

THE EXTRAORDINARY FORM—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: The Ecclesial Effects of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass
Convener: Daniel J. Olsen, Saint Xavier University, Chicago
Moderator: Daniel J. Olsen
Presenters: Rev. James G. Sabak, O.F.M., Providence College
Timothy Brunk, Villanova University

This session began with Rev. James G. Sabak presenting his paper, “Extraordinary Confusion: Does the Extraordinary Form of the Mass Prohibit the Anti-Structural Nature of the Liturgy as Ritual?” To begin, Sabak defined anti-structure by centering on Victor Turner and Aidan Kavanaugh’s work on the topic, highlighting how anti-structure can be seen as an orienting principle for ritual action. Sabak used this understanding to argue that all ritual can be seen as anti-structural in nature. If ritual bypasses, or even denies this essential quality, it cannot fulfill its proper liturgical function. The second major part of the paper applied this understanding to the recent reintroduction of the “extraordinary form” of the mass. Sabak argued that the extraordinary form does not allow the ritual to enact its anti-structural basis due, in part, to its ahistorical and time-bound reality. This limitation encroaches upon the understanding of liturgy as ritual advocated at Vatican II and renders the mass incapable of fulfilling its essential liturgical function. He concludes, therefore, that the extraordinary form of the mass “cannot adequately or even suitably express the anti-structural nature of liturgical ritual.”

Timothy Brunk followed by delivering his paper, “*Summorum Pontificum* and Fragmentation in the Catholic Church.” After briefly tracing the history of the reintroduction of the 1962 Missal since Vatican II, Brunk posed two orienting questions: 1) Does Pope Benedict XVI’s *Summorum Pontificum* (SP) do an end-run around the liturgical reforms of Vatican II? 2) Does the celebration of the mass according to the 1962 Missal set up parallel understandings of church and assembly? To answer the first, Brunk claimed that SP rendered the new missal of Paul VI “optional,” thus making the reforms of Vatican II optional in practice. To address the second, he argues that parallel understandings have, in fact, developed, using the participation of the assembly, the place of Scripture in the liturgy and the ecclesiology articulated in the liturgy, to explore the point in depth. He then invited reflection on Benedict XVI’s claim that the two forms might offer a “mutual enrichment” to the Church. Brunk challenges this understanding by posing several questions regarding what “kind” of mutual enrichment that the “unreformed” liturgy might offer to the ongoing liturgical life of the Catholic Church.

The discussion that followed was wide-ranging. It began with some follow up questions about how religion and the liturgy can/should serve as a “disruptive force.” One participant asked, “If anti-structure and the ‘disruptive’ nature of the liturgy are central to the understanding of its purpose, can it be argued that the extraordinary form does not qualify as liturgy at all?” As a result, a key question became: What is liturgy? Moreover, after Vatican II, should ritual be easily understandable or should we have to work at understanding it? How much “work” should be expected in this regard?

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Other themes that emerged were ecclesiological at base, exploring a sense of elitism that is evoked within this overall discussion, as well as how that elitism meshes with an inclusive, big-tent view of Catholicism. “What is wrong with diversity in liturgical life?” one participant asked. Asking this question in an American context was viewed as particularly apropos. “Is inclusivity even applicable here, when the implementation of the liturgical mandate of Vatican II is at stake?” another wondered. These questions remained mainly unresolved, but led to robust discussion of ecclesial identity and the role of ritual in forming that identity.

Finally, there was dialogue about the aesthetic quality of local liturgical celebrations. Can/should one be able to determine how one would like to participate in the celebration of the mass? Are we too nostalgic in our memory of what the Latin Mass used to look like in the local parish? Do we take adequate stock of the incarnational quality of liturgical practices?

In all, this session served as a thoughtful engagement about a highly charged topic in the life of the contemporary Catholic community. How this community remains unified in the midst of the potentially fragmenting nature of this debate remains a poignant question in our day.

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