

Polarisation and Liturgy/Andrew Cameron-Mowat SJ. Published in *Priests and People*, October 2004. Reprinted with permission.

What comes to mind of when you see the word “elephant”? For those of you who have come across one of these creatures you will be able to form a picture of one. Part of your thinking process would, of course, rely on what you had been taught about what “elephant” is, though you probably would not imagine the same elephant as someone else. You might be able to agree with another person about the very notion of “elephant”, though the size of ears would obviously be something of a talking point. A basic question would be whether you thought of the elephant as dead and stuffed and in a museum, behind a glass case and incapable of movement - or as a living, breathing (and smelling) elephant which might act in ways that were unpredictable, but which were essentially within the concept of “elephantness”. The live elephant would behave in ways which were expressive of its nature, and we would have to make allowances for it to perform occasional random acts. The elephant in the museum would not be able to do anything as it would be dead.

What does this have to do with the liturgy? At the Second Vatican Council, the assembled bishops approved by an overwhelming margin the text of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and since its promulgation in December of 1963 the Church has carried out the work of implementing it. Pope Paul VI implemented the reform of the liturgy as one of the monuments of his papacy. Along the way, he abrogated the previous versions of the rites, so as to prevent any confusion and doubt that these revised rites continued as the *traditional* rites of the Roman Catholic church. The sacramental rites were revised and updated according to the historical and theological discoveries and developments of the centuries, and indicated awareness of the needs of the faithful, in particular of the call of the bishops that there be full, conscious and active participation by all of the people in the celebration of the sacraments. The reforms were led by the Pope, with the bulk of the work being undertaken by the *Consilium*, the group set up to carry out the detailed work involved, with multiple groups of highly trained experts and theologians to consult, under the auspices of the Congregation for Divine Worship. The bishops of each country of the Church were then expected, through catechesis, training and careful implementation, to replace the old rites with the revised versions. As a concession to the pain that the reform of the Mass might cause, Paul VI allowed bishops to give permission for “elderly” priests to continue to use the old rite of Mass as long as they celebrated it without a congregation.

With the changes in the liturgy came the restoration of the earliest as well as the most recent ways of understanding the fullest meaning of the rites. Now the whole church was truly the sanctuary: the place where the sacrifice was celebrated on behalf of all. The priest, placed in the role of pastor and leader, was one who fulfilled his role in the celebration of the liturgy *alongside* others who fulfilled their roles. Edward Schillebeeckx makes this clear: “The fundamental gain of this constitution is that it broke the clergy monopoly of the liturgy. Whereas it was formerly the priest’s affair, with the faithful no more than his clientele, the council regards not only the priest but the entire Christian community, God’s people, as the subject of the liturgical celebration, in which each in his proper place is given his own particular hierarchically ordered function - a theological view with all kinds of practical repercussions.”¹

We know what then happened. As early as 1965 it was already clear that there was going to be hostility to the reforms of the liturgy. Pope Paul VI addressed this trend directly in his general Audience of 17th March: “These remarks ... show a lack of understanding about religious rites ... They do not indicate a true devotion or a genuine perception of the import of the Mass. Rather they betray a certain spiritual laziness, the refusal to make the personal effort toward understanding and participation... Before, it was enough to assist; now, it is necessary to take part. Before, being there was enough; now, attention and activity are required. Before, everyone could doze or perhaps even chatter; now all must listen and pray... The assembly becomes alive and active; taking part means allowing the soul to become attentive, to enter into the dialogue, to sing, to act.”²

Attacks against the reform have ranged from the scholarly and polite to the uninformed and uncharitable, with the force of the latter greatly outweighing the former. Recent changes, instructions and reforms have diminished the force of the abrogations, and there has been a trend toward restoring older ways and medieval theology. By restoring what they regard as “tradition” to the church’s liturgy, various elements have jeopardised true liturgical tradition in ways which will be difficult to put right.

The methods used are easy to spot: refer to the former rite of Mass as “traditional”; second-guess the value of the theologians and liturgical scholars who advised the bishops at Vatican II and afterwards; flood the bishops and the Vatican with letters of complaint about “abuses”; slow down or even halt the passage of documents which promote the agenda of liturgical reformers; reform the structures of the church to prevent further reform and to (at least partially) restore the former rites.

We regularly see advertisements for “Traditional Roman Rite” Masses in our catholic newspapers, and there is no confusion intended in the description: they refer to the rite celebrated prior to the reform. This means that we are now in the *unique* position, completely unforeseen by Paul VI, of having two Masses of the Roman Rite labelled “traditional”, both of which are approved for use.

Articles are appearing which are quite insidious in the way in which they polarise the theologians of Vatican II into one of two camps: the von Balthasar camp (true to the tradition, maintaining the authority of the church over [secular] humanity, emphasis on the holiness of faithful Christians) and the Rahner camp (allowing for the possibility of change and development, of inculturation, of the importance of the human person, of the pastoral needs concerning weakness, sin, suffering). The reconsideration of Rahner is of particular contemporary importance. The aim of his critics seems to be to shift his insights about the Liturgy of the World, of the anonymous Christian, of the inherent goodness of the human person, toward the liberal, relativistic, post-modern views that are presently (and in many ways deservedly) under scrutiny. Better to follow von Balthasar with his emphasis on membership of the Church as saving institution. For these people, the world is inherently sinful and godless. The Mass of the Roman Rite, before the changes, was an organic whole, pure, holy, and beautiful; it offered a refuge in its mystery and mysticism. The reform has done little but tarnish that sacred deposit. As for the liturgists, that joke about us and terrorists continues to be heard, but the reason we are reluctant to negotiate is that we have studied the issues in depth. There are other types of theologian in the world than dogmatic or systematic ones, and liturgical theology could be more valuable today because it has greater relevance at the “front line”.

It is human nature to omit writing a letter of approval or to state that things are merely acceptable. It is regrettable that so much credence has been given to letters of complaint sent anonymously to the Vatican, with lurid descriptions of abuses which are not checked and may in fact not be true.

As for the slowing down of progress, no finer description of the situation can be found than that given by Sir Humphrey in “Yes, Minister”: “In government, many people have the power to stop things happening but almost nobody has the power to make things happen. The system has the engine of a lawn mower and the brakes of a Rolls Royce.” The delay of the granting of the *recognitio* to liturgical translations has been an embarrassing feature of the last ten years. This has given the impression of a desire to prevent the bishops from further advancing necessary inculturation and adaptation, and to ensure that the old ways are allowed to co-exist alongside the revised rites.

In more recent times there has been the additional problem of the issuance of disciplinary documents and liturgical instructions some of which show little sign of having been considered by experts in liturgy at any real depth. This is the second of the situations completely unforeseen by Paul VI. We now have, for example, *Liturgiam Authenticam*, which authorises the methods to be used to translate liturgical texts into the various vernaculars. This document was issued after a long period of refusal to discuss its contents with the bishops who would need it most: those wanting to ensure that good translations would be made available in their countries. More recent scholarship on the document has shown how embarrassing it is on almost every level. But it has achieved exactly what its unnamed

authors desired: slowing down the process of reform in translation almost to a stand-still, and preventing the possibility of the use of more contemporary prayers and texts which celebrate the genius of the human imagination in prayer through Christ to the Father.

There have been hard-fought battles, but, in reality, the liturgical renewal project is only just begun. The present arguments about translation are in some sense a diversion - painful, angry, frustrating, certainly - from the main project: full, conscious and active participation by all of the people. This must go hand in hand with the bishops fulfilling the role given to them by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium*: they have the primary authority on liturgical reform and inculturation. In many ways the treatment of the bishops on matters liturgical has been quite remarkable: this is much more about ecclesiology than about liturgy. There is a level of centralisation and control and a denial of collegiality and local levels of authority which takes us back to the time before Vatican II. Meanwhile the people of God find their role reduced to that of consumers whose good will is in danger of failing and whose patience is running out.

I would like to make some suggestions as to how to make progress in the present situation.

The first and most important thing that has to be done is to find a way to restore the trust of priests and people in their bishops and in the levels of church government which affect the celebration and the development of the liturgy. This is an urgent task: it is quite astonishing to me to see the level of distrust, dissatisfaction and, finally, disinterest in recent official church documents on the liturgy. Priests in many parishes seem to have little time for reading much less implementing these authoritative texts, several of them signed by the Pope himself. A good sign of the future came about at the latest *ad limina* visit by our bishops, during which they had a personal meeting with the Cardinal Prefect of the CDW. At the very least, this will have contributed to the possibility of the CDW displaying a greater level of trust in our bishops. Nevertheless, we still await the official granting of the *recognitio* to the translation of the newly revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which will enable the bishops and the hard-pressed Liturgy Office in London to begin to disseminate the carefully-prepared pastoral teaching and catechesis necessary for the promulgation of this valuable document. The translation was sent to Rome for approval in December 2002. It would be good if our bishops could be more confident in their own role and status, though at the present moment it should be acknowledged that the bishops of the United Kingdom display far greater unity than their brothers across the Atlantic. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, describes their status clearly: [27] "Bishops, as vicars and ambassadors of Christ, govern the particular churches entrusted to them... In virtue of this power, bishops have the sacred right and the duty before the Lord to make laws for their subjects, to pass judgment on them and to moderate everything pertaining to the ordering of worship and the apostolate... nor are they to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiffs, for they exercise an authority that is proper to them, and are quite correctly called "prelates," heads of the people whom they govern." In a recent article on the significance of *Lumen Gentium*, the eminent ecclesiologist Joseph Komonchak states that the council "does not see the Church as a vast multinational religious corporation with central headquarters in Rome, branch offices in major cities, and retail shops in parishes... The gathering of the People of God into communion in the mystery of God takes place locally as the word of God is preached and faith is generated, as the power of the Spirit renews hope, as the love of God creates love for God in return and love of the brethren, as this new people, so defined and so constituted, realizes an at least partial transformation of the world in which it arises."³

My second suggestion would be to strengthen the force of the abrogations of Paul VI, and make the old rite available only to *elderly priests who celebrate it in private*. Several parishes already celebrate the *Novus Ordo* in Latin if that is what is required: plenty of incense, altar servers, candles, Palestrina, rich vestments - no problem. I have celebrated the Mass in Latin on many occasions, and it seems to me to be highly successful. Perhaps there should also be a period of compulsory transition implemented for all priests ordained after 1970, with perhaps five years for them to prepare for the celebration of the *Novus Ordo* exclusively.

Next, I would suggest that *Liturgiam Authenticam* be opened up for debate and discussion by bishops and liturgical experts, with the possibility of its revision and correction in the near future. This would not be out of the ordinary as such documents normally undergo careful discussion and revision (though usually before they are promulgated). The new General Instruction of the Roman Missal is an obvious example. Another example is the recent *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (on abuses in the celebration of the Eucharist) which went through as many as twelve drafts.

The process of inculturation in liturgy seems to have slowed down or even stopped, and we are in danger of losing the proper meaning of the phrase “in substantial unity with the Roman Rite”, replacing it with “completely identical to the Roman Rite”. For writers steeped in the issues concerning inculturation, there needs to be a radical rethink of what is required. For the Benedictine liturgical scholar Anscar Chupungco, the revision of the books was only a first step, and there is still more to be done: “Christian life is richer in content and scope than the Roman liturgy. There is more to life than what the Roman formularies and rites are able to embody. In short, inculturation alone cannot fully satisfy all the requirements for a truly renewed liturgy of a local Church. Creativity, which has always been an inherent feature of the Church's worship, is sometimes not a mere option but an imperative for a local Church that wants its liturgy to be relevant and have impact on the life of the faithful.”⁴

At the more local level, it would be good for parishes to consider forming liturgy groups which, through reading, discussion and study, are energised and enabled to grow in their understanding of the reforms of Vatican II and of more recent times. Several dioceses already have quite active offices of liturgical formation, and these could be developed to foster charitable meetings and the reduction of the polarisation that seems to be present at the moment. In this way, what could be regarded as past inadequacies in leadership can be overcome with strong, clear direction and training. If the church at the local level can offer, both to presiders and to parishes, the education and catechesis required which is spiritual, consoling, and charged with the powerful words of Christ's good news, and which emphasises that the liturgical renewal is grounded in tradition, much that is good will have been achieved.

We are in need of new signs of hope and life in the liturgy, with rituals which celebrate our unity rather than emphasise our division, which foster our prayer and which help us to grow in wonder at the power and love of the risen Christ. Romano Guardini, writing on the occasion of the German liturgical congress at Mainz forty years ago, summed up the situation then, and his words remain relevant today: “The question is whether the wonderful opportunities now open to the liturgy will achieve their full realisation; whether we shall be satisfied with just removing anomalies, taking new situations into account, giving better instructions on the meaning of ceremonies and liturgical vessels or whether we shall relearn a forgotten way of doing things and recapture lost attitudes.”⁵

Let us pray for an end to squabbles about who stands where, when; about pottery or metal vessels; about word order and inclusive language; about vestment colours; about the placement of tabernacles; about the difference between “special” and “extraordinary”. These are preventing the Church from moving forward into a truly inculturated way of celebrating the liturgy, in which the word is worthily proclaimed and preached, in which the risen Christ raises our spirits in unity and peace, in which the world can be transformed by our joy and hope in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit.

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Vatican II: The Real Achievement* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 27-8.

² Paul VI, audience, 17th March, 1965, in *Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979: conciliar, papal, and curial texts*, International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982), edited and translated by Thomas C. O'Brien. Document 27, page 115.

³Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology” in Peter Phan, ed. *The Gift of the Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 86.

⁴Anscar Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Liturgical Press, 1992), 53-54. See also his *Liturgies of the Future* (New York: Paulist, 1989).

⁵Romano Guardini, letter to Johannes Wagner, in *Antiphon*, 5, 3.