Tridentine Community News

October 18, 2009

Call To Holiness Conference Report

The Call To Holiness conference held last Saturday, October 10 at the National Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak turned out somewhat different than expected. Several of the speakers gave significant emphasis to the appeal of the Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass. This focus was not evident in the marketing materials used to promote the conference.

Dr. Michael Foley delivered a thought-provoking opening talk entitled "How the Mass Shaped the Western World." After pointing out that many aspects of modern society were inspired by the Mass (e.g.: The layout of a courtroom resembles that of a church. Once someone has "passed the bar" [Communion Rail analogy] and may practice law, he is permitted to enter the front "sanctuary" of the courtroom, where only "ordained" attorneys may go.). Dr. Foley further proposed that it was the Extraordinary Form's structure that caused the Mass to have such influence, and questioned whether the Ordinary Form would have been compelling enough to affect society so pervasively.

Fr. Eduard Perrone presented PowerPoint slides comparing the Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Mass side by side (just as this column did in January, 2008). He pointed out the value of veiling the sacred (just as this column did in February, 2006) via the Communion Rail, chalice veils, and the like. Various "hmmms" and "aaahs" of realization were heard from some of those present who may not have pondered these matters before.

Bishop Athanasius Schneider, a member of the same Canons Regular of the Holy Cross to which our own Fr. Wolfgang Seitz belongs, spoke about the importance of realizing what, and Who, the Holy Eucharist is. Following the theme of his recently published book, "Dóminus Est – It is the Lord!: Reflections of a Bishop of Central Asia on Holy Communion", he logically developed that argument that if we believe that the Eucharist is the Real Presence of our Lord, then we should not be so casual in permitting the Eucharist to be handled by laypeople or received in the hand, which can lead to all sorts of desecrations, both inadvertent and intentional.

Priest blogger extraordinaire Fr. John Zuhlsdorf of What Does the Prayer Really Say (www.wdtprs.com) spoke about the necessity and benefits of reverent worship in today's society.

Sacred Heart Seminary Director of Music Dr. Ronald Prowse led a time-constrained seminar on Gregorian Chant. He provided an introduction to reading chant notation, and showed how English propers can be set to chant tones. A schola comprised of seminarians was present to sing the 4:30 PM Mass.

The corridor leading up to the Shrine church was filled with vendors offering a variety of religious materials for sale, as was the school gymnasium across the street where lunch was served.

Call To Holiness has always featured orthodox speakers, however this was the first time that the Traditional Latin Mass was a primary theme. It would not be unreasonable to speculate that at least half of the people in attendance are not presently regular Tridentine Mass attendees. However, most were likely conservative Catholics, and among them surely were some who simply had never had the Traditional Mass explained to them.

The morning and afternoon Masses at Shrine were of the typical suburban parish variety. These were parish Masses and not conference Masses per se, so this was understandable, yet it also brought home the fact that we have a long way to go to re-educate most Catholics about proper structure and form in the liturgy.

The rise of EWTN and Catholic radio; a spate of new, orthodox Catholic publications and web sites; and the Internet's role in spreading news quickly has made people aware of the appeal of traditional worship. Yet liturgy by-the-books is a topic that is virtually never brought up at most Catholic parishes. Likewise, the metro Detroit and Windsor Catholic media seems so heavily focused on pro-life and Marian topics that the sacred liturgy is rarely addressed. This is not to disparage those topics, as they are vital indeed, but to discuss them to the virtual exclusion of the liturgy results in Catholics' general unawareness of a significant part of their faith. Indeed, how can one even credibly argue against the Latin Mass if one is unfamiliar with it?

Nevertheless, this Call To Holiness conference demonstrated yet further proof that the pendulum is swinging back towards recovering our liturgical heritage. Who could have ever imagined in the late 1990s, or even five years ago, that Call To Holiness would focus on the Tridentine Mass?

Appropriate Attire in the Sanctuary

At virtually every Tridentine Mass location, everyone in the sanctuary wears liturgical attire during Mass. The celebrant, of course, is fully vested. Altar servers, as well as clergy and choir members who may be present, traditionally wear cassock and surplice. This creates an atmosphere of decorum fitting for the sacred actions taking place. Conversely, inappropriate or excessively informal attire in the sanctuary can be a source of distraction and can make a statement that what goes on at Mass is not really that special at all. In essence, it can have the opposite effect of a Communion Rail; it can "unveil" the sacred.

It may not be realistic for lay lectors and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist to be vested. By the same token, however, by virtue of the gravity of their responsibilities in handling the Holy Eucharist, it seems out of place for Extraordinary Ministers to be dressed in, for example, jeans and sweatshirts. As Bishop Schneider argued, we Catholics either believe or we do not in the Real Presence. If we do believe, should Extraordinary Ministers not give our Lord at least the same respect via their attire that they would give a fine restaurant?

The Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass avoids these potential dichotomies by excluding the possibility of lay lectors and by restricting the distribution of Holy Communion to priests and deacons, both of whom must be vested while performing their duties.