

The Holy Spirit, the History of the Church and the Liturgy.

**Some concluding remarks delivered on the occasion of the seventh CIEL symposium,
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Having heard the most profound insights on the theme of our symposium, we are once again convinced of the paramount importance of the liturgical mysteries for the life of the Church. Indeed, theological epistemology itself points to this privileged place of the liturgical celebration, for it is only in the liturgy that the substantial presence of the divine is realised; and only at the moment of the liturgical re-enactment of the events of the Redemption is their temporal and metaphysical identity made possible by the Will of the Redeemer Himself, who makes use of certain human gestures to renew the one gesture capable of delivering us from our sins. As the Second Vatican Council reiterates, using the words of the Roman Missal in the prayer ‘super oblata’ for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, the work of Redemption is truly accomplished in the liturgy (SC.2). Far from any nominalist rationalism, the celebration of the Liturgy must not merely be regarded as a commemoration of God’s work for humanity: it constitutes in itself the reality of that work, forms part of it, and effectively communicates its fruits to humankind.

1. The History of the Church and of the Liturgy.

Consequently, the moments most deeply imbued with the divine Spirit within his Church take place with great regularity, and indeed with daily precision, during the celebration of the Holy Liturgy. Apart from the proclamation of a dogma by the infallible voice of the Church through the Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, rarely can a historical event have such significance as the celebration of the high point of the Liturgy, that is to say, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The sacramental renewal of the act of definitive atonement through the real and numerically identical re-enactment of the Lord’s Supreme Sacrifice has scarcely any purely individual, local or limited historical significance, but every time the Church, obeying the command of her theandric Head, repeats this act, its significance once again transcends the narrow confines of the present time and exerts an influence on the entire history of the world. In the Liturgy and through its ceremonies, particularly those of a strictly sacramental nature, the Church changes the course of history and the destiny of mankind each and every time. In this light, the minister of the Divine Liturgy can do nothing more important in the course of his day, nor

anything more in keeping with his office, than to perform that which he alone is capable of accomplishing, as the ordained representative of Christ and His Church.

Consequently, it follows that, throughout its history, the Church has always taken particular care to ensure the purity and accuracy of liturgical gestures in the fullness of their meaning. Throughout its history, with all its storms, sufferings, wars and catastrophes, the Church has always, for its part, remained calm, organic and relatively peaceful in the realm of the Liturgy. Admittedly, as the speakers at this symposium have once again demonstrated with all the rigour of their scholarship, there have been changes and adjustments, interferences and adaptations; yet it seems that these developments have never affected either the essence of the Liturgy or even the meaning of the ceremonies as a whole and the detailed rubrics. Whilst one may rightly speak of a growing understanding of the liturgical expression of the divine mystery in the early centuries of the Church's history, and whilst one observes visible progress in the Roman Rite towards the splendour of the Pontifical Mass, it would nevertheless not be justified to speak, in a theological sense, of a transformation of the Liturgy, neither in terms of its sacramental significance and theological meaning, nor in terms of its forms and rubrics. On the contrary, the historical evolution of the liturgy over time leads to a better understanding of the content of dogma, makes the hierarchical conception of the Church more visible, and lends greater force to the varied symbolism of the mystery.

Above all, one can never detect any abrupt break in the development of the dogma of the faith within the liturgical reality of the Church's history. On the contrary, as is the case with the development of the dogma of the faith as a whole, the growth of the Liturgy always displays a dynamic towards greater richness, greater clarity and greater depth, and never seems to experience the catastrophes, upheavals and revolutions of secular history. Even in periods when the history of the Church sometimes suffers severe setbacks—for which unexpected changes in political history appear to be merely secondary causes, themselves influenced by revolutions in the theological and philosophical thought of their time—the quiet and almost clandestine development of the liturgy is scarcely affected by these vicissitudes and remains, as it were, under the special protection of Him who is present in various ways in the celebration of these signs of his love for humanity in distress. It is only after hundreds of years that local customs, even those of Rome, will be adopted by the whole Church, because the bishops—and first and foremost the Supreme Bishop of the See of Rome—are extremely cautious in their liturgical decrees and leave ample scope for the ritual traditions of the various regions, and this applies not only to the venerable vestiges of Christian antiquity, but also to the specific rubrics of various Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Rhenish, Westphalian and French dioceses. It is not appropriate to cite here all the scholarly

works concerning the Missal of St Pius V, but all research is unanimous in stating that this Missal constitutes merely an important stage in a slow and organic development, prepared by a movement of Catholic reform far older than that of the so-called Reformed religion and its theological revolutions. Indeed, most local rites remained untouched, and the Roman Missal was universally accepted only more than three centuries after the death of its holy promulgator.

Clearly, the history of the Liturgy follows its own laws, which know neither deliberate changes, nor unexpected revolutions, nor artificial stages. One might even say that certain additions introduced at a later date, such as overly fashionable hymns, were unable to survive because they had not truly received the blessing of liturgical custom. They ultimately had to disappear from the liturgical life of the Church. Church law, up to the **Codex Iuris** of St Pius X—which was formally influenced by the method of civil codes—still gave greater weight to customary law, and it may be said that the earlier **Corpus Iuris** was nothing other than an authorised collection of the formulation of this law as it had been practised throughout the history of the Church. Similarly, the Roman Missal of St Pius V can be seen as a collection of traditional liturgical law formalised and promulgated by the Roman Pontiff, the supreme judge of ecclesiastical, dogmatic, canonical, liturgical and other traditions.

2. The Spirit and History.

Indeed, it is hardly surprising that the most substantial aspects of the Church's historical development – dogma, law and liturgy – experience neither revolutions nor qualitative leaps, because, like the whole life of the Church, they are under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the soul of the Mystical Body of Our Lord, and the mysterious form of His being and His action. The words used by the Apostles at their first 'council' in Jerusalem – 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' – not only indicate a clear awareness of their authority as the 'Norma normans traditionis', but also emphasise their conviction that the Spirit will never abandon his Church in the course of its history. The philosophy and theology of history, already developed by the great Doctors of the Church, notably St Justin, St Irenaeus, St Augustine and St John of Damascus; lived out and proclaimed, amongst others, by the popes St Leo the Great, St Gregory the Great, St Gregory VII, Alexander VII, Blessed Innocent XI, Blessed Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius XII, Paul VI – who, incidentally, was an admirer of Boniface VIII – and John Paul II, undoubtedly reveal an indisputable doctrine: the history of the Church, with all its storms and fluctuations, is and remains the History of God with His chosen people under the present and perpetual guidance of the 'πνεῦμα του Θεού', which leaves an indelible mark on its history, every period of which bears His imprint.

This Catholic truth has always been fiercely attacked by the doctors of the so-called Reformed religion, who saw nothing in the history of the Holy Church but a continual departure from the purity of doctrine, law and morals of the first three centuries. Paralysed by a negative interpretation of history, beginning with the original fall of our ancestors, they were no longer able to understand that God's grace has never failed—and never fails—His people. This remains true even in moments of sin and moral misery, which have never been able to entirely destroy their relationship with their God, whose Mercy seems, paradoxically, to be greater than His Justice. They were even less able to comprehend that the Lord's grace had not only given new life to those blessed by the waters of baptism, but that the entire history of humanity had been given a new direction towards the fulfilment of the Lord's grace in the eternity of Heaven for ever and ever. Unable to conceive of the Power of the Eternal One—whom they measured by human smallness—they failed to see that His purpose was the 'recapitulatio omnium rerum in Christo', the renewal of all things in the Lord, including the renewal of the world, of humankind and of history. Protestantism, in all its contradictory denominations, is united in this anthropocentric error, believing that once man's relationship with God has been destroyed, God's very power is diminished to such an extent that He can no longer do anything to counter the metaphysical weight of man's sin. According to this logic, God remains powerless in the face of human nature, which has been utterly destroyed by sin; He cannot heal it, but can only cover it with His grace, which is bestowed without any inner connection to human endeavour. In the Protestant mindset, history – and also the history of the Church, which is here seen as a purely external association – is under the yoke of sin and cannot unfold under the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This conviction regarding the history of the Church was definitively formulated – with useful ideological modifications – by the Protestant historian Rudolf Sohm at the end of the nineteenth century. He introduced a tripartite division into the development of the Church's life that was entirely artificial and followed but a single principle: that of anti-Catholic dogma. According to Sohm, the history of the Church is said to have comprised three periods: that of the first three centuries, still close to the Lord – and at odds with the logic of the Protestant doctrine of grace – which was entirely charismatic; The second epoch, extending roughly up to the so-called Gregorian Reform – around 1050 – was already more hierarchical, yet still reasonably open to the work of the Holy Spirit; The third, following St Gregory VII, was the period of legalism, which was truly destructive of the charism of the early Church and thus typically Catholic. Apart from the theological difficulty of reconciling this theory with the Protestant conception of history, and the historical difficulty posed by the indisputable existence of multiple legal and hierarchical elements in the teaching not only of the early

Church but of the Lord himself, Sohm's hypothesis fails to explain why the charism of the Spirit would have diminished in the Church over the centuries, nor does it provide criteria for judging whether a development within the Church is charismatic or not.

All these difficulties have been refuted by historians and canonists time and again, yet it nevertheless appears that Sohm's hypothesis may have exerted a pernicious influence on twentieth-century theology. The view that the Spirit of God was active primarily during the first three centuries has led to a theological and liturgical 'archaeologism' which found its culmination in the unfounded doctrine of a 'new Pentecost' in the Church in our own time, as if the Spirit of God could have withdrawn from the life of his Bride for centuries, only to return today. Deplored by the Magisterium, this doctrine—clearly of Protestant origin—has given rise to a fragmentation of the history of theology, canon law and liturgy, which has been arbitrarily divided into 'happy', 'less happy' and 'downright unhappy' periods, which some believed could be punished with an almost total 'damnatio memoriae'. Sohm's criticism of the 'juridification' of the life of the Church was widely taken up by a certain new school of theology – which, incidentally, has now been entirely superseded and rendered obsolete by far more radical ideas – and it was thought possible to neglect, and at times even scorn, the insights made possible by the Middle Ages, the Catholic Reformation and the nineteenth century. Instead of recognising God's hand throughout the history of the Church, it has been confined to certain periods, interpreted and studied naively in the light of a very recent ecclesiastical development spanning only a few years, the definitive significance of which within the entire history of the Mystical Body of Christ remains as yet unknown. The criterion for distinguishing the importance or charism of ecclesiastical eras cannot be justified by personal preference, nor, even less so, can it stem from a principle alien to Catholic theology. Otherwise, one risks falling into the trap already cited by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*: 'What they call the spirit of the times is often nothing more than their own spirit.'

If one does not possess objective and irrefutable proof – which is difficult without a clear statement from the Magisterium of the Church – one must nevertheless assume that the whole Church is guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, and that no period can be excluded without detriment to the authenticity of the entire ecclesiastical tradition. The various expressions of Tradition are never in conflict, but are always interconnected to form a unity of truth which alone guarantees the correct transmission of the full richness of Revelation. The consistency of dogma, the consistency of canon law and the consistency of the liturgy are based on a consistency across the historical periods in the life of the Church, which, despite all the difficulties both internal and external, has always preserved the same truths, the same hierarchical structures, the same sacraments and the same essential liturgical formulas. It is

the Holy Spirit, the soul of the Lord's Bride, who makes possible this continuity of Tradition, enlivened by grace and built upon the Lord's Revelation.

3. The Spirit and the Liturgy.

As the papers presented at this symposium have once again demonstrated, the central aim of C.I.E.L. is to promote the study and understanding of the fact that this unity brought about by the Holy Spirit is also found, and in a particularly powerful way, in the classical Roman Liturgy. Our intention, which is increasingly well understood by the bishops and has always been supported by the relevant Roman Congregations, is to explore in greater depth the historical roots of the Church's great Liturgy, so that this treasure of authentic Tradition may not come to be disregarded because of liturgical theories that overlook the necessity for homogeneity in the life of the Church at every level.

Whilst it must be maintained that the entire historical life of the Church, with its ups and downs, its glories and its miseries, is animated by the continual assistance of the Holy Spirit—because the Church is the chosen people of the New Testament to whom the promise of the Lord's daily presence has been given— this assistance will find its most intense moments in the development of the understanding of revealed truth and in the solemn forms through which the Lord's power is present in the Church. The condition for this presence to be realised, however, lies in respect for all that the Lord has revealed in word and deed, and for the manner in which the Church, under the guidance of the Spirit, has handed this down throughout its history. Without this integration of revealed truth and authentic tradition, this presence cannot be sustained, and the unity between word and sacrament will, at least for a time, be in danger; and if the neglect of the link between Truth, Tradition and History is not remedied, the essential truth of the Catholic faith would be destroyed forever.

For this reason, the life of the Church clearly shows that the development of dogma and the development of the liturgy are not only closely linked, but that the Holy Spirit has taken particular care of these essential expressions of Revelation and of the Lord's Presence. Every sentence, every formula, every word of dogma has been subjected to lengthy processes of clarification, explanation and discernment, until, at the end of this slow and prudent evolution – and often after attacks and heresies that were only with difficulty overcome – the Magisterium has pronounced its definitive judgement. And even within these authentic statements, scope has always been left for the development of traditions whose meaning did not yet appear sufficiently clarified.

The same organic and gradual process has been at work in the evolution of the Liturgy over the centuries. The Church has been guided by the Spirit, whose instruments are, of

course, prudence, discernment and tradition. If, as we firmly believe, the Lord is present in the Liturgy—and most intensely in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, where He gives Himself to humanity in His very substance—it seems evident that the Spirit of God, the executor of the divine will of Redemption, has taken particular care over the liturgical forms so as not to cast doubt on this august presence upon which our salvation depends. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, observed with an interesting metaphor during the recent symposium held at Fontgombault, the liturgy has never been ‘frozen’. Indeed, far from being preserved in an unchanging state of perfection, like dogma, it is always part of the history of the Church, the field of the Holy Spirit’s work. And because this is so, we must accept that the historical forms of the liturgy, just like the historical forms of dogma, are valid and legitimate expressions of the work of the Spirit and, consequently, form part of the authentic tradition of the Church, the guardian of Revelation and the gateway to Salvation. They are to be treated with the utmost caution and altered only following a consistent process of assimilating other forms, which will not be new but will in turn be the expression of a tradition lived out in accordance with the faith and the laws of the Church itself.

If we begin to tamper with these forms, the results will be the same as if we were tampering with the expressions of dogma. Anyone who would sacrifice the work of the Holy Spirit in these two areas to the spirit of the age would, at the same time, be sacrificing at least part of the Catholic Tradition. As Bishop Piolanti, the great representative of the Roman School, told me before his death: “It is not enough merely to maintain the integrity of dogma!” The Spirit also, and above all, preserves the integrity of the Liturgy. It is not the spirit of the age that should influence it. “Principiis obsta!” The spirit of the world may sometimes disguise itself in an attractive, open and appealing guise. But the August Majesty of God does not allow Himself to be confined to any particular historical period. The Triune God dwells in the Infinite, of which only Tradition, shaped by his Spirit, is the adequate reflection on this earth. If the C.I.E.L. makes a modest contribution to making this great Tradition known in liturgical matters, it takes part in the development of the Liturgy according to the forms that this same Spirit, the soul of the Church, has brought forth throughout history. We do not wish to be the creators of a liturgy within the Church, but rather to be humble disciples of the Holy Spirit, who introduces us to the mystery of a liturgical Tradition which is not a venerable monument of ecclesiastical antiquity from the past, but the form of the perpetual presence of God’s grace amongst us.