

The Council And The Mass

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Summary: On the eve of the beginning of Vatican Council II she pens a personal appreciation of the Mass and its role in her life and the meaning of participating in its celebration. She has harsh words for priests who mumble and rush through both English and Latin prayers at Mass. (DDLW #794).

We laymen have said little so far about the coming council and Christian renewal. Partly it is because as lay people expressing ourselves at all times about such important issues as man's work, his present unemployment, the situation of the family, materialistic education in Catholic school as well as public school, man and the state, war and peace—it is endless, the issues we have covered, the articles we have written over almost thirty years. One might say we were preparing the ground, pointing up the issues.

This is probably my last chance, this issue of the Catholic Worker for me personally to write about some things that are in my heart about the Mass, for instance, that holy sacrifice, which is the heart of our life, bringing us into the closest of all contacts with our Lord Jesus Christ, enabling us literally to “put on Christ,” as St. Paul said, and to begin to say with him, “Now, not I live, but Jesus Christ in me.” With a strong consciousness of this, we remember too those lines, “without Me, ye can do nothing,” and “with Me you can do all things.”

The New Man —————

We know through long experience how hard it is to think in these terms, and only through constant exercise in the works of love and peace, can we grow in faith, hope and charity. Only by nourishing ourselves as we have been bidden to do by Christ, by eating His body and drinking His blood, can we become Christ and put on the new man.

These are great mysteries. Most of the time we do not comprehend at all. Sometimes the Holy Spirit blows upon us and chases some of the fog away and we see a bit more clearly. But most of the time we see through a glass darkly. Our need to worship, to praise, to give thanksgiving, makes us return to the Mass daily, as the only fitting worship which we can offer to God. Having received our God in the consecrated bread and wine, which still to sense is bread and wine, it is now not we ourselves who do these things except by virtue of the fact that we will to do them, and put ourselves in the position to do them by coming to the Holy Sacrifice, receiving communion, and then with Christ in our hearts and literally within us in the bread we have received, giving this praise, honor and glory and thanksgiving.

How inadequate words are to say these things, to write them.

Which brings me to what I want to say. One morning Eddie Gerlock, newly ordained priest of Maryknoll, came to us to say one of his first Masses at the farm. We have known him as a truck driver, delivery boy bringing clothes and bread and apples. He was thin as a rail in his black cassock and I prayed he'd have the strength for the missions. He preached a little homily, short and simple, saying that the aim of his priesthood would be to bring joy to people. He wanted people to know the happiness of God.

Understanding the Liturgy

The Mass he said was the Saturday Mass of Ember Day, and every word he spoke during the Mass was slow, low and distinct. We heard the Latin and certainly those of us who had been following the Mass for many years, could understand, could pray with him. I would say that most of us could. Such words, such key words, Caritas, Alleluia, Gloria Patri, et Filio and Spiritui Sancto, Christe Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis, laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam . . . All of those words John Filliger, Hans Tunneson, Joe Roche, Joe Cotter, and all our others too numerous to mention, knew. They had sung them in the masses we had at Easton in the old days when it was not permitted us to have the missa ricitata! Of course we are all for the vernacular, but still we understood those parts of the Mass.

It was a low Mass because Fr. Gerlock was going to sing his first high Mass later at Binghamton, New York. Each word was slow, but distinct and reverent. We participated. The words sank into our hearts and became part of us.

To many it will be unimportant that I, a lay woman am saying these things. I might better stick to my own field, I will be told and write about the poor, about the slums, about social justice, about rebuilding society within the shell of the old.

Our Mass

But the Mass begins our day, it is our food and drink, our delight, our refreshment, our courage, our light. And it is our Mass, not just the priest's Mass. There was one unbalanced young man with us all one year who went into rages against our dear priest, Fr. Faley because he spoke of "my Mass." It put him in an ungovernable rage. He stood outside Father's door sneering and taunting him and wounding him with poisoned shafts of hatred. Trying to tear from him his self respect, his dignity at being consecrated to offer his Mass (and ours) to God each day. Indeed there are saints and martyrs in our midst, and for all I know this young man was an instrument of God permitted to go off the deep end so that he in a way could be a voice of God in insisting on the great truth that it is indeed our Mass.

Fr. Faley was slow and deliberate and always we could count on a Mass that took three quarters of an hour to say, no more, no less. It was so terrible a privilege that he stammered over the words of consecration, and I used to hold my breath, praying he would get through them. He is no longer with us and we hope he is praying for us in heaven.

And now we come to our real criticism, the point of all this that I am trying to write. Most priests rush through the Mass as though they were going to forget the words unless they say them as fast as possible. Not only the Latin which is garbled so that it sounds like magic, but also the vernacular, the prayers at the foot of the altar. In those prayers we do have the vernacular and all the priests who are crying aloud for the vernacular do not seem to realize that those prayers they are saying are important too, and the intention with which those prayers are said. The words of an angel, the words of Elizabeth in the Hail Mary, repeated three times. The Hail Holy Queen by St. Bernard who left the field of battle and drew his whole family after him into the monastery and feared not to be called pacifist, appeaser, coward, seeker for an ivory tower. Then we invoke all the saints and go on with the prayer to St. Michael who is the patron of Russia, and my patron too since they celebrate his feast on November 8th, my birthday. After that come the thrice repeated prayer to the Sacred Heart, a devotion which especially calls to mind the humanity of Christ, His human love for us, His life on this earth, with its hungers, loneliness and fatigue. And now Cardinal Spellman, God bless him, has added still another prayer, the Divine Praises, Blessed Be God, Blessed be His Holy Name, Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God, true man; and so on, like a creed, a declaration of faith. It is indeed an invocation of the Name.

The Power of the Name

In regard to the Name, Abbe Louis Bouyer in the Meaning of Holy Scripture, University of Notre Dame Press, has this to say of “His Name; it is the supreme expression of His presence (after the Angel, the Face, the Shekinah, His presence in the fire and the cloud) more spiritual and more personal than all the others.”

Do we believe this, do we believe in the Holy Name and the power of the Holy Name? It was reading the Way of a Pilgrim, published by Harper, and also included in Russian Spirituality by Fedotov, a collection of the writings of the Russian saints, that brought me first to a knowledge of what the Holy Name meant in our lives. Reading of Gandhi who repeated the name of God at his spinning and during his demonstrations, in times of fear during demonstrations, that again emphasized it in my mind. Fordham Russian Center has a pamphlet “On the Invocation of the Name” which teaches us to pray without ceasing with every breath we draw, with every beat of our hearts. And lastly, J. D. Salinger in the New Yorker, in his stories Frannie and Zooey, later published in book form, brings again to us a concept of the meaning of the Name.

A Plea to Celebrants

With this recognition of the importance of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, still with us in the bread and wine of the altar, how can any priest tear through the mass as though it were a repetitious duty? This is the impression they give people when they do this, like the children at Fatima who used to say only Hail Mary, or Our Father, and think they had said their prayers, and perhaps they had if they realized the holiness of these words. The

priest often says the first words and slides through the rest in meaningless mutter. And some of the best priests I have met do this, abusing the prayers of the Mass in this way.

I am begging them not to. I am begging them to speak as though the words were holy and inspired and with power in themselves to produce in us the understanding—the participation that should change our lives.

“You cannot fail to see the power of mere words,” Joseph Conrad wrote in his preface to *A Personal Record*. “Such words as Glory, for instance, or Pity. Shouted with perseverance, with ardor, with conviction, these two by their sound alone, have set whole nations in motion and upheaved the dry hard ground on which rests our whole social fabric.”

So I am praying that at the Council, at all the Masses and at the Council, the word made flesh will be among them. Forsake them not O Lord, Our God.