

*Ten Years of the Motu Proprio
"Ecclesia Dei"*

by

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger



*Translated by
Fr. Ignatius Harrison
Brompton Oratory, London*

www.latin-mass-society.org

A lecture given at the Ergife Palace Hotel, Rome on Saturday 24th October 1998, to an audience of some 3000 traditional Catholics.

Ten years after the publication of the Motu proprio "Ecclesia Dei", what sort of balance-sheet can one draw-up? I think this is above all an occasion to show our gratitude and to give thanks. The diverse communities that were born thanks to this pontifical text have given the Church a great number of priestly and religious vocations who, zealously, joyfully and deeply united with the Pope, have given their service to the Gospel in our present era of history. Through them, many of the faithful have been confirmed in the joy of being able to live the liturgy, and confirmed in their love for the Church, or perhaps they have rediscovered both. In many dioceses - and their number is not so small! - they serve the Church in collaboration with the Bishops and in fraternal union with those faithful who do feel at home with the renewed form of the new liturgy. All this cannot but move us to gratitude today!

However, it would not be realistic if we were to pass-over in silence those things which are less good. In many places difficulties persist, and these continue because some bishops, priests and faithful consider this attachment to the old liturgy as an element of division which only disturbs the ecclesial community and which gives rise to suspicions regarding an acceptance of the Council made "with reservations", and more generally concerning obedience towards the legitimate pastors of the Church.

We ought now to ask the following question: how can these difficulties be overcome? How can one build the necessary trust so that these groups and communities who love the ancient liturgy can be smoothly integrated into the life of the Church?

But there is another question underlying the first: what is the deeper reason for this distrust or even for this rejection of a continuation of the ancient liturgical forms?

It is without doubt possible that, within this area, there exist reasons which go further back than any theology and which have their origin in the character of individuals or in the conflict between different

personalities, or indeed a number of other circumstances which are wholly extrinsic. But it is certain that there are also other deeper reasons which explain these problems. The two reasons which are most often heard, are: lack of obedience to the Council which wanted the liturgical books reformed, and the break in unity which must necessarily follow if different liturgical forms are left in use. It is relatively simple to refute these two arguments on the theoretical level. The Council did not itself reform the liturgical books, but it ordered their revision, and to this end, it established certain fundamental rules. Before anything else, the Council gave a definition of what liturgy is, and this definition gives a valuable yardstick for every liturgical celebration. Were one to shun these essential rules and put to one side the *normae generales* which one finds in numbers 34 - 36 of the Constitution *De Sacra Liturgia* (SL), in that case one would indeed be guilty of disobedience to the Council! It is in the light of these criteria that liturgical celebrations must be evaluated, whether they be according to the old books or the new. It is good to recall here what Cardinal Newman observed, that the Church, throughout her history, has never abolished nor forbidden orthodox liturgical forms, which would be quite alien to the Spirit of the Church. An orthodox liturgy, that is to say, one which express the true faith, is never a compilation made according to the pragmatic criteria of different ceremonies, handled in a positivist and arbitrary way, one way today and another way tomorrow. The orthodox forms of a rite are living realities, born out of the dialogue of love between the Church and her Lord. They are expressions of the life of the Church, in which are distilled the faith, the prayer and the very life of whole generations, and which make incarnate in specific forms both the action of God and the response of man. Such rites can die, if those who have used them in a particular era should disappear, or if the life-situation of those same people should change. The authority of the Church has the power to define and limit the use of such rites in different historical situations, but she never just purely and simply forbids them! Thus the Council ordered a reform of the liturgical books, but it did not prohibit the former books. The criterion which

the Council established is both much larger and more demanding; it invites us all to self-criticism! But we will come back to this point.

We must now examine the other argument, which claims that the existence of the two rites can damage unity. Here a distinction must be made between the theological aspect and the practical aspect of the question. As regards what is theoretical and basic, it must be stated that several forms of the Latin rite have always existed, and were only slowly withdrawn, as a result of the coming together of the different parts of Europe. Before the Council there existed side by side with the Roman rite, the Ambrosian rite, the Mozarabic rite of Toledo, the rite of Braga, the Carthusian rite, the Carmelite rite, and best known of all, the Dominican rite, and perhaps still other rites of which I am not aware. No one was ever scandalized that the Dominicans, often present in our parishes, did not celebrate like diocesan priests but had their own rite. We did not have any doubt that their rite was as Catholic as the Roman rite, and we were proud of the richness inherent in these various traditions. Moreover, one must say this: that the freedom which the new order of Mass gives to creativity is often taken to excessive lengths. The difference between the liturgy according to the new books, how it is actually practiced and celebrated in different places, is often greater than the difference between an old Mass and a new Mass, when both these are celebrated according to the prescribed liturgical books.

An average Christian without specialist liturgical formation would find it difficult to distinguish between a Mass sung in Latin according to the old Missal and a sung Latin Mass according to the new Missal. However, the difference between a liturgy celebrated faithfully according to the Missal of Paul VI and the reality of a vernacular liturgy celebrated with all the freedom and creativity that are possible - that difference can be enormous!

With these considerations we have already crossed the threshold between theory and practice, a point at which things naturally get

more complicated, because they concern relations between living people.

It seems to me that the dislikes we have mentioned are as great as they are because the two forms of celebration are seen as indicating two different spiritual attitudes, two different ways of perceiving the Church and the Christian life. The reasons for this are many. The first is this: one judges the two liturgical forms from their externals and thus one arrives at the following conclusion: there are two fundamentally different attitudes. The average Christian considers it essential for the renewed liturgy to be celebrated in the vernacular and facing the people; that there be a great deal of freedom for creativity; and that the laity exercise an active role therein. On the other hand, it is considered essential for a celebration according to the old rite to be in Latin, with the priest facing the altar, strictly and precisely according to the rubrics, and that the faithful follow the Mass in private prayer with no active role. From this viewpoint, a particular set of externals [phénoménologie] is seen as essential to this or that liturgy, rather than what the liturgy itself holds to be essential. We must hope for the day when the faithful will appreciate the liturgy on the basis of visible concrete forms, and become spiritually immersed in those forms; the faithful do not easily penetrate the depths of the liturgy.

The contradictions and oppositions which we have just enumerated originate neither from the spirit nor the letter of the conciliar texts. The actual Constitution on the Liturgy does not speak at all about celebration facing the altar or facing the people. On the subject of language, it says that Latin should be retained, while giving a greater place to the vernacular "above all in readings, instructions, and in a certain number of prayers and chants" (SL 36:2). As regards the participation of the laity, the Council first of all insists on a general point, that the liturgy is essentially the concern of the whole Body of Christ, Head and members, and for this reason it pertains to the whole Body of the Church "and that consequently it [the liturgy] is destined to be celebrated in community with the active participation

of the faithful". And the text specifies "In liturgical celebrations each person, minister or lay faithful, when fulfilling his role, should carry out only and wholly that which pertains to him by virtue of the nature of the rite and the liturgical norms" (SL 28). "To promote active participation, acclamations by the people are favoured, responses, the chanting of the psalms, antiphons, canticles, also actions or gestures and bodily postures. One should also observe a period of sacred silence at an appropriate time" (SL 30).

These are the directives of the Council; they can provide everybody with material for reflection. Amongst a number of modern liturgists there is unfortunately a tendency to develop the ideas of the Council in one direction only. In acting thus, they end up reversing the intentions of the Council. The role of the priest is reduced, by some, to that of a mere functionary. The fact that the Body of Christ as a whole is the subject of the liturgy is often deformed to the point where the local community becomes the self-sufficient subject of the liturgy and itself distributes the liturgy's various roles. There also exists a dangerous tendency to minimize the sacrificial character of the Mass, causing the mystery and the sacred to disappear, on the pretext, a pretext that claims to be absolute, that in this way they make things better understood. Finally, one observes the tendency to fragment the liturgy and to highlight in a unilateral way its communitarian character, giving the assembly itself the power to regulate the celebration.

Fortunately however, there is also a certain disenchantment with an all too banal rationalism, and with the pragmatism of certain liturgists, whether they be theorists or practitioners, and one can note a return to mystery, to adoration and to the sacred, and to the cosmic and eschatological character of the liturgy, as evidenced in the 1996 "Oxford Declaration on the Liturgy". On the other hand, it must be admitted that the celebration of the old liturgy had strayed too far into a private individualism, and that communication between priest and people was insufficient. I have great respect for our forefathers who at Low Mass said the "Prayers during Mass" contained in their

prayer books, but certainly one cannot consider that as the ideal of liturgical celebration! Perhaps these reductionist forms of celebration are the real reason that the disappearance of the old liturgical books was of no importance in many countries and caused no sorrow. One was never in contact with the liturgy itself. On the other hand, in those places where the Liturgical Movement had created a certain love for the liturgy, where the Movement had anticipated the essential ideas of the Council, such as for example, the prayerful participation of all in the liturgical action, it was those places where there was all the more distress when confronted with a liturgical reform undertaken too hastily and often limited to externals. Where the Liturgical Movement had never existed, the reform initially raised no problems. The problems only appeared in a sporadic fashion, when unchecked creativity caused the sense of the sacred mystery to disappear.

This is why it is very important to observe the essential criteria of the Constitution on the Liturgy, which I quoted above, including when one celebrates according to the old Missal! The moment when this liturgy truly touches the faithful with its beauty and its richness, then it will be loved, then it will no longer be irreconcilably opposed to the new Liturgy, providing that these criteria are indeed applied as the Council wished.

Different spiritual and theological emphases will certainly continue to exist, but there will no longer be two contradictory ways of being a Christian; there will instead be that richness which pertains to the same single Catholic faith. When, some years ago, somebody proposed "a new liturgical movement" in order to avoid the two forms of the liturgy becoming too distanced from each other, and in order to bring about their close convergence, at that time some of the friends of the old liturgy expressed their fear that this would only be a stratagem or a ruse, intended to eliminate the old liturgy finally and completely.

Such anxieties and fears really must end! If the unity of faith and the oneness of the mystery appear clearly within the two forms of celebration, that can only be a reason for everybody to rejoice and to thank the good Lord. Inasmuch as we all believe, live and act with these intentions, we shall also be able to persuade the Bishops that the presence of the old liturgy does not disturb or break the unity of their diocese, but is rather a gift destined to build-up the Body of Christ, of which we are all the servants.

So, my dear friends, I would like to encourage you not to lose patience, to maintain your confidence, and to draw from the liturgy the strength needed to bear witness to the Lord in our own day.