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*Noble Beauty, Transcendent Holiness:
Why the Modern Age Needs the Mass of Ages*
by Peter Kwasniewski*

Professor at Wyoming Catholic College, Peter Kwasniewski offers a thoughtful, well-rounded argument for the superiority of the Latin Mass. His view of Vatican II, though harsh, is mostly nuanced, though his failure to grant the *Novus Ordo* its place will disappoint some. He situates the Council within wider, modernist currents and the Liturgical Movement, frequently backing his argument with Conciliar documents. He is harshest on the post-Vatican II era and its main players—Annibale Bugnini, Pope Paul VI, the “smug” writers of the following decades celebrating a victory over supposedly obscurantist, outdated spirituality.

Kwasniewski never hides his low opinion of the outcome of Vatican II. He clearly defines the issue as being *Novus Ordo* (also called Ordinary Form) versus the Latin Mass (the so-called Extraordinary Form or *Vetus Ordo*). His quotation of Henry Sire sums up much of his own oftentimes strongly-worded argument on both Masses:

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[T]he traditional Catholic liturgy, with all its attendant devotions, made up a whole of potent beauty and imaginative persuasion, which bound souls to the Faith as no rationalist invention does. In its place, the new Mass has set an experience of soul-destroying secularity at the heart of every Catholic's ordinary experience of his faith. . . . The old liturgy was a nourisher of souls, the new is a starver of them.¹

In other words, pick your sides, readers.

Kwasniewski spends much time examining the Extraordinary Form in light of tradition. The third chapter, highlighting the spirituality of Our Lady, is particularly illuminative. Like many Catholic writers, he sees in the Blessed Virgin the summation of Christian living and the basis of ecclesiology. Individuals and the Church as a whole need to emulate Mary's receptivity, a receptivity that is not passive, but rather contemplative: "We do not make or create or fashion this word, but, like Mary, we receive it from another, we suffer it and are thus transformed by it, as potency is fulfilled by actuality."² This is the spirituality that the Latin Mass forms in us.

In Chapter 8 the author returns to contemplation, discussing the meaning of *participatio actuosa*: "a deeper sense of engagement that begins and ends with interior activity—faith leading to contemplation."³ The author never shies away from how strange or different this is for contemporary westerners accustomed to individualistic, utilitarian values. It is, in fact, a holy strangeness. Kwasniewski expresses his nuanced view of Vatican II here, showing that the Council can be appropriated by supporters of the Extraordinary Form: "[T]he Council Fathers did not intend to use *actuosa* to mean 'hyperactive.'"⁴ His learned

¹ *Ibid.*, 126–127.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴ *Ibid.*

reinterpretation of the Council, by addressing commonly-heard counterclaims, significantly strengthens his argument.

The Extraordinary Form is a powerful spiritual director, an aid to the modern soul thirsty for contemplation and a break from materialism and busyness. Kwasniewski cites Joseph Ratzinger's wise insight into the modern condition:

In the present age, we are all possessed by a strange restlessness that suspects any silence of being a waste of time and any kind of repose as being negligence. . . . And yet in the religious sphere receptivity is at least as important as activity.⁵

The chief sin of the post-Vatican II era was the pride of believing that humans could refashion the liturgy. Kwasniewski starkly describes the process, contrasting it with the humble devotional receptivity of past centuries:

[T]here was never a time in the Church's history . . . when the Roman liturgy was sliced into discrete portions that were farmed out to subcommittees . . . for redactions and spliced back together, with the ragged joints still showing.⁶

There is in the *Novus Ordo* a modernist logic, in other words (rationalist, utilitarian, individualist, horizontal, narcissistic), that has much in common with the Protestant spirit.

Fortunately for readers, the author doesn't leave us hanging, but develops a theology of tradition greatly inspired by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's insight that modern man can no longer handle an "invisible, remote, and mysterious God."⁷ Ratzinger's words reflect the author's argument: "Worship is no longer going up to God, but drawing God down into one's own world."⁸ Yet for Kwasniewski the liturgy

⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42, footnote 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*

allows God, with all His mystery and majesty, to break into our world and re-form us to His image.

The author thus contrasts modernity with tradition, the Ordinary Form with the Extraordinary Form. The former Mass is horizontal and understandable, and therefore boring. The latter, being beautiful and mysterious, by its very strangeness presents a challenge to the intellect. Kwasniewski borrows Pope John Paul II's characterization of the Latin Mass as being counter-cultural. Kwasniewski notes the tension between the modern and pre-modern person attending the Extraordinary Form: "When you attend the traditional Mass, you find yourself either attracted by something special in it, or put off by the demands it makes. Lukewarmness is not an option."⁹ It is this interplay of modern and pre-modern that helps readers grasp the significance of the Latin Mass for the contemporary western world. The Extraordinary Form, Kwasniewski argues, can save us and the world. This is a convincing claim though it does leave followers of the *Novus Ordo* spiritually homeless and hopeless even where this Mass is said with reverence.

Much of Kwasniewski's argument is, not surprisingly, politically incorrect. He supports a hierarchical view, where the priest and the laity have a different relationship to the Eucharist. Eucharistic ministers and the reception of the Eucharist in the hand are inconsistent with Catholic sacramental theology. It is the priest's hands alone that have received the anointing necessary to handle the sacred Host.

This is connected to another politically incorrect assertion. Effort, not accessibility (a byword of the people Kwasniewski opposes), is key. The Extraordinary Form, "a veritable bootcamp of spiritual discipline" with plenty of painful kneeling,¹⁰ demands much of the worshiper. Its mystery cannot be rationally fathomed. The priest's many

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

gestures, developed over the centuries and conducted with rubrics-guided precision, cannot be totally understood, perhaps even by the priest himself. This presupposes humility: The humility of not knowing everything. That is why the Latin Mass is not boring, but captivating. This leads to another keen comparison: “With the elements that once appealed to the whole man and his emotions having been stripped away, novel elements are invented and inserted.”¹¹

Such contrasts will, perhaps unfortunately, offend many. Perhaps this is the book’s greatest weakness: Kwasniewski is polemical, not irenic. He does not seek peaceful co-existence between the two Masses. He even predicts that one will eventually prevail. Perhaps this reflects the author’s realism: We are all involved in the liturgical wars, whether we want to be or not. He notes Martin Mosebach’s observation that we have all become “an armchair expert in the nature, structure, rubrics, and history of the sacred liturgy,” where the individual “become[s] a spectator and a critic” rather than a worshiper.¹² Here Kwasniewski criticizes Latin Mass devotees for being especially critical of the smallest deviations, asking, “Can we break through to a childlike apprenticeship to the sacred liturgy?”¹³ Ultimately, the author notes, “we do not need to invent new things; we need to rediscover old things that have always worked and will always work.”¹⁴

The Chapter “A Perpetual Feast of All Saints,” explicitly outlining the old things that need rediscovery, is the book’s highlight and in practical terms is the part of the book that succeeds best at contrasting the Ordinary Form with the Extraordinary Form. The latter Mass is where we meet and get to know the persons—the saints, mystics, angels—of the eternal faith. These persons are our spiritual helpers. We

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹² *Ibid.*, 170.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

can ask for the prayers of SS. Peter and Paul, Kwasniewski enthuses: “These saints become one’s friends, and one’s communion with them grows as each year their feasts are dutifully celebrated.”¹⁵ Ridding the Mass of the names of the great angels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael is a sure sign of the decline of faith among Church leaders according to the author.

Kwasniewski’s clarity and sincerity, a great strength of the book, also produce the greatest weakness. While he repeatedly cites Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and while he does examine Vatican II with nuance, Kwasniewski never manages to express sympathy for the *Novus Ordo* in the way that Ratzinger has. While the Pope Emeritus seems to have accepted that the *Novus Ordo* is here to stay, and that we need to make the best of it, Kwasniewski the liturgical warrior asks readers to take sides and prepare for battle, a most un-Catholic thing to do. Readers would benefit from his changing his either-or to Ratzinger’s both-and and trust that the Holy Spirit will work things out in the end.



REFERENCES

Kwasniewski, Peter. *Noble Beauty, Transcendent Holiness: Why the Modern Age Needs the Mass of Ages*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.