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VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE - Fundamental elements of the Roman Liturgy (3)
Gregorian Chant, silence and … the Altar Bell
Rev. Nicola Bux and Rev. Salvatore Vitiello

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - Gregorian Chant, also because of the fact that the cantors are not the centre of attention, is in keeping with the spirit of the Roman Liturgy, as Icons are for Byzantine Liturgy. Father Jacques-Marie Guilmard Benedictine monk from Solesmes, stresses the need to keep in mind the meaning of the text, the musical form and overall melodic development, the type of ornamentation, the same mode and musical sense of the whole. Not last: the choir's grade of competence, the acoustics of the place of worship, the number of choristers, not to mention the voices.

Gregorian Chant which achieves harmony of body and soul was composed by contemplatives rather than great artists; so it inspired Palestrina and can inspire religious music of the future. Certainly Gregorian Chant, John Paul II wrote in the Breve Iubilari feliciter dated 1980, remains the unifying musical bond for Catholics helping them to experience, as Pope Benedict XVI said, the unity of the Church.

The Liturgical Celebration must have a homogenous phonic balance and therefore in chant and prayer a soft voice is best, it is consonant to the attitude of humility and discretion which we should have before God. Hence the need to avoid tones which are «shouted» and to use instead quieter tones proper to prayer in 'secret' (cfr. Mt 6,5). In this sense Benedictine Liturgical prayer can be considered a model for our inspiration. Therefore, beginning with the priest who leads the people of God, it would be good, especially on solemnities, to return to the use of Gregorian Chant for the Ordinary, by now familiar in the local language, and perhaps even parts of the Proper of Mass.

There is then silence in the Liturgy, fundamental to allow our heart to listen to God who speaks. The soul is made for recollection rather than noise and discussion; a symptom is that we find noise disturbing. First of all we must restore to the church building the dignity of a holy temple, where no one raises his voice, beginning with the priest and other ministers who set the example. The church is the place where we speak to God in humble silence or in a soft voice.

This is what constitutes the Rite, a term which means reiteration and which we should not fear because the believer needs to remember Christ. The Rite helps the faithful become familiar with the Liturgical language, thanks to its repetitive gestures and chants: a choice of style which is constant and homogenous and constitutes our identity as worshippers of the Majesty of God, so different from the deafening din of daily life, from fragmentation of languages and styles which distract attention from the centrality of the mystery.

I will give one example. A certain Italian diocese issued a series of quite erroneous and misleading Guidelines and Norms for Acolytes and Readers. Article 49 p. 15, with regard to the moment of the consecration, after recalling the possible incensing of the consecrated host and chalice, with zeal worthy of the best of causes affirms: «At this point candles, altar bells, masters of ceremonies and other ministers should not appear since they would only function like the old altar rails which prevented the people from seeing and participating in the Mystery being celebrated on the altar. With regard to the use of the altar bell, in actual fact, the Coerimoniale Episcoporum [Ceremonial of Bishops] at point 150 states, according to local use, but in our diocesan Church the altar bell is no longer in use».

Apart from the equalling of persons and things, and ignorance with regard to the significance and function of the Altar Rails in the West (Iconostasis in the East) which in Judaism and in early Christian times distinguished the sanctuary or presbyterium from the nave or hall, it would seem, for the author of the norms, that the Mystery is better seen without this "area", "presbyterial or ministerial" as it is called today - and therefore better participated. Poor Torchères and Altar Rails guilty of not allowing the faithful to participate! - we will not include Iconostasis,

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because it is not right to criticise Eastern Christians - Where the rails have been dismantled faith would not seem to have increased. We will save the patrimony of the faith precisely by leaving it in its own habitat which is the Liturgy, not relegating it to diocesan museums and church concerts.
As far as the Altar Bell is concerned, resolutely, as in many cases, one person decides for all that "the bell is no longer in use". But in many of our churches the bell is still heard because, so I am told, despite much effort on the part of the ministers, the faithful tend to be distracted and the bell, much more discreetly than any verbal reminder, fosters devotion at the most solemn moment. With its sound the little altar bell - like the great church bells - stirs our eternal memory of God. Or do we intend to abolish church bells too? At least, the end of the Guidelines and Norms for Acolytes and Readers in question conclude: «…the Church does not provide us with intangible Liturgies regulated everywhere with strict rules. She offers a choice and opportunity for adaptation». In other words forget about "guidelines and norms" … it's up to each to do what he thinks best. Is this the spirit of the Liturgy described by Romano Guardini and Joseph Ratzinger and, in between these two great theologians, by the Council? If the Liturgy is not opus Dei, for His praise and glory, where is the foundation of the ars celebrandi? Urgent attention must be given to formation for future priests, education of the faithful and "liturgists" in primis.
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