

The Variants of the Roman Rite

Their Legitimacy and Revival

This talk will argue for the legitimacy of the historical variants of the Roman rite, and—although not in every detail—it will urge their restoration. At the same time it seems obvious that today these variants cannot be restored legally. Hence before treating the principal subject of this paper, I wish to resolve this seeming contradiction and clarify my basic standpoint.

Legal provision is necessary for the liturgy as a human and communal function to be performed in an organized and uniform manner. The liturgy, however, as the vital organ and principal manifestation of life for the “pilgrim” Church transcends its own legal regulations. The set of rules effective today do oblige the individual believer to comply with religious obedience on the level of liturgical practice, but they cannot preclude further study and reflection, nor can they prevent that certain conclusions, drawn within the given legal framework and with due sense of responsibility, be put into practice, at times even with the explicit intention of revising some of the regulations in effect. The competent authority in liturgical matters is usually not a scientific or spiritual assembly, and this is equally applicable to an episcopal conference, the general chapter of a religious order, or even the Holy See. Therefore, legal provisions must be preceded by the serious work of scientific or spiritual circles who will then be able to convince the competent authorities of the best course of action, providing them with all the necessary information and assisting them in implementing the authoritative decisions. This is exactly how changes—both advantageous and deleterious—were effected in liturgical history.

Someone may say that in view of the liturgical upheaval of the last century it would be better not to invoke individual competence and generate changes on its basis; we have witnessed too many miscarried initiatives. In principle, I agree with this opinion, and I do not think that we possess the same creative genius with which the experts of the late patristic age in Rome or the clergy of the Carolingian era approached the liturgy. Yet it is an illusion to expect that a system so artificially disrupted in its continuity will return spontaneously to the process of organic development. Our age certainly does not excel in creativity regarding common cultural goods deeply rooted in history, but at least it possesses a strong capacity for synthesis; and this is exactly what is needed today. We are also emboldened by the example of Pope Benedict XVI who has just restored one of the historical forms of the Roman rite by an appeal to intrinsic values instead of canon law.

Historical overview

From the very beginning Christian liturgy has lived in a number of variants. The Oriental and Eastern rites became closely associated with certain heretical or schismatic tendencies, yet the readmission of various Uniate churches into Christ's one true fold has clearly demonstrated that the Catholic Church is able to carry out its work of sanctification just as effectively in one rite than in another. Within the Latin tradition itself different variants developed, of which we may speak in two respects. The so-called Old Latin liturgies—such as the Ambrosian and Mozarabic rites—differ from each other in essential structural elements, and, though at times they mutually influenced each other, they represent substantially independent developments. One of these is the so-called Old Roman rite which reflected the ancient practice of the major Roman basilicas. The other group of variants comprises the regional uses and the rites of religious orders which came into existence following the Carolingian age. Since these are all descendants of the Frankish redaction of the Old Roman rite, in basic structural terms they are identical, and with good reason they can be called the variants of the same Roman rite. This presentation will focus chiefly on these.

The liturgical historians of the past few decades—often rather tendentiously—considered the Carolingian or Franko-Roman liturgy a result of a radical reform, in the course of which, as if by a process of inculturation, the Roman and Transalpine (especially Gallican) customs were forged together. The unbiased study of the available sources, however, indicates that the real goal of the liturgical experts in the court of Charlemagne and Pepin the Short was, in fact, a rather pure Romanization of the liturgy. The fact that this was not completely realized is due mainly to two factors. On the one hand, the Old Roman liturgy itself was not entirely unified at the time. Some of its textual elements and customs were not yet fixed, and so there were certain discrepancies between the model sources. The adoption came about in separate stages, in between which some liturgical changes took place in Rome, as well. From the beginning, the liturgical practices of the major Roman basilicas and the parish churches (also called *tituli*) were different from each other. On the other hand, the austere, almost puritanical character of the papal liturgy seemed somewhat foreign to the inhabitants of the Transalpine regions, and its adoption would have required the abandonment of many widespread customs even in Italia. In this situation, the “architects” of the Franko-Roman liturgy felt compelled, despite their original intentions, to use the available material somewhat creatively, although their activity was marked by venerable moderation.

The Franko-Roman liturgy and its variants are linked together by the fact that they draw upon the same set of texts, melodies, devices, and ceremonies, that these elements are arranged in the same structural framework, and that on certain points they are identical down to the minutest detail. The differences can be traced back to

the heterogeneous Roman source material, the strength of pre-Carolingian traditions, and the fragmentation of the institutional background after the death of Charlemagne. The first generation of ritual variants is most likely the result of spontaneous divergent developments, and these “deflections” became the identifying marks of various institutions only later. The next generation often consciously endeavoured to develop proper and peculiar characteristics. This is particularly clear in the case of certain monastic liturgies or the newly established episcopal or archiepiscopal sees. Among the variants of the Franko-Roman rite we find also the rite of the Papal Curia and the Franciscan Order, which was later labelled as “Tridentine rite” and recently as “Extraordinary form” in common parlance.

The notion of complete uniformity made occasional appearances also in the Middle Ages, but it only managed to gather real momentum in the period of the Reformation. This had several reasons: (1) the regional variants became associated with the ambitions of certain “national” churches to grow more independent from Rome; (2) the rapid spread of heretical movements increased the doctrinal worries, which seemed to warrant tighter control over liturgical customs; and finally (3) the invention of the printing press provided great technical help, which made the prospect of unification even more attractive. It was in this situation that the Council of Trent ordered the revision of liturgical books, and thus the official editions of the Roman books were published—in almost every respect with pre-conciliar content.

The use of these books did not become mandatory to the same degree. The promulgation of the Ritual did not apply to the particular churches outside of Rome. The bull introducing the new Pontifical, however, excluded every other alternative and replaced all the previous editions of the Roman Pontifical. The adoption of the Breviary and the Missal was obligatory only for those churches where there was no previous tradition of at least two hundred years, but the introduction of the new Roman books remained an option anywhere. If the competent local authorities decided to adopt the Roman editions, they could not return subsequently to their original books. From all this it seems abundantly clear that in principal neither the Council nor the popes implementing its decisions had any objection to preserving the variants with longer traditions, yet both the common ecclesiastical climate of the period and convenience favoured Romanization.

Only a few dioceses and religious orders managed to withstand this wave of uniformity, but in the modern period even in these ritual uses various compromises were introduced under the sway of the recurring demands for assimilation. The opposite tendency gained ground only very rarely and usually in the context of at least suspicious religious and intellectual currents. Interest for the medieval ritual variants was chiefly cultivated in 17th–18th-century France, in the milieu of Gallicanism, and in 19th–20th-century England. In the 20th century few religious orders also made at-

tempts to restore their traditional liturgy on the basis of medieval sources. The Holy See did not oppose this intention and in certain cases even official actions were taken.

In the meantime the Tridentine form lived on almost unchanged and grew ever more uniform. Apart from the continuous growth of the calendar and the rubrics of its use, modifications were minimal until the 20th century. From this time on, however, the reforms became rather frequent. To mention only the most important ones: the reformed Breviary of Pius X (1911), the new “Pian” translation of the Psalms (1945), the new order of the Holy Week (1951–1955), the rubrical reform of John XXIII (1960), and the last version of the old Missal (1965). Their common characteristics are the quick, centralized execution and the absence of organic development. If we peruse the scholarly liturgical literature of the period, it becomes apparent that, with the sole exception of the 1911-Breviary reform, this series of reforms (including both the pre-1962 and post-conciliar editions) can be traced to the same persons, institutions, and ideologies. For this reason it is truly regrettable that today the traditional Franko-Roman liturgy is officially represented by a rather transitional variant, which has partially broken away from its millennial antecedents. We can affirm that between the historical and the mid-20th century forms of the Tridentine liturgy there is a deeper rupture than between the same Tridentine form and any historical variant of the Franko-Roman rite.

Legitimacy and authenticity

After this rather sketchy overview the question arises: how can we orient ourselves amongst the multiplicity of variants, and if legal validity in and of itself is not a guarantee of liturgical quality, on the basis of what criteria can one variant be considered better than another? In my opinion we must distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic legitimacy. Extrinsic legitimacy is determined by legal and doctrinal aspects, while intrinsic legitimacy, which I prefer to call authenticity and consider prior to extrinsic legitimacy, is determined by the inner logic of the liturgy itself. The source of this intrinsic coherence is the tradition transcending human memory.

For the following reasons, the authenticity of the liturgy cannot be judged on the basis of legal or doctrinal considerations. Insofar as the law is concerned, the liturgy is subject to legal regulation only for practical reasons; historically it is prior to the law, while in the objective order of being it is higher than the law. From a doctrinal perspective the often cited principle of “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” is misunderstood by anyone who adjudicates the authenticity of a liturgical text or gesture based on whether the doctrinal content it communicates is orthodox. On the one hand, many different texts or gestures are capable of expressing orthodox doctrinal content, but this in and of itself does not make them suitable for liturgical use. (For this very reason the attitude, so widespread in traditionalist circles, of building the criticism of the

liturgical reforms exclusively on doctrinal grounds is altogether defenceless against liturgical barbarism.) On the other hand, there are many historical examples to liturgical texts or gestures which proved to be, if not unorthodox, at least imprecise or ambiguous, and so their change or replacement became topical. Even so this rarely ever led to actual changes before the 20th century, whereas there are quite a few dogmatic truths which had become parts of ceremonial texts or the objects of liturgical celebration well before they were theologically defined. Thus the texts and gestures hollowed by liturgical use transcending human memory cannot be submitted to dogmatic judgments (of course, the situation is quite different with the newly composed texts). Their situation is comparable to the texts of Sacred Scripture: they, too, are sources of the deposit of faith, which must be interpreted in each arguable case in the context of the full body of ecclesiastical doctrine.

If it is so, the determination of a rite's authenticity becomes feasible only with the study of the widest possible range of ritual variants. The Christian liturgies, within their field the Latin tradition, and its further divisions into Roman and Franko-Roman rites with all their ritual variants display numerous characteristics which can be identified without regard to age or region. The presence of other features is more limited or completely accidental. By considering the temporal and spatial extension of these features we can develop a hierarchy, within which the individual liturgical phenomena take their place on different levels. In ethnographic terms, we are dealing with a complex compound of "hard" and "soft" components.

It was undoubtedly to the detriment of the liturgical period following the Council of Trent that with an all-inclusive uniformity it obliterated the difference between the "hard" and "soft" components, as well as between their transitions. With this was lost the ability by means of which even a mediocre medieval liturgist could recognize whether a given variant remained within the framework of the Roman rite. By the beginning of the 20th century, only the exaggeratedly detailed regulation was able to guarantee the authenticity of the rite, and it was for this very reason that the 20th century proved to be unfit for liturgical reform. The natural instincts were already gone, the minor but frequent interventions had weakened the intrinsic authority of the tradition, and it seemed as if the competent authority were in all respects the ultimate arbitrator in matters liturgical. All this has prepared a fertile ground for the unprecedented liturgical collapse after the Second Vatican Council.

It is also a fact that the decentralized, medieval-type paradigm was able to preserve the identity of the rite for a much longer period of time than its pedantically over-regulated modern counterpart. Its real safeguard was not obedience, but the aforementioned ability for self-orientation, or in other words, liturgical instinct. The legalistic approach of the modern period, on the other hand, has led to the paradoxical situation whereby the institutions in service of liturgical integrity became the most

willing agents of disintegration. I am convinced that it is the institutional establishment officially arrogating to itself all matters liturgical that is mainly responsible for allowing a very limited circle of clerk-like “experts” to accomplish the radical subversion of the Roman rite in the space of only a few years.

Considering all these, the following conclusions may be drawn. In terms of authenticity the so-called Tridentine rite is authentic but it is not the sole representative of the Roman rite. Furthermore, this ritual form has undergone a number of unfortunate changes in the 20th century, whereas the abandonment of the other, non-deformed variants was not the result of an organic process, but of unfavourable practical circumstances and an inauspicious intellectual climate. The situation today, that is, the parallel use of more, historically distinct variants of the Roman rite is based on the fact that the competent authority itself decided to overwrite the criterion of extrinsic legitimacy in the name of considerations rooted in intrinsic authenticity. This has created a precedent from which we may logically infer that every authentic variant of the Roman rite has been given the chance for a “legal” revival.

In practical terms, after a long period of decadence the continuity of the Roman rite has suffered such a deep rupture that in most areas we may only speak of a wholesale restoration. This also means that returning to the strictly-speaking Tridentine practice today is not really supported by a solid, widespread, and immemorial custom; we may even consider other variants if their adoption is favoured by concrete and weighty arguments. I would like to list three such arguments.

(1) First, the historical variants of the Roman rite are often more authentic representatives of the actual Roman tradition than the Tridentine or, especially, the 1962-form. This is not only due to the modern modifications, but also to the fact that the Tridentine or Curial practice, despite all its enduring qualities, was originally the rite of a chapel and of the papal court officials. Although some of the new research indicates that in many cases the simplicity of the Tridentine form is more on account of its Old Roman heritage, it is certain that by virtue of its particular function it lacked many of the characteristics of the public liturgical practice peculiar to the major Roman Basilicas and medieval cathedrals.

(2) Secondly, I would like to mention the argument relating to the practical use of the ritual variants. If we suppose that the ill-fated reform attempts of the 20th century were fomented by legitimate needs and real problems, then it is insufficient to return to the pre-conciliar conditions. Rather, preserving the authenticity of the rite, we must find new ways to solve the problems and answer these exigencies. In this process the thorough study of the ritual variants proves to be of great assistance, and this is what prevents mishaps most effectively.

(3) Thirdly, there is a cultural-psychological argument. The particular ritual variants of the Roman rite make it possible for individual communities to develop a

closer connection with the liturgy on account of the fact that in it they can recognize and express their own cultural identity. In this context the culture and the regional or monastic identity acquire a religious dimension by becoming a part of cultic offerings. At the same time the structure of the Roman rite is also such that it allows particular groups to reclaim their common, Roman identity. In the present situation this would also increase the attractive power of returning to the tradition.

The way of revival

The revival of one of the historical variants of the Roman rite would not mean its comprehensive restoration down to the smallest detail. With most of the ritual variants it would not even be possible, partly due to the lack of proper documentation, partly because of certain inconsistencies or the discrepancies between the available sources. Another difficulty is posed by the fact that the particular rites themselves underwent changes in the course of their long, at times more than 500 years long, history. What should be the basis for their revival: their last form, their most representative period, their historical apex, or their earliest source material? What shall we do with the minor variants within the same rite? How can we resist the temptation of liturgical antiquarianism, or how can we integrate the most decisive elements of modern Catholicism by which the old variants obviously could not have been influenced? All these questions could only be answered responsibly if the available data have already been duly processed and our judgments have been properly sharpened by detailed study and practical experience. Nonetheless, I would like to highlight some important principles which, due to the brevity required by such a talk, I have no time to explain fully.

Especially in a medieval context one should not attribute the same significance to the secondary elements of the rite (votive ceremonies, commemorations, processions, etc.) than to the primary content, that is to the yearly circle of the Mass and the Office or the administration of sacraments and more important sacramentals. The question of the Mass-ordinary also requires special circumspection. This is usually a subject of particular interest today, yet the direct study of the relevant sources shows them to be a less eminent component of the rites. In the Middle Ages the priestly apologies and the other non-constitutive, silently prayed textual elements of the Mass were manifestly less canonical, and so they were more subject to change, even within the same rite. The same could be said about the parallel textual elements of the Office (e.g. blessings, absolutions, preces, etc.). We cannot forget that in the core of the ritual variants we find the solemn sung liturgy of a representative church, and so the texts are perceived together with the music. Consequently, the melodic variants become characteristic features of a given rite. At the same time the rubrical regulations are formed in various ways, and this much at least is certain: they are much more re-

laxed than in modern times. In the Middle Ages the rite was expressed primarily through liturgical books, while the secondary rules and laws of custom had much less significance. Yet again we are confronted with the fact that in comparison to the modern approach, treating all of the liturgical elements on the same level, the ritual variants are much more complex in structure and content.

Taking all this into account, I think that the restoration of a ritual variant is only possible in several stages. My premise is that a closer relationship might be formed between the “extraordinary form” of the Roman rite and its historical variants, if the early 20th century form of the Roman rite once again became legal. This is one of the short-term goals.

The first step pertains to liturgical historians. Based on the most extensive research possible, the source material has to be made available in good-quality and usable editions, and later, based on these publications the “ideal type” of the rite has to be determined. This is very important because the original material often splits into several sub-variants, and these could only be understood by an age when the liturgy was still considered the principal sphere of cultural self-expression. Today we have to rest content with the restoration of the major variants associated with an entire country or a larger region, and this requires a serious work of synthetization.

We cannot ignore the Tridentine-type sources either, and this is for the following reasons. The Tridentine rite is better documented than any other ritual variant, and so it may be normative in cases when data are lacking or contradictory. Since in modern times the Tridentine rite has spread to every corner of Latin Christianity, its total abandonment would obliterate a centuries old tradition, and so its integration is not only a practical necessity but also intrinsically desirable. Moreover, some of the feasts and ceremonies that originated after the 16th century simply do not feature in the medieval sources. In such cases the Tridentine books certainly become the standard, although cutting back on the sanctoral cycle periodically is an obligation that cannot be ignored.

The only method of reviving a proper ritual variant without infringing liturgical law is to return to the use of local melodic variants. However, if we aim at changes that touch upon liturgical texts and rubrics, it is best to handle the various types of liturgical books separately.

The Ritual was the only Tridentine liturgical book which did not become universal, and even the modern editions of diocesan Rituals preserved a number of ancient traditions. It is still possible to appreciate and cultivate them. The Ritual was also the ceremonial book that absorbed the Processional, which, in addition to the actual processions, also included the special ceremonies of the liturgical year, for example, for Candlemass, Ash Wednesday, and the Holy Week. Since the individual dioceses still have the right to issue their proper Rituals, there is no reason why the new editions

could not restore some of the old customs, including the aforementioned processional rites as well.

The restoration of the Breviary cannot be omitted. First of all because, apart from the monastic Office books, none of the Breviaries legally approved today preserved the ancient Roman tradition. It is also necessary because, despite the relevant magisterial pronouncements, there is still no real result to the repeated calls for the restoration of the Divine Office to the public liturgical life of the Church. The local ritual variants could fulfil an important role in trying to resolve the problem, since there can be no doubt about their authenticity and they are from a period when the Office was still an integral part of the everyday liturgy. In addition, it has become clear from the historical study of the liturgy that the ritual variants manifested themselves especially and most deliberately in the proper material of the Divine Office. Until a reassuring canonical solution is found, the lay faithful are in the easiest situation. If it is made available to them, they can use without any restriction one of the historical Office-types, and by doing so they may be preparing their eventual legal restoration.

In comparison, the restoration of the different variants of the Missal is much less urgent. The Mass proper is much more fixed on the level of readings, chants, and prayer texts. There are only a few emblematic points where the local variants could be revived, but even in this case, we may speak only of wider groups of regional traditions than about separate, individual rites. The significant variations are to be found in the sequences and the Alleluia verses. The eradication of the sequences is, indeed, a painful aspect of the Tridentine reforms, but if they are used as quasi congregational hymns (that is, they are not among the official texts to be prayed by the celebrant), they can become good occasions for featuring the older traditions even within the framework of the present rubrical regulations. The less fixed position of the Alleluia verses within the Mass proper is obvious historically, therefore it would be reasonable eventually to relax the rubrics so that the choice of texts can become more liberal. The Mass ordinary is another case altogether. As I have already mentioned earlier, the corpus of the apologies from the prayers at the foot of the altar, offertory, and priestly communion is rather large and quite variable, but it is not part of the most important identifying features, and their variability can be observed even within the same rite. These texts were originally considered private preparatory prayers, and they became parts of the official ceremonial texts only gradually. In the medieval sources it is often difficult to determine how far advanced this process may actually be.

The restoration of the different variants of the Pontifical remains an illusion in our days. The first reason is that nowadays very few pontifical ceremonies are conducted in the world according to the traditional Roman rite. Until this rite remains in a minority status, practically every bishop would be using a different book. The other reason is that the Roman Pontifical, from the time of its first edition, made all the other

alternatives impossible. Although the legitimate authorities could restore other authentic Pontifical-variants, opting for the Roman version seems more reasonable than with other liturgical genres. The Roman Pontifical is not a Curial ceremonial book, but a well-managed, organic summary of the total European Pontifical material which was adopted, from the end of the 13th century, by most of the particular churches in Europe, even when in other respects they were still resolutely holding on to their proper rites.

In conclusion, the primary field for the restoration of ritual variants is the Divine Office, and the use of the particular editions of the Ritual is still possible, although they are in need of some revision and supplementation. Momentarily, the restoration of the different variants of the Missal is not desirable, and even in times to come it should rather extend to the proper. The revival of different Pontifical variants is something our generation will have to do without. May God grant that in the future there will be time when—thanks to the revitalization of the Roman rite—this question will also become topical!