ASSESSING LITURGICAL REFORMS

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***Mass Misunderstandings: The Mixed Legacy of the Vatican II Liturgical Reforms* by Kenneth D. Whitehead. St. Augustine's Press, 2009. Order online at www.staugustine.net or your favorite online bookseller.**

The subtitle presents the burden of this highly informative book. Not every liturgical reform given us by the Second Vatican Council sat well with the devout, as older Mass-going Catholics are aware. Nor, as the author makes clear, did the reforms have the desired effect of returning more Catholics to the practice of their faith, measured by attendance at Mass.

Kenneth Whitehead quotes the present pope, when he was the cardinal archbishop of Munich ten years after the Council, as speaking bluntly of "the present decadence of the Catholic Church." Another decade later, the same words of the same Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger were quoted in the immensely successful book-length interview with him titled *The Ratzinger Report*. In that book the future pope noted: "Developments since the Council seem to be in striking contrast to the expectations of all, beginning with those of John XXIII and Paul VI."

No more important development arrived than the widespread and uproarious rejection of *Humanae Vitae*, Paul's clear restatement of the aboriginal condemnation of contraception, a condemnation unique to Hebrew tradition and Catholic tradition alike. (For the Hebrew condemnation, which was essentially carried ahead by the Catholic Church, see *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, under "Birth Control.") But the way in which the reform of the liturgy mandated by the Council was carried out had to rank high on the list of the shocks undergone by the Church following the Council.

Paul VI's high expectations for the Council were dashed all too soon. By 1968, three years after the Council's end, he lamented that the Church was engaged in "self-destruction." That anguished cry, Whitehead observes, is "equally indicative of what occurred and how it seemed to some observers at the time."

But how does all this fit in with what Whitehead calls the "mixed legacy of the Vatican II liturgical reforms"? The answer lies in a maxim cited no fewer than five times in this book: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, which can be rendered *the law of what we are to pray is the law of what we are to believe*. That means that the liturgy embodies the Catholic faith and teaches us our Catholic beliefs. But a seemingly inevitable corollary of that principle is that a distorted liturgy distorts our beliefs.

Certainly the most obvious means of distorting the liturgy lies in translation. The Italian words for translator and betrayer are so close that to link them is proverbial with educated Italians. Still, translators must be allowed some freedom lest the result be unidiomatic, hence wooden and creaky. But the translations of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) were often "flat, pedestrian, and prosaic," in Whitehead's words.

At times they were seriously distorted. Among the most egregious examples is the still current translation of the *Gloria*. Early in the Mass, the Church gives us the song that the Gospel has the angels sing at Bethlehem, *Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. Straightforwardly, to anyone with even a slight knowledge of Latin, that last phrase means *peace to men of good will*. Why then did ICEL omit *of good will*, words implying that Heaven may not give peace to men lacking good will?

Is that not a vital lesson of the Gospel? Of ordinary experience?

Whitehead observes that examples of the same kind could be multiplied in the "liturgical texts that have constituted our liturgy in English over the past nearly forty years"—although he also chronicles the reform of the ICEL carried out over the past decade and more by Cardinals Medina and Arinze so that the new English translations that will be coming out promise to be enormous improvements over what we have had since the Mass began to be celebrated in the vernacular.

ICEL's original translations were also guilty of omitting repetitions, which might be considered trivial since no meaning seems to be lost. Moreover it has long been a criticism of the Church's prayers that they engage in the "useless repetition" of the Gentiles. But repetition need not be useless. It is embedded in literature from ancient to modern times, and for good reason. Remove the anguished repetitions of Lear over his dead daughter, and much of the impact vanishes. Moreover you would be bereft of a supreme example of Shakespeare's dramatic genius.

We might think that drama has little to do with the liturgy. But we must recall that the core of the liturgy, the Mass itself, is a representation of the drama of Calvary. (Note carefully: that's *re*-presentation. I italicize the *re* and insert a hyphen for fuller clarity.) The Mass deserves the best that our sense of drama can offer.

Three years before his election as Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote of the older usage, ordinarily styled *Roman*, or *Tridentine* after the Council of Trent:

"Anyone who nowadays advocated the continuing existence of this liturgy or takes part in it is treated like a leper; all tolerance ends here. There has never been anything like this in history; in doing this we are despising and proscribing the Church's past. I must say, quite openly, that I don't understand why so many of my episcopal brethren have to such a great extent submitted to this rule of intolerance, which for

no apparent reasons, is opposed to making the necessary inner reconciliation within the Church." [*God and the World*.]

This, for all its untempered language, was not far removed from Pope John Paul II's demand in the *motu proprio* of 1988 in which he excommunicated the extreme conservative Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre for ordaining four bishops without the necessary agreement of the Holy See. Despite the excommunication, he cautioned that respect "must everywhere be shown for the feelings of all those who are attached to the Latin liturgical tradition." However Whitehead notes that it was "only in response to an actual schism that Pope John Paul II finally called for 'a wide and generous application' of the indult provisions allowing the celebration of the Tridentine Mass."

It is impossible, in a relatively brief review, to cover all the important matters raised and fully explained in this wide-ranging book of 240 pages. Among them are some Jewish reactions to the prayers for the Jews in the retained Tridentine Mass, official changes in those prayers, and Whitehead's careful explanations of them; reasons why some highly dedicated Catholics are uncomfortable with the post-conciliar Mass; extreme reactions against Vatican II among some ultra-conservative Catholics; prospects for the return of ultra-conservative schismatics; the welcome accorded Benedict XVI's overtures by the successor to schismatic Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre; and the repudiation by most Catholics of the renewed condemnation of contraception by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*.

With that disastrous repudiation, Whitehead concludes Part One of his book, which deals with the revival of the traditional Roman Mass by the new Pope. The middle part, which is by far the longest, deals with Vatican II and the reform of the liturgy.

A relatively brief Part Three examines the Lefebvrite schism

more deeply, and recounts the diffusion of "creative" liturgies after the Council. Amazingly, one of the most assiduous initiators of such liturgies was the papal master of ceremonies himself, Archbishop Piero Marini. For example, he staged dances in the liturgy, despite their explicit prohibition. Only after two years and more from Benedict's election was Marini removed, "kicked upstairs" to head a papal commission. He was replaced by another Marini, named Guido, no relation.

It is unfair to single out any one part of Whitehead's book as the most important, but I do so anyway. Part Two, on "Vatican Council II and the Reform of the Sacred Liturgy," has fifteen chapters whose headings will catch the attention of many readers. Among them: *Kneeling or Standing?*, *The Tabernacle of the Blessed Sacrament*, *How "Altar Girls" Got Approved*, and *"Inclusive Language."*

Part Two contains some other devastating criticisms of effects on the liturgy from radical feminism. I hasten to add that radical feminism—to be distinguished sharply from humane feminism—has not only tainted the worship of God through defective translations and arbitrary additions, but has damaged the most basic natural institution of all, namely, the family.

Quite pertinently when speaking of radical feminism, Whitehead quotes the ancient Roman poet Horace: "You may throw nature out with a pitchfork, but she will keep coming back." Horace might have added: "brandishing her own pitchfork." Or as Horace's older contemporary Cicero, when speaking of natural law, put it more mildly: "Whoever disobeys it is fleeing from himself, rejecting his human nature, and hence will suffer the very worst penalties even if he escapes what is commonly considered punishment."

Whitehead's chapter, *How "Altar Girls" Got Approved*, is of interest less for how that happened than for what he thinks

female acolytes might comport for the future. He makes the point that women still may not “be appointed or installed as acolytes, or servers at the altar,” but he notes that feminists who want access to priestly ordination consider altar girls “yet another wedge issue,” positioning them all the closer to their goal of reaching the priesthood.

Yet Whitehead is far from critical of the new liturgy. For example, he favors the new Eucharistic Prayers and use of the vernacular, and explains some of the benefits of the new liturgy generally.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should state that I count Kenneth D. Whitehead among my oldest and most cherished friends. One reason that I esteem him so highly is the service he has rendered the Church through his many excellent publications. The present book is an outstanding example.

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