



Fresco. Church of St. Urban, Rome. *Cecilia. Valerian. Tiburtius. Baptism of Tiburtius.*

FACING THE PEOPLE

We have heard a good deal about the alleged protestantizing of our western liturgy, and it might be worthwhile investigating this charge. We can consider the matter under three heads: the doctrine of the Mass, its language and its manner of celebration.

Obviously, it is the first of these aspects, doctrine, that is of fundamental importance, but I do not wish to treat of it except to say that according to the official documents, where the sacrifice and the real presence are concerned "nothing has changed." And yet for many there is an uneasy feeling that something, and something vital, has changed. In the sixties there were those indeed who proclaimed and rejoiced that things had fundamentally changed, but "Radical Catholicism" is now a thing of the past.

In so far, however, as that "uneasy feeling" is connected with the vernacular, is it enough to say that it is largely by an historical accident that the vernacular in the sixteenth century was associated with Protestantism? Another way of putting it is that but for Protestantism and the reaction it provoked we might have had our Catholic vernacular then, though I believe that Latin would have continued alongside of it as I trust it will do so now.

There is then nothing "Protestant" about the vernacular as such, or shall we say there need not be. (Here I prescind from what might otherwise be said about our present version.) However, we cannot altogether divorce language from the way it is used. For Luther in the first place, liturgy meant proclamation, and proclamation

meant *speaking*—not “the blessed mutter” nor even chanting—and of course in the mother tongue. With typical vehemence he said that the gospel should be “screamed.” The point is that faith (in the full-blooded sense) is to be aroused so that in the Mass the stupendous gift of the redeeming body and blood can be laid hold on. Moreover, as Luther clearly saw, proclaiming the word meant facing the people not only in the pulpit but at the altar.

A truly Protestant liturgy then is first of all a preached one, one that is verbally proclaimed. We need not go into the significance of “the Word” for Protestantism. As Word of God it is of no less significance for Catholicism. However, Protestantism came at a time when books were being printed and distributed as never before, and when it could be envisaged that the godly ploughboy would read the scriptures. The *word* was thus further emphasized. Moreover, the ability to read, and the spur to do so in the case of the Bible, by no means damped the readiness to listen to lengthy and frequent sermons. What Gregory Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy* says about the wordiness of Protestant liturgy is much to the point for us now.

Anyway, what is right for the pulpit is not necessarily so at the altar. Verbal proclamation is not the only form of expression though it has its place indeed, and this is primarily in the liturgy of the word and supremely in preaching. The sad truth, nevertheless, is that in bringing the liturgy of the word into greater prominence, it is the pulpit or what does duty for it that in contemporary Catholicism stands most bereft of significance, while throughout the rest of the Mass verbalizing has gained the upper hand. One commentator could go so far as to exclaim: “The word, the liturgical text, has to take precedence over rite, over gesture. The latter will achieve an elemental simplicity, an evangelical transparency and starkness.”¹

What is central to the Mass is not, however, word but action. The Eucharistic sacrifice is not merely a sacrifice of praise but in it something happens. The one and eternal sacrifice becomes sacramentally present, the work of the Holy Spirit and yet also of the Church in obedience to the command of its Lord: “Do this.” Primarily, therefore, suitable *action* is called for, expressive of awe and adoration; and let the voice be lowered or else raised in chant. And if the previous rite erred by excess in its use of symbolic actions, that is no reason why we should err by defect in the present one.

Nor should the fact that nowadays the celebrant usually faces the people mean that he must cease to perform his traditional function, that of leading the people into the mystery. Except perhaps rarely and marginally he is not an activator. Trying to make things meaningful, moreover, by any other means than a formal and restrained address must soon pall. Even in the delivery of the readings there should be a certain reserve so that they speak for themselves, or rather allow the Word to speak through them. And, quite simply, at the altar while the celebrant has the people in view it is not they whom he first of all has in mind, although all he does and says or sings should conduce to their reverent participation. But first of all he has and must have in mind the devout fulfilment of his part in the celebration. This is more telling than anything else where the people are concerned.

Proclamation then is not necessarily or primarily always a matter of words. Other modes of expression and communication may at times be more potent: movement and gesture in silence or to the sound of music. So much so that the consecration in the Tridentine Mass, whether “high” or “low,” could be held to proclaim with no mean effectiveness the mystery it enacted. I am not saying the revised rite when properly celebrated, with duly controlled voice to begin with, is any less effective. Nor do I hold that the priest’s facing the same way as the people is necessarily to be preferred. I merely think there should be latitude in these things. Directives have followed which qualify the original recommendation that altars now be free stand-

ing. In the first of his two letters which touch on this subject, Cardinal Lercaro wrote:

We wish to emphasize. . .that the celebration of the whole Mass facing the people is not absolutely indispensable for pastoral effectiveness. The entire liturgy of the word, in which the active participation of the faithful is amply achieved through dialogue and song, already proceeds facing the people. . .Certainly it is right to wish that the liturgy of the eucharist itself might be celebrated facing the people and that the faithful be enabled to follow the whole rite directly, thereby participating with a greater awareness. But that must not lead to the rash, often mindless rearrangement of existing churches and altars at the cost of a more or less irreparable damage to other values, also calling for respect.²

And again the Cardinal notes:

It should not be forgotten that many other factors (besides facing the people), on the part of the celebrant and on the part of the ministers and surroundings, are required to make the celebration genuinely worthy and meaningful.³

Following upon the first of these quotations we read:

The construction of altars facing the people is therefore desirable in new churches.⁴

In the light of the last twenty years' experience, should not this also include the possibility of celebrating in the former manner? Here I would only stress, however, that the right kind of proclamation for the sacramental mystery is not so much one that confirms in faith—the preacher's task—as one that conduces to the *adoration* which is faith's highest expression and its deepest need.

I do not believe all the same that the restoration of the Tridentine Mass—to whatever status—will solve our problems. For one thing, the vernacular has come to stay. But in the present circumstances the worldwide indult for the Mass in its previous form may be a step in the right direction. For some indeed this is a disturbing development, and one recalls how on the morrow of its disclosure the liturgists assembled in Rome reacted. Nevertheless, it should prompt us to look again at what was right as well as at what needed changing in the "old" Mass, and at what may have been mistaken as well as what should endure in the reform. Forgive the truism, but we should not repeat the primitivist error of going back as we think to the early Church and writing off all that has happened since. We should recognize that if in the course of centuries there can be false or merely temporary developments, there can also be genuine and lasting ones whether at the doctrinal or at the cultural level. Let us treasure and where necessary strengthen the continuity between past and present. And while restoring where needed the element of proclamation-in-prayer, let us have no doubt about the role of the homily or sermon, replete with doctrine and instruction and with eloquence where this is to be had.

DERYCK HANSHELL, S.J.

NOTES

1. Luis Maldonado, "Further Liturgical Reform," *Concilium*, Vol. 2, No. 4.
2. *Notitiae* 1 (1965). All these excerpts and their translation came from *Documents on the Liturgy (1963-1979)*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1984.
3. *Ibid.* 2 (1966).
4. *Ibid.* 1 (1965).



Painting, Basilica of St. Cecilia, Rome. *Baptism of Valerian. Apparition of the Angel.*

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