



Celebrating the Sacred Mysteries

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The Liturgical Cliff

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Advocates for a more dignified and reverent celebration of the Mass – this author among them – continue to pine for this or that reform that will refocus the liturgy, in the words of Father Richard John Neuhaus, back to the **Real Presence of God** and away from **God’s Really Awesome People**.

As helpful as individual or wholesale reforms may be, they will be of little avail unless the overall ethos of the Mass first shifts in the manner wryly described by Father Neuhaus. But re-centering this ethos on the solemn worship of God prompts fears of a “liturgical cliff” beyond which precious few pastors are willing to push.

For over forty years, the vast majority of Catholic parishes have tilted the celebration of the Mass in a manner that was thought to stimulate God’s Really Awesome People. The Church, according to cultural trends, needed to be a more welcoming and friendly place. So we placed greeters at the doors, and, just in case we were not welcomed enough the first time, we are then invited by the lector to greet our fellow pew-mates before Mass begins. The music melody and attendant instruments are also intended to appeal to us, not God, so that the celebration may feel meaningful for us, the worshippers. Whether God, the object of worship, will be satisfied by our selections is not even given a thought.

But a far deeper – and more dangerous – ingredient to this people-centered approach is the relationship that has developed within the Mass between the priest and the people. Catholics in the pews expect the priest to engage them both by his manner of celebrating the Mass and by his homily. And it is on these two criteria, rightly or wrongly, that every priest is judged. A priest, by definition, is a mediator whose role is to bring people to God. Now in the contemporary view, the priest has been reduced to the “presider” or “facilitator” of religious entertainment for the people, forming what Pope Benedict has called a “self-enclosed circle.”

Priests, conscious of this precarious dynamic, feel as though they have no choice but to give people what they have come to expect – a Mass catered to their needs, or at least their needs as prescribed by liturgists over the last forty years. Change risks alienation, and alienation risks empty pews. And even if a priest is willing to take the risk, other factors – the choir, his fellow priests in the parish, expectations for extraordinary ministers and altar girls – are often even more difficult to combat.



Benedict XVI celebrates *ad orientem* the *Novus ordo Missæ*

In this situation, reorienting the Mass back towards God presents a liturgical cliff – a negative backlash from a large portion of the faithful who feel disengaged by a liturgy not wholly focused on them. And the liturgical cliff is made steeper and more sobering because these Catholics bear no blame for their people-centered Mass preference. They were thrust into this manner of worship by a precious few who held the reins with full force, and this is all they know – and, therefore, all they want.

Two actions in particular, the use of Latin and the priest facing east toward God rather than the people, bring instant threats of the liturgical cliff from the typical Sunday church-goer. The sad irony here – and the sign of just how people-centered the liturgy has become – is that Vatican II calls for the faithful to know and sing the ordinary parts of the Mass in Latin. It says nothing about turning the altar so the priest may face the people. In fact, it assumes that the priest and people are facing the same direction as they had for nearly two millennia.

How can the Mass be returned to its proper God-centered orientation without pushing the faithful over the liturgical cliff? There is no easy answer. Pope Benedict has recognized the dangers inherent in making such a transition: “Nothing is more harmful to the liturgy than a constant activism, even if it seems to be for the sake of genuine renewal.”

The Liturgical Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sought to awaken the faithful to the sublime splendor of the Mass, and Vatican II was supposed to be its pinnacle. But with the *Novus Ordo Missae* that followed the Council, the Liturgical Movement collapsed, its goal never realized. If before the Council the essence of the Mass was obscured from the faithful by overlaid rules and external devotions, as Benedict has stated, now this same essence has been obscured by a cult of the self.

A new liturgical movement, as called for by Benedict in his magisterial *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, is necessary to restore the sacred element of the Mass. The new English translation of the Mass was a first stroke, and a masterful one, in this direction. It restored sacred language without altering the people-centered ethos to which we have grown accustomed – avoiding the liturgical cliff.

The next step is to return this people-centered ethos to a God-centered one. It begins with a whole series of homilies and lessons with a simple theme: Mass is not about us, it is about God.

Only if we grasp this simple theme can we avoid the complexities and unpleasantness of the liturgical cliff. Only then can meaningful reforms of rubrics take place. And only then will God's people see that their awesomeness depends entirely on the Real Presence of God.

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Syllabus

Seminar 1: 16 & 23 January 2013 (two 90-minute sessions)

The Roman Liturgy: Tradition and Reform

- Holy Mass in the Scriptures
- The Protestant Reformation and the Mass of Pius V
- The Pre-Conciliar Liturgical Movement
- Vatican II: *Sacrosanctum concilium*
- The Full, Active and Conscious Participation of the Faithful
- The Post-Conciliar Implementation of *Sacrosanctum concilium*
- The 1960s and the Mass of Paul VI

Seminar 2: 30 January 2012 (one 90-minute session only)

The Roman Calendar: Celebrating the Lord Jesus throughout the Year

- The Role of the Calendar in the Mosaic Covenant
- Apostolic Preaching and the Liturgical Calendar
- The Spirituality of the Liturgical Year
- The Temporal, the Sanctoral and the Ritual

Seminar 3: 6, 20 & 27 February, 6 & 13 March 2012 (five 90-minute sessions)

The Roman Missal: Celebrating the Lord Jesus in the Present Moment

- The Institution of the Eucharist
- The Eucharist as Final Sacrifice and Sacred Banquet
- The Apostolic Origins of the Order of the Mass
- The Structure of the Eucharistic Celebration in the Latin Rite
- The Texts of the Mass: Ordinaries, Propers and Commons

Seminar 4: 20 March 2012 (one 90-minute session only)

The Roman Lectionary: Celebrating the Lord Jesus in the Scriptures

- The Public Proclamation of Scripture
- The Jewish Cycle of Torah and Haftarah Portions
- The Lord Jesus Proclaims the Scripture
- One-Year, Two-Year and Three-Year Cycles of Lessons

Seminar 5: 10 & 17 April 2013 (two 90-minute sessions)

The Roman Gradual: Celebrating the Lord Jesus in Song

- The Hebrew Roots of the Christian Psalter
- The Night He Was Betrayed
- Speaking and Chanting

Seminar 6: 24 April & 1 May 2013 (two 90-minute sessions)

The Liturgy of the Hours: Celebrating the Lord Jesus throughout the Day

- “Seven Times a Day Will I Praise You, O Lord”
- Sanctifying Time: The Spirituality of the Hours
- The Role of the Hours in the Life of the Faithful

Seminar 7: 8 May 2013 (one 90-minute session only)

The Catechumenate: Then and Now

- The Catechumenate of the Early Church
- The Rites of Christian Initiation before Vatican II
- The Rites of Christian Initiation after Vatican II
- In what sense can the catechumante said to have been “restored?”

Seminar 8: 15 May 2013 (one 90-minute session only)

Liturgical Practice in the Parish: Rupture or Continuity?

- Vatican II as a Definitive Break with Tradition
 - The Hermeneutic of Continuity
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Required Texts:

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2012)
Celebrating the Sacred Mysteries Compendium (2012)
The *Magnificat* Roman Missal Companion (2011)

Futher Reading, for the unrepentant liturgy geeks among us:

Aillet, Bishop Marc. *The Old Mass and the New: Explaining the Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010)
Bouyer, Louis. *Life and Liturgy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956)
Guardini, Romano. *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935)
Guéranger OSB, Dom Prosper. *The Holy Mass* (London: Baronius Press, 2009)
_____, *The Liturgical Year*
(<http://www.theliturgicalyear.org/theliturgicalyearpdfs.html>)
Mahrt, William Peter. *The Musical Shape of the Liturgy* (Richmond: CMAA, 2012)
Ratzinger, Joseph. *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000)
_____, *The First Debates on the Liturgy Schema* from *The Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966)