

Smells and Bells do not Suffice

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 9 April 2023

One would expect that, in the aftermath of *Traditionis custodes*, everyone would have already abandoned any hope of reforming the liturgical reform, given that the fundamental incompatibility between the traditional Mass and the *Novus Ordo Missae* has already been established. However, there are still some who cling to this dream, insisting that there is no intrinsic problem with the *Novus Ordo* itself, but only with the abuses and experimentation that often take place during its celebration. If only the liturgy were celebrated *ad orientem* and in Latin, with the choir singing Gregorian chant and polyphony, then all will be well, they say. Yet the truth of the matter is that the so-called “smells and bells” are of little consequence here: the *Novus Ordo* itself, even before the deviations arise, is contrary to the unity of the Church, and therefore cannot be regarded as a Catholic rite.

The Church teaches that when a priest celebrates Mass, he acts *in persona Christi*, and not in his own name. The rubrics of the traditional Mass instruct him on what exactly he must do at each particular moment and leave no room for personal experimentation. It is no longer his individual personality that matters, but his office, by which he is authorized by the Church to offer sacrifice worthily so that God may be worshiped the way He intends to be worshiped. Unity, rather than individualism, defines the structure and constitution of the traditional Mass, and it is clear that the priest is the one who offers sacrifice to God, eliminating the risk that his personal idiosyncrasies will distract the faithful. While abuses are still technically possible, the celebrant must specifically and very intentionally go out of his way to commit these abuses.

In many diocesan parishes, one may find conservative parishioners consciously choose their Mass times based on the celebrant. In other cases, one may find an unfortunate soul who is reduced to attending a new parish every week, hoping to find one with a moderate level of decency where his discomfort is reduced to a minimum. Such a person may ask himself: who commits the fewest abuses, who uses more Latin and Gregorian chant, and who banishes the annoying guitars and terrible folk music? All things considered, we can know that the Church is in crisis by the simple fact that individual Catholics have to sift through the ranks of the clergy to find someone whose liturgical style is less outrageous than the average.

And this is the problem: the celebration of the *Novus Ordo* has always been, and always will be, contingent upon the preferences of the celebrant. Deviations from the rubrics are far easier in the new rite, not simply due to the existence of too many options for penitential rites, responsorial psalms, readings, Eucharistic prayers, memorial acclamations, etc., but due to its spirit, wherein the priest’s personality takes precedence over the worship of God. Having undermined the role of the priest by taking attention away from the concept of sacrifice, it is inevitable that the liturgy will be handed over to the “style” of the celebrant. By shifting the emphasis from God to man, the construction of the *Novus Ordo* itself not only opens up the possibility of abuse, but actively encourages it: the atrocities from the 1970s and 80s, far from being merely unintended consequences of the so-called “reform,” were in fact a constituent part of it.

This means that even the priest who attempts to celebrate the new liturgy reverently will eventually find that it is *still* his individual personality, rather than God, which has become the focus of the liturgy. With this humanistic spirit, it is inevitable that the *Novus Ordo* will cause disunity, given that every individual personality is different. Even if all the various options were eliminated, the very nature of the new Mass, which is centered upon man, would still cause this disunity. And if the liturgy conforms itself to the whims of mere fallen men, then what stops the priest from overstepping his bounds? When Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre informed Pope Paul VI that there were twenty-three Eucharistic prayers being used in France, the pope responded that the true number was likely somewhere in the hundreds. This is a case of “give him an inch and he will take a mile”: the immediate explosion of such experimentation would not have been possible if the new liturgy in itself were not ordered to encouraging abuse.

Now one may object that this is an extreme example, and that the liturgical reform can simply be reformed again, such as by eliminating the excessive number of options and restoring the Roman Canon. However, this misses the point. It is not about one *quality* or another of the *Novus Ordo*, but its very *spirit* as a man-made, man-centered liturgy, designed specifically to be adapted to the subjective and superficial whims of fallen human beings. The parishioner who chooses his Mass times based on the celebrant should ask himself: is there not a problem with the fact that it takes a specific, rare, and exceptional kind of priest to celebrate the Mass “properly”? Bishop Athanasius Schneider’s *Novus Ordo* would certainly be more reverent than Father Joe’s guitar Mass, but is there not a problem with the fact that the faithful’s right to a reverent liturgy can only be fulfilled by looking for an exceptional celebrant like Bishop Schneider?

If the reverence of the liturgy is contingent upon the personal style of the celebrant, then the entire purpose of the liturgy, which ought to transcend the superficial personal whims of individuals, is undermined. The Mass, instituted by Our Lord, ought to sanctify the people so that they may save their souls, but the artificial fabrication of the *Novus Ordo* is predicated upon having supposedly already-holy people and “experts” sanctify the Mass, as though the gift of God were insufficient and needed to be replaced by mere creatures. The reform of the reform, despite its good intentions in calling for more reverent liturgies, is simply a continuation of this error: it treats the liturgy as a man-made invention, prone to human error which then must be fixed by other human beings. And when a frustrated Catholic attends different parishes week after week to find a *Novus Ordo* that does not offend his sensibilities, he too is seeking a merely human solution to the problem, a solution that lies in vetting each celebrant according to his individual style.

Given the diversity of human personalities, this man-made, man-centered liturgy will always be intrinsically ordered to disunity, regardless of whether a priest chooses to incorporate traditional elements into it. While those priests who try to celebrate the *Novus Ordo* as well as they can to offer God more reverence are to be commended for their efforts, sooner or later, they will have to recognize the fundamental issue: *the Mass is not about them*. In the midst of attempting to assert their own liturgical style over the defective framework of the *Novus Ordo* by adopting some “smells and bells,” they run the risk of missing the point entirely: the liturgy should not have to be theirs to fix. The traditional Latin Mass, established by Our Lord and refined through organic development guided by the Holy Ghost over the course of Church history,

does not require them to consciously add traditional elements, as they are built into the constitution of the liturgy itself.

The Church, as one fold under one shepherd, possesses four marks that distinguish her from false churches, and the first of these marks is her oneness: her unity in faith, governance, and liturgical practice. As a man-centered liturgy, subject to the personal preferences and styles of human celebrants, the *Novus Ordo Missae* causes disunity by its very nature due to its individualistic spirit, and so it is out of accord with the identity of the Church. Consequently, it cannot be regarded as a Catholic rite, even if it is still valid in principle. The reform of the reform will never be sufficient, and the addition of some “smells and bells” will never fix the problems inherent in the *Novus Ordo*, which attacks the very identity of the Church; thus, we should attend the traditional Mass not only for the sake of a better aesthetic experience, but for the sake of Catholic doctrine itself.