BAROQUE LITURGY ON TRIAL

(Given at the conference on baroque culture at Franciscan University, Steubenville, Ohio, October 8, 1988, this paper first appeared in *The Dawson Newsletter*, Volume VI, No. 3, Fall-Winter, 1988-89. It is reprinted with permission.)

Since the liturgy of the baroque era is the Tridentine Mass, it seems sadly relevant to be discussing it now, when Archbishop Lefebvre has just gone into schism to preserve this very form of the Mass, which most contemporary liturgists consider to be a very poor liturgical form. All standard liturgical authors consider the Mass of this period to be excessively dramatic in its music and ceremonial, propagandistic in its architectural and artistic setting, and far too tightly structured in its ritual. The dean of liturgists and the man at whose feet I studied at Notre Dame and Brown universities, Fr. Louis Bouyer, in his *Liturgical Piety*, expresses most clearly this opinion. I used to agree, but have since come to an alternate view, which is difficult for me to express, so great is my respect and admiration for this knowledgeable liturgical scholar and theologian. Fr. Bouyer, on this topic in his book *Liturgical Piety*, states:

> From the 16th and 17th century idea of court life Catholics derived their false notions of public worship (i.e., Mass as a performance). An earthly king must be honored daily by the pageant of court ceremonial, so also the heavenly king. The courtly atmosphere around Him was to be provided by the liturgy. . .as many handbooks of the period actually say it was considered to be the "the etiquette of the great King." The most obvious features of it were those embodying the external pomp, decorum, and grandeur befitting so majestic a Prince. The lack of intelligible meaning in so many rites and even in the sacred words themselves, was, therefore praised as enhancing the impression of awe to be given to the dazzled multitude. So also it would have seemed almost indecent to offer the common people any opportunity to participate directly in so sublime a performance. They were rather, only to admire it, dimly from afar, as a scene of unapproachable magnificence.[1]

Our author sees this "distorted interpretation of the nature of the liturgy"[2] as arising from three main factors:

1. The neopagan aesthetic world of the renaissance which substituted Greco-Roman mythology for biblical imagery to the detriment of the latter.
2. A violent hunger for the "super-human instead of the supernatural, as witness the paintings of Michelangelo" and the "enormous rather than the great as witness the statues of St. John Lateran with their hysterical gesticulations."[3]
3. A baroque Catholicism that was more loyal "though not genuinely Christian" which gradually withdrew into "a soulless kind of conservatism."[4]

This last point he has an ambivalence about since on one hand he charges the baroque era held no deep or positive inspiration of its own and simply fossilized the Mass, embellishing it with elements almost completely external and on the other hand, its "rigid and unintelligent traditionalism. . .was the providential means, whereby the Church managed to keep her liturgical treasures safe throughout a long period when scarcely anyone was capable of understanding their true worth."[5] Bouyer compares the baroque preserving of the liturgy to St. Peter's chair (actually a throne from a much later period) enshrined in Bernini's magnificent slipcover or the columns of the Lateran basilica absorbed by Borromini's pilasters.[6]

Actually what many of us regard as the highest aspect of this era, its artistic achievement, Bouyer criticizes, especially the musical art form of the time, opera. He charges it with exalting sensual passion and utilizing "imagery almost completely decorative, flowering in courtly music and ballet."[7] He decries its influence on the liturgy:

> So the faithful of the same period sought to find a religious equivalent of the opera in the liturgy. Churches came to resemble theaters in plan and decoration. The liturgical pomps displayed in such churches tended to smother the traditional text of the liturgy under an increasingly profane kind of polyphony, the text itself having little importance either for the performers or the onlookers. The liturgy became the pretext for an "occasion" similar to a soiree at court complete with a divertissement by Lully. The chief focus of liturgical life, therefore, was no more the Mass, which included too many elements out of harmony with the mentality of the times.[8]
>
> Instead, solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, a ceremony created and developed just in time to satisfy the tastes of the age, managed to assimilate perfectly the courtly ceremony then fashionable. In the presence of the divine King, a kind of heavenly grand opera could be performed with all the display of lights, jewels (mostly false), exquisite polyphonic singing and pageantry which commonly accompany a royal reception. And all this was pervaded with that type of sentimental piety, those panting after divine love, capable of competing successfully with the ecstatic expression of human love."[9]

We have quoted Fr. Bouyer *in extenso* because of his influence and because he states the case against the baroque liturgy so forcibly. Fathers Jungmann and Klauser agree with him in general outline and yet each of them points out how the Tridentine liturgical commissions appointed by Pius IV and Pius V intended to return to the ancient Roman rites or "the pristine norm of the holy fathers."[10] These commissions investigated ancient sources and made use of them, though they didn't have our critical historical liturgical knowledge, and thought the Gregorian missal a pure Roman source, not knowing how many Franco-Germanic additions there were.[11]

The commissions also used the Greek fathers as well as the Latin, under the impetus of the humanists to return to the sources.[12] This does not seem like pure anti-intellectual clinging to the past to me, but investigating the tradition as well as they could and making prudent reforms in the light of this legacy. Jungmann further catalogs the reforms of the Tridentine fathers who:

1. Threw out all sequences except four as being not in accord with the Roman tradition.
2. Purified the Marian trophes (or trimmings) from the *Gloria*.

3. Recommended that the faithful receive Holy Communion each time they attended Mass, which was not the practice of the time, but that of the early Church.
4. Encouraged the printing of prayer books to follow the Mass as long as the canon was not printed.[13]

Such an approach hardly seems like "fossilizing" the liturgy, rather reforming it in the light of sound tradition.

Theodore Klauser in his research discovered that the Tridentine liturgical commissions weren't afraid to prune back the number of feasts that had sprung up like Topsy in the medieval epoch.[14] He even gives statistics to prove his point. In the years from 800 A.D. to 1558 A.D., 290 new feasts were added to the calendar, but that calendar promulgated by the Tridentine missal not only didn't introduce new feasts; in fact, it cut the number back to 133.[15] The commission tried to keep March and April free of feasts so as not to interfere with the venerable season of lent. So anxious were they to return to the ancient Roman calendar, that 85% of the feasts that they kept were from the first four centuries. The emphasis was on the most ancient and Roman feasts, especially apostles, popes and martyrs.[16] They were looking for the "golden liturgical age" of the fathers, as indeed many contemporary liturgists do, and they sought to root out later excesses. They were also interested in centralizing to curb liturgical abuses and the Roman tradition gave them the unity they sought, although Pius V was prepared to allow rites 200 years or older (his own Dominican order) to keep their rites. Louis Bouyer shows that many gladly gave up their rites in exchange for the Tridentine missals "just off the press" with all conveniently located in one volume.

Perhaps the counter-reformation liturgical reform was not quite so stilted and unthinking as Louis Bouyer makes out. Certainly the conciliar fathers at Trent thought they had intelligently revived the liturgy as we can see from these words from a sermon preached by Bishop Jerome Racozonus of Venice at the ninth and last session of Trent on December 4, 1563:

> You have thereby removed from the celebration of the Mass all superstitions, all greed for lucre and all irreverence. . .removed its celebrations from private homes and profane places to holy and consecrated sanctuaries. You have banished from the temple of the Lord the more effeminate singing and musical compositions.[17]
> Moreover, divine worship will be discharged more purely and promptly and those who carry the vessels will be so chastened that they will move others to follow their example.[18]

It is true that the primary concern of the fathers at Trent was less liturgical than doctrinal and was especially to defend the faith against Protestant views. Therefore, the doctrines of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist by transubstantiation and the Sacrifice of the Mass claimed their attention. Yet they treat of the need for liturgical rite and ceremonial:

> Since such is the nature of man that he cannot easily without external means be raised to meditation on divine things, on that account holy Mother Church has instituted certain rites, namely that certain things be pronounced in a subdued tone (canon and words of consecration) and others in a louder tone; she has likewise made use of ceremonies such as mystical blessings, lights, incense, vestments, and many other things of this kind in accordance with apostolic teaching and tradition, whereby both the majesty of so great a sacrifice might be commended, and the minds of the faithful excited by these visible signs of religion and piety to the contemplation of the most sublime matters which are hidden in this sacrifice.[19]

Although Trent is open to reform it is an approach at once conservative and pastoral. In Chapter 8, we read:

> Although the Mass contains much instruction for the faithful, it has nevertheless not seemed expedient to the fathers that it be celebrated everywhere in the vernacular. The holy synod commands pastors and everyone who has the care of souls to explain frequently during the celebration of the Masses, either themselves or through others, some of the things that are read in the Mass, and among other things to expound some mystery of this most Holy Sacrifice, especially on Sundays and feastdays.[20]

We can only wonder at what state the Church would have been on the eve of Vatican II if these wise counsels had been followed and the explanations of the Mass had been widespread. Of course, this requires knowledge on the part of the priest and this is encouraged in the catechism issued by Trent:

> The Sacrifice is celebrated with many solemn rites, none of which should be deemed useless or superfluous. On the contrary, all of them tend to display the majesty of this august sacrifice, and to excite the faithful, when beholding these saving mysteries, to contemplate the divine things which lie concealed in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. On these rites and ceremonies, we shall not dwell, since they require a more lengthy exposition than is compatible with the nature of the present work; moreover, priests can easily consult on the subject some of the many booklets and works that have been written by pious and learned men. . .[21]

Thus far, we have tried to show that Trent's liturgical sense was more sensitive to tradition and intelligent in handling it than Louis Bouyer gives it credit. In respect to his charge of the artificially and sensuous aesthetic of the baroque in art and architecture, art history would take a different tack, now acclaiming the baroque contribution as serious and not simply theatrical. Monsignor Cartwright remarks in his *Catholic Shrines of Europe:*

> There was a time when it was universally fashionable to make little of this baroque style with its bold and startling departure from architectural repose. But today most writers on art seem to have come around to quite a different point of view. Meanwhile Bernini's colonnade and canopy have stood through the years, admirable when they were not admired and admirable now that they are admired. A great many people have always admired them both when it was not correct to admire them and now that it is proper again.[22]

The wondrous new style burst the classical norms of renaissance art and architecture and as employed by the Church sometimes took its inspiration from the early Church. The basilican plan with a nave became popular instead of round renaissance chapels. Bernini's colonnades at St. Peter's reminds one of the cortiles before early Roman basilicas and his twisted columns for the baldachino are inspired by ancient columns from the Constantinian basilica there. In baroque churches, people were much closer to the altar and so could participate in the liturgy more closely, albeit silently. The magnificence of the surroundings are described by Jungmann:

> The Church became a great hall, its walls shimmering with marble and gold. The paintings on the ceilings which grew right out of the plaster of the entablature made the room appear to fade away into heavenly glory. . .The interior of the church has become a great hall filled with sensuous life.[23]

The liturgist's objection to this style is voiced by Klauser:

> During this period, the interior of the church itself became a throne room, whose main wall was completely covered with massive architectonic and often magnificent structures over the altar. The altar itself played only a subordinate role in the total aspect of this end of the church and had become debased to a mere detail by the tabernacle and the throne for the exposition with all their trappings. On the other hand, the throne-room

> character of the baroque church interior excluded all side aisles. . .From every seat in the church people had to see the. . .monstrance as the heavenly Lord had to be able to see everyone of His visitors. Hence the baroque period gave rise to a church interior which once more had the effect of gathering people together.[24]

Even though Klauser criticizes the throne-room concept, he can see some good in it and appreciate its beauty. Of course, the musical flowering is magnificent and too enormous to detail. From Palestrina's trying to follow the norms of Trent to Vivaldi and the great concert Masses of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the riches of the baroque Catholic heritage are too rich to recount here, but surely the beauty of holiness has never been better portrayed.

Before concluding, let us mention the liturgical scholars at work during this period unearthing ancient liturgical texts. We must note Cardinal Bona, Cardinal Tomasi (recently declared a saint by Pope John Paul II in 1986), the seventeenth century Maurists Mabillon and Martene, and the Oratorian Librun in the same era who translated the *Missale Romanum* into French in 1660 for purpose of study.

Finally, are there lessons we can learn from the liturgy of the baroque era, since we have seen that some of its positive aspects departed significantly from Louis Bouyer's analysis? It seems to me that the delight of this era in beauty in all its forms, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music, and their enthusiastic service of the Church and its liturgy, is something we ought to emulate. We now seem to cultivate the cult of the crude and the ugly. As Cardinal Ratzinger says:

> More and more clearly we can discern the frightening impoverishment which takes place when people show beauty the door and devote themselves exclusively to utility. . ."simple" liturgy does not mean poor or cheap liturgy; there is the simplicity of the banal and the simplicity that comes from spiritual, cultural and historical wealth.[25]

The cardinal also expresses himself forcibly on a false archaism which would exalt the patristic period liturgically and throw out every development after:

> In reality the medieval Church (or the Church of the baroque era in many respects) developed a liturgical depth which must be carefully examined before it is abandoned. Here too we must be aware of the Catholic law of an ever better and deeper insight into the inheritance entrusted to us. Pure archaism is fruitless, as is pure modernization.[26]

Finally, I would like to suggest we could learn something from the baroque liturgical approach to the sacred. Although there might have been little external participation by the laity in a great concert Mass (liturgists consider this a grave fault) nonetheless there was a great reverence and such sublimity of artistic and musical form that one was led to bow before the transcendent Lord. This value is so clearly lacking in most of our contemporary liturgy, that the report issued by the extraordinary synod of bishops of 1985, while noting the "hunger and thirst for the transcendent and divine"[27] admitted the Church "has sometimes failed sufficiently to manifest the sense of the sacred."[28] Attempting to correct too external or *active* notion of participation in the liturgy, the synod notes that what is to be sought is "the interior and spiritual participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ."[29] The baroque liturgy did that in its day (critics notwithstanding), but it remains for us to do likewise in our day.

FR. GILES DIMOCK, O.P.

NOTES

1. Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1954), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.* p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* p. 7.
8. *ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Joseph Jungmann, S.J., *Missarum Solemnia* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1950), Vol. I, p. 136.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
12. *ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-145.
14. Theodore Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), Vol. II, p. 104.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Colman J. Barry, O.S.B., *Readings in Church History* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967), Vol. II, p. 104.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
19. Roy J. Deferrari, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, a translation of Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*—30th ed. (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1957), p. 290.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
21. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, translated by Charles J. Callan, O.P., and John A. McCue, O.P., New York: Wagner, 1923), p. 259.
22. John K. Cartwright, *The Catholic Shrines of Europe* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1954), p. 22.
23. Jungmann, *op.cit.*, p. 150.
24. Klauser, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
25. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 128.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
27. *The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops: 1985* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1985), p. 44.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
29. *ibid.*, p. 52.