

Tridentine Community News

April 12, 2009

Precision

You're visiting New York City. You're standing in front of Bloomingdale's. You want to get back to your hotel in Times Square, but you don't have a map. So you decide to ask a friendly face on the street. Which kind of directions would you prefer: "It's down that way. Go around that bunch of buildings", or: "Walk down Lexington Avenue, turn right on 53rd Street, then left onto Broadway. Your hotel will be at 46th Street."

Both sets of directions will get you where you want to go. The first is less specific, and even friendlier. But there's a rub: You're late and someone is waiting for you. You need precision. Clear directions are mandatory.

Today we will discuss the importance of precision and specificity in the celebration of Holy Mass.

The Rubrics of the Penitential Rite

Let's compare the rubrics for the Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass. Strangely, there are different words in the English missal versus the original Latin for the Novus Ordo.

Ordinary Form [self-translation of original Latin]:

"Then follows the penitential rite in which the priest invites the faithful, saying:

Brethren, to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins."

Ordinary Form [Official ICEL English translation]:

"After the introduction to the day's Mass, the priest invites the people to recall their sins and to repent of them in silence. He may use these or similar words:

As we prepare to celebrate the mystery of Christ's love, let us acknowledge our failures and ask the Lord for pardon and strength.

or:

Coming together as God's family, with confidence let us ask the Father's forgiveness, for he is full of gentleness and compassion.

or:

My brothers and sisters [At the discretion of the priest, other words which seem more suitable under the circumstances, such as friends, dearly beloved, brethren, may be used. This also applies to parallel instances in the liturgy.], to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins."

Extraordinary Form:

At the conclusion of the Psalm 42 at the beginning of Mass:

"The priest, signing himself with the Sign of the Cross, says:

P. Our help † is in the name of the Lord.

S. Who made heaven and earth.

Then, joining his hands and humbly bowing down, he says the Confiteor."

Arguably, letting one vernacular translation have options not present in the normative Latin missal or in other vernacular missals introduces a disjunction in the catholicity [small "c"], or

universal consistency, of the Mass. Quite apart from the broader set of options that the Novus Ordo allows in many places, leaving the choice of actual wording of certain parts to the celebrant has proven to be a slippery slope to liturgical abuses. Liturgy is classically not about leeway, but about predictability.

After the Consecration

A previous column mentioned that the Tridentine Mass rubrics specify that the celebrant is to keep his thumbs and forefingers together after the Consecration. This practice is meant to ensure that no particles of the Host fall off or are casually brushed off.

Nothing similar is specified in the rubrics of the Ordinary Form. The *de facto* standard guide to Novus Ordo rubrics, Bishop Peter Elliott's "Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite", says about this issue: "Nowhere in the postconciliar missal is there reference to conjoining thumbs and forefingers from the Consecration of the Host until the ablutions. This reverent practice has several advantages, at least for the duration of the distribution of Holy Communion. But if fragments adhere to his fingers, the celebrant removes them over the paten, cf. GIRM, no. 278." [p. 112]. The traditional practice is thus explained and encouraged...if you are resourceful enough to seek out and read Elliott's book.

Precise rubrics specified in the altar missal that every priest uses in this case help to protect the Blessed Sacrament against profanation. If such issues concern you...and they should...then you can feel reasonably sure that in the Tridentine Mass, our Lord Really Present will be treated with reverence and caution.

The Obvious Isn't Necessarily Obvious to Everyone

One cannot assume that regulations that should be self-evident actually are. If that were the case, there would be no need for certain sections in employee policy manuals. An airline safety demonstration wouldn't have to instruct you how to fasten your seat belt. In sports, no one questions the need for well-defined rules. Precise rubrics keep everyone on the same page. Precision catechizes the faithful by demonstrating that our liturgical practices reflect and emphasize the tenets of our faith. Precision helped the Holy Mass stay consistent for hundreds of years in an era before mass communication. Today, precise rubrics preserve the integrity of the Tridentine Mass across the world in an era of global travel: You will feel at home, and be able to join in the responses, at virtually any Extraordinary Form Mass anywhere.

Precise guidelines for the celebration of Mass result in only good things: predictability, familiarity, and ability to focus on prayer rather than the uniqueness of the given celebration. Good habits are formed in the celebrant, the congregation, the choir, and the altar servers. Precision means there is almost no room for an Extraordinary Form Mass to be invalid or even abusive, regardless of a given priest's liturgical inclinations. And that is why we have liturgy in the first place: to render praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and expiation to our God in a structured manner, fitting the mind and needs of the Universal Church.