

Sermon Delivered by Fr. Calvin M. Goodwin, FSSP

Shrine of The Most Blessed Sacrament, Hanceville, Alabama

September 14, 2007, Feast of the Holy Cross

First of all, we members of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter whom you see in the sanctuary today would like to thank Rev. Mother Angelica, Mother Vicar, and the Poor Clare community for their gracious invitation to celebrate this Mass here today in this magnificent church. We are particularly grateful to Bishop Foley of the Diocese of Birmingham for supporting our presence here and to the members of the EWTN staff and the Board of Directors of this tremendous enterprise, born of Mother Angelica's faith and wisdom and which has been so fruitful for the needs of the Church now for more than a quarter-century.

There are so many things that could be said on this momentous occasion. I will do no more than offer a few reflections as the least of all the members of the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. Many would be able to offer more eloquent and apposite reflections. My comments reflect only my own poor grasp of the great gift that the Successor of Peter offers to the Church in his teaching and his decrees in the *motu proprio*, *Summorum Pontificum*. I cannot claim to represent the Priestly Fraternity as a whole nor any other ecclesial body.

Today marks a great moment in the history of the Church in modern times. This Mass, offered today for the needs and intentions of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, is a concrete and visible token of that "interior reconciliation" within the Church which the Holy Father has both called for and made possible through his recent *Motu Proprio* which restores the traditional liturgical rites of the Church to a central place at the heart of the Church's life.

Surely no one now is unaware of the painful confusions and divisions which afflicted the Church's interior life during recent years. The Supreme Pontiff bears poignant witness to these afflictions when, in the letter to the universal episcopate which accompanied the *Motu Proprio* he writes: "I am speaking from experience, since I too lived through that period with all its hopes and its confusions. And I have seen how arbitrary deformations of the liturgy caused deep pain to

individuals totally rooted in the faith of the Church." And so the Vicar of Christ, making use of that personal authority binding the universal Church which is his alone, has determined that the healing of those painful wounds must begin, and it must begin at the heart of the Church, in the sanctuary, in the Holy Sacrifice which makes present on the altar that very exaltation of the saving Passion of Christ which is commemorated in the feast which we celebrate here today.

Let any spirit of suspicion which has led to division amongst Catholics be banished once and for all by the proclamation of the Vicar of Christ: "What earlier generations held as sacred remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful." And we cannot fail to note that the ancient feast which we celebrate today bears witness to the fact that, out of the most abject suffering the world has ever witnessed, the ignominious Passion and death on the Cross of the Son of God, there emanated reason for a joy and exaltation that will endure so long as this world does and, indeed, is crowned for all eternity in heaven. So too though the Church has witnessed contradictions and conflicts throughout her history, She, the unspotted Bride of Christ, always emerges intact to continue her mission for the honour of God and the needs of souls. Out of this conviction the Vicar of Christ offers to the whole Church an invitation to what he calls an "interior reconciliation" much needed and long-awaited and so deeply appreciated by faithful Catholics everywhere.

Still, it is not enough to take advantage of the joy of this great moment. We must also apply ourselves to the task of appreciating more fully the substance of the mind of the Church as articulated by the Successor of Peter. What then does the Holy Father have in mind as he restores the immemorial rite of Holy Mass, along with all the traditional liturgical rites and uses of the Latin rite? What does he expect it to achieve in the life of the Church?

Well, without attempting to speak for him, let us briefly look at the rite itself so as to glean from its evident nature and character what it is that the Supreme Pontiff wishes to offer, through its restoration, to the attention of the whole Church. Certainly we will find there, in the rite itself, the elements revelatory of the essence of authentic Catholic liturgy. For, as John Paul II, of blessed memory, reminded us just a few years ago, "In the Roman Missal, so-called of St. Pius V ...one finds the most beautiful prayers with which the priest expresses the deepest sense of humility and reverence before the sacred mysteries: these reveal the very substance of what liturgy is."

No doubt much of the ceremony of today's Mass will be unfamiliar to many. Two things in particular will probably stand out. One is that the Mass is celebrated entirely in Latin. The other is that, for much the greatest time of the ceremony, the priest celebrant prays facing the altar. These phenomena are by no means the only significant ones but they are both immediately different to what many have become accustomed to in the liturgy as most often celebrated in recent times. Yet these phenomena, however much they may bring with them the shock of the unfamiliar, are nonetheless integral to the most central principles of liturgical prayer in the Catholic Church. And they are hallowed by an unbroken tradition which, as the Council of Trent solemnly defined, is rooted in the liturgy of apostolic times.

Still, given the more common liturgical practice of recent times, it should cause no surprise if good and sincere people simply ask: why is the Mass in a language I don't understand and the rites in a configuration which makes it impossible for me to see what's going on. It should be made clear then: this venerable rite of Holy Mass in no way has as its goal the obscuring of the elements of the Mass. Just the opposite! It is so constructed as to be eminently revelatory, as Pope John Paul said, of "the very substance of what liturgy is." There is no need, nor would it be germane to the context of a sermon, to analyze elements which may have contributed to certain confusions and anomalies during a time of tumultuous change in the Church's life. For his part—and this is surely sufficient for us

the Holy Father clearly comprehends the historical context and does not forbear to draw certain difficult but unavoidable conclusions: "In

many places the [new Missal] actually was understood as authorizing or even requiring creativity, which frequently led to deformations of the liturgy which were hard to bear."

Beyond that it is surely our priority to note, first, the profound compassion with which the Vicar of Christ seeks to bind up the wounds of those who have suffered, and then the sober and insistent fashion in which he summons the whole Church, bishops, priests, and faithful, to that "interior reconciliation" without which our service of God, liturgically and otherwise, would be gravely impaired. All the varied rites of the Church stand together in offering to God that same worship which all His human creatures owe Him, and all these rites, singly and together, are equally bound constantly to reflect upon the fidelity and constancy with which they do so.

(to be continued)

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PART II

The texts of today's Mass reveal to us as well as any a great deal about the authentic essence of liturgical prayer. In the Introit we read: "May God have mercy

on us, and bless us; may He cause the light of His countenance to shine upon us..." What do we perceive here if not that we are threatened by a darkness, a darkness founded in elements of sin and error and, further, the acknowledgement that it is God's merciful action that we must await to effect the dispelling of that darkness. In the Gospel we read just how that darkness is dispelled: it is through Christ alone, Christ our light: And it is Christ Himself who guides us, by the light of Truth, to the light which saves: "Whilst you have the light, believe in the light; that you may be the children of light." What is our response to the action of God Who saves us in Christ, the eternal light? It is must be to believe in the light.

Thus in Holy Mass, everything builds on that belief in the light. But, and this should lead us to profound reflection, the initiative is God's and Christ alone is, in the Incarnation, the means of that initiative. Just a few days ago the Holy Father gave an allocution reflecting upon the essential elements of Catholic liturgical prayer. These are his words: "In all our efforts on behalf of the liturgy, the determining factor must always be our looking to God. We stand before God—He speaks to us [first] and [then] we speak to Him...I ask you to celebrate the sacred liturgy with your gaze fixed upon God within the Communion of Saints—the living Church of every place and time." The liturgical prayer of the Church is therefore, first of all, something GIVEN to us by God, something which we receive, something to which we are obliged faithfully and humbly to conform ourselves, our hearts, our minds. What is obscure to a world so convinced of its own self-sufficiency is made plain to the eyes of faith turned and lifted toward Him. It is given and revealed to us, in fact, by God through an

unbroken tradition of rites which embody that tradition which stretches back directly to the apostles.

The cultural inclinations and fashions of this world pass and fade away. But the light remains constant. The ancient character of the Church's liturgical action, its words, gestures, and ceremonies, reflect this enduring light in a concrete and sensible way. The words pronounced at the altar today are, to a very significant degree, the same words, the gestures and motions are the same, as those used by Bl. John XXIII and St. Pius V, by St. John Vianney and St. Dominic, by St. Miguel Pro and St. Edmund Campion, by the martyrs of North America and the martyrs of the Crusades, by St. Maximilien Kolbe and St. Augustine of Hippo. Hallowed words. Hallowed action. Hallowed not only by use but by where they come from: that precious and holy tradition that has sanctified individuals, made devout families, given abundant vocations and martyrs to the Church and to the honor of God for almost two millenia. As the Holy Father states in *Summorum Pontificum*, "It is evident that the Latin Liturgy...has stimulated in the spiritual life of very many Saints in every century of the Christian age and strengthened in the virtue of religion so many peoples and made fertile their piety."

Latin is, in effect, our iconostasis. It serves as a "verbal" curtain drawn over the mysteries being carried out at the altar to remind us that, yes, there is a wide and fathomless gap between the incomprehensible majesty and holiness of God on the one hand, and our human sinfulness and smallness on the other. It is a gap which cannot be breached by human presumption or initiative. It is a gap unbridgeable by anything we DO and is overcome only by what GOD does and which we RECEIVE from Him.

The Holy Father Benedict XVI, has repeatedly warned against the tendency in modern liturgical prayer for the community to drift towards celebrating itself and Pope John Paul II insisted, in pointed criticism of elements undignified and inappropriate to liturgical prayer, that "It is necessary to purify worship of deformations, of careless forms of expression, of ill-prepared music and texts which are not very suited to the grandeur of the act being celebrated." In all the several liturgical rites and uses of the Church then we are, in common, obliged to seek only those elements which authentically and worthily reflect the august sacrifice they embody.

Thus today, in the ancient Roman rite, we bow as did our fathers in the Faith. We kneel as those who have gone before us these many centuries have done. We prostrate ourselves before the awesome re-

presentation on the altar of the Sacrifice of the Cross. The epistle of today's feast reminds us that even "in the name of Jesus every knee should bow of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth." If this is the appropriate action to the mention of the Holy Name, how much more reverence and devotion should inform our acknowledgement of His very presence on the altar! Nothing casual but, instead, a communal "turning toward the Lord" (the words again of our Holy Father) in gratitude, love, and awe for what is DONATED to us by a merciful God when we could NEVER achieve it or make it happen for ourselves. And by this submission we are united, as St Paul reminds us, to the Church triumphant in heaven and the Church suffering in Purgatory in offering to God our common homage.

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PART III: Conclusion

The first thing then which we need to understand is that this mystery takes us BEYOND the limits available to unaided human comprehension. It CANNOT be grasped or encompassed by puny human intellect alone, darkened as it is by the inroads of sin. We can find our way to it only through a humble and reverent and faith-founded attentiveness. Not a passivity, mind you, but an attention which is, in fact, the "activity" most essential to our participation in the Mass. As Pope John Paul II put it, making his own the words of St. Augustine from so long ago, but still wholly normative for authentic Catholic worship, "The highest music is the one that arises from our hearts. It is precisely this harmony that God wants to hear in our liturgies."

The most perfect participation in that sacrifice is in fact exemplified by Our Blessed Lady at the foot of the Cross. And what is it that she does there at the foot of the altar of the Cross—nothing, in fact, that mortal eyes can perceive. What does she say there nothing that mortal ears can hear. And yet no human being ever was or ever could be more fully or more intimately involved in that Sacrifice than she was at that moment. As always, she shows us the way. Thus with Our Lady at the foot of the Cross, we too can only be present and wonder, asking ourselves in union with the prayer of the priest at the altar, "Quid retribuam...", "what return shall I make to the Lord for all that He hath GIVEN unto me... This is both the beginning and the goal of participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Everything that fails to lead to that reverence and interior union, or which impedes it, impedes authentic participation. And all elements of exterior participation consonant with these principles will inevitably have the character of authenticity.

And when that sacrifice is crowned in the moment of Holy Communion what is it that we "do"? We RECEIVE, receive what we could never fashion or make for ourselves but which is freely GIVEN to us by a loving and merciful God in His Son, Our Saviour. The body and blood, soul and divinity of the Son of God: a moment, above all, for devout and humble receptivity. This is the moment of Mount Thabor when the apostles are rapt in silent wonder, their heads bowed low in awe and holy fear until, as St. Matthew tells us, "Jesus came and touched them" and then, "looking up, they saw only Jesus." That is a text in which the early Christians would have recognised their own rite of Holy Communion.

Through this rite of Holy Mass, and not infrequently without particular verbal comprehension, saints and martyrs have been raised up for the Church, simple people and children have entered into heroic holiness—not because they grasped or saw but because they revered and believed. Oh how we need today, how young people need that simple and humble faith of a Bernadette who attested, when questioned by the priest, that she did NOT understand the awesome message that Our Lady had chosen her to convey, but nevertheless her FAITH in Our Lady was real enough and wholly unshakeable—and thus became richly fruitful for her own relationship with God as well as for the mission which had been entrusted to her. Yet how many have forgotten that their first responsibility is to know God in this world through the exercise of the virtue of faith! The world's modalities are insufficient in themselves for divine worship. We must surrender to the Christ our light Who alone guides us beyond the world's deceptions to the realm of divinely-given revelation. And that revealed Truth is made present here today, and every day that Holy Mass is celebrated in all the approved rites of the Church, through the renewal of the Sacrifice of the Cross.

Let's be clear. No one here has the slightest intention of proposing the immemorial liturgy as the "solution" to the Church's sea of troubles. The purpose of liturgical prayer is, in any case, not to fix things for the Church but so to unite us to Christ, Our Lord that we can navigate the troubled sea of this world always oriented towards, and one day finding our repose in, Him. But the Church will surely benefit so much from the reintegration in her life of this "most beautiful thing this side of heaven," as Fr. Faber memorably described the ancient rite of the Mass! Priests will benefit in their interior life and countless souls will benefit from that silence in which alone the voice of God may be discerned.

No, this Mass is not a challenge to the Church, nor an act of condemnation, nor a political act but an immeasurable enrichment of her life. It is a sign, this restoration, a sign of renewed vigour and self-awareness for the Church. We should familiarise ourselves with the provisions that the Holy Father has made in *Summorum Pontificum*, ponder them for the wisdom they embody beyond their immediate practical prescriptions. The sacrifice of the Cross in this ancient and venerable form is to be exalted as is the Cross itself in this ancient and venerable feast which we celebrate today.

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