

# books in REVIEW

THOMAS STORCK

## LITURGY THAT SPEAKS TO THE SOUL

**Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis: Sacred Liturgy, the Traditional Latin Mass, and Renewal in the Church.** By Peter Kwasniewski. *Angelico Press*. 212 pages. \$16.95.

Peter Kwasniewski, a professor of philosophy and theology at Wyoming Catholic College, has written a wide-ranging book consisting of articles, most of which originally appeared in *The Latin Mass* magazine, that pin the many problems in the Catholic Church today — indeed, over the past fifty years — on the state of the liturgy. In question here is the Mass of the Latin Church, or Roman rite, whose ancient liturgy was replaced in 1970 with a “new order of Mass,” or *Novus Ordo Missae*, which has weakened or even destroyed the sacred atmosphere or ethos that was long associated with Catholic worship.

At the beginning of his book, Kwasniewski accurately sums up the current situation in the Church. “Since the Second Vatican Council,” he writes, “the Ro-

man Catholic Church has experienced an unprecedented crisis in her very identity, extending even to her hitherto impregnable sacred doctrine and spirituality, her apostolic and missionary activity.” Everyone reading this is, no doubt, aware that not only are the majority of Catholics today poorly catechized, but a large number who *are* better instructed — clergy, for example, or academics — think nothing of rejecting important aspects of the sacred inheritance of doctrine received from our Lord Himself and His Apostles, while the bishops, appointed guardians of their flocks, do little or nothing about it. Many have blamed this sorry state of affairs chiefly on the new Mass introduced by Bl. Pope Paul VI, especially as it is typically celebrated at ordinary parishes. In order to explain the deleterious effects the change in the Mass has produced, or at least contributed to, commentators have tended to use two types of arguments, and Kwasniewski does likewise.

In the first place, Kwasniewski

concentrates on the actual text of the *Novus Ordo*, pointing out that its wording is poorer theologically than that codified by Pope St. Pius V in the sixteenth century. When one compares, for example, the Offertory prayers of the Mass of Paul VI (the ordinary form), with those of the Mass of Pius V (the extraordinary form), one is struck by the theological depth of the latter. Since it is rare for a priest who celebrates the *Novus Ordo* to use the traditional Roman Canon (Canon I), even the Eucharistic Prayer has

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suffered a definite diminution in its presentation of the mysteries of the faith. Although this loss is certainly real, arguments of this type can be overdrawn, for the theological richness of the extraordinary form is contained in prayers said or sung in Latin, a language no longer understood by most of the congregation. Moreover, the congregation does not even hear

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some of the prayers in the Latin Mass (notably the Offertory and Canon) since the celebrant prays them in a low voice. Although most of those who attend the extraordinary form of the Roman rite probably use a missal, and thus can profit from this theological richness, was this true before the Council when this Mass was normative throughout the Latin Church? I do not know, but we cannot simply assume that what obtains at the present among the admittedly small number of traditional Latin Mass devotees was the norm for the entire Church in an earlier era.

Kwasniewski employs a second common line of criticism of the *Novus Ordo* that is by far stronger. James Hitchcock, in his 1974 book *The Recovery of the Sacred*, summed up this argument: "In the actual life of the Church, most sacred symbols are not understood by most believers in an explicit, intellectual way, but are nonetheless apprehended as having meaning.... The total effect of these symbols is to sustain a strong belief in God, even though specific symbols may not always convey specific religious meanings."

The atmosphere of the Latin Mass, especially a sung Mass, is entirely different from that of the typical *Novus Ordo* Mass. The former bespeaks a sacred action, something focused on another world, and seems to bring something from that other world into ours now, as indeed actually occurs in the eucharistic sacrifice. But the new Mass at best struggles to retain some of that sacred atmosphere, and at worst has descended into a sort of religious ba-

nality. Kwasniewski is well aware of this. "If the liturgy cannot immediately *show* something meaningful to a wide-eyed child, then it has failed," he writes. "The bowing priest reciting the Confiteor, the acolyte swinging a censer, the subdeacon, deacon and priest aligned hierarchically during solemn Mass, the awesome stillness of the Roman Canon — all these things speak directly to the heart, to the heart even of a little child.... The *Novus Ordo* liturgy has little to say to such souls because it *only* says, it does not *do*."

More than once Kwasniewski hits on what he calls the "never-ending verbiage" of the *Novus Ordo*. By this he means that the new Mass is deficient in symbol and atmosphere, and instead puts a premium on words, on instruction, as if the Church could verbally bludgeon Catholics into living the faith, instead of presenting us here and now with an opportunity for real participation in the heavenly liturgy, the Kingdom of God come among us — a powerful motivation toward holiness and love of God. "The traditional Mass exhibits the paradox of a liturgy with more text but less verbosity than its modern counterpart," Kwasniewski observes. "By the books it has *more prayers*, there is more verbal substance to it, and yet, without a doubt, the overall impression is one of *less wordiness*, less 'textiness,' than is felt to be the case with the *Novus Ordo*...[which] stipulates that nearly everything must be spoken out loud, and what is worse, proclaimed to all the world — which can make the whole thing seem like a pious harangue."

It is precisely the mystical

character of the traditional Latin Mass that has appealed to so many people of different ages and places, of varying levels of education and culture, and that has provided the context and impetus for so much of the Catholic art and music that are now considered the glories of the cultural patrimony of the Church, and indeed of the whole human race.

Of course, this emphasis on the liturgy as something that creates a sacred atmosphere does not mean that Kwasniewski is downplaying actual instruction in Catholic doctrine. But the liturgy must not be seen as a kind of special CCD class. In fact, one of the sad things about the post-conciliar era is that catechetics has declined hand in hand with the desacralization of the liturgy. We surely need more and better teaching of the faith, but instruction (at least explicit instruction) is not the liturgy's chief task. That is the task of Catholic education, and a liturgy that attempts to place before the worshiper the sacred action of re-presenting Christ's death on Calvary can be a powerful aid to such explicit instruction.

Although Kwasniewski argues that the change of Mass is chiefly responsible for the deplorable situation the Church finds herself in today, he recognizes that other elements have likewise contributed to our plight. He devotes a chapter to what he calls "a threefold amnesia": In addition to the "attenuation" of the sacred liturgy, he lists the "downplaying of integral Catholic social teaching" and the "dismissal of St. Thomas Aquinas as Common Teacher." In this he is exactly correct, and it

is probable that had St. Thomas's place as common doctor of the Church not already been widely questioned for twenty-some years before the Council, the kind of thinking that ultimately led to the *Novus Ordo* might have had considerably less influence. Moreover, the traditional Mass, divorced from its place within a robust reception of the Church's doctrinal and intellectual heritage, can become a kind of juridical or habitual fetish, so that one becomes satisfied with a hastily said low Mass that meets perhaps the bare requirements of Catholic tradition but lacks the splendor and richness that Kwasniewski is at pains to contrast with the barrenness of the *Novus Ordo*.

The faith that began in Christ's liturgical action on the original Holy Thursday was meant to extend itself to encompass all of life, individual and social, nations and entire civilizations. In the thought of St. Thomas, the Church found a means to integrate and order all of this, all of reality in fact, giving due attention and weight to both the natural and supernatural, to body and soul, to the individual person and the community. Catholic social teaching applied this understanding of the unity of life to the social order and recognized that man's political and economic activity does not exist for its own sake. As Pope Pius XI taught in *Quadragesimo Anno*, "Particular economic aims, whether of society as a body or of individuals, will be intimately linked with the universal teleological order, and as a consequence we shall be led by progressive stages to the final end of all, God Himself, our highest

and lasting good." This is in part what the liturgy symbolizes: the offering to God of all that man has made and done, in union with the sacrifice of the cross wherein the Incarnate God offered Himself in His human nature to the Father. Certainly the Mass, in whatever form, does do this, but there is no reason why the outward form of the liturgy should not contribute as much as it can to symbolizing this offering, to giving us a visible glimpse of the heavenly liturgy, to helping us form our souls and even our bodies in accordance with it. This the traditional Latin Mass does in a pre-eminent manner, at least when it is celebrated with the splendor that rightfully belongs to it.

Every Catholic who is interested in the Church's apostolate of conveying the Gospel to every creature will at times be perplexed about how to appeal to the secularized man of the Western world, to the historic cultures of Asia, and to the seemingly intractable world of Islam. Kwasniewski is convinced that the traditional Roman

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liturgy can play an important part in presenting the faith to the men and cultures of today's world. He points out that most cultures have traditionally had sacred rites, even sacred languages, of their own: "All the great religious traditions of the world have retained a sacred language.... Some kind of sacred language seems almost to be a constitutive component of religion as such.... The traditional liturgy is thus the *chief missionary tool* of the Catholic Church, her main point of contact with Jews, Muslims, Eastern Christians, Hindus, Africans, and so on."

But this raises one more point that needs to be discussed in the context of a book promoting and justifying the traditional Latin Mass. Kwasniewski states that his "purpose here is not to diagnose lapses or distortions of traditionalism, but on the contrary, to point out that its fundamental instinct is sound." Well and good, but in any comprehensive discussion of the problem,

we cannot ignore such "lapses or distortions." One of the reasons why the extraordinary form of the Roman rite does not make more progress, does not appeal to more people on account of its intrinsic richness and beauty, is that it is associated in the minds of many with a perceived narrow, critical, and rigid attitude. This perception is not entirely just, but those who rightly call attention to the many errors and contradictions that are rife in the Church today might consider doing so in a manner more calculated to win friends and influence people. Moreover, many supporters of the traditional Mass seem content with a low Mass, sometimes said entirely silently, in violation of the rubrics. I venture to predict, however, that the traditional Latin liturgy will never regain its rightful place in the Church unless it is everywhere celebrated with the solemn splendor and richness it deserves. Kwasniewski is certainly aware of this, and more than once he states that the extraordinary form

is most fittingly celebrated in its solemn mode.

If supporters of the traditional liturgy (among whom I count myself) really wish to see that liturgy become widespread, then one of the most important things to aim for is its frequent, indeed weekly, solemn celebration. Without that, arguments that in the end are mere comparisons of text with text will not persuade most people. As Kwasniewski says, "If the liturgy cannot immediately *show* something meaningful to a wide-eyed child, then it has failed." In this respect, the silent low Mass does fail, especially for the vast majority of Catholics today who did not grow up with it.

Let Kwasniewski's book, then, be a starting point for serious discussion not simply about how to preserve the Latin liturgy as a kind of relic for those who are attached to it, but about its role in revitalizing the Church, in restoring Catholic sensibilities, Catholic intellectual life, and even a genuine Catholic social order. ■