FIRST THINGS

RETURN TO FORM

A CALL FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE ROMAN RITE

by

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The times in which a new form is born are extremely rare in the history of mankind. Great forms are characterized by their ability to outlive the age in which they emerge and to pursue their path through all history's hiatuses and upheavals. The Greek column with its Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian capitals is such a form, as is the Greek tragedy with its invention of dialogue that still lives on in the silliest soap opera. The Greeks regarded tradition itself as a precious object; it was tradition that created legitimacy. Among the Greeks, tradition stood under collective protection. The violation of tradition was called *tyrannis*—tyranny is the act of violence that damages a traditional form that has been handed down.

One form that has effortlessly overleaped the constraints of the ages is the Holy Mass of the Roman Church, the parts of which grew organically over centuries and were finally united at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. It was then that the missal of the Roman pope, which since late antiquity had never succumbed to heretical attack, was prescribed for universal use by Catholic Christendom throughout the West. If one considers the course of human history, it is nothing short of remarkable that the Roman Rite has survived the most violent catastrophes unaltered.

Without a doubt, the Roman Rite draws strength and vitality from its origin. It can be traced back to the apostolic age. Its form is intimately connected with the decades in which Christianity was established, the moment in history the Gospel calls the "fullness of time." Something new had begun, and this newness, the most decisive turning point in world history, was empowered

to take shape, take on form. Indeed, this newness came above all in the assumption of form. God the Creator took on the form of man, his creature. This is the faith of Christianity: In Christ all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form, even in that of a dead body. Spirit takes form. From this point on, this form is inseparable from the Spirit; the Risen One and Savior, returning to his Father, retains for all eternity the wounds of his death by torture. The attributes of corporeality assume infinite significance. The Christian Rite, of which the Roman Rite is an ancient part, thus became an incessant repetition of the Incarnation, and just as there is no limb of the human body that can be removed without harm or detriment, the Council of Trent decreed that, with respect to the liturgy of the Church, none of its parts can be neglected as unimportant or inessential without damage to the whole.

It is said that every apparently new thing has always been with us. Alas, this doesn't seem to be the case. The industrial revolution, science as a replacement for religion, and the phenomenon of the wonderful and limitless increase in money (without a similar increase in its material equivalent) have given rise to a new mentality, one that finds it increasingly difficult to perceive the fusion of spirit and matter, the spiritual content of reality that those who lived in the preindustrial world across thousands of years took for granted. The forces that determine our lives have become invisible. None of them has found an aesthetic representation. In a time that is overloaded with images, they have lost the power to take form, with the result that the powers that govern our lives have an intangible, indeed, a demonic quality. Along with the inability to create images that made even the portrait of an individual a problem for the twentieth century, our contemporaries have lost the experience of reality. For reality is always first seized in a heightened form that is pregnant with meaning.

In a period such as the present, unable to respond to images and forms, incessantly misled by a noisy art market, all experimentation that tampers with the Roman Rite as it has developed through the centuries could only be perilous and potentially fatal. In any case, this tampering is unnecessary. For the rite that came from late antique Mediterranean Christianity was not "relevant" in the European Middle Ages, nor in the Baroque era, nor in missionary lands outside

Europe. The South American Indians and West Africans must have found it even stranger, if possible, than any twentieth-century European who complained that it was "no longer relevant"—whereas it was precisely among those people that the Roman Rite enjoyed its greatest missionary successes. When the inhabitants of Gaul, England, and Germany became Catholic, they understood no Latin and were illiterate; the question of the correct understanding of the Mass was entirely independent of a capacity to follow its literal expression. The peasant woman who said the rosary during Mass, knowing that she was in the presence of Christ's sacrifice, understood the rite better than our contemporaries who comprehend every word but fail to engage with such knowledge because the present form of the Mass, drastically altered, no longer allows for its full expression.

This sad diminution of spiritual understanding is to be expected, given the atmosphere in which the revision of the Roman Rite was undertaken. It was done during the fateful years around 1968, the years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and a worldwide revolt against tradition and authority after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The council had upheld the Roman Rite for the most part and emphasized the role of Latin as the traditional language of worship, as well as the role of Gregorian chant. But then, by order of Paul VI, liturgical experts in their ivory towers created a new missal that was not warranted by the provisions for renewal set forth by the council fathers. This overreaching caused a breach in the dike. In a short time, the Roman Rite was changed beyond recognition. This was a break with tradition like nothing the Church in its long history has experienced—if one disregards the Protestant revolution, erroneously named "the Reformation," with which the post-conciliar form of the liturgy actually has a great deal in common.

The break would have been irreparable had not a certain bishop, who had participated in the council (and signed the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in good faith, assuming that it would be the standard for a "careful" review of the sacred books) pronounced an intransigent "no" to this work of reform. It was the French missionary archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and his priestly society under the patronage of Saint Pius X whom we have to thank that the thread of tradition,

which had become perilously thin, did not break altogether. This marked one of the spectacular ironies in which the history of the Church is rich: The sacrament, which has as its object the obedience of Jesus to the will of the Father, was saved by disobedience to an order of the pope. Even someone who finds Lefebvre's disobedience unforgiveable must concede that, without it, Pope Benedict XVI would have found no ground for *Summorum Pontificum*, his famous letter liberating the celebration of the Tridentine Mass. Without Lefebvre's intransigence, the Roman Rite almost certainly would have disappeared without a trace in the atmosphere of anti-traditional persecution. For the Roman Rite was repressed without mercy, and that repression, supposedly in the service of a new, "open" Church, was made possible by a final surge of the centralized power of the papacy that characterized the Church prior to the council and is no longer possible—another irony of that era. Protests by the faithful and by priests were dismissed and handled contemptuously. The Catholic Church in the twentieth century showed no more odious face than in the persecution of the ancient rite that had, until that time, given the Church her identifiable form. The prohibition of the rite was accomplished with iconoclastic fury in countless churches. Those years saw the desecration of places of worship, the tearing down of altars, the tumbling of statues, and the scrapping of precious vestments.

If you cannot abide the disobedience of Archbishop Lefebvre—because it is more than a little sinister that something redemptive for the Church should arise directly from the grievous sin of disobedience to ecclesiastical authority—you may comfort yourself with the thought that his act of conscious disobedience on the particular point of the Roman Rite was not that at all. When Pope Benedict had the greatness of soul to issue *Summorum Pontificum*, he not only reintroduced the Roman Rite into the liturgy of the Church but declared that it had never been forbidden, because it could never be forbidden. No pope and no council possess the authority to invalidate, abolish, or forbid a rite that is so deeply rooted in the history of the Church.

Not only the liberal and Protestant enemies of the Roman Rite but also its defenders, who in a decades-long struggle had begun to give up hope, could barely contain their astonishment. Everyone still had the strict prohibitions of countless bishops echoing in their ears, threats of

excommunication and subtle accusations. And one hardly dared draw the conclusion that, in view of Pope Benedict's correcting of the wrongful suppression of the Roman Rite, Blessed Pope Paul VI had apparently been in error when he expressed his strong conviction that the rite long entrusted to the Church should never again be celebrated anywhere in the world. Benedict XVI did even more: He explained that there was only a single Roman Rite which possesses two forms, one "ordinary" and the other "extraordinary"—the latter term referring to the traditional rite. In this way, the traditional form was made the standard for the newly revised form. The pope expressed the wish that the two forms should mutually fructify and enrich each other. It is therefore natural to assume that the new rite, with its great flexibility and many possible forms of celebration, must draw near to the older, steady, and fixed form of the Roman Rite, which provides no latitude whatsoever for encroachments or modifications of any kind. According to the approach stipulated by Benedict's letter, the celebrant of the new form of the rite is even required to celebrate the Mass in both forms, and must do so with the same spirit if he does not want to contradict the truth that he is dealing with a single rite in two forms.

Whenever Pope Benedict spoke of a mutual influence and enrichment between the two forms of the rite, he surely did so with an ulterior motive. He believed in organic development in the area of liturgy. He condemned the revolution in the liturgy that coincided with the revolutionary year 1968, and he saw the connection between the liturgical revolution and the cultural one in world-historical terms, for both contradict the ideal of organic evolution and development. He regarded it as a serious offense against the spirit of the Church that the peremptory order of a pope should be taken as warrant to encroach upon the collective heritage of all preceding generations. After decades of use throughout the world, Benedict not only considered it a practical impossibility simply to prohibit the new rite with its serious flaws, but in all likelihood he also perceived that such an act, even if it had been feasible, would have continued along the erroneous path taken by his predecessor, one of reform by fiat. The correct path would be found, so he hoped, in a gradual growing together of the old and new forms, a process to be encouraged and gently fostered by the pope.

This hope of restored liturgical continuity was connected to the concept of a "reform of the reform," a notion Benedict had already introduced when he was a cardinal. What Ratzinger wished to encourage with the idea of reform of the reform is exactly what the council fathers at Vatican II had in mind when they formulated *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. They wanted to allow exceptions to the use of Latin as the common language of the liturgy, insofar as it should be beneficial to the salvation of souls. That the vernacular was presented as the exception only emphasized the immense significance of Latin as the language of the Church. They imagined a certain streamlining of the rite, such as the elimination of the preparatory prayer at the steps of the altar and the closing Gospel reading, which would have been highly lamentable losses without any noteworthy advantages, but which would not have damaged the essence of the liturgy. Of course they left the ancient *offertorium* untouched. These prayers over the bread and wine make clear the priestly and sacrificial character of the Mass and are therefore essential. Among these, the *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Holy Spirit who will consecrate the offerings, is especially important. According to the apostolic tradition, which includes the eastern Roman Empire, this prayer of consecration is critical.

There can be no question that the council fathers regarded the Roman Canon as absolutely binding. The celebration of the liturgy *ad orientem*, facing eastward to the Lord who is coming again, was also uncontested by the majority of council fathers. Even those who undertook the Pauline reform of the Mass and who swept aside the will of the council fathers didn't dare touch this ancient and continuous practice. It was the spirit of the 1968 revolution that gained control of the liturgy and removed the worship of God from the center of the Catholic rite, installing in its place a clerical-instructional interaction between the priest and the congregation. The council fathers also desired no change in the tradition of church music. It is with downright incredulity that one reads these and other passages of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, for their plain sense was given exactly the opposite meaning by the enthusiastic defenders of post-conciliar "development." One cannot say that Ratzinger's call for a reform of the reform intended in any way to go back "behind the council," as the antagonists of Pope Benedict have maintained. As

any fair-minded reading of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* makes clear, the reform of the reform has no goal other than realizing the agenda of the council.

Pope Benedict proceeded very carefully. He pursued his plan through general remarks and observations. While still a cardinal, he let it be known that the demand for celebration of the Eucharist *versus populum*, facing the congregation, is based in error. He endorsed the scholarly work of the theologian Klaus Gamber, who provided proof that never in her history, aside from a very few exceptions, had the Church celebrated the liturgy facing the congregation. Ratzinger pleaded that, if it is impossible for the altar to be turned around, priests should place a large crucifix on the altar so that they can face it during the prayers of consecration. He fought with varying success for the correction of the words of institution that, with the introduction of the vernacular, had been falsely translated in many places. For example, in contradiction to the wording of the Greek text, one hears from the altar that Christ had offered the chalice of his blood "for all" (a reprehensible presumption of salvation) instead of the correct phrase "for many." In Germany, the land of the Reformation that most strenuously resisted Ratzinger, the erroneous translation remains uncorrected to this day.

Other attempts at a reform of the reform might have followed these, but all would have had slim chance of success. One of the most important consequences of the Second Vatican Council has been the destruction of the organizational structure of the Church by the introduction of national bishops' conferences, something entirely alien to classical canon law. This diminishes the direct relationship of each individual bishop to the pope; every Vatican intervention in local abuses shatters when it hits the concrete wall of the respective bishops' conference. This is what happened recently when the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship called for a return to the celebration of the Eucharist *ad orientem.* After an outcry of indignation, mainly from English clerics, the request, which was entirely justified, had to be dropped immediately.

Pope Benedict himself undertook no further attempts in this direction. One may well say that he gave up his deeply felt desire for a reform of the reform when he arrived at the decision, in its

essence still puzzling, to abdicate. He must have known that few in positions of power in the uppermost reaches of the Church's hierarchy had pursued the reform of the reform with the same conviction as he did. When he withdrew, he effectively gave up this project. He then had to witness his successor, far from shying away from the issue, actually condemning in quite explicit terms any thought of a reform of the reform. Therefore the greatest achievement of Pope Benedict, at least in a liturgical sense, will remain *Summorum Pontificum*. With this instrument he accorded the Roman Rite a secure place in the life of the Church, one protected by canon law.

Anyone who thinks that this does not amount to much is simply unaware of the long decades that preceded these official documents. They were, to use the words of Friedrich Hölderlin, "leaden times." No one who has a clear picture of the state of the present Church and of the world in general could hope that a single pope, during a single pontificate, would be able to correct the defective liturgical development that was encouraged by a mentality antagonistic to spiritual realities. But everyone who worked to keep the Roman Rite alive was aware of the endless obstacles placed in their path. These obstacles have not disappeared everywhere, but it is impossible to ignore the great difference *Summorum Pontificum* has made. The places where the Tridentine Mass is celebrated today have multiplied. The traditional Roman Rite can now be celebrated in proper churches, which causes many people to forget the cellars and courtyards where those who loved the ancient rite long maintained a fugitive existence. The number of young priests with a love for the Tridentine Mass has increased considerably, as has the number of older priests who have begun to learn it. More and more bishops are prepared to celebrate confirmation and holy orders according to the old rite.

These facts may give little comfort to those who have the misfortune to live in a country where this renewal of the ancient form is nowhere to be seen—and there are more than enough such regions. The time has come to set aside a widespread assumption in the Catholic Church that the liturgy and religious education are in good hands with the clergy. This encourages passivity among the faithful, who believe that they do not have to concern themselves with these matters. This is not so. The great liturgical crisis following the Second Vatican Council, which was part

of a larger crisis of faith and authority, put an end to the illusion that the laity need not be involved.

The now decades-old movement for the restoration of the Roman Rite has been to a considerable extent a lay movement. The position of priests who support the Roman Rite was and will be strengthened by *Summorum Pontificum*, and hopefully the cause of the Tridentine Mass will receive further support from the eagerly awaited reconciliation of the Society of St. Pius X with the Holy See. Yet this does not change the fact that it will be the laity who will be decisive in bringing about the success of efforts to reform the reform. The laity of today differs from the laity of forty years ago. They had precise knowledge of the Roman Rite and took its loss bitterly and contested it. The young people who are turning to the Roman Rite today often did not know it as children. They are not, as Pope Francis erroneously presumes, nostalgically longing for a lost time. On the contrary, they are experiencing the Roman Rite as something new. It opens an entire world to them, the exploration of which promises to be inexhaustibly fascinating. It is true that those who discover the Roman Rite today and relish its formal exactness and rigorous orthodoxy are naturally an elite group, yet not in a social sense. Theirs is a higher mystical receptivity and an aesthetic sensitivity to the difference between truth and falsehood. As Johan Huizinga, author of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, established nearly a century ago, there exists a close connection between orthodoxy and an appreciation of style.

The vast majority of the faithful have in the meantime never known anything else but the revised Mass in its countless manifestations. They have lost any sense of the spiritual wealth of the Church and in many cases simply are not capable of following the old rite. They should not be criticized on account of this. The Tridentine Mass demands a lifetime of education, and the post-conciliar age is characterized, among other things, by the widespread abandonment of religious instruction. The Catholic religion with its high number of believers has actually become the most unknown religion in the world, especially to its own adherents. While there are many Catholics who feel repelled and offended by the superficiality of the new rite as it is frequently celebrated today, by the odious music, the puritanical kitsch, the trivialization of dogma, and the

profane character of new church buildings, the gap that has opened up in the forty years between the traditional rite and the new Mass is very deep, often unbridgeable. The challenge becomes more difficult because one of the peculiarities of the old rite is that it makes itself accessible only slowly—unless the uninitiated newcomer to this ancient pattern of worship is a religious genius. One has never "learned everything there is to learn" about the Roman Rite, because in its very origin and essence this enduring and truly extraordinary form is hermetic, presupposing arcane discipline and rigorous initiation.

If the Tridentine Mass is to prosper, the ground must be prepared for a new generation to receive such an initiation. Pope Benedict disappointed many advocates of the old liturgy because he did not do more for them. He refused the urgent requests to celebrate the Latin Mass at least once as pope, something he had occasionally done while a cardinal. But this refusal stems from the fact that he believed—no matter how welcome such a celebration would have been—that the reinstitution of the old rite, like all significant movements in the history of the Church, must come from below, not as a result of a papal decree from above. In the meantime, the post-conciliar work of destruction has wounded multitudes of the faithful. Unless a change of mind and a desire for a return to the sacred begin to sprout in countless individual hearts, administrative actions by Rome, however well-intentioned and sound, can affect little.

Summorum Pontificum makes priests and the laity responsible for the Roman Rite's future—if it means a lot to them. It is up to them to celebrate it in as many places as possible, to win over for it as many people as possible, and to disseminate the arcane knowledge concerning its sacred mysteries. The odium of disobedience and defiance against the Holy See has been spared them by Pope Benedict's promulgation, and they are making use of the right granted them by the Church's highest legislator, but this right only has substance if it is claimed and used. The law is there. No Catholic can, as was possible not long ago, contend that fostering the Roman Rite runs counter to the will of the Church.

Perhaps it is even good that, despite *Summorum Pontificum*, the Tridentine Mass is still not promoted by the great majority of bishops. If it is a true treasure without which the Church would not be itself, then it will not be won until it has been fought for. Its loss was a spiritual catastrophe for the Church and had disastrous consequences far beyond the liturgy, and that loss can only be overcome by a widespread spiritual renewal. It is not necessarily a bad thing that members of the hierarchy, in open disobedience to *Summorum Pontificum*, continue to put obstacles in the way of champions of the Roman Rite. As we learn in the lives of the saints and the orders they founded, the established authorities typically persecute with extreme mistrust new movements and attempt to suppress them. This is one of the constants of church history, and it characterizes every unusual spiritual effort, indeed, every true reform, for true reform consists of putting on the bridle, of returning to a stricter order. This is the trial by fire that all reformers worthy of their name had to endure. The Roman Rite will be won back in hundreds of small chapels, in improvised circumstances throughout the whole world, celebrated by young priests with congregations that have many small children, or it will not be won back at all.

Recapturing the fullness of the Church's liturgy is now a matter for the young. Those who experienced the abolition and uncanonical proscription of the old rite in the late 1960s were formed by the liturgical praxis of the 1950s and the decades prior. It may sound surprising, but this praxis was not the best in many countries. The revolution that was to disfigure the Mass cast a long shadow ahead of itself. In many cases, the liturgical practice was such that people no longer believed in the mystagogical power of the rite. In many countries, the liturgical architecture of the rite was obscured or even dismantled. There were silent Masses during which a prayer leader incessantly recited prayers in the vernacular that were not always translations of the Latin prayers, and in a number of places Gregorian chant played a subordinate role. Those who are twenty or thirty today have no bad habits of these sorts. They can experience the rite in its new purity, free of the incrustations of the more recent past.

The great damage caused by the liturgical revolution after Vatican II consists above all in the way in which the Church lost the conviction with which all Catholics—illiterate goatherds, maids

and laborers, Descartes and Pascal—naturally took part in the Church's sacred worship. Up until then, the rite was among the riches of the poor, who, through it, entered into a world that was otherwise closed to them. They experienced in the old Mass the life to come as well as life in the present, an experience of which only artists and mystics are otherwise capable. This loss of shared transcendence available to the most humble cannot be repaired for generations, and this great loss is what makes the ill-considered reform of the Mass so reprehensible. It is a moral outrage that those who gutted the Roman Rite because of their presumption and delusion were permitted to rob a future generation of their full Catholic inheritance. Yet it is now at least possible for individuals and for small groups to gradually win back a modicum of un-self-conscious familiarity with even the most arcane prayers of the Church. Today, children can grow into the rite and thus attain a new, more advanced level of spiritual participation.

The movement for the old rite, far from indicating aesthetic self-satisfaction, has, in truth, an apostolic character. It has been observed that the Roman Rite has an especially strong effect on converts, indeed, that it has even brought about a considerable number of conversions. Its deep rootedness in history and its alignment with the end of the world create a sacred time antithetical to the present, a present that, with its acquisitive preoccupations, leaves many people unsatisfied. Above all, the old rite runs counter to the faith in progress that has long gone hand in hand with an economic mentality that is now curdling into anxiety regarding the future and even a certain pessimism. This contradiction with the spirit of our present age should not be lamented. It betokens, rather, a general awakening from a two-hundred-year-old delusion. Christians always knew that the world fell because of original sin and that, as far as the course of history is concerned, it offers no reason at all for optimism. The Catholic religion is, in the words of T. S. Eliot, a "philosophy of disillusionment" that does not suppress hope, but rather teaches us not to direct our hope toward something that the world cannot give. The liturgy of Rome and, naturally, Greek Orthodoxy's Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom open a window that draws our gaze from time into eternity.

Reform is a return to form. The movement that seeks to restore the form of the Latin Rite is still an avant-garde, attracting young people who find modern society suffocating. But it can only be a truly Christian avant-garde if it does not forget those it leads into battle; it must not forget the multitude who will someday have to find their way back into the abundant richness of the Catholic religion, once the generations who, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, sought the salvation of the Church in its secularization have sunk into their graves.

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