

“Female altar servers”: feminist ideology and the Roman liturgy

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1. Post-Conciliar Liturgical Innovation: First and Foremost Theological; Secondly Ideological

My remarks today will offer a frank critique of certain aspects of modern liturgical reform which have gained increasing prominence over the last decade, that is to say, twenty years or more after Pope Paul VI's promulgation of the reformed Roman Missal. These are aspects which, in my view, are based on something other than a mere change or development of *theological* significance. Rather, they would appear to constitute a new phase in the process of liturgical innovation, whereby foreign *ideological* tendencies are being introduced into the most sacred acts of the Latin-rite Church: the ideology of nationalism (in the name of inculturation) and the ideology of feminism (in the name of women's dignity). It is this latter trend that I shall focus on in particular today.

When I speak of two 'phases' in post-conciliar liturgical change – the theological phase followed by the ideological phase – I do not mean to suggest two clearly distinct periods standing in stark contrast to one another, because the most notable characteristics of each successive phase are also found to a significant extent in both. Rather, it is a gradual shift in the emphasis placed on them by those who exerted pressure to bring about ever more far-reaching changes.

The first period, the *theological* phase, can be said to cover the first quarter of a century (1969–1994) following Pope Paul VI's promulgation of the new order of the Mass on 3 April 1969, in the Apostolic Constitution **Missale Romanum**. This phase was marked chiefly by the introduction, imposition and gradual assimilation within the living body of the Church of liturgical changes whose origins and rationale were to be found more or less within the confines of Christian theology – though not always distinctly Catholic. That is to say, we have heard and seen a constant focus on themes such as ecumenical *rapprochement* with Protestants through this rigorously simplified Mass, which is less formal and more flexible in the vernacular; a much more extensive use of Holy Scripture in the liturgy; an emphasis on the aspects of the Eucharist as a fraternal and communal meal rather than on its character as the Sacrifice of the eternal High Priest; and an ecclesiology which highlighted the Church as

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‘People of God’ rather than the Mystical Body of Christ, thereby emphasising the role and ‘active participation’ of the laity in the liturgy.

Whilst we Catholics continue to argue vigorously over the positive or negative value of these changes, our disputes in this area tend to be viewed by the dominant secular culture of modern Western societies as a rather dreary exercise in nit-picking – “internal squabbles”, so to speak, over minor details of strictly ecclesiastical conduct, of little interest to the wider culture. For example, the archetypal innovation during what I call the *theological* phase of the liturgical reform was probably the introduction of Communion in the Hand. For many of us here today, this has been a particularly important issue, because it directly touches on the convictions and sensibilities of each member of the faithful regarding the central mystery of the Mass at the sacred moment of their most intimate participation in that mystery. But in the wider secular culture and amongst the general public, this issue has barely raised a flicker of interest: in fact, it has been practically a non-issue. How often have we seen debates on Communion in the Hand feature on a television talk show or fill the pages of feature articles in **The New York Times** or its European equivalents?

In contrast to this relative apathy on the part of the laity regarding the kinds of liturgical issues they regard as strictly theological, or ‘religious’ in the narrow sense, other changes now affecting the way Catholics worship are attracting considerable media attention. I am convinced that the prominence these changes are now assuming in the public consciousness, both within and outside the Church, is an indication of a new and more radical phase in liturgical reform which, as I have suggested, we might call *ideological* rather than theological, since its roots lie not in specifically Christian thought, – whether they be Catholics, Protestants or Eastern Orthodox – but rather in secular and political agendas whose philosophical lineage can be traced back to the rationalism and egalitarianism of the Enlightenment, or to outright paganism, rather than to ideas presented as deriving from the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

In regions dominated by non-European cultures, the most noticeable ideological influence in this context is a certain anti-Western nationalism. In Catholic ecclesiastical circles, this exaggerated national pride is now manifesting itself in the form of impatient and increasingly widespread demands for inculturation in the liturgy. In traditionally Christian societies in the West, on the other hand, the secular, socio-political ideology that has the strongest impact on the Catholic liturgy is, of course, feminism. Feminism, like ethnic or national pride, has for some time been a significant force amongst Catholic liturgical innovators; but it is really only during the last decade that these incursions of secular ideology into

the sanctuary have become so widespread and proved so presumptuous that they have succeeded in gaining recognition at the highest ecclesiastical levels. For example, Article 42 of the 1995 Vatican Instruction, **The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation**, granted the Church's official approval for 'applause, rhythmic swaying and dance-like movements' during the celebration of Mass.²

This document examines these innovations in the context of non-Western cultures where they might have claimed to be an authentic part of local religious traditions. In fact, however, the highest level of liturgical ecclesiastical authority, represented by the Vatican Secretariat for Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations, was not content to restrict these customs to African, Asian or Oceanic contexts. This Secretariat, which in the late 1980s was under the extremely 'progressive' leadership of Monsignor (now Bishop) Piero Marini, secured permission from the Holy Father to allow liturgical dance even during Masses for predominantly *Western* congregations, despite the complete absence of such a tradition in Western Christian worship. And so it was that we recently witnessed the spectacle of young, white ballerinas swaying before the eyes of the Supreme Pontiff during the recent Mass held to mark World Youth Day in Rome.

2. The Challenge of Women Serving at Mass

Whilst the concession that most clearly represented the first 'theological' phase was Communion in the hand, the one that can be regarded as symbolically ushering in the period of 'ideological' reform is the even more unprecedented change announced by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in its letter of 15 March 1994: the admission of women to the service of the Mass.

I would suggest that this was a truly revolutionary change. It is worth recalling that as recently as 1980, when the Holy Father reaffirmed the two-thousand-year-old prohibition on female Mass servers in **Inestimabile donum**, the Vatican's official liturgical publication, *Noticiae*, published an article stating that this prohibition had been "set in stone" as far back as the fifth century AD.³ This "stone", however, has now crumbled to dust before our very eyes. Should we now accept this innovation with a passive and silent shrug of the shoulders? Some who, prior to 1994, were uncompromisingly opposed to women serving at the altar subsequently claimed that, whether we like it or not, the issue of female altar servers is a settled matter, and indeed one *of little importance*, and that consequently we should stop lamenting after the event and simply get used to the presence of girls at the altar during Mass.

² "... *manuum percussio seu plausus, fluctiationes rhythmicae seu motus modulati, aut choreae motus*". *AAS* 87 (1995), p. 304.

³ Aimé-Georges Martimort, "La Question du Service des Femmes à l'Autel", *Noticiae*, Vol. 16, 1980, pp. 8–16.

To this, I would reply quite simply that the question of women's service at the Altar *is by no means* a matter of little importance. The Eucharistic Liturgy lies at the very heart of the life of the Church, and the Altar is situated at the very centre of the Eucharistic Liturgy. It is the Holy of Holies according to the New Covenant of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This means that any radical and unprecedented innovation concerning what takes place at the altar will inevitably bring about significant changes – whether in the short term, the long term, or both – in the hearts and minds of the faithful attending worship.

But someone will surely ask, 'What is so terrible about having girls at the Altar?' Most members of this audience are already well aware of the serious problems, questions and uncertainties raised by this innovation, but it is worth recalling some of the main points.

Firstly, the total and extreme novelty of this practice is *in itself* highly troubling. Why do I say this? After all, in a technological age and culture in which anything new almost automatically enjoys the presumption of improvement, progress and superiority, such an attitude may seem to some to be mere obscurantism: resistance to something new and different solely *because* it is new and different. But in the Catholic liturgy, as in Catholic doctrine, the *a priori* presumption ought to be exactly the opposite of what rightly prevails in the natural sciences and technology. The very logic of a religion that claims to have been *divinely and definitively revealed two thousand years ago* demands that its faithful be profoundly conservative in their outlook on life. A presumption of novelty *a priori*, within a hermeneutical context, is not merely a case of stubborn or blind prejudice; it is profoundly reasonable and, in fact, necessary. After all, God is eternal; consequently, as the American Catholic journalist Joseph Sobran wisely observed, the liturgy *ought* to appear and seem 'old-fashioned', and indeed ancient, because that is the closest we mortals can come to representing the idea of eternity.

In the case of a religious tradition which has not only existed but has been consciously, continuously and emphatically reaffirmed and upheld for two millennia, there must be a strong presumption that such a tradition reflects the will of Christ. And this is indeed the case with regard to the tradition opposing the ministry of women at the altar. In the Vatican journal **Noticiae**, the liturgy specialist we have already mentioned, Aimé-Georges Martimort, states that:

[the] general discipline of the Church [against women serving at the altar] was set in stone by Canon 44 of the Collection of Laodicea, which is generally dated to the end of the 4th century and which has appeared in almost all canonical collections of the East and the West .⁴

⁴ Martimort, *op. cit.* (translated by Michael Baker, St Joseph's Foundation, Sydney, Australia, 1994).

Martimort also points out that the Popes, since St Gelasius in 494, had denounced this practice as an abuse. It seems that feminist influences were already making themselves felt in Sicily and southern Italy at that time, and that Pope St Gelasius felt compelled to write to the bishops of those regions, telling them:

We have learnt with sadness of the great contempt with which the sacred mysteries have been treated. This has reached the point where women have been encouraged to serve at the altar and to perform functions unsuitable to their sex, since these have been assigned exclusively to persons of the male sex , no. ⁵

All editions of the Roman Missal from 1570 to 1962 reproduced the prohibition on female altar servers, as did the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* (can. 813, § 2), not to mention the documents of the post-conciliar reform in their earlier, less radical phase.

In short, it would appear that the Vatican's 1994 decision to permit female altar servers was the most radical liturgical change ever officially authorised by the Church's supreme authorities. As is well known, Communion in the hand had been permitted in certain regions in ancient times, and it was not even uncommon to see women serving as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. In an excellent study on the question of women's service at the Altar, published in France just a few weeks before the fateful announcement in April 1994, Abbé Michel Sinoir, a priest of the Archdiocese of Paris, presents evidence that from the earliest times, in convents of cloistered nuns situated far away in the desert, where priests and deacons rarely came to visit, the Church permitted the Mother Superior to remove the Eucharistic Body of Christ from the Tabernacle to give Holy Communion to the other sisters; however, she was not permitted to use *the altar* to do so .⁶

This condition is highly significant and was also reflected in the wording of the 1917 Code of Canon Law. Canon 813, §2, of the former Code, mentioned above, stated: "A woman may not perform the functions of a minister at Mass, except when no man is available and for a just cause, and provided that she gives the responses from a certain distance, *without approaching*

⁵ *Ibid.*, quoted in Michel Sinoir, **La question de l'Admission des Femmes au Service de l'Autel**, Paris, Pierre Téqui, 1994, p. 28 (translation by the author).

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 26.

“*the altar under no circumstances*” (bold added).⁷ Such legislation, I believe, provides us with the key to a deeper understanding of the heart of the Church’s tradition on this point. And as Father Sinoir observes, this prohibition on the presence of women in the sanctuary, even as readers, remained an official norm of the Church’s liturgical law until , 1994.⁸ The 1975 edition of *the General Instruction on the Roman Missal* states in §70:

Those ministries which are performed *outside the sanctuary* may be entrusted to women if the priest in charge of the church deems it prudent. Account must be taken of the provisions of note 66 concerning the place from which the Scriptures are to be read (bold added).

And what exactly does §66 of *the Instruction* say?

The Bishops’ Conference may permit a woman to read the passages from Scripture that precede the Gospel, and to present the intentions for the Prayer of the Faithful. It is also for them to specify the place from which *she* may proclaim the Word of God to the faithful in the most appropriate manner (bold added).

If we consider §§ 66 and 70 together, the meaning of *the Instruction* is perfectly clear: if it is necessary to have female readers, the Bishops must decide which of the various

⁷ The wording of this canon must not be overlooked when assessing the argument put forward by a correspondent to **The Tablet** of London, Dr

Peter Marshall, who cited a work published in the early 16th century in an English translation entitled **The Interpretacyon and Sygnyfycacyon of the Masse**. According to Marshall, its (anonymous) author, a Flemish Franciscan, states “that whilst women were prohibited under Canon Law from preaching, incensing the altar or touching the chalice, paten or corporal, there was ‘no commandment stating that they may not assist at Mass’, and that ‘young girls may assist and serve at Mass in cases of necessity’, when no man is available” (The Tablet, 8 February 1997, pp. 173–174). Marshall presents this as evidence that women’s service at *the altar* has some legitimate precedent in Catholic tradition. However, first of all, the mere absence of ‘a commandment’ in the current canon prohibiting a particular custom is not in itself proof that the Church regards that custom as lawful. This is particularly true in liturgical matters, where many specific prescriptions have been contained in documents of lesser importance than the sacred canons, or simply in oral tradition. Consequently, the conclusion drawn by this anonymous Franciscan does not follow from his premises. Furthermore, even if it reflects the accepted ecclesiastical custom of his time and country, we cannot reasonably conclude from this that the kind of ‘service’ or ‘assistance’ which might then have been legitimately provided by the ‘young girls’ included their presence *at the altar*. Given that direct proximity to the place of sacrifice had been explicitly forbidden to women ‘in almost all canonical collections of the East and West’ from the fourth century to the present day (cf. Note 3 above), it seems more reasonable to conclude that the assistance referred to in this 16th-century source was nothing more than the sort of female ‘ministry’ envisaged in the 1917 Code of Canon Law: for example, giving the verbal responses of the server and ringing the bell, whilst remaining at a distance from the altar.

⁸ The prohibition was, however, largely ignored, even in papal liturgies. The author of this document, whilst studying in Rome in the 1980s, had the privilege of serving as a deacon, lector and cantor (for the responsorial psalm) at several Masses celebrated by Pope John Paul II. I recall that it was quite common for women – whether religious or laypeople in secular dress – to proclaim the first or second reading from Scripture, or the intercessions of the Prayer of the Faithful, from the raised sanctuary beneath the famous bronze baldachin in St Peter’s Basilica.

Of the possible locations *outside the sanctuary*, which is the most appropriate for women to read.⁹ However, in the context of the 1994 decision, *the General Instruction* promulgated by the Vatican in July 2000 substantially revised these norms, removing all reference to gender. In this new document, the paragraphs we have just quoted from the 1975 *Instruction* are replaced by a shorter provision dealing with temporary or extraordinary lay ministers (i.e. those who have not been definitively instituted as lectors or acolytes). The text reads as follows:

The liturgical functions mentioned above in Nos. 100–106, which are not the exclusive privilege of priests or deacons, may also be entrusted to lay people by means of a liturgical blessing or a temporary delegation. These lay people must be chosen by the parish priest (^e 10 (*parochus*)) or by the priest in charge of the church. With regard to the role of the priest's assistant at the altar, the provisions laid down by the Bishop for his diocese must be observed.¹¹ It is therefore this that the post-conciliar Roman Rite liturgy has now eliminated, for the

For the first time in history, all traces of distinction between men and women regarding access to the sanctuary have been removed. But if the Church's absolute and unbroken tradition reserved the sanctuary—and above all the altar itself—for male ministers, what was the main reason for this? Here we come to the central question. There are numerous secondary or incidental reasons why the Vatican's 1994 decision caused consternation amongst many Catholics: some have raised very pertinent questions regarding the procedure or the apparently bizarre legal mechanism by which the change was introduced. Several have noted that the admission of female altar servers often has the effect of discouraging young boys from a service that is no longer regarded as masculine in character, thereby jeopardising a fruitful source of future priestly vocations. Others have pointed out that by effectively rewarding the

⁹ The very fact that the Vatican deemed it necessary to request new and separate episcopal decisions regarding the position of the lectern or ambo, in cases where women are to use them, is indicative. This demonstrates that §66 of *the Instruction*, even when taken entirely in isolation from the explicit restriction set out in §70, did not include the sanctuary itself amongst the places where bishops could legitimately decide to admit women. For if the legislator *had* envisaged the admission of female readers into the sanctuary as a legitimate option, §272 of *the 1975 Instruction*—which dealt expressly with the place where the readings might be made and clearly (albeit only implicitly) included the sanctuary as an appropriate location—would have been sufficient to cover this matter. It would not have been necessary to seek further episcopal decisions regarding the location within the church where women in particular should read the Scriptures. In §272, *the Instruction* dealt with the location from which Scripture readings should be made, and specified only that it should be 'a place on which the faithful could naturally focus their attention'. And further: 'As the layout of the church requires, the lectern should be placed where those reading can be easily heard and seen by all.' It is evident that in many cases, or indeed in most cases, a position on the raised sanctuary itself would satisfy these conditions, and this was the well-established and continuing custom in many churches and in the vast majority at the time *the Instruction* was promulgated. (In older churches – especially the larger ones – dating back to before the invention of the microphone, it was, of course, common to have a raised pulpit on one side of the nave, directly opposite the sanctuary, so as to facilitate the proclamation and preaching of the Word.)

¹⁰ In American English, the parish priest is usually referred to as the 'pastor' of the parish.

¹¹ The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, **Instituto Generalis Missalis Romani** (2000), §107 (translation by the author). The original text reads as follows: "*Liturgical duties which are not proper to a priest or deacon, and which are discussed above (nos. 100–106), may also be entrusted to suitable laypeople selected by the parish priest or rector of the church, by means of a liturgical blessing or a temporary delegation. As regards the duty of assisting the priest at the altar, the provisions laid down by the Bishop for his diocese shall be observed.*" (The text is taken from the website of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Liturgy.)

The disobedience of those priests and bishops who granted permission for these female altar servers whilst it was still prohibited has encouraged further breaches of the norms of Roman discipline, and this was a blow to those who had remained obedient to the traditional norm, sometimes at the cost of great personal hardship. Once again, some have pointed out that the new regulation will pose a further obstacle to the reunification of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Indeed, the legislation governing the Eastern *Catholic* Churches, like that of the Orthodox Church, continues to prohibit women from serving at the altar – a contradiction that reinforces the impression that this innovation in the West was, sad to say, a concession by the Vatican to feminist ideological pressure rather than a decision based on a genuinely liturgical or ethical principle. The simple fact is that in the West, feminist ideology, with its false liberal and anti-evangelical principle,¹² according to which ‘discrimination’ and ‘inequality’ are inherently unjust

, exerts far greater pressure in the media, within church institutions, and in popular culture than it does in Eastern European societies and outside Europe.

I believe that these objections to the 1994 decision to allow women to serve at the altar are very valid and relevant, but to a certain extent they are transitory and incidental, rather than substantive. They do not get to the heart of the matter, because they do not fully explain *why* the Church, in both the East and the West, has insisted so vigorously for almost two millennia on excluding women and young girls from the sanctuary;

Martimort’s study helps us to understand the Church Fathers’ perspective on this point. After citing a number of ancient texts and canons opposing the service of the altar by women, he observes:

It would appear that the true motivation behind this long-standing custom of excluding women from the altar lies in the link that united the lower ministries of the priesthood itself, to the extent that they had

had become the normal stages leading to the priesthood. This link is already evident in the view of St Cyprian [who died a martyr in 258].¹³

This idea of service at the altar as fundamentally a step on the path to the priesthood is reflected not only visually—in that altar servers are dressed like priests, in cassocks and surplices—but also linguistically, through the terminology used in certain languages. In Spanish, for example, a Mass server is called a *monaguillo*, which etymologically means ‘little monk’. And in Italian, the word for an altar server is *chierichetto* – ‘little cleric’ – which means that the term coined by the Italians for female altar servers is in itself an affront to Catholic doctrine: they are called *donne chierichetto*, ‘little *female* clerics’. But of course,

¹² The parable of the labourers in the vineyard, who, without any *injustice*, received the same wage for unequal work (cf. Mt 20:1–16), is highly relevant to this event. Western liberal and socialist ideology, which confuses privileges with rights, denounces inequality *per se* as unjust.

¹³ Quoted in Sinoir, *op. cit.*, p. 28 (author’s translation).

Catholic doctrine teaches that women cannot become members of the clergy (that is to say, under the post-conciliar sacramental framework, bishops, priests or deacons).

Consequently, the Church's two-thousand-year-old refusal to allow women to serve in the sanctuary has been clearly linked to the fact that such service is very closely connected, both symbolically and often causally, to the priestly ministry itself. And this can never be conferred upon women, as John Paul II reaffirmed on the Feast of Pentecost 1994, in the Apostolic Letter **Ordinatio Sacerdotalis**.¹⁴ This link between the altar of Christ's sacrifice and masculinity in turn raises the whole mystical theme of the symbolism of gender found throughout the Old and New Testaments. Yahweh is the Bridegroom of Israel, his chosen beloved. Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church: He is the one who initiates the fruitful relationship in which supernatural grace – the source of the 'new creation' – flows from Mount Calvary to be received by the Church, his Bride, who brings it to fruition like a Mother who gives birth to her new children, nourishes them and raises them up through Baptism and the subsequent sacraments.

Abbé Michel Sinoir's study highlights this point, drawing also on the liturgical tradition of the East to further illustrate this symbolism of the sanctuary. In Eastern churches, the division between the sanctuary and the nave is marked even more clearly than in the Western tradition by means of the iconostasis, a screen adorned with images of Our Lord and the saints which effectively conceals the rest of the sanctuary from the view of the laity and into which one enters through the holy doors. Father Sinoir explains the Eastern tradition as follows:

Symbolically, the iconostasis represents Heaven, and its liturgy, which foreshadows Heaven, is celebrated solely by members of the clergy. The nave is symbolically the earth, the dwelling place of men and women who are preparing to enter into Glory. By analogy, this is the same mystery as that of *Christ the Bridegroom*, renewing his sacrifice within the sanctuary, which is received with gratitude by *the Church, his Bride*, who is still on her pilgrimage here below.¹⁵

It follows that to defend the service at the altar by women on the grounds that the ministers are, after all, merely performing acts of minor importance (pouring wine and water, etc.) rather than carrying out actions that require the sacrament of Holy Orders, is to miss the point. Far too many Catholics have indiscriminately accepted the fallacious argument that, since women are permitted to be extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, it is illogical to exclude them from service

¹⁴ Cf. AAS 86 (1994), p. 548. Whilst it does not go so far as to be a dogmatic (*de fide*) definition of a revealed truth, such as that of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, the key phrase of this document is clearly an *ex cathedra* definition, infallible *in itself*, of a truth 'to be held definitively' (*tamquam definitiva tenenda*); a truth, therefore, which belongs to the second of the three categories of doctrine listed in the Church's 1989 Profession of Faith and in the 1998 Motu Proprio **Ad Tuendam Fidem**. Unfortunately, a high-ranking figure, the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, seems not to have realised that **Ordinatio Sacerdotalis** clearly fulfils the conditions laid down for an *ex cathedra* definition by the dogma of papal infallibility promulgated in 1870 by the First Vatican Council. See the writer's article, 'Cardinal Ratzinger on the subject of "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*"', in **The Priest** (journal of the Australian Confraternity of Catholic Clergy), Spring 1994 / Summer 1995, pp. 5–6.

¹⁵ Sinoir, *op. cit.*, p. 32 (translation by the author).

from the altar. This argument is based on the principle that, within a given hierarchy of responsibilities, the right to perform a more important task implies, *a fortiori*, the right to perform lesser tasks as well. Possessing priestly faculties obviously includes, for example, or implies the faculty to perform acts that even deacons may perform. Consequently, it is argued, given that the distribution of the Eucharistic Body of Christ is clearly a higher or more dignified task than simply handing water and wine to the priest, a person who has the right to distribute Holy Communion should, *a fortiori*, have the right to serve at the altar. Catholics, both liberal and traditionalist, have often been persuaded that admitting women as Eucharistic ministers whilst prohibiting female altar servers is contradictory and illogical. (Liberals, of course, conclude that to resolve this contradiction, women should be admitted to both ministries, whilst traditionalists strongly advocate excluding them from both.)

However, the premise on which this argument is based is false; namely, the premise that the relative dignity or nobility of these different *functions* is the main criterion for deciding who should perform them. In fact, as we have seen in examining the Church's canonical tradition, the main emphasis in Catholic tradition has been less on *what* a woman could or could not *do* during Mass, but rather on *where* she ought or ought not *to be*. And the place where a woman was never, under any circumstances, supposed to be, was at the altar or even near the altar of sacrifice: that is to say, the sanctuary. But in contrast to service at the altar, the distribution of Holy Communion is almost always carried out outside the sanctuary, so that, in the context of this criterion, there is no contradiction in allowing women to distribute Holy Communion, but not to serve at the altar.

This raises the question of why the liturgical *position* itself, rather than the liturgical *function* itself, has traditionally been considered so important in this context? The answer, in my view, is that placing too much emphasis on the function itself would reflect a very limited and 'pragmatic' understanding of the sacred liturgy, which is deeply symbolic, evocative and imbued with imagery in every respect. What is essential in this matter of the service at the altar is the entire setting of the sanctuary, the visual impression of the whole of what or who is present there, and the sublime message conveyed by this setting as a result.

Moreover, in the age of television, Madison Avenue advertising, computer-generated imagery and depth psychology, we ought to be more aware than ever of the subtle yet profound impact that visual images and symbolic acts have on our consciousness, our beliefs and our attitudes – particularly when they are constantly repeated. And setting aside the reflections based on the biblical symbolism of the 'Bride/Groom' that we have discussed, the

of having two sexes mingling at the altar can only be one that tends to secularise or desacralise the liturgy
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Let us take another example of how this new mixing of the sexes distorts a noble tradition. Many cultures – or indeed most cultures, both Christian and non-Christian – have a traditional ceremony that has been practised at weddings and in marriage rites since time immemorial: the bride is surrounded or accompanied by other young women, the bridesmaids .17 Consequently, what a bizarre and unsettling effect would it have if this ancient tradition in the wedding ceremony were replaced by the custom of surrounding the bride with young men instead of young women? ‘Gentlemen of honour’ rather than bridesmaids would indeed be a grotesque innovation, sending out uncertain, bizarre and unsettling signals to the congregation. The same would apply to replacing the best man with a woman—that is to say, another attractive young woman who is *not* the one he is marrying!

Similarly, the service of women in the sanctuary is in reality a bizarre innovation – one that clashes with the symbolism of the sexes which is latent in the created order and which is clearly evident in revelation. Father Sinoir sums it up very well:

The presence of women in the sanctuary, which is the place of Christ the New Adam,
Bridegroom and Saviour, and hence the place of the bishop, spouse of his [local] church,
the place of the priest
and the deacon – this unjustifiable female presence, even if it does not destroy the objectivity of
the perpetually renewed Act of Redemption, greatly undermines the personal faith of every
member of the congregation by confronting them with a sign that distorts the mystery; it
impoverishes our faith .18 This distortion of the sacred symbolism of the liturgy, striking at its very
heart – the Holy of

, which is the altar of sacrifice – is the deepest reason why the service at the altar by women is a serious distortion of the Church’s worship. The altar server, traditionally regarded as a priest-in-waiting, is visually presented in this role through his posture and his actions, which provide immediate assistance and preparation for the quintessential priestly act: the offering of the Sacrifice.

Other analogies should help us to see this. Pope John Paul II’s well-known argument against contraception is a good example. He says that such actions are akin to telling a lie, not with words, but with body language. The conjugal act, by its very nature, is a way in which spouses say with their bodies, ‘I give myself totally and completely’. But

¹⁶ This will probably be particularly emphasised when teenagers of both sexes serve at the altar *together*. I have discovered the practical common sense of certain Puerto Rican altar servers to be highly relevant in this regard. When some of our boys from the Ponce Cathedral and Pro-Cathedral teams learnt of the Vatican’s decision in 1994 and were asked what they would think if they were asked to serve alongside girls, the spontaneous reaction was quite cool: ‘No, Father. That wouldn’t work. Very quickly you’d have situations where boyfriends and girlfriends would find themselves together at the altar, exchanging glances, snogging during the sign of peace, and so on.’

¹⁷ Cf. Psalm 44(45):15, the psalm of the ‘royal wedding’: ‘the bride is led before the king with her attendants’.

¹⁸ Sinoir, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

When contraceptives are used, the act is distorted and becomes a kind of falsehood or dishonesty, because the spouses *do not* give themselves to one another without reservation, but rather remove the potential for fertilisation. In the same way, we might say that since 1994 the Latin-rite Church, by inviting women to serve in place of the priestly sacrifice, dressed in the priestly vestments of the alb or cassock, gives the impression of speaking with a forked tongue. In its purely verbal communication, the Church issues documents clearly stating that women can never be priests; yet in its physical expression, particularly in its most sacred liturgical *act*, it would seem to imply the exact opposite.

Another analogy in the realm of sexual ethics concerns marriage itself as the only legitimate setting for intimacy between a man and a woman. As a corollary to the Sixth Commandment, Catholic tradition—and indeed natural law, recognised by virtually all cultures—has always insisted that, for a married person, it is incompatible with true fidelity to flirt or to have a romantic attachment to anyone other than one's spouse (spending time alone with that person on a regular basis, exchanging glances, words, caresses, love letters, and so on), even if no sexual act takes place. Such behaviour is understood by everyone to lead naturally to sexual union, even if it does not always reach that stage. In exactly the same way, the constant and vigorous tradition of the Church has been that service at the altar is objectively directed towards the priesthood, even if not all altar servers or acolytes ultimately become priests. From this perspective, one might say that a woman or young girl who serves at the altar, whatever her personal intentions, however respectful, reverent and modest her behaviour and attire, by her very presence in the sanctuary commits herself to what is objectively a form of indecency. She is, in a sense, flirting with the ultimate goal of ordination to the priesthood – imitating it, coming as close as possible with a tasteless familiarity and an indiscreet intimacy. Her liturgical role insinuates and suggests ordination as her own ultimate goal or fulfilment, even though this is absolutely precluded by the Law of Christ.

Moreover, this natural symbolism of service at the altar signifying a potential for the priesthood is so clear and profound that I suspect there are very few Catholics, whether liberal or traditionalist, who do not recognise or accept it. To those who are deeply convinced that women's service at the altar is good and appropriate, I would pose this simple question: 'Is it not also true that you are sceptical regarding the Church's position against the ordination of women, and that in fact you would like to see women priests as well as women serving at the altar?' I would venture to suggest here that almost the only people who would answer 'No' to this question – that is, people who are firmly opposed to the ordination of women whilst firmly supporting women serving at the altar – would be certain cardinals, bishops and priests. And I suspect that, even in such cases,

the enthusiasm for female altar servers on the part of some generally conservative members of the clergy and hierarchy probably stems not from deep liturgical or spiritual reflection on the pros and cons of this innovation, but rather from a sense that, as pastors, they ought to be sensitive to popular demand to some extent. There has been a major shift towards female altar servers amongst liberal Catholics, and it is the Church's pastors who are, after all, the decision-makers. It is they who bear the brunt of women's fury, the rhetoric and the tears of frustration directed at the 'patriarchal' Church, and it is they who must formulate some sort of response to these women's incessant and strident demands. Given this relentless pressure, it is not difficult to see how some prelates who are entirely orthodox on the issue of women's ordination might nevertheless be happy to introduce female ministry at the altar as a way of demonstrating that they are not 'intransigent'. That is to say, they regard this as a compromise (commonly referred to these days as a 'pastoral solution') which they hope will pacify or appease the feminists to some extent, whilst keeping the doctrine of the Catholic tradition (as distinct from discipline) intact. It is certainly no accident that the Vatican itself made public these two related decisions – the admission of female altar servers and the Pope's definitive doctrinal statement against the ordination of women – at almost the same time (in March and May 1994 respectively). But these hopes of appeasing feminist ideologues by making concessions to them are proving, as was to be expected, to be illusions. I see no evidence that the feminist campaign against 'patriarchy', with its demand for the ordination of women, has waned in any way over the last six years. In fact, it would appear to have gained in scope and intensity.

In short, the presence of women at the altar introduces a profound tension, an internal contradiction, into the sacred liturgy. It is an ideological statement that politicises and secularises our celebration of the Eucharist. Instead of reflecting the sublime harmony of the communion of saints—a foretaste of Paradise—the sanctuary comes to symbolise an earthly battlefield in the new Cold War against the 'patriarchy'. By their very presence in the sanctuary, women are regarded as 'on the march' and fighting to conquer more territory (more 'space for their devotions', as the new liturgists put it). In fact, women present themselves as striving to attain something which the Catholic faithful must believe will never be granted to them – ordination to the priesthood. At the same time, their presence alongside men at the altar, the Holy of Holies, clashes with the supernatural atmosphere of the liturgy by blurring the distinction between the role of the Bridegroom and that of the Bride. Furthermore, in contrast to Communion in the hand, which is at least limited in scope by the fact that it is a personal and voluntary act, the service of women at the altar is an innovation which, by its very nature, leaves the congregation with no choice. In any Mass where women or young girls serve at the altar, an extremely public spectacle is imposed on everyone present, whether they like it or not.

3. What can be done?

It seems to me that most participants at this conference would tend to see the solution to the current liturgical decline—of which women serving at the altar is but one aspect—in a growing return to the use of the pre-Vatican II Roman Missal. My personal opinion, however, is that whilst the pre-conciliar rite should always be retained as a legitimate option as long as there are Catholics who prefer it, a broader and longer-term solution would be to take up the call of the German liturgical scholar, Msgr. Klaus Gamber, to form a new liturgical movement, or to ‘reform the reform’. The idea would be to work towards a different implementation of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy, **Sacrosanctum Concilium**, which, in the context of the distortions of the Roman liturgy today, is in fact a very conservative document. It received a favourable response even from Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and says nothing, for example, about opening up liturgical ‘ministries’—which were traditionally reserved for priests, deacons or sub-deacons—to lay men, let alone lay *women*. I believe that the constitution of Vatican II could be implemented without introducing *any* of the innovations that have alienated so many Catholics since the new Mass was introduced, and I set out in detail what such a liturgy might look like in a talk I gave in March 1995 at the Eucharistic Conference in Colorado Springs.

The advantage I see in this long-term move would be twofold. Firstly, it would incorporate into the traditional liturgy the reasonable changes that the Council actually called for. And secondly, there would be a chance that the Holy See might one day grant a revised form of the traditional Latin Mass the same status as the *Novus Ordo*, so that traditional Catholics would no longer feel like ‘second-class citizens’ in their own Church. As we all know, the use of the 1962 Missal is hampered by numerous restrictions, and frankly, it seems unlikely that a future Pope would lift these restrictions entirely, to grant the Mass complete equality of status exactly as it was on the eve of Vatican II.

However, in the short term, I believe that a more specific initiative could be beneficial. This would involve approaching the Holy See with a view to securing recognition of *the right* of priests and the faithful who are attached to the two-thousand-year-old tradition to be able to offer and attend the Holy Sacrifice *without* female altar servers.

Such an approach may perhaps be better understood in the context of certain points of canon law; and here I refer to an article published in the *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Newsletter* by an American canonist, Msgr. John F. McCarthy, who is the founder and director of the priestly society to which I have the honour of belonging, the Oblates of Wisdom.

Monsignor McCarthy notes that since the new authentic interpretation came into force,¹⁹ , c. 230, §2 now refers to a variety of liturgical functions that may be performed

¹⁹ Cf. AAS 86 (1994), pp. 541–542

by lay people, both men and women; but that, amongst these various functions, female altar servers *alone* receive special treatment – treatment which tacitly acknowledges that this particular liturgical role is a particularly delicate and contentious one when performed by women. The Bishops’ Conference must consider the matter, and even if it decides in favour of female altar servers, this cannot be made binding on individual bishops who decide against this practice. The Holy See emphasises the need to uphold the ‘noble tradition’ of young *boys* serving at the altar as a source of priestly vocations, and indeed, the wording of the Vatican Instruction clearly implies that service at the altar by women should be regarded as the exception rather than the rule. Emphasising the importance of explaining this innovation thoroughly to the faithful, Article 3 of the Instruction begins in very hypothetical terms: “If in any diocese (*Si autem in aliqua diocesi*) the Bishop permits, for particular reasons (*peculiares ob rationes*), that female ministers, as well as [male] ministers, serve at the altar” .²⁰

This kind of conditional and circumspect language is not found in Vatican documents permitting *other* female ministries covered by canon 230, §2 (lectors, cantors, Eucharistic ministers, etc.). Only ‘female ministers’ at the altar are singled out for this special treatment. For this reason, McCarthy draws the following conclusion:

The implication is that the general liturgical norm prohibiting female altar servers remains in force, such that, as a general rule, women may not serve at the altar unless a local ordinary intervenes by means of a positive act and grants permission within his territorial jurisdiction. Consequently, the Congregation has clarified the authentic interpretation, which means that an *indult* is granted to diocesan bishops to permit the use of female altar servers .²¹

This brings me to the main point. If, in fact, the authentic interpretation of c. 230, §2, and the accompanying Instruction constitutes an indult – in other words, an exception to the rule, a concession that deviates from the norm of exclusively *male* service at the altar – it should logically follow that no one has the right to impose this exception on those who wish to worship in accordance with the norm. In other words, it must be recognised that priests and the faithful who strongly object to celebrating or attending Masses where the ministers are women or young girls have the right to attend Mass celebrated in accordance with the norm. Consequently, it seems highly appropriate to seek an official clarification from the Vatican or a recognition of this right, or at the very least, of the validity of a liturgical spirituality – as one choice amongst many – which, even within the context of the post-conciliar rite of the Mass, restricts service at the altar to men and young boys. There is no

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

²¹ John F. McCarthy, “The Canonical Significance of the Recent Authentic Interpretation of Canon 230.2 Concerning the Women’s Ministry at the Altar”, *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Newsletter*, December 1994, p. 15 (The article had been published in *Living Tradition*, January 1995). The author also points out (p. 17) that in any case the 1994 authentic interpretation applies solely to the Church of the Latin Rite, and that the canon law of all Eastern Rite Catholic Churches continues to prohibit women’s service at the altar.

I doubt that it will take much more than this to stem the feminist tide that threatens to sweep away the post-conciliar Roman Rite liturgy in many countries. But at the very least, such a clarification should be an improvement.

I have the impression that Catholics who regularly attend the Tridentine Mass under the terms of the 1984 Indult and the 1988 Motu Proprio **Ecclesia Dei** are often tempted to respond with a certain indifference to my address today, thinking that the service at the altar by women – which is specifically prohibited by the 1962 Missal – is, after all, solely a problem for ‘*Novus Ordo*’ Catholics. Some traditionalists even go so far as to welcome with satisfaction – or even joy! – any further innovation or distortion introduced into the post-conciliar rite, in the hope that such changes will lead to greater disenchantment with the entire liturgical movement initiated by Vatican II and, consequently, a growing reaction in favour of the unaltered traditional Roman rite. Such attitudes seem to me, unfortunately, to be tinged with self-righteousness and ‘isolationism’. We are all members of the same Church, and the current liturgical instability – despite the laudable intention of the new *General Instruction* to call for a halt to further innovations – remains a problem that affects us all, particularly as there seems to be no guarantee that the concessions of **Ecclesia Dei** will continue indefinitely under subsequent pontificates. Furthermore, there are countless Catholics who, in any case, have no access to a ‘Mass with an indult’, and who now have women serving at the altar imposed upon them at parish Masses, Sunday after Sunday. Please therefore pray for the success of the initiative I have suggested, so that we may retain some respite in those dioceses where the ecclesiastical atmosphere is steeped in the sickening stench of feminism. Regular Masses must always be available where priests and the faithful who love the pure and ascetic atmosphere of our liturgical tradition know that they will be able to worship in complete peace of mind, without having to endure the ideological harassment represented by the unwelcome presence of women at the altar.