

# ELEPHANTIASIS OF THE WORD

(This paper was read at the annual general meeting in England of the Association for Latin Liturgy, October 13, 1986.)

If the traditional sacrality of the Mass is to be retained and passed on to future generations, we are agreed that this must be done within the post-conciliar rite; and there can be no doubt about the importance of Latin for the fulfilment of this aim. Nevertheless, Latin alone cannot achieve it. Whether we like it or not, the vernacular is here and has come to stay, though of course it is not a question of "either-or" but of "both-and."

In the liturgy, however, non-verbal communication is no less potent than what is done by words. It may even be more so. What is done by words, moreover, is not all at what may be termed the tanoy level: mere information, announcement. (In England, "tanoy" refers to public address systems. Ed.) Words also can be powerfully emotive, richly or delicately suggestive. Words in fact can be poetry, or a species of prose very far from that of the tanoy. It is obvious, of course, that words of this sort are in varying degrees needed in the liturgy; and it is for so largely failing to provide words of this sort that the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL) has provoked almost universal criticism. It was in order to do something practical about this that the Association for English Worship came into being some ten years ago, the moving spirit being Fr. Mark Elvins.

But that group soon came to realize—if it had not already—that you cannot compartmentalize concern for communication in the liturgy. You cannot care about verbal communication and not about the complementary non-verbal communication. Nor can you care about one form of verbal communication, the vernacular, and not about another, Latin, with all its unsurpassably rich associations in music. On the other hand, in publishing the *Ordo Missae* with Professor Bennett's translations the Association for Latin Liturgy on its part showed a concern for the vernacular which was not altogether welcome in some circles. I shall not here discuss matters of style. These are gone into in Robert Walmsley's introduction to *Prayers of the Roman Missal: two versions compared*, which St. Michael's Press, Farnborough, brought out earlier this year.

I think it is true to say that what most distinguishes the post-conciliar from the pre-conciliar Mass is the emphasis on the liturgy of the word, on what was sometimes known as the fore-Mass. But I would go further and say that in practice the whole of the Mass has been in danger of becoming a liturgy of the word. To an alarming and benumbing extent the verbal element has taken over from the non-verbal in communication. This is what I mean by my title, "Elephantiasis of the Word." And yet paradoxically there has been little emphasis on what is fundamental to the liturgy of the word in the strict sense.

The wordiness of the liturgy is then what we overall have to deal with, but we can start by seeing how the liturgy of the word itself should be cut down to size.

When I say cut down to size, I do not mean "let's have things just as they were before." There was a need for a wider range of scripture readings in the Mass, though whether the present arrangement is the ideal one may be doubted. It seems to fall between two stools, giving us neither the highlights, as it were, nor a complete as well as unbowdlerized reading of the sacred text. What has been forgotten is that the Mass does not stand by itself: it is surrounded by the canonical hours, and one of these in particular helps to spread the load where scripture reading is concerned. So and not least would its private reading. It is this perhaps to which the reform should first of all have addressed itself, expecting neither immediate nor universal success.

Devotions must always have their part, and the staple ones such as the rosary are far from unscriptural. With the situation more truly assessed, the burden on the Mass would be lightened, and we could revert to just two readings instead of three where at present these occur. The alleluia verse if not the old gradual, with its seasonal modifications, would then be sufficient and appropriate, although the responsorial psalm could be retained where it is sung, especially in the way the monks of St. Bernard's Abbey, Leicester, do this. It is quite deadly otherwise. As for the chiming of the Old Testament reading with the gospel of the day, this seems to me to be unnecessary at the best and artificial and constricting at the worst. It is for the preacher to supply the cross-references which he thinks expedient.

And here I must utter a protest against the apparent strait-jacketing of the preacher's choice of topic. He is supposed to base his homily or sermon on the scripture readings or on some other text in the Mass of the day. Of course, at Christmas and Easter, for instance, he will preach on the mysteries to which the texts of the proper testify. But at other times of the year he may well feel obliged to speak on matters, moral or doctrinal, to which he will not find reference in the texts at his disposal. Nor is it scriptural preaching to preface his remarks with a text which only superficially bears on what he has to say. Whereas to instruct the people in their faith and in the way they should behave need by no means be an unscriptural exercise. And has not such instruction been sorely needed?

The notion has bedevilled us that the Mass must have a "theme." But there is no need to seek for this. The theme of each and every Mass is one and the same: the redemption. It is right, of course, that different aspects of the redemption should be stressed in the readings and prayers and so forth: Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and the mystery of Christ as reflected in our Lady and the saints, and in the married state as the nuptial Mass makes clear. In this the liturgy of the word is properly subordinate to the liturgy of the sacramental sacrifice to which it points. Themes that do not so point, as in so-called peace rally Masses or workers' rights Masses, are obviously suspect.

This misunderstanding of the true place and nature of the liturgy of the word is most of all to be reprehended when it invades the very area of the sacramental sacrifice. What is the point, for instance, of a eucharistic prayer for reconciliation? There are two of these in fact. Is not reconciliation the point of any and every eucharistic prayer? Is not the whole point of the redemption our reconciliation with God through Christ? As for reconciliation with one another there is already a Mass for this, in the usual sense, i.e., prayers and readings but not a special canon; and there is the same for peace and justice. The place for prayers for particular intentions is outside the eucharistic prayer, which may nevertheless and rightly include such basic intentions as those "for the living and the dead."

It is highly doubtful if there should be any special Mass texts for children. If for adults non-verbal weighs as much as verbal communication in the Mass, it cannot be less so for children. Certainly there should be no special eucharistic prayers, but again there are such, three of them, and redolent of the sentimentality which affects adults of a certain sort. "We thank you for all that is beautiful in the world and for the happiness you have given us." If children are happy—and are all of them happy all the time?—they are not conscious that they are so, and the little philistines are quite unaware of "the beautiful." And what is most depressing about this nonsense is that it is to be found in the Latin original: *Tibi laus pro pulchritudine, quae in universo est orbe, et pro gaudio, quod cordibus nostris infundis*. We have lived to see *romanità* go down before "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

I might dilate on the verbosity of Eucharistic Prayer IV, but we come now to what is perhaps the most pervasive element in the elephantiasis of the word; and this lies

not so much in the texts as in their vocal treatment. If the pre-conciliar Mass could be said to have been primarily a Mass that was *prayed*, the present one as usually presented is primarily a Mass that is *proclaimed*. Facing the people, the priest ordinarily goes on addressing them during the canon as if there were no difference between the liturgy of the word and that of the sacrament. One has heard the words of consecration almost shouted, as Luther once exclaimed that they should be: Luther for whom preaching was primary and the sacrifice anathema. Not only has the word engulfed the Mass, but the range of the voice is too often constricted to that of the tenor.

This is not, however, a necessary effect of the priest's facing the people when at the altar. If during the eucharistic prayer it is obvious from his whole stance that the priest's attention is where it should be, namely on the altar and on what takes place on it, and if his voice is somewhat lowered, or raised but in the sacrality of chant, to this same presence of the mystery will the people's attention be directed, sight and sound corroborating.

Sight and sound: the non-verbal elements in communication, those elements in verbal communication itself which are not just verbal in the dictionary sense: it is these elements in which our over-verbalized liturgy is chiefly lacking. It need not be. Cut back the verbal element to where it belongs and to the manner in which it belongs, and, in the space as it were which this leaves, bring in music and silence and ceremony and incense, and the traditional liturgy will emerge fully in its revised state as it is meant to do.

Now we come to the paradox which I mentioned earlier on, namely, that in the liturgy of the word there has been little emphasis on what is fundamental to it. Too little do we take note of the Protestant emphasis on the Catholic truth that the word—the word that speaks of God and through which the Holy Spirit speaks—this word is not the mere word of scripture, however aptly and richly set forth. This word is the preached word. It is the sermon—and the conciliar document makes no distinction between sermon and homily—it is the sermon that fully and properly proclaims the word of God. It is this upon which the celebrant, if he is the preacher, should be intent where it is a matter of taking thought for the liturgy. I don't mean that singing and ceremonies and readings should not be rehearsed. I do mean that neither celebrant nor people should be concerned to "create" the liturgy, to "make it up," something new every time. What is laid down may need to be adapted to the occasion, as with an open-air papal Mass, but the structure and procedure are basically what are to be found in every Mass. Indeed, a very great advantage of a fixed and formal liturgy is that it not only frees all concerned to concentrate on the best rendering of what is laid down, but it enables the celebrant-preacher to give full time to the preparation of his sermon, while it sets the sermon off in contrast with the rest of the liturgy, even the readings which precede it. It is in the sermon that the word—and the speaking voice—is most properly exercised, without music, book or ceremony. It is the one unscripted expression in the liturgy. And its place is the pulpit, its time the sermon; and not one inch, one second beyond.

Here another paradox is to be seen although it reflects the misunderstanding upon which we have been dwelling. In overflowing its limits the element of the word has not only aurally but visually obliterated landmarks, leaving all at a dead level. Altar and the place for preaching are crowded into a single space. The preached word is of its nature *to* the people, and there is a telling contrast between this and the prayers and chants and above all the great prayer of the Mass which are *to* God. But this distinction is lost, or at least seriously weakened, where there is no pulpit or at least a well-placed ambo, forming a separate focus of attention and direction both of eye and ear.

It might now be suggested that with the liturgy of the word reduced to its proper proportions, with the sermon as its summit, to the relief of the rest of the Mass, we could tolerate a vernacular which left a good deal to be desired. True it is that the burden of the sacrality of the Mass must be spread over other elements besides the verbal one. But the spoken liturgical language should not be out of key with those other elements. Do not expect it, however, to rival the treasured excellencies of the best of the old Latin texts or of the Book of Common Prayer. The age of gold can hardly be recaptured, and as we soon found out when the translation committee of the Association for English Worship started meeting, nine or ten years ago, imitation old gold is not on. The mean between the leaden or brass voice and the golden voice, however, is the silver voice; and I think we can strive for that with some hope of succeeding. The good news is that ICEL itself seems largely to have come round to AEW's views.

We should not have to wait for some quite minor but often recurring irritants to be removed. "And also with you" could cede overnight to "And with your spirit." We should be able to say "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof; but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." We should not have to say "We believe." We do want to say "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts." "God the almighty Father" is no match for "God the Father almighty." The strings of alternatives at the beginning of Mass and after the consecration should be done away with. They are an unhappy compromise between what is formal and the variety which it is thought that informality would bring. Perhaps among them the following would go: "The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." In this rendering by unreformed ICEL it might be no loss. To have it as it should be, however, might make us want to keep it: "Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (which is purest gold and from the authorized version).

The first of the acclamations after the consecration curiously illustrates the main contention of this paper: the misdirection of the word, and in this case misdirection by the word. But note that it is not the Latin that is at fault but the translation. ICEL has: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." Not only is the staccato tany style inept, but it deflects our attention from the sacramental presence: it talks *about* Christ—the proper place for which is the pulpit—instead of speaking *to* him. If we follow the Latin this is what we get: "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and we confess your resurrection, till you come."

The examples to which I have drawn attention do not show ICEL in its best light, as do the eucharistic prayers, despite some things one would want to change. The trouble is that ICEL has not always fielded its first team. Not so much then to do ICEL down—for we are partners now—as to show that I think a good thing can be made of translation, here is the last prayer in the solemn blessing for Pentecost, in the ICEL version and then in AEW's.

God inspired speech in different tongues  
to proclaim one faith.  
May he strengthen your faith  
and fulfil your hope to see him face to face.

May he who made all the tongues of mankind  
to speak as one  
in confessing the one true faith  
keep you in that faith  
and bring you at last through faith and hope  
to see him face to face.



Giotto *The Nativity*

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