

Introductory remarks by Cardinal Robert Sarah

Saint John Henry Newman wrote in the mid-19th century: "There is a time for silence and a time for speech; and the time for speech has come... I desire a laity [...] that is learned and well-educated. I desire that you increase your knowledge and cultivate your reason; that you perceive clearly the relationships between one truth and another..." These words were addressed to the lay people who came to be trained at the Oratory in Birmingham, which he himself had founded, and they are equally relevant to lay people in the 21st century. Today, too, "the time has come to speak", and today, too, the Church urgently needs lay people trained in the faith to confront, through their words and witness, the error and open attacks against the Truth, which is Christ, that arise both outside and inside the Church.

The necessary formation referred to by Cardinal Newman also implies formation in the liturgy, which occupies a central place in the theology and life of the Church, understood not only as a series of rites and ceremonies, but as a fundamental expression of faith and a means by which the baptised actively participate in the mystery of Christ. Indeed, the liturgy celebrated by the Church on earth is not simply a human act, but a symbolic representation of the liturgy celebrated in heaven, where angels and saints praise God in perpetual praise. We humans join in this heavenly liturgy in the celebration of divine worship.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite teaches that liturgy has a profoundly symbolic character. Every rite, every gesture, every word has a meaning that transcends the visible and refers to higher spiritual realities. The sacraments and liturgical rites are vehicles which, through symbols, allow believers to access the divine presence. This is why learning about the liturgy, like learning about the faith, also means deepening our understanding of divine realities that we cannot perceive with our senses, but which we inherit through baptism.

But how can the laity deepen their knowledge of the liturgy if there are no teachers who, based on the solidity of serious scientific study, can teach its history, development and meaning? When these functions of research and teaching are not adequately provided by the institutions responsible for them, it is the duty of the laity to promote initiatives that stimulate this knowledge, which, once again, is nothing other than a deepening of the faith of the apostles that we have received as a gift from God.

The International Centre for Liturgical Studies – an institution composed mainly of lay people – has been fulfilling this function for more than twenty-five years. At the annual conferences

it organises, specialists in various aspects of liturgy come together to present and discuss their research. In other words, the aim is to promote knowledge of the Catholic faith in the area of worship. This aspect is particularly important today. In a world that is increasingly defined by materialism, secularism and belief in the tangible, the importance of sacred worship becomes crucial. We live in an age where what cannot be measured, seen or perceived by the senses is easily dismissed as irrelevant or non-existent. Even within the Church, the Holy Mass, the summit of the liturgy, is sometimes considered a simple fraternal gathering, from which all elements that cannot be explained rationally or that have no immediate usefulness are excluded. In this context, the study of the liturgy implies a profound affirmation of the transcendent dimension of reality, a reality that goes beyond what our senses can grasp and points to the eternal and the divine.

In this sense, sacred worship becomes an act of spiritual resistance. "The time of the word has come," said Cardinal Newman. In a society that often celebrates only the immediate, the pragmatic and the sensory, the act of worship we perform in the celebration of Holy Mass is a counter-cultural statement.

The publication of the third volume of the CIEL Proceedings, which brings together research conducted by specialists in various fields of liturgy, is precisely a concrete action aimed at deepening knowledge of divine worship and training priests and laypeople in this fundamental aspect of our faith. Such initiatives are all the more valuable and necessary contributions at a time when "the time for words has come."

Cardinal Robert Sarah