

Tridentine Community News

October 11, 2009

The Extraordinary Form in Ordinary Churches

Last Sunday, October 4, Fr. Mark Borkowski, organist and cantor Wassim Sarweh, and a team of altar servers traveled to St. Joseph Church in Jackson, Michigan to celebrate the parish's 10:30 AM Tridentine Mass. The occasion was the anniversary of the founding of the parish, which Fr. Mark attended as a young man. The experience had lessons to teach, as readers of this column are accustomed to grand, historic churches providing a most apt setting for the Extraordinary Form liturgy.

St. Joseph's current church dates from circa 1968. It is an octagonal structure, reminiscent in many ways of Birmingham's St. Regis Church, albeit somewhat smaller. There is no high altar, only a main altar on a large sanctuary platform. A semicircle of steps separates the sanctuary from the nave (where the pews are), if one can even properly call it a nave. There is no Communion Rail; kneelers are temporarily moved into place before Holy Communion.

The organ console is located to the right of the sanctuary. The organ itself is, fortunately, a pipe organ, but a simple one. The organist faces the congregation while playing. However, the music stand on top of the organ blocks the organist's view of the altar. Essentially parallel to the altar, the organist cannot easily determine if the celebrant is at the Epistle, Gospel, or center positions at the altar, making it challenging to determine quickly where the priest is in the Mass. If you have seen a competent organist ply his or her craft, it is not always a pretty sight; one must be fairly athletic to be able to jump around the various keyboards, set the stops, play the pedals, and turn the pages of the music. Whether one considers this a display of virtuosity, downright ridiculous looking in a Wizard of Oz fashion, or somewhere in between, most would agree that seeing the organist's machinations is a distraction from what is going on at the altar. There is a reason why organs and musicians in a Catholic church are traditionally located out of sight: they are not supposed to provide any sort of visual accompaniment.

Acoustically, the church was dead. Omnipresent carpet and sound-absorbing wood in the ceiling killed off any reverberation from the organ and cantor. Lift a finger off a key on the organ, and the church is immediately quiet.

At the altar, Fr. Mark and the servers were somewhat disoriented. Where does the sanctuary begin? What constitutes the equivalent of the altar platform? The entire, large sanctuary area? If so, the steps at the front of the sanctuary platform are quite a bit further away from the altar than the steps in front of a traditional high altar. If there are sufficient servers that some could serve as torch bearers, where would they go? The steps in front of the sanctuary are close to the first row of pews; there is not the traditional large flat space between the altar and the nave. The rubrics of the Extraordinary Form are quite specific and presume a classic church layout according to the norms prescribed by St. Charles

Borromeo at the time of the Council of Trent, yet those rubrics must be dynamically interpreted in a setting such as this.

Despite our misgivings and uncertainties about the execution of the Mass in this space, afterwards, several regulars at St. Joseph commented that this was one of the most memorable Tridentine Masses they had seen. The primary reason was that most of their Masses are Low Masses. The experience of chanting the Ordinary of the Mass and hearing the Propers sung, along with the extra liturgical elements of the *Aspérages* and the use of incense, were things to which that congregation was not accustomed. Wassim was impressed that St. Joseph's organist even seemed inspired to attempt a sung Mass, now that an example had been given.

Also worth noting is that St. Joseph Church is viewed by the Jackson Tridentine Community as quite an upgrade from their former home, the storefront Sacred Heart Chapel. Let's also not forget that the solid liturgy and parish life practiced at this parish for many years was the source for Fr. Mark's vocation. We cannot focus too heavily on the building.



We point all of this out because if we are collectively to promote the Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass, and wish to see it celebrated in more churches, including those in the suburbs, then we will have to deal with architecture such as this. There are only so many historic churches in North America. Yes, we are starting to see some modern churches being re-done in a more traditional fashion, but that will be a

slow process. The reality is that we must learn to make the Tridentine Mass work in such buildings. We must not be dismissive but rather supportive of such efforts.

That being said, we have been entrusted with quite a gift in being able to hold our own Masses in such striking historic churches. Because God expects more of those to whom more was given, we have a responsibility to strive to make the best possible use of these edifices for the purpose for which they were built, the solemn celebration of the Church's Classic Liturgy.

Solemn High Anniversary Mass at Windsor's Assumption Church Next Sunday, October 18 at 2:00 PM

Until now, well-known priests from outside the Diocese of London, Ontario have been invited as celebrants of Windsor's annual Anniversary Mass. This year, as the community enters its "adulthood" at age 18, we have something different in mind:

Over the past year, several young priests of the Diocese of London have begun studying the Extraordinary Form Mass. While several young priests of the Archdiocese of Detroit have long held an interest in the Traditional Mass, this is a new phenomenon in the London Diocese. It is therefore only appropriate that we invite one of those young priests to be our celebrant this year: Fr. John Johnson, transferred to Windsor this summer and presently pastor of the cluster of St. Theresa and St. Vincent de Paul Parishes.