

# Annibale Bugnini

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

*A new English version of the Sacramentary—the collection of prayers used at Mass—is to be introduced next year. The article below comments on the career of one of the pioneers in the liturgical movement that, forty years ago, resulted in Latin’s being replaced by the vernacular in Catholic worship.*

**F**OR MOST OF US the official prayers of the Church—those in the *Sacramentary*, for instance—have something absolute about them; we don’t think of them as having been composed by a particular person at a given time and place. But, of course, somebody did write them, probably first in Italian at the Vatican, whence into Latin and then into English (by the much-abused International Commission on English in the Liturgy). Annibale Bugnini was one of those “somebodies.”

Bugnini is an instance of the right man being at the right place. He was a highly skilled and erudite liturgist in Rome just at the time that the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) turned its attention to the reform of the liturgy. Both his training and experience prepared Bugnini to assume a leading role. In 1938, when he was twenty-six, he received a doctorate for his study of the liturgy and the (sixteenth-century) Council of Trent. He became archivist of the Vatican Library in 1940 and for three years (1943-46) was a member of the Pontifical Institute for Christian Archaeology. He was also rector of the Lazarist Seminary from 1939 to 1943, a post he was to resume in 1952; and, finally, he had experience as a pastor for two outlying districts of Rome.

His major contribution to liturgical reform before the Council was his editorship (1944-63) of the learned journal *Emphemerides Liturgicae* and of a double series of books on liturgical subjects. He was able to shift the emphasis in liturgical studies from rubrics to scholarship and pastoral care. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of subscribers to the periodical and the creation of a forum for leading European liturgists. A bibliography of his own writings published shortly before his death in July 1982 contains over three hundred titles. He was also active during the late forties in supporting and founding institutes for liturgical studies; starting in 1948 he lectured on liturgy at the Papal Urbaniana University, was a member of the Papal Institute for Church Music (1955) and, from 1957 until his dismissal in 1962, of the Pastoral Institute of Lateran University.

Bugnini was himself a product of a steady move toward liturgical reform that had been fostered especially by Saint Pius X, Pius XI—who had set up the Congregation of Rites in 1930—and Pius XII—who appointed Bugnini secretary of a New Commission for the Reform of the Liturgy in 1948. The first matter addressed was the reform of Holy Week, a project that had been under consideration from pontificate of Benedict XIV (1740-58). One striking anomaly was the custom of celebrating the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday morning, when a handful of the faithful would gather to hear the priest sing *haec nox est* (“This is the night”) in the full light of day. In 1951, in response to a petition from the bishops of France and Germany, Pius XII allowed some parishes to celebrate, for the first time in centuries, the vigil on Holy Saturday night. The restored vigil was extended to the entire Latin Church in 1955, as part of a general reform of Holy Week.

Holy Week was not the only concern of the Commission. Many important documents were issued that were, in themselves, part of the preparation for the great reform to come: new editions of the Divine Office, of the episcopal liturgy, of the ritual, and of the missal, the restoration of the full ceremony for adult baptism, and the reorganization of the Church calendar.

One persistent difficulty of this and other commission was the custom of choosing a member of the hierarchy as chairman. Inevitably some were unsympathetic to the work of a commission and unappreciative of the importance of serious scholarship. At the first International Congress for Pastoral Liturgy, held at Assisi in 1955, 1,500 delegates, five cardinals, sixty bishops, and twelve abbots heard an opening address in which the Prefect of the Congregation of Rites and the President of the Congress, Gaetano Cardinal Cicognani, spoke emphatically against any use of the vernacular in Catholic worship. On 6 June 1960, Cardinal Cicognani, was appointed chairman of the Preparatory Commission on the Liturgy for the forthcoming Council; the secretary of the Commission was Father Bugnini. A subcommittee prepared a preliminary statement for the Council that so impressed the bishops that the Constitution on Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) became the first major conciliar document. Cicognani died shortly before the opening of the Council (October 1962) and was replaced by canon lawyer, Arcadio Cardinal Larraona, who tended to separate himself from the work of the Commission. In July 1962 he circulated a mangled version of the schema on the liturgy that was universally rejected. Its gist was that only general liturgical norms were needed since the Holy See could always decide about individual cases. The schema prepared by Bugnini, on the other hand, was warmly received by the Council Fathers.

Nevertheless, shortly after the opening of the Council, Bugnini fell into disgrace and went into what he called his “first exile.” He lost his place on the Commission and his lectureship at the Lateran University. Towards the end of the Council he was reinstated as secretary of a committee set up to implement the recommendations of the Constitution on the Liturgy. This was the period of the creation of forms of worship that have afforded us Catholics a new liturgical experience. Bugnini continued as a secretary of another commission that carried on this work until, in 1975, he was abruptly dismissed in the course of some rearrangements in the structure of these commissions. The popular press attributed his dismissal to—of all things—his having been a Freemason, but his fault seems to have been an unbreakable, almost bull-headed, commitment to his radical version of liturgical reform. Bugnini then accepted an appointment as pro-nuncio Iran, a post he held until his death in 1982. The present Pope’s sensitivity to the importance of continuity in liturgical development as well as the experience of the last forty years have revealed the drawbacks as well as the gains in some, at least, of the dramatic changes that followed the Council. The new *Sacramentary* can, therefore, be seen as a return to a more balanced view of the richness of the Catholic tradition of solemn public worship. ❧