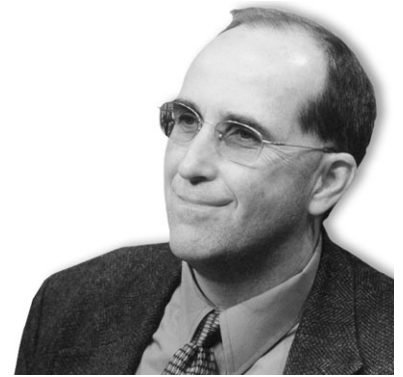


Critical Mass

by Leon J. Suprenant, Jr.



I've often heard—but not always taken—the advice that it's not a good idea to bring up the subject of religion or politics in mixed company, because it's sure to start an argument.

Especially after working with Catholics United for the Faith (CUF) for the past 10 years, I'm tempted to add the sacred liturgy to the list of taboo subjects, at least when it comes to speaking with a broad spectrum of Catholics. Everyone seems to have firmly held views about the “new Mass” and about what they like and dislike about the way Mass is celebrated in their own parish or diocese.

Meanwhile, despite the proliferation of documents, committees, and experts on the subject of liturgy in recent decades, we continue to receive reports of liturgical irregularities and abuses from around the English-speaking world which cause untold confusion and harm.

These reports further embolden those who believe that Vatican II was an unmitigated disaster and who consider the Council's liturgical reforms to be weapons of Mass destruction. And then there are two generations of Catholics who have not been formed well in the faith. They don't really understand the liturgy, and they approach the Mass (if at all) from a secular mindset that's largely oblivious to the subtleties of the Roman rite.

Those of us who really strive to “think with the Church” can readily see that things aren't right. Catholics are grief-stricken when the Mass is celebrated in a manner that at least appears to be irreverent and unfaithful to liturgical norms. Instead of being the sacrament—i.e., sign and instrument—of unity, the Eucharist in a sense becomes the sacrament of division, a veritable battlefield of conflicting agendas. How displeasing this must be to the Lord.

If that's not enough, when lay people speak out against some of the liturgical engineering they've been subjected to, they're made to feel as though they're the troublemakers, that they're the ones out of step with the Church.

Friends in High Places

Fortunately, the Vatican understands the confusion, scandal, and suffering occasioned by the liturgical misadventures of recent decades and has taken some significant action to ensure the worthy celebration of the Mass.

First, on Holy Thursday of last year, Pope John Paul II issued a beautiful encyclical letter on the Eucharist entitled *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, in which the Holy Father stressed that the Eucharist stands at the center of the Church's life. He stated afresh for our time the Church's traditional

teaching on the Eucharist with the desire to rekindle the faithful's Eucharistic “amazement” at this sublime gift. He also pointed to the positive fruits of Vatican II's liturgical reforms to the extent they have fostered a more conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He emphatically singled out the rise of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass as a positive development that draws the faithful to a deeper participation in the Mass.

At the same time, the Holy Father noted that there are “shadows” amidst the positive lights. Specifically, he said that “as a result of a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation, there have been a number of *abuses* which have been a source of suffering for many” (no. 52, original emphasis). He appealed urgently that liturgical norms “be observed with great fidelity.” To that end, he asked the appropriate Vatican offices to issue a “more specific document, including prescriptions of a juridical nature, on this very important subject” (*ibid.*).

On March 25th of this year, the Vatican's liturgy office, headed by Cardinal Francis Arinze, issued *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (“Sacrament of Redemption”) in response to the Holy Father's request. While not comprehensive in scope, this document does catalog a wide range of

abuses, from the use of invalid matter to tampering with the Eucharistic Prayer, from non-ordained faithful assuming functions reserved to the ordained priesthood to administering First Communion to children prior to First Confession. (To obtain copies of these documents, call toll-free (800) MY-FAITH, or visit www.cuf.org.)

Redemptionis Sacramentum corrects erroneous practices in clear, firm language, providing concrete steps for the diocesan bishop to take in such matters. Even more, it explicitly empowers lay people to communicate concerns regarding liturgical abuse to Church authorities in truth and charity.

Wait and See

We are profoundly grateful for the recent actions of the Holy See to correct widespread liturgical abuses. However, one shouldn't be surprised to find that many of the faithful are skeptical as to what, if any, effect these new documents will have on the way the Mass is celebrated in their own parishes. After all, the norms supposedly were already in place, and there has been no shortage of Vatican documents addressing issues of faith, morals, and Church discipline in this country.

Let's put it this way. While one can never fully plumb the depths of the sacred mysteries that are celebrated in the Mass, it's also nonetheless true that celebrating the Mass in accordance with liturgical norms is not rocket science. In fact, I'd gently suggest that reading the actual prayers provided by the Church is even easier than making them up as one goes along!

Cardinal Arinze rightly points out that part of the problem is ignorance of the rite. He also cites sincere yet misguided attempts to deal with difficult pastoral or ecumenical situations.

But it runs much deeper than that. The fact is that there is a liturgical intelligentsia in this country that is not on the same page with the Holy See.

Take, for example, the Vatican's 1997 *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest*. This instruction strove to address the widespread blurring of the roles of clergy and laity. As Vatican II taught, the priesthood of ordained clergy and the priesthood of the faithful differ in essence and not simply in degree. The Holy See considered it such an important issue that eight high-ranking Vatican offices collabo-

rated on this document, and the final version was personally and formally approved by Pope John Paul II.

This document has been largely ignored in this country, and so several items addressed in that document have required reiteration in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*.

Professor Richard Gaillardetz, in addressing the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions last fall, candidly opined that John Paul II's pontificate had reinterpreted Vatican II's vision for reform of the sacred liturgy. It was a polite way of saying that the Pope, Cardinal Arinze, *et al.*, are wrong, and that his own views—shared by other liturgical “progressives” in this country—are more reflective of the “spirit” or “vision” of Vatican II. And regarding the above 1997 *Instruction*, Professor Gaillardetz says it seems “far removed” from the intention of Vatican II, and that the Vatican seems to “obsess over the distinctiveness of the sacred ministry of the ordained.” He anticipated more of the same with respect to *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, which was still in the draft stage at the time he gave his talk.

Given this ongoing opposition to the Holy See's liturgical disciplines, one can reasonably anticipate that the lay faithful in many places will continue to be caught in the crossfire. We need to persevere in prayer and offer sacrifices for the renewal of the Church in our country. And buoyed by *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, we should encourage the faithful, reverent celebration of the sacred liturgy by our pastors.

Source and Summit

The Eucharistic sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life. Therefore, it's incumbent upon us, even in the midst of difficulties, to tap into the superabundant grace Christ makes available to us at every Mass.

Surely we must be properly disposed to receive so great a sacrament. At minimum, we should first go to Confession if we're aware of having committed a serious sin (cf. Catechism, no. 1385). But to maximize the efficacy of the Eucharist in our own lives, I'd suggest that we strive to enter into Mass with the following dispositions:

(a) Gratitude—The Eucharist is the greatest gift Our Lord has left to His Church. In our parish we have access to the Bread from heaven that gives us eternal life (cf. Jn.

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From Our Founder

How different the holy Church would be this very day if, years ago, we had been filled with a spirit of humility and compunction, of patience and ready obedience, with the spirit of the Publican, who stood afar off, not venturing to raise his eyes to heaven, but only saying, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). Or if, like St. Paul, we had *begun* by saying, from the bottom of our hearts, “Lord, what would you have me do?” Or if, like St. Catherine of Siena, we had been able to cry: “Thanks be to Thee, Eternal Father! . . . I was sick and you gave me . . . a medicine against a secret infirmity that I knew not of, in this precept that in no way can I judge any rational creature, and particularly Thy servants, upon whom oft times I, as one blind and sick with this infirmity, passed judgment under the pretext of thy honor and the salvation of souls.”

H. Lyman Stebbins
March 1987

6:54). The “shadows” of liturgical abuse should not distract us from the more fundamental reality that Our Lord and God is freely giving Himself to us here and now. This reality should fill us not only with gratitude, but with what the Holy Father calls “Eucharistic awe.”

(b) Serenity—Liturgical irregularities can be profoundly disturbing. If they are really abuses and not mere annoyances, they should be brought to appropriate authorities as provided for in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*. But taking godly action and allowing anger to fester are two different things. The latter is not righteous and not a fruit of the Spirit. As we offer ourselves in union with Our Lord (cf. Rom. 12:1), let us serenely ask the Lord to transform our frustrations into opportunities to grow in sacrificial love.

(c) Family spirit—In his 1988 apostolic exhortation *The Lay*

Members of Christ’s Faithful People (visit www.vatican.va for complete text), Pope John Paul II calls the faithful to see one’s parish as “the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit” (no. 26). Sadly, at times we feel we need to go elsewhere for Mass, yet ordinarily we should strive to be a leaven where we are. Rather than stand outside the liturgy, judging its technical and artistic merit and perhaps shopping for the liturgy that best suits our preferences, the Holy Father’s profound reflection calls us to a deeper and more expansive vision of the parish as a “Eucharistic community.”

May this special issue of *Lay Witness*, devoted to the sacred liturgy, help advance the Church’s perennial goal that the faithful in some way relive the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, when “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Lk. 24:31). ■

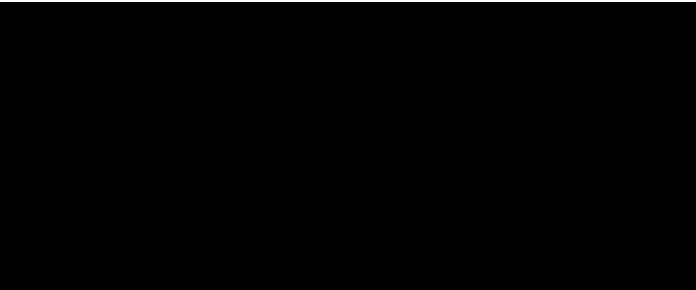
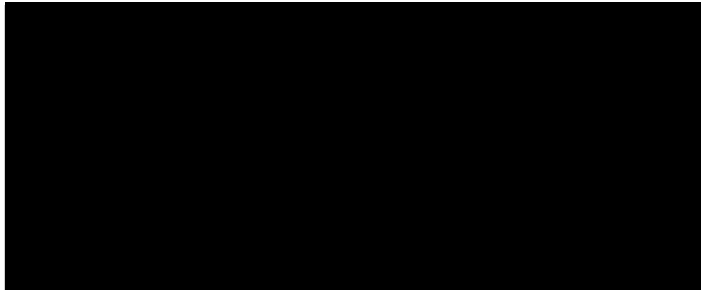
SCRIPTURE MATTERS

by Scott Hahn

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