

A pastoral perspective on the Ecclesia Dei communities

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I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this international symposium on the traditional liturgy, even though I feel unworthy and ill-equipped for this task. I shall therefore take refuge in the one with whom I identify at this moment, St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, who, despite her obvious lack of theological training, was elevated by the Holy Father to the rank of Doctor of the Catholic Church. Not that I come anywhere near her holiness. However, through her intercession, I shall have the grace to attain the wisdom she possessed, and through her prayers and assistance, I shall be able to make my contribution—even if it is only that of my pastoral experience—before this assembly, so rich in learning and knowledge of the faith.

It seems to me beneficial from a pastoral point of view to reflect on St Thérèse of the Child Jesus. Allow me to expound briefly on her teaching. She offers us an attitude that is rich in lessons for pastoral ministry.

Let us examine directly the source of the holiness of her teaching. The Holy Father, paraphrasing Scripture, tells us in the letter *Divini Amoris Scientia*: ‘The knowledge of Divine Love, which the merciful Father offers through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a gift granted to the little ones and the humble, so that they may know and proclaim the secrets of the Kingdom, hidden from the learned and the wise’.

What pastoral implications does this entail?

Firstly, let us reflect on the following question: if our God is a God who reveals, He is also a God who keeps certain things hidden. He reveals them only when hearts are sufficiently open to receive His secrets and His designs.

What does God hide from the learned and the wise? In truth, we may say that when wisdom and learning drive out humility, God leaves us in spiritual darkness.

What pastoral message might the Holy Spirit convey to the Ecclesia Dei communities through Saint Thérèse?

An understanding of, living out and applying Saint Thérèse’s Doctrine of Spiritual Childhood would have prevented the wound inflicted on the Church by the illegal consecrations of 1988 at Ecône, which, with the passage of time, has de facto led to a genuine schism and has been a major obstacle to the worldwide growth of the traditionalist movement.

Disobedience, as practised by the Society of Saint Pius X, can never be an acceptable or effective means of saving the Church and serves only to exacerbate an already difficult situation.

¹ Conference delivered at the 6th International Colloquium of the Centre International d’Études Liturgiques (CIEL), November 9-11, 2000, in Versailles, France.

Little Thérèse speaks:

I am not at all concerned about the future. I am sure that the will of the Good Lord will be done. That is the only grace I desire. We must not try to do better than Him. Jesus needs no one to accomplish His work.

The proclamation of Little Thérèse as a Doctor of the Church must invite us to follow her ‘little way’ if we desire not only the restoration of the Tridentine Mass but also the resurrection of the Church, lost amidst the turmoil and darkness of the times.

The way of Little Thérèse—which is one of simplicity, humility, trust and faith in God, self-doubt and obedience—is praised by the Roman Pontiff as a light to guide the Church as it now begins its journey into the third millennium. Her ‘little way’ is a good way.

Second pastoral guideline: the path of humility that St Thérèse asks of us, as pastors, is to listen to the little ones of today’s Church – the simple, humble and modest people whom we serve. My position is as follows: we must recognise the experience of God demonstrated by the faithful of the *Ecclesia Dei* communities. More than ten years have passed since the promulgation of the *Motu Proprio* ‘*Ecclesia Dei*’ by Pope John Paul II, which granted Catholic traditionalists a space of freedom. After more than a decade of ‘*Ecclesia Dei*’, we can look at the outcome of this papal initiative and conclude that the fruits are good.

I cannot put it better than His Eminence, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger:

Ten years after the publication of the ‘*Motu Proprio*’ *Ecclesia Dei*, what assessment can we make? I believe that, above all, this is an opportunity to show our gratitude and to give thanks. The various communities established thanks to this papal document have given the Church a great number of priestly and religious vocations which, zealous, joyful and deeply united to the Pope, serve the Gospel in this present age of history. Through them, many of the faithful have been strengthened in the joy of being able to experience the liturgy and in their love for the Church – or perhaps they have found both. In many dioceses – and there are quite a few of them! – they serve the Church in collaboration with the bishops and in fraternal communion with the faithful who feel at home in the renewed form of the new liturgy. All this can only inspire us today to gratitude.” (Lecture given in Rome by Cardinal Ratzinger, 24 October 1998).

On the subject of gratitude, allow me to digress for a moment. I consider it a privilege to have lived through and witnessed the transition from the pre-conciliar period of the Church to the era of Vatican II. It is also a joy for me to recall my ordination to the priesthood in the old Latin rite. It is with fond memories that I recall the Tridentine Mass in Latin, and I confess to feeling a sense of nostalgia for traditional practices such as the daily wearing of the cassock, the tonsure, and so on, which fell into disuse after the Council.

I am aware that some people take a dim view of expressions of nostalgia when it comes to liturgical matters. I can only respond to such criticism by reminding people that feeling nostalgic is

a manifestation of our humanity. For if it is legitimate to feel nostalgia for our childhood, our home and our youth, why should it not be the same when we fondly recall the liturgical wonders and memories of days gone by?

But what I feel – and I think you probably feel the same – is that this is not merely nostalgia. Even young people, from the generation born after the 1960s, appreciate the traditional rite, not merely for reasons of artistic or musical form, but driven by their ‘*sensum fidei*’ – their sense of faith – because they are ‘thirsting’ for the spiritual riches of the Latin liturgy, which they feel they have been deprived of.

It is a marvellous phenomenon. The Holy Spirit blows where he wills. He is revealing to a whole generation of young people a spiritual treasure which is a source of spiritual elevation not only for the previous generation but also for themselves, the current young generation. It is a paradox to observe that the Holy Spirit is thus offering us all a ‘new’ way of worshipping.

But the Ecclesia Dei communities have shown that the traditional Latin rite will not remain a museum piece but rather a source of spiritual nourishment for the generations of the third millennium. For this, I thank our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who promulgated **Ecclesia Dei**, which ‘legitimises’ the return to the pre-conciliar rite and thus provides the *necessary liturgical continuity* spanning the periods before and after the Second Vatican Council.

As a priest for nearly four decades and a bishop for about a decade and a half, I view Ecclesia Dei and its implications from a positive and practical perspective. I would like to highlight the following three points in particular: Ecclesia Dei is a *pastoral means of instilling a sense of the universality and unity of the Church within the logical diversity of a Church spread throughout the world*. John Paul II writes in Ecclesia Dei, n. 5:

Firstly, *there is a need for historical continuity in the liturgy*. Ecclesia Dei meets this need. In truth, the New Order cannot in any way exist on its own without the traditional Latin Mass, just as I cannot exist without my parents. To put it more simply and forcefully, the New Order cannot have any meaning in itself without reference to its predecessor. Thus, the preservation of the pre-conciliar rite is a concrete service that Ecclesia Dei communities render to the Church.

Secondly, the experience of the Ecclesia Dei communities is valuable in the process of inculturation whenever it arises.

John Paul II writes in Ecclesia Dei, n. 5:

It is essential that all pastors and the rest of the faithful develop a new awareness, not only of the legitimacy but also of the richness for the Church of a diversity of charisms, traditions of spirituality and apostolate, which also constitutes the beauty of unity in diversity: this ‘harmonious’ blend that the earthly Church raises up to Heaven under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Alongside the New Evangelisation, we must inculturate the Church’s presence, the faith and its teachings within the mosaic of peoples and cultures that make up the world. Within the

kaleidoscope of ethnic groups, nationalities, dialects and languages, the bond formed by the Latin Rite, which unites us, serves to emphasise *the una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia* that is the authentic Church of Christ. The challenge lies in the need to re-examine a great many contemporary ideas and practices that emerged in the post-conciliar period under the pretext of modernising the Church.

Thirdly, I wish to emphasise that the Ecclesia Dei communities represent a *challenge and a promise of more fruitful evangelisation in the future*.

I declare that *there is no longer a need for aggiornamento but for kenosis*. Not to reform the Church, but to reject negative attitudes and aversions towards new movements or charisms, which are undoubtedly fruits of the Spirit.

In a paradoxical way, your communities bear witness to the eternal youth of the Church. Thriving and growing under the influence of youth, your religious communities and assemblies of the lay faithful draw their strength and nourishment from the time-honoured Latin rite of our 2,000-year-old Church. The Ecclesia Dei communities are a place where the past is a source for the future. In conclusion, I sincerely believe that this symposium is of vital importance in providing us with a forum for debate and a place to study and assess the Ecclesia Dei movement in relation to the Church as a whole. Meetings of this kind create a synergy amongst the Ecclesia Dei communities that paves the way for greater participation in the life of the Church, even in an undertaking as ecclesial as a future ecumenical council.

Just as Scripture assures us that in Heaven there are many mansions for the elect, so too on this earth is the Church vast enough to welcome all those who sincerely desire to enter and live within her bosom. Following the Second Vatican Council, different ways of living as a Church have emerged, and let us not forget that the Church has always had diverse expressions of rites and worship. St Paul says:

We do not know what we ought to ask for in our prayers, according to our needs. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and he who searches the hearts knows what the Spirit's desires are; he knows that the Spirit prays in accordance with God's will for the saints. We know, moreover, that all things work together for the good of those who love God. (Romans 8:26–28)

I shall conclude with a prayer for you all. May the most recent and youngest Doctor of the Church, the Blessed Saint of Carmel, through her Doctrine of the Spirituality of Childhood, be your guide on your journey with the Church into the Third Millennium of the Christian era.

May you always preserve the Church in a state of joyful youth through your constant prayers and sacrifices, and may you draw light and grace from the ancient rite of our Holy Mother the Church, whilst maintaining unity with the Roman Pontiff in the work of evangelising the world.