

Tridentine Community News

November 14, 2010

Progressive Solemnity

At a recent funeral, a reader asked a set of related questions: Why are there defined forms of the Extraordinary Form Mass (Low, High, Solemn High)? Why are the distinctions so marked, as opposed to in the Ordinary Form? Does one Mass type provide more grace than another?

The last question is the easiest to answer. It is an axiom of the Church that every Holy Mass is a font of grace. God does not need the Holy Mass; mankind needs it. Mankind's thought processes are influenced by the senses, and thus it helps us, not God, that there are different forms of the Mass, reflecting varying degrees of solemnity.

Consider a fine dinner. That meal could be ordered for carry-out and enjoyed in very informal circumstances. Paper plates and utensils could be used. It could be served outdoors at a camp site. The same meal could also be had in a fancy restaurant. It is haute cuisine either way, but the environment of a fine restaurant and its high standards of service are more fitting for a major occasion. So it is with the Sacred Liturgy: The Holy Mass is the same Mass, offering the same supernatural graces, no matter how it is celebrated. Likewise, a wedding is still a wedding regardless of the level of solemnity of the accompanying Holy Mass.

Nevertheless, Holy Mother Church recognizes that we humans employ and benefit from ritual in our secular lives to distinguish special occasions such as graduation, anniversaries, and retirement. In a similar fashion, the Extraordinary Form Calendar assigns each Feast Day a Class from one to four. First Class Feasts are our most important days; Fourth Class our least. The Feast of Pentecost and the feast of a relatively obscure saint do not demand the same awareness on the part of the faithful.

A particular beauty of the Extraordinary Form is its definition of different types of Holy Mass: The formal setting of a Solemn High Mass (with Deacon and Subdeacon) is more fitting for a special occasion, presuming sufficient sacred ministers are available. A Missa Cantata (High Mass celebrated by a priest alone) is more typically feasible nowadays for feasts of above-average solemnity. We celebrate Missa Cantatas on weekdays at St. Josaphat and Assumption-Windsor on weekday First and Second Class Feasts when a Credo as well as Gloria are specified, to heighten awareness of the Church's calendar in our daily thinking. The Low Mass is fitting for Third and Fourth Class weekdays, when time and resources are limited.

The concept we are describing is referred to as Progressive Solemnity. Not just the form of the Mass, but also the incidentals surrounding it, can and should differ depending on the importance of the occasion. For example, gold vestments may be substituted for every vestment color other than black or violet. Traditionally gold is used for more solemn occasions. Likewise, cloths used at the altar, such as the purificator that covers the chalice, come in varying degrees of decoration, from almost plain white cloths to fabric with gilded edging and sewn golden images. Chalices can

vary from the relatively plain to jewel-bedecked, intricately patterned models.

Presuming that we had options in our inventory, we wouldn't use our best gold vestment for a Fourth Class Feria weekday Mass. Nor would we use a relatively plain vestment or chalice for Easter Sunday Mass. Some of the chants of the Mass are also adapted to levels of formality: For example, the Prefaces are printed in Ferial Tone for less important feasts; in Solemn Tone for most Sundays and major feasts; and in a More Solemn Tone for the most solemn of occasions and feasts such as Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, and Pentecost Sunday.

The rubrics surrounding the Feast Classes and Mass types free us to focus on prayer and preparation, not on worrying how to make a particular feast's Mass appear more significant. The High Mass rubrics set elevated standards and give us something to strive for. Without those standards, would we, for example, elect to chant the Holy Gospel? Or sing the Credo and the Mass responses? Those are enhancements to the Mass that might not be intuitive nowadays, yet once experienced, clearly add to the sense of sacredness.

The Ordinary Form does not demarcate differences as clearly between forms of the Mass. There are no clear definitions of Low and High Masses. A particular Sunday Mass, for instance, might have hymns, a sung Gloria, a recited Creed, but no sung Propers. Chapter VI of Msgr. (now Bishop) Peter Elliott's *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite* describes the elements which could constitute a "Solemn Mass" in the Ordinary Form, largely drawing on customs modeled on the Tridentine Mass, in an effort to supply details missing in the official rubrics. For instance, His Excellency suggests the use of two deacons, thurifer, torch bearers, master of ceremonies, and book bearer.

The Church does not limit graces depending on the form of Mass. For instance, nowhere in rubric, custom, or Canon Law is it stated that one must attend a High Mass in order to gain some sacramental benefit or Indulgence. At the same time, in 1998 then-Cardinal Ratzinger delivered a speech in which he urged Extraordinary Form Masses to employ music when possible, as humans are attracted by the more sacred atmosphere.

Again, God does not need this, *we* do. Anything that helps us focus our worship according to the mind of the Church can be good for our spiritual life. Thus while every Holy Sacrifice of the Mass conveys grace – even if our personal preference is not for a particular form of Mass or type of music used in the Liturgy – Progressive Solemnity fits our human need to distinguish certain occasions as more worthy of our attention than others.

Tridentine Masses This Coming Week

Mon. 11/15 7:00 PM: Low Mass at St. Josaphat (St. Albert the Great, Bishop, Confessor, & Doctor)

Tue. 11/16 7:00 PM: Low Mass at Assumption-Windsor (St. Gertrude the Great, Virgin)