

The Roman Missal used in coronations

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This lecture aims to demonstrate, through a few examples, how the classical Roman rite can be one of the most powerful elements of the ‘New Evangelisation’. Indeed, by emphasising a deeply sacred vision of the liturgy, it enables those who approach it – and even more so those who live by it – to experience the transcendence of God and thus to pray to Him ‘in spirit and in truth’.

First, however, we must outline what is meant by the sacred. To do so, we shall draw upon the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas and his modern commentators.

By way of introduction, let us state straight away that the loss of a sense of the sacred (taken in its broadest sense) has reached a level rarely seen in our society: one need only consider the realms of life and death, and authority—both political and familial—and so on... Unfortunately, the Church is not immune to this scourge and, through the secularisation that is rampant within it, it is part of the general trend. The liturgy itself, the very embodiment of the sacred, is suffering the same fate: how many Masses resemble poorly organised spectacles devoid of any notion of God, where one is overcome by a single feeling: the desire to flee! Everything must be pastoral and therefore tailored to human needs: this is the result of anthropocentrism, which attacks the liturgy and attempts to rationalise the mystery as much as possible in order to bring it within human reach. For the liturgy, this way of thinking has extremely significant consequences: it shifts its centre. Through the notion of ‘active participation’—understood as an external action rather than an inner act—the congregation takes centre stage. The congregation, celebrating under the leadership of a presider, takes the place of Christ and his sacrifice. What matters is that it comes alive, that it becomes aware of itself, that it fulfils itself. As Monsignor GAMBER puts it:

‘We are now subjected to a liturgy that is no longer centred on God [...] but on the parish gathered for the communal meal’.² We are thus confronted with two

¹ Acts VIII. Versailles. 8–10 November 2002.

² GAMBER, K., **La Réforme liturgique en question**, Editions Sainte-Madeleine, 1992 (French edition), p. 86.

very different perspectives on the matter. The question that therefore arises can be formulated as follows: ‘What is the Mass first and foremost? A worship service offered to God or a “self-celebration of the congregation”?’ The answer we give to this question will determine the place we assign to the sacred. In their book *LITURGY AND CONTEMPLATION*, Jacques and Raïssa MARITAIN offer a definition of the Mass that may shed light on this:

‘[...] God Himself intervenes in the worship offered to Him; God Himself is present at the heart of the liturgy. The heart of the liturgy is the Holy Mass, the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated on the altar, the bloodless immolation in which, through the ministry of the earthly priesthood, the Eternal Priest offers Himself as a victim to His Father; The centre of the liturgy is an act of infinite and infinitely transcendent value, a truly divine act, beyond comparison with even the highest works of grace in the human soul: because it is an act of God (making use of the priest as an instrument), not an act of man.’³

For some, the assembly and the individual will take precedence; for others, sacred things will be important by virtue of their ordination to worship and to God, the centre of the liturgy. For the former, respecting sacred things means ‘returning to the law’⁴; it means disregarding the Incarnation, since which ‘God’s otherworldliness is right here: divine transcendence [reaches] us at the very heart of our lives, as a dimension of our own existence’.⁵ In short, Jesus Christ, through the Incarnation, having taken on every aspect of human life, has sanctified everything: humanity is holy, every one of our actions is holy, even the most natural. In this way, the supernatural is subsumed into the natural; all orders are conflated. A logical conclusion which we borrow from Father ANTOINE regarding the elements used in the liturgy: these must be ‘desacralised, restored to their simple human truth, which alone matters here’. In the same vein, how can we fail to quote Father Philippe ROUILLARD, OSB:

‘Anything in the liturgy that seeks to create an atmosphere of mystery falls flat and no longer serves to symbolise the presence of God. It seems artificial to celebrate

³ MARITAIN, J. & R., *Liturgy and Contemplation*, Bruges, 1960, p. 27.

⁴ ANTOINE, P., S.J., ‘Is the Church a Sacred Place?’ in **Etudes**, March 1967, p. 447 quoted by C. Barthe
‘A Plea for the Sacred’ in **Catholica**, August 1990, p. 15

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

the liturgy in a 'sacred' building, with 'sacred' objects and vestments, and to submit to a whole ritual devoid of meaning. The 'sacred' nature of those formerly known as 'ministers of worship' also poses a problem. The true symbols of God's presence, of his action, of the encounter with him, can only be drawn from everyday life, so-called profane life: it is man who is the best image and the best sacrament of God, not man decked out in strange garments, but man in his poverty and weakness, or in his effort to come to the aid of those who suffer. ' 6

A brief study of the thought of St Thomas Aquinas on the subject may help us to see things more clearly and to find answers to the objections mentioned above.

The concept of the sacred in St Thomas is found, amongst other places, in his discussion of the virtue of Religion, which leads us to render to God the honour due to Him. As modern commentators on St Thomas (such as Fr MENNESSIER and Fr LABOURDETTE) point out, 20th-century studies have shown that the concept of the sacred is a fundamental element of all religions, with some even going so far as to define the sacred as the very essence of religion.

St Thomas had already embraced the idea of the sacred as a natural reality, whilst placing it in its rightful place within Christian worship. Two aspects can be found in his thought: **the realism of the sacred** through the notion of consecration, the separation from the profane, and the resulting holiness. The distinction between the profane and the sacred is not obsolete. Quite the contrary: in Christian worship, the sacred develops into a complex liturgical structure: it is a whole system comprising people, objects and actions. For St Thomas, there is absolutely no doubt about this: one need only reread the conclusion of Article 3 of Question 99 (IIaIIae) on the degrees of holy things. Earlier, he defines the sacred as follows: 'The quality of the sacred is attributed to that which is ordered towards the worship of God'; and—an important clarification for us—he adds: 'by virtue of the fact that a thing is set apart for the worship of God, it becomes something divine; we therefore owe it a certain respect which is transferred to God u.' 7 Why all this? The situation is best explained

when we take the sacrificial act as our starting point, for it is this which best accounts for the existence of sacred realities. Indeed, because sacrifice is an action

6 ROUILLARD, P., O.S.B., article 'Liturgy', Dictionnaire du Catholicisme, Paris, vol. 7, p. 892, quoted by C. Barthe, *ibid.*

7 THOMAS AQUINAS (St), *Summa Theologica* II-II, 99,3, corpus, ed. by the Revue des jeunes, Paris-Tournai-Rome, 1934.

It is precisely in order to enhance the character of reverence and devotion—of which it is the pre-eminent sign—that ministers, places and objects are themselves set apart from the secular realm, becoming holy and sacred. Through a specific rite of separation, they receive a significant mark, a sacred character which consists essentially in their suitability for worship. It should be noted that in spiritual worship there is not merely an outward mark, but that the reality is enhanced in its efficacy—namely, its capacity to serve as an instrument of the divine virtue which stirs the acts of the infused virtue of religion.

The relativity of the sacred in terms of its relationship to inner worship. Indeed, the entire order of the sacred is directed towards a single effect: to evoke in the soul feelings of devotion and reverence. The hylomorphism espoused by St Thomas justifies this as follows: ‘We cannot, of course, reach God through the senses, but sensible signs prompt our mind to turn towards him’.⁸ Father MENNESSIER summarises the thought of the Angelic Doctor when he explains that ‘The principal function of external worship is to inspire inner reverence. The solemn nature of all that pertains to divine worship will be the principal means of achieving this.’⁹

On the strength of these statements, we can say that the liturgy—and especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the supreme homage paid to God alone—is the realm of the sacred. A few examples drawn from the Roman Missal will show us how the sacred exists and unfolds within the traditional liturgy:

1) *In general: through the distinctly theocentric orientation revealed by:*

- a) The orientation of the altar and, consequently, of the ministers. We address God, facing towards Him.¹⁰
- b) The orientation of the readings: The Gospel is chanted facing north, which symbolises the proclamation of the Good News to the pagan nations (the north symbolising these nations). The orientation of these readings is a sign of openness to the universality of the Church and not of withdrawal into the community that is listening.
- c) The liturgical language: In the liturgy, we speak first and foremost to God. The concept of sacred language is significant: it reminds us that the liturgy is not a dialogue amongst Christians but a dialogue of love between the Church, the bride, and Christ, the bridegroom.

⁸ Ibid., II-II, 84, 2, 3um.

⁹ MENNESSIER, I., ‘The Idea of the “Sacred” and Worship According to Saint Thomas’ in R.S.P.T. 19 (1930), p. 74.

¹⁰ On this subject, we cannot recommend highly enough the reading of: **Tournés vers le Seigneur!**, Ed. Sainte-Madeleine, 1993, the French edition by K. GAMBER.

d) The clear articulation of the purposes of the Mass: it is a sacrifice of praise to the Most Holy Trinity, as made explicit by the numerous Trinitarian conclusions and by the three prayers

‘Suscipe Sancta Trinitas’, ‘Suscipe Sancte Pater’ and ‘Placeat Sancta Trinitas’. It is essentially a sacrifice (an immanent purpose): thus the Offertory already refers to the sacrifice of Christ.

e) The silence that gives way to mystery and the adoration that flows from it. This silence is far from being artificial; it coincides with an action. It is not a meditation following the homily or after Communion, but it envelops what is taking place in a subtle and profound way, thus enabling the highest possible participation—that of the heart and the mind.

f) The priest’s address to the faithful is strictly confined to the homily, which is the great advantage of giving priority to what is being celebrated rather than to the community. We thus dispense with the words of welcome and farewell—now so fashionable—which disrupt the sacred atmosphere, and with explanations of the rites, which create a disconnect between what is grasped intellectually and what is about to be experienced, not to mention the inevitable change in tone of voice (between the tone of explanation and that of the sacred action) which introduces an unfortunate break.

g) The numerous bows before the cross emphasise this orientation: when the priest says ‘Oremus’, pronounces the name of Jesus, at the conclusion of prayers that mention Christ or the Trinity, at the various ‘Gloria Patri...’, at the ‘Gloria’ and at the ‘Credo’.

h) The deep bows required during the ‘Confiteor’, the ‘Munda cor’ (during which the deacon kneels), the ‘Te Igitur’, the ‘Supplices’, and for the prayers before Communion.

i) Eyes raised towards Heaven, clearly demonstrating the dialogue the priest establishes with God (during the ‘Te Igitur’, ‘Suscipe Sancta Trinitas’, etc.)

2) *In particular: through the respect due to each ‘sacred thing’.*

Having established the link between respect, reverence and the sacred through this brief study of the thought of St Thomas, we can highlight a few examples of respect in the liturgy of the Mass which serve as sure indicators of the presence of the sacred. The sacred atmosphere one experiences is indeed due to all the signs of respect that surround the liturgy:

a) With regard to the Eucharist, which, amongst the sacred things, holds a place quite apart. The Eucharistic Species do indeed contain Our Lord Himself; we speak of the

the Holy Species, towards which, by virtue of their entirely special union with Christ, any irreverence is irreverence towards God. The traditional rite prevents this and encourages inner reverence:

- Through numerous genuflections before and after each of the actions involving the Holy Species ('Per Ipsum', the breaking of the bread, Communion and, above all, the Elevation). These are expressions of faith.

- Through the reverent manner of handling the Holy Species ('Per Ipsum', the breaking of the bread, and the priest's reception of Communion). Regarding the 'Per Ipsum', for example, the 'Ritus Servandus' states as follows: Then, he (the priest) uncovers the chalice with his right hand and adores the Blessed Sacrament by genuflecting; he then rises and takes the Host respectfully between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand... (all these precise gestures contribute to the inner effect).

- By keeping his fingers joined from the Consecration until the purification, out of respect for any possible particles.

- By using the Palla, which prevents any foreign matter from falling into the Precious Blood,

- By reciting the three beautiful prayers of preparation for Communion: 'Domine Jesu Christe qui dixisti...', 'Domine Jesu Christe Filii Dei vivi...', 'Perceptio...', as well as the formula 'Panem caelestem accipiam, et nomen Domini invocabo...' and the threefold 'Domine non sum dignus'.

- Through the manner in which the faithful receive Communion (on their knees and on the tongue).¹¹

b) With regard to ordained ministers:

Those who perform a function in worship that is particularly closely linked to liturgical rites receive from the Church a mark, a distinctive sign of their office. The rite must emphasise this visibly.

It does so by means of the double Confiteor at the beginning of Mass (for the low Mass), the almost complete recitation of the Lord's Prayer by the priest, and the priest's reception of Communion separately from that of the faithful.

The liturgical kisses add to the reverence required towards the celebrant. The ordinary gesture of giving and receiving is thereby elevated; it loses its ordinary character.

The vestments specific to worship must be worn to remind us that the action to be performed is not ordinary but great and holy, and that it requires our full attention and

¹¹ On this subject, we would like to refer the reader to the book by Bishop LAISE: *Communion in the Hand*, Paris, 1999.

very special sentiments. Hence the symbolism of the prayers recited whilst the ministers are dressing: they prepare them to celebrate the Mass with dignity. For the faithful, these vestments clearly indicate that the action taking place is not trivial.

Respect for those in sacred office is also expressed in the seating arrangement in the choir, where places are not allocated at random. The visibility of the hierarchy contributes to the sacredness: everyone has a clearly defined place. This hierarchy is also evident in the rite of incensation (at the Offertory) and, at a solemn Mass, during the exchange of the sign of peace: in the old rite, the sign of peace is taken from the altar, which symbolically represents Christ. It is therefore from Christ himself that the sign of peace descends to each of those who receive it. It is passed by the priest to the deacon, who gives it to the subdeacon, who then carries it to the choir. All this is done with order and dignity: the recipient bows; the giver places his hands on the recipient's shoulders, whilst the recipient places his own hands beneath the giver's elbows; they embrace and then greet one another, exchanging the words: 'Pax tecum – Et cum spiritu tuo'.

a) With regard to the objects: these must be handled with care. As Bishop Martimort quite rightly says: 'Set apart from the profane and imbued with beauty, the place or object consecrated for divine worship must henceforth be treated with great respect. In most cases, it is a prayer by the bishop that has effected this consecration, accompanied by the anointing with holy oil.'¹² Thus, the deacon wipes the chalice at the Offertory and likewise the paten at the moment of the 'Libera nos...'. Both the chalice and the paten remain largely veiled during the ceremony to suggest that they are not ordinary objects. The corporal, for its part, is carried to the altar by the deacon in a pouch. Need we remind you that the missal is a liturgical book that must be treated with care? It is neither a poor-quality photocopy nor a small colour magazine. The altar, for its part, plays a central role in the liturgy. On numerous occasions, the priest kisses the altar: at the beginning of Mass when he mentions the relics, before turning towards the congregation; when he mentions the altar in the 'Supplices...'. Furthermore, the altar is incensed on two occasions: at the beginning of Mass and during the Offertory. It should also be noted that only the priest places his hands on the altar before giving the sign of peace and throughout the Mass.

¹² MARTIMORT, A.G., 'Le sens du sacré' in **La Maison Dieu**, 25, 1951, p. 61.

‘Prescriptions of details whose meticulous and sincere observance is already, for our people, a great lesson in the meaning of the divine,’ said the same Bishop Martimort .¹³

In light of all that we have just said, we may conclude that the presence of a very rigorous ceremonial helps to maintain the sense of the sacred at a very high level; according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, this ‘belongs to the virtue of religion’¹⁴ and is therefore not optional. This same ceremonial structure fosters a certain wholesome stability that enables one to focus on the essentials. It stands in contrast to a penchant for innovation that surprises and unsettles the faithful. It fosters a harmony without which any ceremony is tedious and burdensome. It creates a sense of being transported to another world.

Its virtues are such that it is not surprising to see certain modern authors questioning a certain ‘ceremonial deficit’ in current practice and advocating a ‘return’ to a ceremonial conceived ‘as a reverent and joyful attention paid to the signs of the faith and their manifestation in liturgical acts, so that they may be recognised and honoured as such’¹⁵

Another sets out “in search of a spirituality of liturgical celebration” and, in this context, quotes a certain Salvatore Marsili:

‘[...] the celebration itself cannot take place haphazardly. It must be carried out with such a level of faith and consistent inner attention that it allows for the discovery of both the actual presence of Christ and the experience of opening oneself personally to this presence and this divine action’.¹⁶

Conversely, everything in the Old Rite is laid down and specified, including the inner sentiments – adoration and reverence – and the many gestures that evoke and call for them. The sense of the sacred shines forth in it, and the sense of divine transcendence is manifest. It is therefore one of the most beautiful means that Providence gives us for the manifestation of our faith and, by the same token, for evangelisation.

¹³ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁴ CCC no. 2144 (It is in this same section that the fine quotation from Newman appears, para. 5.2: ‘Are the sentiments of awe and the sacred Christian sentiments or not? No one can reasonably doubt it. These are the feelings we would have, and to a profound degree, if we were to behold the sovereign God. These are the feelings we would have if we ‘realised’ his presence. To the extent that we believe he is present, we must have them. Not to have them is not to realise, not to believe that he is present.’).

¹⁵ HAMELINE, J.-Y., ‘Observation on our ways of celebrating’ in **La Maison Dieu**, 192, 1992, p. 17.

¹⁶ MARSI, S., ‘La liturgia primaria esperienza spirituale cristiana’ in T. Goffi and B. Secondin, **Problemi e prospettive di spiritualità**, Rome, 1983, p. 276, quoted by J. POLFLIET, **Questions liturgiques**, 83, 2002/2–3, p. 229

Allow me to quote Bishop A.-M. Martimort once more, and this will serve as my conclusion:

‘[...] it is only to the extent that our ceremonies impart to the faithful the authentic sense of the sacred that they will truly find the Lord. *Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus*: this sweetness can be savoured only by those who have first acquired a sense of divine reverence. “ ”¹⁷

¹⁷ MARTIMORT, A.-G., ‘Le sens du sacré’ in *La Maison Dieu*, 25, 1951, p. 74.