

## **The Roman liturgy: a veiled revelation<sup>1</sup>**

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When we say that the Roman liturgy is a veiled revelation, we must first clarify which liturgy we are referring to. In 1968, Pope Paul VI introduced a new liturgy which, in many important respects, departs from the liturgy that for fifteen hundred years was the only valid one and which, in the life of the Church, has been marginalised by the new one. It is difficult to see how this new liturgy could be described as a "veiled revelation" insofar as it has been stripped of many ancient sacramental signs. Nevertheless, for some time now, the Roman dicasteries have been referring to the old rite as "classical," and the most obvious meaning this can have is that it is considered a valid reference point for liturgical sacrifice and prayer. In 1984, Pope John Paul II specified the conditions for the use of the old liturgical books; recently, he himself celebrated a Mass according to the old rite. It therefore seems that the old rite can be treated as a purely scientific question. That is why, in this presentation, this dimension of "veiled revelation" will be considered exclusively on the basis of the books of the old rite, which, given the number and importance of the veiled elements found therein, can indeed be said to be a "veiled revelation" or, better still, that this rite "veils in order to reveal better."

The first example of this is the celebrant, who wears vestments, each of which has a symbolic meaning. To begin with, he places the amice around his neck while reciting a prayer over the helmet of God that he is placing on his head; but what is veiled is a gesture that meant much more in pagan and Jewish antiquity: repentance and mourning, as well as reverence for the sacred place. We note that, in brief prayers, the priest takes on the characteristics and virtues associated with each of the priestly garments—such as chastity, strength, and humility—truly like the parts of the armour mentioned by St. Paul.

The priest literally 'puts on' the new man, Christ. Of course, he asks that this external clothing be matched by an internal transformation. Nevertheless, it remains fundamentally an external act: grace comes from "above", that is, from outside, and man does not consider his perfection to be the result of his own efforts but as a gift, which he appropriates by clothing himself and which comes from outside himself. In the case of the bishop, this goes even further: he puts on gloves and shoes and is thus completely 'wrapped up'; I cannot help but think here of Mircea

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<sup>1</sup> Acts VIII. Versailles. 8 to 10 November 2002.

Eliade's description of the priestly ' ' of certain African tribes, which must be carried so as not to touch the ground, which would cause them to lose their magical power<sup>2</sup> . Furthermore, this "dressing" of the bishop clearly emphasises that he possesses the fullness of the priesthood, insofar as he wears the vestments corresponding to the different orders: in addition to the priestly vestments themselves, he wears the tunic of the subdeacon and the dalmatic of the deacon. Finally, when he performs a sacramental action and takes the host in his hands, he removes his gloves to transmit the blessed flow that he himself received at the moment of the laying on of hands during his episcopal consecration.

The bishop is accompanied by altar servers whose shoulders are covered with a strip of cloth called a humeral veil (velum); Their function is to hold the episcopal insignia during the liturgy: the mitre and crozier, which they do with their hands covered by the humeral veil. In the past, the Gospel book was also carried with the hands covered by the vestments. Covering the hands is a gesture of respect that dates back to antiquity and expresses the condition of servant. Even today, in the secular world, servants who serve at table sometimes wear white gloves: this is a distant reference to the fearsome angels described in the Apocalypse of St John, who stand before the throne of God and hide their hands, feet and faces with their four pairs of wings. The Apocalypse is the liturgical book of the New Testament. Like angels, altar servers surround the priest who is about to slaughter the sacrificial lamb.

It is the Offertory, after the readings from Scripture and the confession of faith, that marks the beginning of the sacrifice itself; then the subdeacon brings the sacred vessels and the oblates to the altar. The chalice is covered with the paten, on which the host is placed. The host is covered with the pall, which is a stiff white cloth, and this is itself covered with a piece of fabric the colour of the priestly vestments: the veil. Thus veiled, the chalice resembles a tabernacle – a miniature tent – which hides the sacred vessels. The subdeacon carries on his shoulders the humeral veil with which he holds the chalice and the paten on which the host is placed, which cannot be seen. It is in this way, veiled, that the oblates are carried, both before consecration and after they have been consecrated, as well as the chalice and the ciborium containing the consecrated hosts. This is always

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this relationship is nowhere confirmed in the liturgical books. The rubrics of the West often remarkably avoid any reference to mystical and sacred concepts, which are nevertheless obvious. All the liturgical texts of the Western Church are imbued with a cold rationalism, an assertive desire to "not want to know" what each of the liturgical rubrics refers to in the general context of the history of religions. From the very beginning – as evidenced by the conflict between Peter and Paul – Christianity's attitude towards paganism has been fundamentally torn between two tendencies: on the one hand, a strict and puritanical attitude of rejection, which wanted to see no connection between the 'abominations of paganism' and the new religion; and on the other hand, a universalist attitude which regarded paganism as a second Old Testament in which the Holy Spirit had, through art and philosophy, prepared the coming of the Redeemer. As much as it was obvious to the proponents of this second attitude that elements of the ancient priesthood were found in the Christian priesthood, this conception was suspect and abhorred by the proponents of the first attitude.

the case, in the Eastern Church: during the procession of the oblates, before the consecration, the fragments of bread prepared for the sacrifice and the wine are presented, covered with a veil, for the veneration of the people. The offering thus veiled is Christ who has not yet been sacrificed, just before the crucifixion; it is not yet the "sign of contradiction" raised to heaven. It is also Christ still clothed, waiting for his clothes to be torn off.

Once the subdeacon has brought the oblates and sacred vessels to the altar, the deacon gives him the paten. With his shoulders and hands covered by the humeral veil, the subdeacon then takes his place on the steps of the altar and raises the paten before him. Two interpretations have been given for this gesture: on the one hand, it is a sign of reverence for the dish on which the consecrated host, the Body of the Lord, will be placed. But it has also been seen as an ancient Roman custom: in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, before saying his own Mass, the pope would send particles of the host to all the station churches in the city. In each of them, the subdeacon, wearing the humeral veil, presented this particle on the paten to show that the sacrifice being celebrated was related to the sacrifice of the Pope, the visible head of the Church, and that, time and history being suspended, as in every sacrifice of the Mass, there was only one sacrifice: that of Christ on Golgotha, from which all liturgical sacrifices flow and into which they converge. Thus, this angel presenting the sacrificed lamb covered with a veil was the incarnation of the eternal liturgy, which the Apocalypse calls "the marriage of the Lamb" and with which earthly liturgists simply associate themselves when they offer a sacrifice.

This action of veiling the paten was considered so important at the time when the cult was established that it was incorporated into the simplified forms of the Mass. When no subdeacon participates in the liturgy, the priest, at the Offertory, slides the paten under the corporal, a square white cloth on which the Corpus Christi—the host—rests. When the priest performs this act – and others – he turns his back to the congregation and thus hides what he is doing, so that the faithful cannot see him, and the priest's body then constitutes, in a way, a living iconostasis. The same is true of other actions and gestures, which are therefore performed in a "veiled" manner. In the first millennium, the iconostasis of the Eastern Church corresponded in the West to either a high choir enclosure, or chancel, or a large space separating the community from the altar, or even a ciborium that could be completely hidden by curtains. Even today, in Rome, one can still see curtain rods and very old bronze curtain rings on a number of these stone baldachins erected above the altars.

Of all these elements that served to veil the rite, only the chancel, reduced to the communion table, and the wide space separating the altar from the community remain in the ancient Western

rite. In addition, the backs of the celebrants, dressed in garments of the same colour, formed a screen that prevented the sacrifice from being seen. Three traditions converge in this regard. The first originated in the Temple of Jerusalem, where a curtain protected the Holy of Holies. It was in front of this curtain that incense was burned on the altar of perfumes while the victims were sacrificed on the altar of burnt offerings. Thus, in Jerusalem, sacrifices were made in front of the curtain. Only the invisible God, symbolised by the incense, remained hidden in the Holy of Holies. This curtain fascinated the pagans to such an extent that they incorporated it into some of their rites: during the Hellenistic period, it was stolen – it was dyed with Phoenician purple and was therefore very valuable – and placed in the temple of Zeus at Olympia, in the cella in front of the colossal statue of Zeus. From there, it could be unrolled from the roof, falling into a chest decorated with ivory reliefs at the foot of the statue.

This innovation introduced to the temple of Zeus – because, in fact, the statues of the Greek gods did not need to be veiled since, except for a few days of celebration, they were kept in the cella, which was always closed – leads us to a second tradition that explains why, in Christian liturgy, certain gestures and objects were veiled and hidden. There was once a ritual originating in the court of the Basileus of Persia: it was the rite of the monarch's epiphany, which Diocletian was to take up and introduce to the court of Rome. On certain days, to honour the emperor and his family, the court would gather in the imperial aula. The imperial family stood on a platform hidden behind a curtain. When the curtain opened, the entire court prostrated itself. These curtains can be found in Byzantine iconography, where they became an important element in the representation of saints: on the icon, the saint appears between two parted curtains; what was thus represented was the moment of his epiphany, to which one responded by showing reverence. In the liturgy, each hidden element of the rite corresponds to an epiphany: that of the Word of God, which is carried in procession from the sanctuary; that of the oblates, during the procession; and finally that of the Body and Blood of the Lord, after transubstantiation; in the West, the priest raises them above his head so that the congregation can see them.

The third tradition has not yet been well highlighted, in my opinion, although it is a long-established practice. Since ancient times, Mass has been celebrated at the Holy Sepulchre: not only in the church that was built above it and where there are several altars, but also in the Grotto of the Sepulchre itself. On this occasion, the priest and the faithful gather in the antechamber of the Sepulchre, and it is there that the readings preceding the sacrifice are read. Then the priest enters the Grotto of the Sepulchre, where the niche serves as an altar and the altar cloth represents, in a way,

the Holy Shroud. When he is inside the grotto, the community in the antechamber cannot see him, they can only hear his voice. The consecration takes place in the secrecy of the tomb and, as such, assimilates the sacrificial act of Golgotha with the moment of resurrection in the tomb: indeed, this resurrection was a kind of transsubstantiation, which is the supreme transformation that a substance can undergo, passing from death to life. In a church, the faithful stand before the rood screen and the iconostasis – or the back of the priest, which acts as a screen – as they would before the tomb in Jerusalem, in the secrecy of which the resurrection took place, in the absence of any human witnesses. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was the first church founded by Emperor Constantine, who initiated the art of church building. The discovery of the Cross by his mother Helena marked the beginning of an era of reconstruction of the Passion of Jesus, which made it possible to study in great detail the Holy Sepulchre, the central place of faith.

In the Eastern Church, before the Offertory, the deacon makes this appeal: "The doors! The doors! Attention to the doors!" Of this entire "closed door" ritual, the Eastern Church has retained only this appeal to hide things. In the Western Church, the first of the minor orders was that of "doorkeeper" – ostiarius – who was responsible for ensuring that, after the readings, neither the unbaptised nor public sinners participated in the mystery of the sacrifice itself. During the first millennium, in the tradition of the Apostles, the liturgy was conceived as the celebration of a mystery in which the uninitiated and those who were not worthy were not allowed to participate; they had to remain in the narthex, which is the entrance hall of the church. It was there that the priest absolved the sinner by striking him with a long rod called a narthex – in Greek, 'ferula' – which gave its name to this part of the church reserved for those who were not allowed to participate in the mysteries. In Rome, these "ferulae" were in use until after the Council in the seven main station churches. However, in recent centuries, as it was no longer possible to verify whether all members of the community were eligible to participate in the celebration, the Church recognised the need to preserve the mysteries of worship from profanation. Thus, during the second millennium of the Christian era, the custom of pronouncing the most sacred formulas, the "Canon", whose culmination is the consecration, in a low voice became established in the West, so as to hide them behind a veil of silence.

The small golden cabinet in which the hosts not distributed at Communion are kept is called a "tabernacle": this is a Latin name of Jewish origin that referred to a small tent in the Mosaic temple. The term "tent" implies the idea of "textile". The door of the tabernacle is usually hidden by a brocade curtain, the colour of which normally corresponds to the liturgical colour; the only colour

not allowed is black, which is reserved for funeral Masses and Good Friday: this would be incompatible with the Presence of the living God. Inside, most tabernacles have another curtain, and the ciboria are also covered with a veil that covers them like a cloak: this is the pavilion. Thus, when the ciborium is removed from the tabernacle, it feels like peeling an onion one layer at a time: each layer hides another.

We should also mention the most well-known element, the one that is most noticeable: from Passion Sunday to Good Friday, crucifixes, paintings and statues are covered with a veil. As this takes place during Lent, when worship is reduced to its simplest form – the organ remains silent, the bells do not ring from Holy Thursday to Holy Saturday, certain prayers are not recited and no flowers are allowed on the altar – this veiling of crucifixes, paintings and statues has been described as a 'fast for the eyes'. But strictly speaking, the intention of this rite is not to deny the pleasure of the eyes: it has its origins in the rite surrounding the authentic Cross discovered in Jerusalem by Empress Helena, the cult of the "Vera Crux", which first took place in Jerusalem and was then transferred to Rome, where it was held in the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Like any relic, the Holy Cross was wrapped in cloths when it was kept in the sacristy during the year. On Good Friday, it was brought into the church and the cloths were removed in a solemn ritual so that it could be displayed to the faithful. On either side of the Cross, a deacon ensured that the faithful who came to kiss it did not give in to the temptation to take a fragment. However, such fragments did eventually find their way – albeit quite legally – into many churches in Europe. During the Enlightenment, it was jokingly said that if all these fragments were gathered together, they could be used to reconstruct a forest, but this is a slander that has no basis in reality: it has been calculated that, if they were all gathered together, they would amount to no more than a large stake, which in itself, of course, neither confirms nor refutes the authenticity of each individual relic.

That said, in Europe, each of these fragments was the subject of a ritual identical to that practised in Jerusalem and Rome: it was solemnly unveiled before the congregation, who then came to venerate it, and this ritual was exactly the same in France and Germany. Eventually, it was adopted in all churches that did not possess a relic of the Cross: the cross standing above the altar was veiled and, on Good Friday, it was venerated as was done for the Vera Crux; this is the rite of the Adoration of the Cross. The cross was therefore veiled, not to hide it from view, but to proceed with it as was done with the authentic Cross: it was no longer an object of meditation, an object of worship, a sacred symbol; it had become once again the authentic instrument of torture on which Christ had died. So the cross was veiled in order to emphasise the historicity of the act of salvation.

This also applies to the introduction into the *Creed* of the name of Pontius Pilate, a moderately well-known provincial administrator: the *Creed* thus speaks of a real death, on a real cross, at a specific time in the world, in a specific place, and this addition rejects the mythical, allegorical and symbolic interpretation of the events recounted in the New Testament.

It was later that the practice of veiling all crucifixes, paintings and statues in churches was established, and this has nothing to do with the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday. Encounters between Latin and Byzantine Christianity during the Crusades led the West to adapt the concept of the iconostasis, at least during Lent. It was then that, in Cluny, the space around the altar began to be enclosed during Lent with large painted canvas "Lenten curtains". During fasting periods, worship took place behind these screens. In Germany, a few of these large curtains can still be seen, for example in Zittau and Brandenburg. After the Council of Trent, the practice of celebrating rites behind screens or curtains spread very quickly throughout Europe. All that remains of this practice is the covering of paintings and statues with a veil, a custom that transformed the entire church into a kind of narthex, an undecorated vestibule where, in accordance with the custom of the early Church, public sinners waited to be absolved. After the Cluniac reform, the entire community was to consider itself, like public sinners, to be doing penance and remain outside the sanctuary until Easter.

For rationalist movements throughout history, the religious practice of veiling objects and rituals has become the very symbol of obscurantism. Just as the concept of 'illumination' evokes the image of a lamp shining light into every corner of a cellar full of cobwebs and rats, the rhetoric of the Enlightenment readily asserted that this movement tore away veils and ripped off masks. For the Enlightenment, what the veils hid from the faithful was nothing but deception. This idea can be found in the Baroque period, where the allegory of *Fides* was represented as a woman whose head and eyes were covered with a veil – which may already have concealed a subversive intention, it would be interesting to verify this. Faith is voluntary blindness, said these pious representations, which did not really encourage imitation. It was a reaction in defence of the faith, disturbed by rationalism, which believed that religion should be linked to a *sacrificium intellectus*. But in reality, the faithful had known the meaning of the cultic veil since ancient times. When Pompey entered the Temple of Jerusalem as a victor, he pulled aside the curtain of the Temple with sacrilegious intent, much to the despair of the priests. What he saw filled him with a sense of triumph – a feeling we know well: behind the curtain, there was nothing.

But what should have been behind the Temple curtain? Did Pompey really believe that he had opened the eyes of the pious Jews by violating their sanctuary? What he did not see—or did not want to see—was that what constituted the important message in the eyes of the pious Jews who frequented the Temple was not what the curtain did not hide, but the curtain itself.

We learn the true meaning of this "veiling" of things and people from the first mention of such a practice in Holy Scripture: in this case, it is the veiling of clothing. After the original sin, Adam and Eve discovered with horror that "they were naked", and they made themselves clothes out of leaves. There is something very disturbing about this passage: according to Genesis, man was created perfect. His nakedness was not a flaw: it was an expression of his likeness to God. After Adam and Eve disobeyed the divine commandment, this flaw suddenly appeared, even though, outwardly, man had not changed in any way. But he has lost something that he now lacks and that arouses in him a feeling of loss. In theology, what he has lost is grace. Clumsily, man tries to compensate for this loss. He covers himself to recover what had previously clothed him in his radiance.

The "veil" is therefore a visible sign of the halo of grace and holiness that has become invisible to man. In the liturgy, the veil is the halo that corresponds to the very essence of the sacred vessels and their even more sacred contents, a halo that no one should forget if they want to have a true understanding of the meaning of the sacred vessels, signs and hosts. If, in the liturgy, an object is veiled, it is not to be hidden from view, to make it a mystery or to conceal its appearance: everyone knows what it looks like. On the other hand, this appearance says nothing about its true nature – and that is the *raison d'être* of the veil. And when we lift this veil, when we penetrate beyond the other veils that lie behind it and remove them one by one like the layers of an onion to reach the heart of the mystery, we are then confronted once again with a veil: the host itself is a veil, as a French hymn to the Eucharist says: "O divine Eucharist, O mysterious treasure! Under the veils of the host is hidden the King of Heaven."

We could therefore summarise a theological doctrine of "veiling" by saying that God's creation is real, but that this reality, this capacity for reality, has been weakened by original sin. Its insufficient reality, its lost capacity to radiate beyond itself and to make itself known as the thought

of the Creator, are expressed by the veil, which replaces this radiance<sup>3</sup>. We can now see what a liturgy that renounces veiling things tells us—or does not tell us: the presentation of naked materiality no longer takes into account the supernatural perfection of creation and the world's capacity for redemption.

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<sup>3</sup> In the new rite instituted by Pope Paul VI, as well as in practice—now common and sometimes even encouraged by bishops—nothing is hidden anymore. There is no longer any separation between the sanctuary and the community. The veil of silence no longer hides the Canon, the sacred vessels are no longer sheltered by a veil, and the ciborium canopy no longer exists. The ministry of the subdeacon, attested since the <sup>third</sup> century, has been abolished. Nor is the paten covered with a veil anymore. During the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament, it is rare to use the humeral veil to hold the monstrance – in fact, this rite itself has almost disappeared. As for veiling the crucifixes during the Passion, this is left to the discretion of the priests: some do it, others do not. In defence of liturgical reform, it is constantly asserted that the Mass has been "restored" to the form it had in early Christianity, by "purifying" it and removing all later additions. In this context, veils and coverings are commonly presented as "late additions", whereas they express the "mystery" that was already present in the liturgy of the <sup>first</sup> century. Like all historicisms and restorations – including in the field of art – archaeologism can be criticised in the same way that Faust criticised Wagner, who was steeped in history: "What you call the spirit of the times / is the spirit of the lords themselves / in which the times are reflected."