition, governing the geographic location of the sanctuary.

In all of these matters I am mindful of the fact that you, Father Küng, have previously expressed some concern about Catholic preoccupation with Thomism. Despite strong Thomistic training, this writer has never been able honestly to identify himself as a Thomist. He has rather been a Bonaventuran, and, I suppose, an Augustinian. Nonetheless, his routine studies in Criteriology fill him with dismay at the utter lack of critical apparatus in the going discussions on liturgical reform.

Thirdly, the business about a deep gulf emerging between the priest and the people. Suppose one did grant that, liturgically speaking, a kind of symbolic gulf had developed. One would still question most seriously whether this had anything to do with the *de facto* social gulf, either before or after the Reformation. I am glad that you do not lay the European exodus from Sunday Mass

entirely at the feet of the form of the Mass. Latterly, the scant attention paid to documents like *Rerum Novarum* was certainly a far more basic cause of that exodus. That, almost alone, as Pope Leo said, was the great scandal. Even now, one questions whether "it is basically a question of overcoming the thousand-year-old gulf between the people and the priest at the altar." Is it not possible to be properly concerned over what seems to many of us to be a patent fact that despite the acceptance of the minimal reforms espoused by St. Pius X—say the widespread practice in this country of frequent communion—we emerge with a less abiding piety than that of our fathers and grandfathers, who were perhaps half Jansenistic?

Finally, since I am chiefly involved in the matter of a singing worship, I am obliged to say that it was the last pigeonhole, "the Mass of the Future," which prompted the writing of these few notes. What do you mean by a renewal of the method of singing psalms? I hope you do not refer to the contraptions of Gelineau. An Anglican Rector recently told me: "We have been three hundreds years trying to get rid of that sort of thing." (And allow me to aver that the genius of Gregorian psalmody is one thing that is adaptable to the vernacular.) I hope that you do not refer to the current practice—an *ersatz* revival—which has everyone singing the psalms; for the ancient practice called for a soloist for the psalmody. One need have no special quarrel with your plea for "a more sparing use of incense." But this is bound to jar many of our liturgical dust-throwers. It is not especially uncommon to observe, in churches of high liturgical repute, a meaningless processional reconstruction which may well include some of the better Gelineau psalms. When the procession enters the church, alas, one can scarcely see the altar for the smoke.

Neither does one mind the plea for the omission of the Last Gospel, for there is already a foundation for its omission in recent liturgical legislation. *But where on earth do you come up with the notion of omitting the Gradual?* You talk about the necessity of going back to the very oldest of the Church's traditions. Certainly the Gradual, the Alleluia, and their versicles rank among these. Certainly the meditative function during this singing is of high importance. It does not matter one whit that pastors and church-music practitioners the world over have glossed over this traditionally important function between the services of the Word. One might be permitted to adjudge that if reform is needed, this is precisely a place where it ought to be introduced, and that it would be the least "romantic" of all reforms.

In closing, Father Küng, may I say that I appreciated your adhering to traditional, if archaic, translations into English? Scriptural texts must have unction, and besides, everybody knows what "thy" means. A far cry from a particular "English Mass Demonstration" making the rounds (copyright, if you please) which would have us respond to "The Lord be with you" with a flip: "and with you, too!"

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