

LITURGICAL CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

(Reprinted from *Social Justice Review*, with permission of the editor, who prefaced the article with these words: "This is a layman's reflection on the recent definition of a liturgist, 'an affliction sent by God so that those Christians who have never suffered for their faith may not be denied the opportunity to do so.' It is justified by the observation of James Hitchcock: 'The crisis of worship currently affecting the Church is perhaps the most serious of its many crises.'")¹

I entered the Catholic Church in 1952, having been reconciled from Byzantine Greek Orthodoxy. Among the factors which influenced a difficult decision to become a Catholic was the powerful spiritual attraction exercised by a hieratic Latin liturgy whose beautiful Gregorian chants and splendid polyphony drew a poor sinner into the contemplation of that supernatural world of heavenly glory where the living God dwells in awesome majesty and purity—together with his angels and saints. The divine liturgy for Eastern Orthodox peoples is truly "heaven on earth," and it was immensely reassuring to me that in embracing Catholic orthodoxy I would have to sacrifice none of the richness of liturgical worship characteristic of the magnificent Byzantine liturgy. I rejoiced that a common liturgical piety was shared with Catholics of the Roman rite and that a worship worthy of God was also evident in the sacred ceremonies and luminous liturgical atmosphere of Latin rite churches—and carried out with meticulous care in the great Benedictine monastic abbeys and monasteries devoted to liturgical study. I felt at home participating in the Roman liturgy whose theocratic quality reflected much of the religious climate of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom which is

beautifully balanced between reverential fear, awe before God's majesty and humble love, piety and childlike fondness; there is a proper tension between very acute awareness of Christ's divinity and transcendence and the tender affection that is manifest in His unutterable mercy.²

For Catholics too, the liturgy

... is the earthly version of the liturgy celebrated in heaven amidst the angels and blessed by the sovereign High-Priest according to the order of Melchisedech. It is the *divine* liturgy. For the eyes of faith it is the contemplation of invisible reality, evidence of the eschatological hope. It is the spiritual reality of that worship in spirit and in truth whose whole value lies in its dependence on the one single sacrifice of Jesus Christ.³

I shall never forget the experience of entering a Catholic church while a "seeking" university student and hearing the *Missa de Angelis* sung by the children of the parish at a morning Mass. There are countless testimonies to the power of truly sacred liturgy and music to attract souls to the beauty and wonder of Jesus Christ, the Revelation of God.

There is no doubt in the mind of many Catholics that the authentic liturgical reforms decided upon by legitimate ecclesiastical authority and set forth in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council were both eminently desirable and urgently needed. The living participation of the people (*actuosa participatio populi*) in a sung liturgy (#113, 114, 118, 120 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) had long been the hope of the dedicated pioneers of the liturgical movement eager to draw upon the rich fount of liturgical experience rooted in the mystagogic theology of the fathers of the Church—both east and west. Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* could only be welcomed in its declared efforts to renew the liturgy. Formalism, exaggerated rubricism, and other

barriers (including language) standing in the way of truly communitarian liturgy were to be removed. Moreover, certain deficient spiritual attitudes were to be corrected. One writer, for example, has noted the spirit of pragmatism and consumerism which gripped the mentality of some of the clergy in the pre-conciliar Church:

The philosophy of consumerism is that you outwit the merchant, get the most mileage out of the dollar. If the consumerist society is thus bargain minded that is all to the good, except that the mentality transfers itself over into the worship patterns. Low Mass is a better "bargain" than high Mass. It doesn't take as long ... Put the Mass on the basement bargain counter. And let them come in their bermudas and halters.

A few sentimental ballads were enough music for some of the clergy. Anything more of the arts was unmanly if not immoral. Many priests were narrow. Their education seldom reached out beyond the trade. The ball game and the usual tid-bits of clerical gossip were the fare conversation wise. They read little, prayed less, built and drank much. Be it to their everlasting glory and honor that they upheld the Creed and the Commandments, especially the sixth of the latter. They were liturgically moronic. If the chausable went on straight it was a minor miracle. The philistinism and anti-intellectualism of the clergy imprinted themselves upon the Church in America much to the detriment of any embellishment of worship. Masses were on the hour every hour 7 to 11 and no sermon May through October.⁴

Now, fifteen years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, it is clear that a profound *liturgical malaise*—far worse than anything in the pre-conciliar Church—grips the Church in the United States and Canada. Millions of Catholics have been alienated from the Catholic Church by the incredible experimentation and faddism marking the celebration of the *Novus Ordo* in all too many parishes.⁵

The mystery, reverence, awe, and splendour which have traditionally surrounded the sacred action of Christ the High Priest in the Mass have been frankly replaced only too often by the lust for innovation, the introduction of eccentric practices, and the loss of the *sacred* which have proven an occasion of scandal for many. Writing in *The Priest* magazine, Fr. Rawley Myers lamented:

At the very time when our congregations are more educated and more appreciative of beauty, we have turned away from our rich tradition of the beautiful in the Church in this country. In music we have substituted for our old and beautiful music the singing of foot-stomping Methodist-type handclappers. And in our spoken liturgy we have been given prayers and readings that use a simplistic language that is trite at the first reading let alone the one hundredth.

... Have businessmen gotten in control of the Church? Liturgists certainly have turned our worship into a very businesslike affair. The language of our liturgy is now the unadorned, unimaginative, unattractive and shabby language of the business world, ordinary English with all the beauty and magic of poetical language squeezed out. (December 1976)

Another observer has noted:

The wretched idolatry of tinkering with sacred realities, has, unfortunately

penetrated the Church and produced only too often a mediocrity-ridden liturgical celebration, a show for spectators that distracts from the holy, frustrates intimate communion with God and vulgarizes, where it does not suppress, sacred actions, symbols, music and words.⁶

Not unexpectedly, the “professional liturgists” who bear much of the responsibility for the liturgical debacle which has in turn brought great suffering and shame to millions of Catholics, appear pastorally unrepentant for the disaster. When Cambridge classics scholar, Christopher Monckton, noted some 400 errors in the new rite of Mass as translated by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL)—errors ranging from mere grammatical points to free renderings bearing no resemblance to the original Latin—Fr. John Rotelle, OSA, former associate director of the secretariat for the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) and presently executive secretary of ICEL, replied in an interview: “I see little to be dissatisfied with in the present translation.” For his part, Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughn of New York declared: “What has happened with the present translation is that the sacral language has been toned down, references to the sacred, and to God, wind up eliminated in the modern translation.”⁷

Writing in 1975, sociologist Andrew Greeley observed that a 47 percent decline in Mass attendance in the U.S. represented:

one of the most drastic declines in religious practice in the whole of human history. To make matters worse, the weekly church attendance for those under 40 has fallen beneath 30 percent. Substantially less than a third of the Catholic adults in the country are going to Mass every week.⁸

There is nothing in the behavior of the leadership of the American church which would give you the slightest hint that they feel any sense of urgency, much less an awareness that they are in the middle of one of the worst disasters in the history of Christendom—a 30 percentage point decline in a mere 15 years.⁹

It should be added of course that the *causes* of this decline have been consistently distorted in Fr. Greeley’s writings.¹⁰

Nevertheless, an endless stream of books, magazines and articles by “progressive liturgists” have trumpeted the triumph of their “renewal of the Church,” promoting the increased secularization of Catholic liturgical experience. The reaction was inevitable (as new liturgical abuses replaced old ones)—as even liberal activist Dan Herr was forced to admit:

The liturgist claimed victory too soon. You can lead a man or woman to a pew but you can’t make them like it. You can teach them to sing but they may even refuse to open their mouths. You can call a celebrant a president, you can fill the sanctuary with a variety of people, you can eliminate the abuses of the old way, you can have the laity answer a few prayers and try to persuade them they are “participaing.” But when we added it all together, the result was not only less than promised, it was downright miserable and before long more and more American Catholics began to say so either with their feet by staying home or by complaining when they did attend.¹¹

The impact of doctrinal confusion as well as senseless liturgical experimentation

pandering to the young has been summarized by Professor James Hitchcock of St. Louis University:

There has been a substantial loss of young people to the Church during the period of change, and although there are many possible reasons for this, one in particular has not been recognized—that younger Catholics during the past decade have had no experience of a stable and self-confident Church able to hand on its beliefs with assurance and authority. In thousands of ways what young people have received in the Church is a situation of seemingly boundless confusion, internal conflict, and steady disintegration.¹²

Hitchcock's *The Recovery of the Sacred*, published in 1974, analyzed with great penetration the illusions of progressivist theologians and liturgists. For these proponents of "Americanized liturgy," it was evident that the crucial distinction between the sacred and the profane had simply disappeared from their theological horizon. Liturgy had been reduced to a process of "praying and partying" intended to enhance interpersonal relationships and to serve the needs of the human community. (As a priest-speaker exclaimed to the delighted audience of a Milwaukee liturgy seminar: "Have parties. I like that kind of Christianity!") A consequence has been the displacement of traditional sacral liturgy by informal, casual and spontaneous celebrations (utilizing profane techniques and gimmicks such as audio-visuals) and the stressing of "creativity" by "planners." This was inevitable, of course, given the de-emphasis of Catholic *doctrine* concerning the Mass as sacrifice and paschal banquet. For too many "liturgy teams" intent on "planning climactic experiences of faith," fostering "peak experiences" and "sensitivity," liturgy was clearly no longer the celebration of the sacred mysteries of Jesus Christ, no longer the experience of the sacred and the holy, the glorification of God and the sanctification of men. The Holy Sacrifice appeared transformed into the celebration of human creativity, the celebration of socialized human activity, the experience of humanitarian benevolence and fulfillment—the joyous celebration of narcissistic and liberated American Pelagians mewling endlessly about "luv." How many Catholics have indeed become "floaters" from parish to parish in the attempt to find a liturgical celebration void of the excesses which destroy the believer's capacity for prayer, interior recollection, and contemplation of heavenly things! How many other Catholics have accepted as normal accouterments of an "American liturgy"—in the name of "renewal"—the silly banners ("Smile, God loves you!"), balloons, dancing girls in leotards, hordes of extraordinary lay ministers milling in the sanctuary, ugly tables, potato sack vestments, Raggedy Ann costumes, frenetic guitar Masses, hootenanny Masses, puppet Masses, jazz Masses, polka Masses, and the antics disfiguring "charismatic" Masses. "They celebrate themselves more than they celebrate God," said the great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in commenting upon similar travesties of Catholic worship.¹³ Though Msgr. George A. Kelly does not devote a chapter on liturgy in his remarkable book, *The Battle for the American Church* (1979), it is evident that the battle has also been fought on the plane of liturgical theory, experimentation, and polarization.

If Catholic liturgy is indeed what the great fathers of the Church have declared it to be (and it is): "The piety of the Spouse for her heavenly Bridegroom," than the liturgical scandals of the past few years which have alienated millions of church-goers, must be said to manifest an especially grievous species of *impiety*. In 1972, Fr. Henri de Lubac had already denounced the *doctrinal inversion* responsible for the "confused mentality" of

liturgists clearly influenced by the various intellectual currents feeding a revived Modernism:

According to (these) interpretations, in the celebration of the Eucharist it is the human community of those assembled that gives itself its own expression, so as actually to constitute itself thereby as though the celebration had no other origin than the community and no other purpose than for it to become aware of itself. Nothing more is “given from above;” the work of Christ is nothing more than a myth. Such a reversal is a perversion of faith, human self-celebration. Immanentism of this kind is not usually expressed outright. It insinuates itself into people’s minds more by omission than by positive statements or brutal negations. It penetrates by the excitement it stirs up in places of humble prayer and adoration. Need we say that such “spiritual” assemblies from which the Spirit of Christ is absent, can give rise to nothing but separatism and schisms?¹⁴

Surely, it is no longer possible to gainsay that the liturgical aberrations American Catholics have suffered from, embody—at their worst—a peculiarly suggestive form of *liturgical atheism*.

Pope Paul VI (who suffered from his own crown of thorns in an agonizing pontificate) had pointed out as early as 1967:

An even greater source of sorrow is the inclination of some to deprive the liturgy of its sacred character—to “desacralize” it (if we can even call it liturgy anymore). This necessarily leads to the desacralization of the Christian religion as well. This new outlook whose sordid roots are easy to discern, would destroy authentic Catholic worship. It leads to doctrinal, disciplinary and pastoral subversions of such magnitude that we do not hesitate to consider it deviant. We say this with sadness, not only because it evinces a spirit that runs counter to canon law, but also, because it necessarily involves the disintegration of religion.¹⁵

If some of our professional American liturgists prefer to “whistle in the dark” concerning the unscholarly, inept, and catastrophic result of their “reforms” and “adaptations” inflicted upon the faithful (taking advantage of “loopholes” in Vatican directives), perhaps they might profit from the views expressed by more detached observers. It will soon be seen that the latter agree with the pleas of many of the Catholic laity for a more beautiful, accurate, and majestic translation of the *Ordo Missae* of Pope Paul VI. So far, of course, such cries have gone unheeded, despite growing unbelief that the present banal and insipid ICEL translation (which according to one Methodist scholar has “all the splendour and flavor of a wet potato chip”) is what Vatican II intended to give the People of God! Nor, unfortunately, have the pillars of the liturgical establishment been much moved by the mountains of criticism echoed even in secular magazines. For example:

Anyone who thinks that a new prayer book will help us Anglicans should attend his nearest Roman Catholic church next Sunday to see what a mess they made of their English translation. There are plenty of such churches around for the semiilliterate. (*Time*, February 9, 1976)

The pertinent observations of eastern-rite Christians are perhaps of even greater interest:

After Vatican II, we witnessed many experiments in the Roman rite, some of them quite strange... There are certain practices which still today, 12 years after the appearance of the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, make the average Christian wonder about the extent, the mode and the reasonableness of these changes ... I attended a Roman rite Mass recently which began with a dance. Young girls, with quite non-liturgical notions, performed more or less acrobatic dances in front of the altar. I was stunned to disbelief. What does dancing of this kind add to the mystery of the divine liturgy? What is the purpose of this cheap exhibitionism? ... I wish I could be convinced that polka Masses, jazz Masses, folk Masses and the like are liturgically and spiritually beneficial. (Fr. Basil Shereghy in *Byzantine Catholic World*, 1975)

... One of the items in our news machine told about a priest in the Midwest who is called the polka priest. It seems that he has incorporated polka music into the Mass. In fact the canon of the Mass features a certain popular polka. Flushed by success this priest is travelling throughout the United States showing off "his wares." One begins to wonder if the liturgy is slowly becoming the theatre of the absurd. Polka Masses indeed!

We have a full-blown liturgical scandal on our hands. The sad truth is that many people are staying away from church because they are scandalized by the likes of polka Masses, nuns dancing free-style before the altar and everyone using "home-brew" versions of liturgical rites. The price that will eventually be paid for this venture into the absurd will be high.

We in the eastern rites must be careful that we are not drawn into this liturgical malaise. We have strict rules governing the administration of the sacraments and the performance of liturgical rites. They may be "old-fashioned" and restrictive, but in the long run they will serve our purposes better than experimentation that goes on unrestricted.

(Editorial writer, *Eastern Catholic Life*, August 1, 1976)

In an interesting reply to a widely-publicized letter by the great Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Professor John Lindsay Opie of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia took the occasion to excoriate the liturgical mangling indulged in by Roman Catholics:

In a little more than a decade, although the beginnings can be traced back much farther, the entire mystical and liturgical edifice of the Latin Church has been skillfully dismantled. Interior prayer and the sense of divine mystery are obviously discouraged, altars have been broken down or substituted, sacred instruments discarded or sold. Replaced by what is officially known as "service," of the attendance to the social welfare of others, asceticism is to all effects, no more. The lofty unbroken tradition of the Roman liturgy has been rejected in favor of a choice of novelties, all having in common an embarrassingly childish conceptual structure, flat insipid sentiments, awkward gestures, and a speech redolent of nothing more than solemn journalism. The relation of the traditional liturgy to this is that of an old red wine to a glass of coca-cola (Fr. Florenski once compared the Orthodox liturgy to Protestant services as an old red wine to tepid

sugared water); the effect of the combined innovations is of course to render the Church totally ineffective as a clear, hard spiritual reality.¹⁶

It may be surmised that the free-wheeling, “turned-on” Catholicism of mod squad liturgists has done grave damage to genuine ecumenism with our Eastern Orthodox brethren. Doctrinal and liturgical disorders have led hundreds of thousands of American Catholics not only to swell the growing army of the unchurched, and into the cults and sects (claiming a superior moral discipline), but also into the dissident Eastern Orthodox churches which retain a vigorous sense of tradition. One Orthodox writer has recently pleaded for an apostolate to disillusioned and disenchanting Catholics no longer attending their parishes or caring to join the Lefebvrist “Old Believers:”

The beauty of our church interior where one can worship surrounded by the icons of the saints, the purity of chant, the magnificent majesty of traditional ritual in the sacred and soul-stirring Eucharistic rite, and apostolicity: all this was once part of our western sister-church, the Roman Catholic. It no longer exists in the western Church and literally hundreds of thousands of people have left this Church. They are people who loved their sacred liturgies. Most of them cannot accept Protestant theology, and as a result go to no Church.¹⁷

It should be abundantly evident from all the preceding that a liturgical crisis of serious proportions is present in the Church. It not only threatens the doctrinal stability of the People of God in the United States and Canada in accordance with the age-old dictum *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, but it has been a distressing cause of apostasy, alienation, and apathy among the members of the Church. Moreover, it serves as a particularly serious source of *scandal* to Eastern Orthodox Christians at a time when doctrinal discussions between Catholic and Orthodox theologians have begun and which promise to be the most fruitful since those held at the Council of Florence (1439).

In November, 1971, the perceptive lay organization *Catholics United for the Faith* issued the following appeal to the American Bishops:

We ask that our Bishops press for a **more accurate** and **majestic translation** of the *Novus Ordo* more in keeping with the sacred dignity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The present Mass translation is acknowledged widely to be a “pathetically pedestrian” adaptation rather than a faithful translation of the Latin *Novus Ordo*. The desecralization of the Mass rite through inept translation does actual spiritual injury to the faithful. That sense of the sacred is sadly diminished, which our fathers felt through that beauty, power and expressiveness of language and gesture which embody splendor and reverence.

... Among some of the faithful there has already been a serious decline in their consciousness of the Mass as something uniquely sacred, full of a mysterious beauty and divine power.

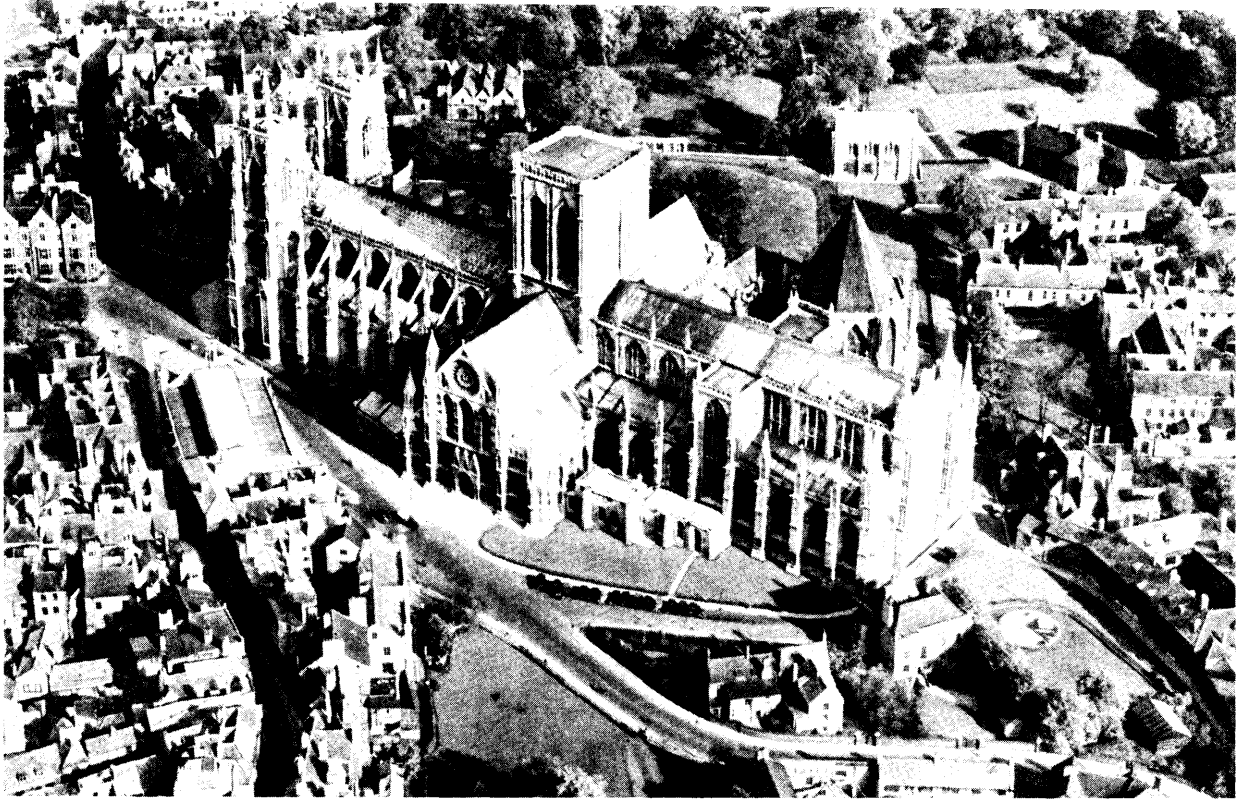
... Catholic resistance to the currents to secularization and laicization in both the Church and society cannot be nourished by a liturgy which has been overcome in itself by those very currents.¹⁸

It is a tragedy that this appeal which eloquently reflected the sentiments of the orthodox laity, went practically unheeded—with the catastrophic consequences already

delineated. Assuredly, it is time for all loyal and faithful Catholics who love the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Mass to renew that appeal now.

D.J. KALEKAS

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1. Hitchcock, James, *The Recovery of the Sacred* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. 173.
 2. LeGuillou, M.J., O.P., *The Spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy* (N.Y.: Hawthorn Books, 1962), p. 56.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 4. Buchanan, Fr. John, "Fiddling While Rome Burns," *Sacred Music*, Vol. 104, no. 2, Summer 1977; p. 4.
 5. See Hitchcock *in extenso*, *op. cit.*; and also "Is the Church Declining?" Summary by a National Opinion Research Center (NORC) research team, *Origins*, NC Documentary Service, April 8, 1976.
- Evidence of "liturgical faddism" is abundant in the pages of *Modern Liturgy*, *Today's Parish*, *U.S. Catholic*, *New Catholic World*, *National Catholic Reporter* *Worship* and other organs promoting liturgical revolution in the Church.
- Typical of the mentality reflected in such publications is the view expressed recently by Fr. John Reedy, C.S.C., whose clerical progressivism contributed some years ago to the demise of *Ave Maria*, the oldest Catholic journal of its kind:
- "Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee told his fellow bishops that their committee on the liturgy (which he chairs) is beginning a three-year study on possible changes in the structure of the Mass.
- "Some of the bishops, a lot of parish priests and quite a few lay Catholics would possibly complain: 'Enough already!' We've had enough tinkering and experimenting with the liturgy. Let us become comfortable with what we have.' That was the attitude about 10 years ago by a bishop who was explaining the work of the Synod. He said, 'Now we have completed the changes in the liturgy. There won't be any more for quite some time.'
- "I smiled and thought: Want to bet?
- "... The legitimate use of the local culture in the liturgy is still being blocked by the style of centralized authority in the Church. In its administration, the Church hasn't caught up with its theology.
- "... The liturgy needs a great amount of work. It will never be complete and unchanging. As the public prayer of a living Christian community, it will always need adaptation.
- "And we might as well get used to it." (In a June column published in *The Catholic News*)
6. Miceli, Fr. Vincent P., S. J., "Detente Reconsidered: A Prelude to Antichrist," *Faith and Reason*, Winter 1976; p. 13.
 7. See *Our Sunday Visitor*, January 28, 1979.
 8. *The Catholic News*, November 20, 1975.
 9. *Buffalo Courier Express*, January 9, 1977.
 10. Sociologist Andrew Greeley's favorite thesis (developed particularly in Greeley, McCready, and McCourt's *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (1976), is that the Church's decline in the U.S. must be placed squarely on *Humanae Vitae*, "one of the worst mistakes in the history of Catholic Christianity." For an excellent summary refutation of the Greeley thesis, see K.D. Whitehead's "The Consequences of the Contraceptive Mentality," Newsletter of Catholics United for the Faith (222 North Ave., New Rochelle, NY 10801), July, 1978.
 11. See *U.S. Catholic* September 1976; p. 25.
 12. Hitchcock, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
 13. Balthasar, Hans Ur von, "The Grandeur of the Liturgy," *Communio*, Winter 1978; p. 347.
 14. DeLubac, Henri, "Credo ... Sanctorum Communionem," *International Catholic Review*, January-February, 1972; p. 21.
 15. Address, "Obstacles to Liturgical Renewal," April 19, 1976, in *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 12, no. 2.
 16. See *Eastern Churches Review*, vol. VII, No. 2 (1975); p. 190.
 17. See the *Orthodox Observer*, May 11, 1977.
 18. See the Catholics United for the Faith Statement, November 17, 1971, presented to the U.S. Bishops' liaison committee for the laity.



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