

Tridentine Community News

November 5, 2006

Book Review:

Beginning at Jerusalem:

Five Reflections on the History of the Church

by Glenn W. Olsen

Ignatius Press, 2004

Reviewed by St. Josaphat parishioner Ken Cory

For the Tridentine community, Olsen's brief, readable, and informative history of the early and medieval Church includes a wealth of compelling liturgical insights. Liturgy is not merely an aesthetic matter. Liturgy has everything to do with creating the kind of worship that generates an awe-inspired conception of God, one that makes the practice of religion inviting and exciting. Indirectly it also has much to do with constructing a truly Christian society, but that is beyond the scope of this review.

Participants in the Council of Trent labored not to conform the liturgy to the world, but to conform the world to the liturgy. "Our problems," Olsen writes, "are not 'merely' doctrinal or moral, but cultural. If this be so, our task must be...the recovery of certain habits of being, certain ways of looking at the world."

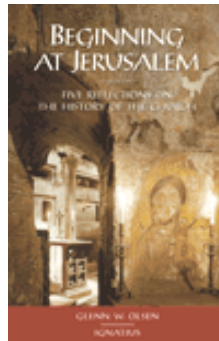
Liturgy has everything to do with that recovery. Pope John Paul II spoke and wrote often about the Eucharist. His masterful encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, of April 17, 2003, was intended to remedy liturgical abuses and heterodox teachings. Did it make a difference in the laity's understanding and consequent reverence for the Eucharist? Apparently not. Only 30% of Catholics understand that the consecrated host is the "Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine." A liturgy that permits people to receive Holy Communion in the hand, while standing, and without an altar server holding a paten lest the Sacred Host fall to the floor, undercuts the Pope's teaching. This illustrates an important point. Doctrines flow from liturgy. Change the liturgy, and while the underlying doctrines cannot change, people's comprehension will. That linkage is not coincidental, and it will not be overcome solely by sound teaching.

Olsen takes issue with the influential Jungmann thesis, i.e., that the early Church had an ideal liturgy that was corrupted in the Middle Ages, lost in the Trent era, and is now finally recovered. The basic error is dismissing silence as something "pietistic" as if active participation requires talk. The angels know better. "Even the angels nearest God cannot know him completely and hence stand in silence...The highest choir, the seraphim, teach us pure worship, for they are wholly absorbed in God" which "stands in rather striking contrast to a certain emphasis on the horizontal sense of community found after the Second Vatican Council. This horizontality has rendered our worship mundane, unholy, and egocentric." Strong words, but Olsen is just warming to his topic.

Jungmann looked at what he supposed was passive liturgy and saw that it was bad. Active, as he defined active, was good. Olsen rejects that passive/active dichotomy. The real question is whether

the laity should be "receptive or contemplative." Olsen draws a distinction between active "receptive" action, and passiveness. Christian perfection lies in "receptivity rather than passiveness as a spiritual stance...The soul goes out to God as God comes to the soul. We, especially in the liturgy, are made to receive a gift, to be open to that gift, and all worthy subsequent action is but a response to what we have received." God is the active agent; man the receptive. God gives; man receives. Contemporary liturgy seems to have two active parties, but no receptive one.

Jungmann was also wrong to assume that liturgy must be didactic. Liturgy does instruct, but not directly. The faithful must be instructed, but the purpose of liturgy is worship, not instruction. Liturgy involves symbolic actions. To be effective, symbols must be compelling. As this survivor of countless homilies on the "meaning" of the Mass can attest, nothing destroys the attractive power of symbols faster than explaining their meaning. It's like explaining the basic meaning of a fairy tale. Do that, and the more subtle meanings are lost. Liturgical symbols, the liturgy itself, must generate a sense of something mysterious, ethereal, numinous, and ultimately incomprehensible, because God and the Mass are in the realm of the incomprehensible. Perhaps so many people now seek bizarre kinds of spirituality because they are deprived of authentic spirituality.



Consider the most profound moment in the Mass. At the moment of the consecration, no one knows fully what "happens" in Heaven. For certain, however, awe-struck angels look on as God the Father accepts the representation of His Son's sacrifice on the Cross. The German mystic, Sr. Anne Catherine Emmerich, 1774-1824, said that if mediocre priests understood what happens in Heaven during the consecration, they would be too frightened to offer Mass! Perhaps there is no liturgy capable of generating emotions proper to the consecration, but, in the words of one liturgist, the "awesome thunder of the silent canon" is preferable to

speech.

Humans are as much body as they are soul. Thus Olsen notes the paradox inherent in a liturgy that largely ignores the physical in this sensuous age. Yes, the laity must shake hands and even introduce themselves to the congregation, but they also require a physical connection to God. People spiritually benefit from genuflecting, using incense, receiving Communion on tongue, kissing relics, and blessing themselves.

Olsen has written an altogether commendable history. Traditionalists will especially appreciate his elaboration of barely articulated liturgical concepts. Olsen is assuring them that their preference for the Tridentine rite is rooted in more than nostalgia. In his view, there is a serious and unfortunately consequential disconnect between current liturgical practices and associated doctrines. However, he is no mere reactionary. Olsen clearly endorses and finds support for his thesis in the Documents of Vatican II and in the more recent Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Questions? Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail info@windsorlatinmass.org with your thoughts.