

Missa est

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

POPE BENEDICT'S interest in the Church history and, in particular, the liturgy, has made him sensitive to the feelings of those Catholics who were startled at the extent and rapidity of the changes to Catholic worship that followed the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The followers of Bishop Lefebvre actually went into schism after the Council and, despite Herculean efforts on the parts of Popes John Paul II and Benedict, have yet to be reconciled with the Church. The present Pope's permission for any priest to celebrate the older form of the Mass was no doubt partly, but not entirely, inspired by his wish to demonstrate to the schismatics that the Church has not altered its theological understanding of the Eucharist. Given the Pope's leadership in this matter, it is worthwhile to examine the attitudes towards the Eucharist that characterized the pre-Conciliar Church in the light of our own practice. A good starting point would be the decree that Pope Alexander VII sent to the bishops of France in 1661:

We have learned with great sorrow that in the Kingdom of France certain sons of perdition, itching with novelties detrimental to souls and despising the laws and practice of the Church, have lately come to such madness as to dare to translate the Roman Missal into French and to hand it over to person of every rank and sex. Thus they have attempted by their rash action to degrade the most sacred rites, to lower the majesty which the Latin language give to them, and to expose the Divine Mysteries to the common gaze.

A good indication of a historical sensibility is the ability to read this without bridle. In fact it is not quite as bad as it sounds. The decree was written because of the misrepresentation to the Holy See by the French Prime Minister, Cardinal Mazarin, who said that a translation was being prepared so that Mass could be said in French. A form of vernacular missals for the laity continued, although Alexander's ban was not removed for 200 years, during the pontificate of Leo XIII. The Mass was popularized not only by vernacular versions of the missal, but also by books about the Mass. A noble descendant of these was published in France in 1951 with the title *Missa est*. The text, by the distinguished scholar Henri Daniel-Rops, is as fine as it can

be. Each moment of the Mass is commented on in two parts. The first is a meditation combining Scripture, history, and spirituality; the second is a prayer rising out of the meditation. With the text are photographs of a low Mass in which the celebrant is vested in the simple white alb and the full Gothic chasuble that represented a liturgical revolution in themselves forty or fifty years ago. So effective was the book that it was reprinted in Quebec in 1958 with Cardinal Leger as celebrant and photographs by Yousuf Karsh. In an English version published at the same time—*This is the Mass*—Karsh photographed Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. A later reprint—*This is the* [new and revised] *Mass* (1967—which attempted to accommodate the text to the revised liturgy cannot be called successful; the tone of the new liturgy is too different from that of the old for a hybrid to be convincing.

An attempt to meet contemporary needs was published a while ago in Canada by Novalis Publishers: *The Mass: Celebrating the Eucharist Today*, by Basil Arbour. It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast to the Daniel-Rops book. For one thing, in his book the photographs give no indication of the existence of a congregation, aside from the occasional appearance of an altar boy. But crowds of people push through the pages of the Novalis booklet. The cover shows what I momentarily thought was a woman vested in alb and stole standing at an altar surrounded by people “of every rank and sex” who are obviously amused at something. It is hard to see what is so funny, though it may be that there is nothing on the altar. This is not a book for anyone concerned about rubrics, if such people still exist; priests celebrate without chasubles; leavened bread is used exclusively; there are altar girls.

The differences between the two books are easily accounted for. The new book describes the Mass essentially as a banquet, the older one, as a sacrifice. Everyone present at a meal naturally takes part in it. And so, nowadays there is an emphasis on the roles of the laity, men and women, in the Mass—reading, bringing gifts, distributing Holy Communion. There are also many pictures of picnics, birthday parties, and family meals. The dialogue which opens the Preface is called “Grace before Meals,” and the purification of the sacred vessels is described as doing the dishes. The sacrificial character of the Mass and the real presence of Jesus under the species of bread and wine are downplayed, the latter to the vanishing point. But in 1951, when it was the sacrificial aspect of the Mass that was emphasized, a congregation was an accidental to the essence of the Mass as it would have been to the crucifixion—though, of course, churches were crowded when Daniel-Rops was writing.

Both books refer to the development of the Mass over the centuries.

The older regarded the Mass as a priceless and fragile inheritance, which by a miracle of divine providence had come down to us intact. The new approach views the Eucharist more as a product of human history, including not a few mistakes. (The “today” of the title is repeated often throughout the text as if it were a synonym for “at last.”) Here is its historical note on the canon of the Mass:

Formerly called the Canon of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer can be traced back to the fourth century. Its final form was established in the seventh century and remains basically unchanged even today. It is now known as Eucharistic Prayer I. With the reform of the liturgy during the 1960s, it was noted that this prayer was lacking in elements of praise and that there was no mention of the Holy Spirit. In 1968, Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV were added to correct this omission.

What follows is the opening paragraph of Daniel-Rop’s section on the canon:

We are approaching the climax of our worship as we begin the great prayer, which now initiates the sacrificial part of the Mass, the true re-enactment of the sacrifice of the Cross. We are come to the *Canon*, that is to say, as this Greek word tells us, to the part of the ceremony which is the *rule* and measure of it all, determining its lines and its whole meaning. Of great antiquity, and stemming, indeed, directly from the Last Supper which it reproduces, this *action*—to use the term which the early Christians employed—gives us pause both by reason of its architectonic magnificence and because of the stately simplicity of its formularies.

I believe a resolution of the tension between the two views is possible. What we have to remember is that the Mass is both a sacrifice and a banquet. The traditional reverence evoked by the continuing activity of God among us in the mystery of Jesus Christ is simply part of being Catholic. But at the same time, the very fact that the liturgy has been reformed by a General Council indicates the foolishness of denying our age the privilege of adding its contribution to the history and the shape of the Eucharist. ❧