



The Merit of a Mass

My
Lord
and
My
God!

by Father Chad Ripperger, F.S.S.P.



Among the traditional faithful there appears to be a kind of intuitive sense that the old rite of Mass is more efficacious than the new rite. Many believe that they derive more spiritual gain from the old rite of Mass than from the new. However, to give a more precise expression to the intuitive sense of which is more efficacious, the new or the old rite, it is necessary to make several distinctions. Since the purpose of this article is very specific, i.e. to ascertain which ritual is more meritorious or efficacious, certain issues regarding the value or efficacy of the Mass will be avoided.¹

Yet, to answer the question of whether the old rite of Mass is more efficacious than the new is of paramount importance. It is the point of departure between priests of the respective rites, since each holds that he is saying the Mass that is best for the faithful.² Nevertheless, the question is a key one since, in the end, whichever ritual is more meritorious ought to be the one that the Roman authorities encourage. Since one of the primary obligations of those in authority in the Church is the glory of God through the salvation of souls, they have the obligation to encourage and, in some cases, require the ritual of the Mass which is most efficacious.

I. Distinctions of Merit

The distinctions within the different kinds of merit of the Mass are first founded on a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic merit or value. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says:

We must also sharply distinguish between the intrinsic and the extrinsic value of the Mass (*valor intrinsecus, extrinsecus*). As for its intrinsic value, it seems beyond doubt that, in view of the infinite worth of Christ as the Victim and High Priest in one Person, the sacrifice must be regarded as of infinite value, just as the sacrifice of the Last Supper and that of the Cross.

...But when we turn to the Mass as a sacrifice of impetration and expiation, the case is different. While we must always regard its intrinsic value as infinite, since it is the sacrifice of the God-Man Himself, its extrinsic value must necessarily be finite in consequence of the limitations of man. The scope of the so-called “fruits of the Mass” is limited.³

In discussing the value of the Mass, one must make a distinction between intrinsic and the extrinsic value. The intrinsic value of any valid Mass is infinite since It

is Christ, Who is infinite, Who is offered. Hence, in this respect every Mass has an infinite value.⁴ The new rite of Mass is just as efficacious as the old rite of Mass in this respect since they are both the same sacrifice of Christ.⁵ The Mass, because it is the offering of God the Son to God the Father, gives infinite glory to God.⁶

However, the extrinsic value or merit of the Mass is finite.⁷ This is so because man, a finite creature, is incapable of receiving infinite effects. In this respect, the value of the Mass is “intensive limited,”⁸ which means that the fruit of the Mass is limited in its measure. Normally, the liturgical writers state that, as to its impetratory and expiatory value, the Mass is finite,⁹ “since the operations of propitiation and impetration refer to human beings, who as creatures can receive a finite act only.”¹⁰ When one considers the actual sacrifice of the Mass, which is the sacrifice of Calvary, it is infinite, but as to its effects, other than the infinite effect of giving God glory, it is finite.

In addition to man’s finitude, the liturgical writers give other reasons for the limitation of the extrinsic value of the Mass. While the Mass is infinite as to What is sacrificed, nevertheless we derive only finite fruits from the Mass. The writers say that the extrinsic merit of the Mass is based essentially upon six things. These six things are intermediaries between the infinite efficaciousness of the Mass and those who receive the actual effects from the Mass.

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A. The Church

The first principle of merit by which the infinite merits of Christ come to man in a finite way is the Holy Roman Catholic Church herself. Since the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is an act of the Church (by means of the priest), then the merit of the Mass is founded upon the holiness of the Church.¹¹ This notion is connected to the fact that one cannot merit a thing without being holy, i.e. without being

pleasing to God by being in the state of grace.¹² While this point applies principally to human beings in this life, it can be said analogically of the Church insofar as she is holy. Since the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is an act of the Church, the moral status of the priest does not increase or decrease the value of the Mass in this respect.¹³ Nicholas Gihl observes that it is because of the essential mark of holiness that the prayers and gestures of the Mass that the Church offers by means of the hands of the priest are always viewed favorably by God.¹⁴ The faithful can always take comfort in knowing that even if the priest and other

faithful at a particular Mass are not holy, they can still derive fruit from the Mass based upon the holiness of the Church.

At the same time, Gihl goes on to observe: “But since the holiness of the Church consists in the sanctity of her members, it is not always and invariably the same, but greater at one period than another; therefore, the Sacrifice of the Church is also at one time in a greater at another in a lesser degree pleasing to God and beneficial to man.”¹⁵ Writing in the *1913 Catholic Encyclopedia*, Msgr. Joseph Pohle seconds and expands upon this notion:

We are thus compelled to concur in another view of De Lugo, namely that the greatness and extent of this ecclesiastical service is dependent on the greater or less holiness of the reigning pope, the bishops, and the clergy throughout the world, and that for this reason in times of ecclesiastical decay and laxity of morals (especially at the papal court and among the episcopate) the fruits of the Mass, resulting from the sacrificial activity of the Church, might under certain circumstances easily be very small.¹⁶

If the actual members of the Church are not very holy their lack of holiness has a direct impact on the efficacy of the Mass, since the Mass is offered always as a public prayer, even when it is offered privately. Given the current scandals in the Church among the clergy and bishops, we can begin to see why the faithful are suffering spiritually. The same can be said for mankind as a whole, since the fruits of the Mass can also be applied for those who are not Catholics. The moral and spiritual depravity of this moment in history has gravely affected this aspect of merit in the Church. This is why the pope and bishops have a grave responsibility for moral reform of the clergy and laity.

B. The Priest as Public Servant of the Church

The next principle of extrinsic merit is the priest insofar as he acts on behalf of the Church, i.e. as a public person and not as a private person.¹⁷ Since the priest by virtue of his priesthood offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, by his very priesthood he is able to merit something for whom he offers the Mass. The priest offers the Sacrifice as a minister (servant) of the Church and so by virtue of his status as a priest his work in the Mass can gain fruit for those for whom he prays. Again, in this sense, the sanctity of the

priest does not affect the fruits coming from the Mass.

Given the aforesaid, it would seem that the particular office that the priest holds may have some effect on the fruits of the Mass. Here we have in mind the distinction between a bishop and a priest. It would appear that since the bishop has the fullness of priesthood,¹⁸ the extrinsic merit flowing from his episcopacy would be greater than

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that of a priest. (We are, of course, leaving aside the relative merit gained by their respective degrees of sanctity, for it is possible for a priest to be holier than a bishop and thereby merit more.) But insofar as the office is concerned, it would appear that the Mass offered by a bishop is more efficacious than one offered by a priest. This may also have to do with the fact, at least in the old rite, that the ritual of the Mass of a bishop is not the same as that of a priest. However, this is, again, outside

the context of the very nature of the office.

It would also seem that, given this argument, the Mass offered by the Holy Father would likewise be more meritorious than the Mass offered by any other bishop. Yet even here we must make a distinction between the merit flowing from the office of the papacy and the merit intrinsic to a specific kind of rite. In other words, it should not be presumed that the new rite of Mass is intrinsically more efficacious because the pope offers it. The actual intrinsic merit of the ritual must be considered on its own, independently of the one who offers it.

Above, we saw that the Mass possesses a certain efficacy by virtue of the holiness of the Church – that is to say, the Mass derives fruit from the fact that it is offered on behalf of the Church. Msgr. Pohle makes an interesting observation in this connection:

Next after Christ and in the second place comes the Church as a juridical person, who, according to the express teaching of the Council of Trent (Sess. XXII, cap. I), has received from the hands of her Divine Founder the institution of the Mass and also the commission to ordain constantly priests and to have celebrated by these the most venerable Sacrifice.... When, however, as De Lugo rightly points out, an excommunicated or suspended priest celebrates in defiance of the prohibition of the Church, this ecclesiastical merit is always lost, since such a priest no longer acts in the name and with the commission of the Church. His sacrifice is nevertheless valid, since, by virtue of his priestly ordination, he celebrates in the name

of Christ, even though in opposition to His wishes, and, as the self-sacrifice of Christ, even such a Mass remains essentially a spotless and untarnished sacrifice before God.¹⁹

This passage is extremely important for two reasons. First, the priest must be part of the juridic person of the Church so that this ecclesiastical merit is maintained. Second, those who offer the Mass outside the Church displease Christ, since it is contrary to Christ's wishes, for the juridic Person who has been given the right to administer the sacraments is the Catholic Church alone. Effectively, this means that the right to administer and protect the sacraments was given by Christ to the apostles and their successors. To offer the Mass or employ any other element of sanctification outside the Church is contrary to the rights of the Church. The term juridic comes from the Latin word *ius*, which means right. While there is a great deal of clamor about how wonderful it is that Protestants, schismatics and heretics outside the Church possess these elements of sanctification, the reality is that it displeases God that they occur outside the Church. Since God has given the Church the rights over the sacraments, anytime they occur outside the jurisdiction of the Church the rights of the Church are violated, since the Apostles and their successors have a right to protect and determine the administration of the sacraments. In effect, it is a violation of justice.

C. The Priest as Private Person

The liturgical writers make a distinction between the priest as a public servant (*minister* in Latin) and a private individual. The priest as a public person, by virtue of his priesthood, is able to merit. However, as a private individual, the priest is also able to merit.

With Christ and His Church is associated in third place



Christ and the Chalice by Juan de Juanes

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the celebrating priest, since he is the representative through whom the real and the mystical Christ offer up the sacrifice. If, therefore, the celebrant be a man of great personal devotion, holiness, and purity, there will accrue an additional fruit which will benefit not himself alone, but also those in whose favor he applies the Mass. The faithful are thus guided by sound instinct when they prefer to have Mass celebrated for their intentions by an upright and holy priest rather than by an unworthy one, since, in addition to the chief fruit of the Mass, they secure this special fruit which springs *ex opere operantis*, from the piety of the celebrant.²⁰

When we consider the action of the Mass from the point of view of Christ who offers by means of the priest, by virtue of the Church as a juridic person and by virtue of the priesthood of the priest who offers, the fruits are derived *ex opere operato*.²¹ It is by the very work performed that these fruits are derived from the Mass. However, since the priesthood and sanctity are ontologically distinct within the priest himself, it is possible for him to have these two kinds of merit, one which is

ex opere operato and the other *ex opere operantis*.

This is why the holiness of the clergy has a direct impact on the life of the Church. If the priests are holy, the fruits derived from the Masses they offer are greater and the Church's faithful benefit more thereby. This is also why the faithful have a certain sense that it is better to have a holy priest rather than an unholy priest offer the Mass for their intentions. The fact is that the Mass said by a good priest is better and more efficacious than the Mass said by a bad priest.²²

Yet, to understand fully the nature of the priest's merit, let us first consider the nature of merit in general. In his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, St. Thomas Aquinas observes that one of the effects of grace is merit.²³ Yet how man is said to merit something from

God must be understood correctly. For between God and man is an infinite distance which constitutes the greatest inequality. Yet justice is between equals.²⁴ Since God and creatures are completely unequal, God owes no mere creature anything in justice. Because there is an inequality, man cannot be just to God by absolute equality. Man, who is finite, is incapable of rendering something infinite to an infinite being. Rather, St. Thomas says, man can be just to God by a certain proportion. By this he means that man's merit with God exists only on the presupposition of the divine ordination so that man obtains from God, as a reward of his work, what God gave him the power to do.²⁵

Now supernatural acts are goods exceeding a natural capacity. Therefore no created nature is sufficient as a principle of a meritorious act in relation to God unless some supernatural gift is added to man's nature, and this is called grace.²⁶ Since man moves by means of his free will, he can have a certain merit insofar as what is rendered to God is freely given. Therefore, merit in the eyes of God

proceeds from free will and grace.²⁷ Merit means "to be worthy of something in return for something done" or "a right to a reward," and so grace makes the act supernatural or worthy of something from God. On the other hand, mortal sin kills sanctifying grace in

the soul, and so no one in the state of mortal sin is able to merit, unless he be reconciled with God through grace.²⁸

The conditions for performing a meritorious act are based upon several things.²⁹ On the side of the meritorious work itself, the work must be morally good. Obviously, an evil action does not deserve a supernatural merit or reward. The action must be free from external coercion and internal necessity, i.e., the person must do it freely. Next, the action must be supernatural – that is, accompanied and motivated by actual grace and proceeding from a supernatural motive. On the side of the person meriting, in order that the action be meritorious, the person must be in the wayfaring state (here on earth). Once a person dies, he is unable to merit.³⁰ The person must also be in the state of sanctifying grace, as the aforesaid clearly shows. Lastly, merit is dependent on the free ordinance of God, for God determines those things which are meritorious.

Now the degree of our merit is based upon several things.³¹ The first is the degree of sanctifying grace: the more sanctifying grace we have, the more meritorious are our actions. Therefore, the holier the person, the more

he can merit for himself and others. The second is our degree of union with Our Lord. The closer we are to Him in prayer, for example, the more we can merit. The third is the purity of our intention or the perfection of the motive under which we act. If one seeks to merit the actual graces to overcome a spiritual imperfection from a motive of charity – that is, he does so purely because he loves God – his action is more meritorious than that of a person who seeks the actual graces because he is tired of falling into a specific kind of sin. The fourth factor upon which the degree of merit is based is the fervor or intensity with which our actions are performed. Still another factor is the virtues with which the soul is adorned. From this we see that the virtuous man is more capable of performing actions in the right manner so that they will be more efficacious. This leads to the last thing upon which our actions are meritorious: the manner or the way in which the action is done. Obviously virtue will provide assistance here but here we are talking about the very way in which

we perform the action. We see in our own experience that how a person performs an action often makes the action better, e.g. a mother who takes care of her child's needs but does so in a cold and unaffectionate manner is less pleasing to us than the woman who does so in a warm and affectionate manner.

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Lastly, with regard to merit, we may say that different kinds of actions merit different graces as well as more graces. For example, the action of undergoing martyrdom is by its nature more meritorious than saying a Hail Mary. Yet relative merit must also be taken into consideration. It is possible for one person, because of the degree of his sanctity, to merit more from an action which is of lesser value than a person who performs a more meritorious action but is less holy. St. Louis Marie de Montfort observes, "Thus you share in the high quality of her intentions, which are so pure that she gave more glory to God by the smallest of her actions, say, twirling her distaff, or making a stitch, than did St. Laurence suffering his cruel martyrdom on the iron grid, and even more than all the saints together in all their most heroic deeds!"³² However, relative merit does not change the nature of the action, and so different actions when considered on their own differ in the reward due to them.³³

We can now return to the discussion of the priest's personal merit. If a priest is in the state of grace, he is able to merit additional fruit from the Mass. Moreover, the holier

he is the more he is able to merit. Now sanctified perfection consists in excellence in grace and the adornment of the soul with all of the virtues, and so the more virtue and grace the priest has the more is he able to merit.³⁴ On the other hand, if a priest is in the state of mortal sin, with respect to his personal merit he is useless to himself and the faithful who could be benefiting from his actions in the liturgy. How the priest offers the Mass also increases merit insofar as it is more meritorious if he offers the Mass reverently rather than irreverently.

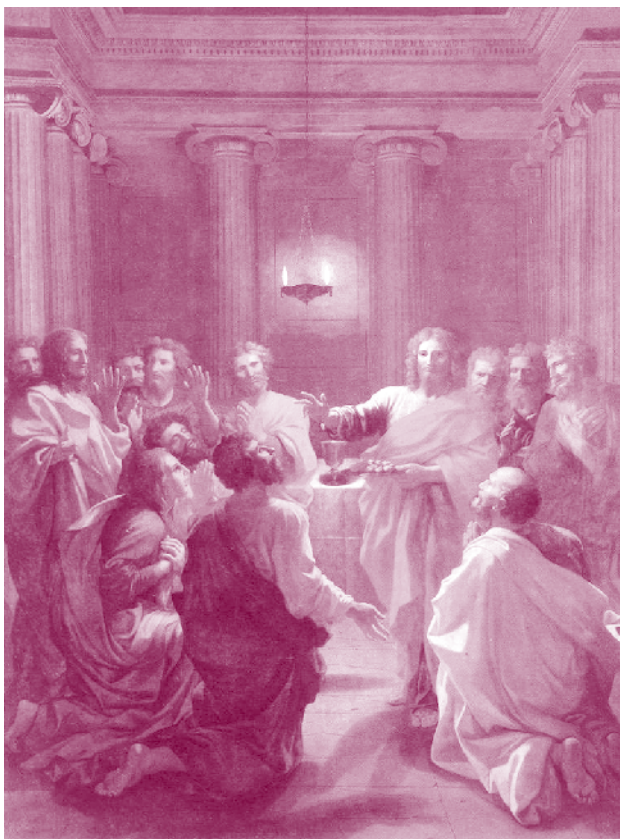
D. The Faithful

What can be said of a priest as a private person can also be said of the faithful. Since the faithful cannot merit anything unless they are in the state of grace, they must ensure that they do not fall into mortal sin if they hope to derive fruits from the Mass by their own work. While the priest is the only one who is capable of confecting the Sacrifice, the people are able to join to the Mass their prayers, sufferings and good works during Mass and throughout the day to derive fruits from it. This also means that if the faithful have a higher degree of virtue and grace, they will be able to merit more from the Mass.

Regarding the faithful, Msgr. Pohle observes:

Finally, in the fourth place, must be mentioned those who participate actively in the Sacrifice of the Mass, e.g., the servers, sacristan, organist, singers, and the whole congregation joining in the sacrifice. The priest, therefore, prays also in their name: *Offerimus* (i.e., we offer). That the effect resulting from this (metaphorical) sacrificial activity is entirely dependent on the worthiness and piety of those taking part therein and thus results exclusively *ex opere operantis* is evident without further demonstration. The more fervent the prayer, the richer the fruit. Most intimate is the active participation in the Sacrifice of those who receive Holy Communion during the Mass since in their case the special fruits of the Communion are added to those of the Mass. Should sacramental Communion be impossible, the Council of Trent (Sess. XXII. cap. vi) ad-

vises the faithful to make at least a “spiritual communion” (*spirituali effectui communicare*), which consists in the ardent desire to receive the Eucharist.... In addition to the active, there are also passive participators in the Sacrifice of the Mass. These are the persons in whose favor – it may be even without their knowledge and in opposition to their wishes – the Holy Sacrifice is offered.³⁵



The Institution of the Eucharist by Poussin

The fact that the merit of the faithful, whether active or passive participants, is derived *ex opere operantis* means that they must meet the requirements of merit as mentioned above. They must be in the state of grace, have a supernatural intention and assist at Mass in a suitable manner – that is, fervently and reverently.

On a pastoral level, this means that the holier the congregation, the more they will be able to merit and therefore the better will be the pastoral life of both priest and faithful. Conversely, if any of the faithful are in the state of mortal sin, it affects everyone else since they are able to merit neither for the rest of the congregation nor for themselves. They become “dead weight,” as it were. In an even worse scenario, if they are receiving Holy Communion in

the state of mortal sin, they detract from the goodness of the Mass extrinsically and in this way affect everyone else. This is why the problem of the state of the faithful is such an important issue. The fact that a vast majority of Catholic couples are either using or have used contraception as well as the general moral and spiritual decay among the faithful in virtually all areas has left this aspect of merit regarding the Mass anemic, to say the least.³⁶

E. The Decora

The next area which can affect the merit of the Mass has to do with what we may call the decora.

The priest who celebrates the Mass and the faithful who participate therein by hearing it, by serving at the altar, by giving a stipend, by procuring the requisite sacred vessels, etc., perform, without doubt, the holiest and most salutary acts of divine worship; for the Church herself says

that there “can be no other works so holy and so divine performed by the faithful” than the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.³⁷

Gihl mentions the procuring of sacred vessels. It is obviously meritorious for the faithful to provide the material means by which the Mass is offered, and this includes those sacred things that are used in the Mass. It is the pious custom and belief that those who procure the items used at Mass are remembered at each Mass, not necessarily by the priest, but by God who looks down from heaven and sees the objects which are used and knows who donated them.

Yet we have used the word “decora” for a specific reason. The term *decora* means a certain fittingness or becomingness about a thing. We use the word “decorate” to indicate the outfitting of a specific room or thing in a manner that suits its use. Here we see that this also applies to the liturgy. If we use objects that do not fit the majesty and the exalted nature of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we can actually detract from the extrinsic merit. Ugly things please God less and thus merit less. Also, if we give with the intention of being cheap, we tell God what we really think of Him – that retention of our money is more important than His glory.

Given the aforesaid, we can make a distinction between objective merit and relative merit regarding the *decora*. The objective merit of the *decora* consists in the objects as they suit the nature of the Mass. Since the Mass is the highest act that can be performed in this life, then the best objects will increase its objective merit. If we give objects that are made of the best and most noble materials fashioned by the best artists in a rightly ordered artistic fashion (and which admittedly may cost a great deal), those objects will give God the most glory and therefore we will derive the most merit in this regard.

Yet the artistic fashion in which the sacred objects are crafted – everything from the church to the vestments the

priests wear – ought to suit the Sacrifice of the Mass according to the particular Mass that is said. This means that the best chalice should be used in more solemn Masses or on more solemn occasions. Part of the beauty of the *decora* consists in the objects being suited to the particular Mass that is being said. At low Masses one may not use the best vestments, whereas at high Mass he may desire the best vestments. This shows to God that we know which things suit which ritual. In the old rite there are various levels of Masses that can be offered, from the Pontifical High Mass all the way down to the low Mass of a simple priest. For the same reason that it would be unsuitable for a simple priest who is offering a low Mass to vest in vestments

suiting to a bishop, we ought to use objects ranging in beauty based upon the level of the Mass.

One of the primary difficulties of the new rite is the disappearance of this differentiation, with the ritual reduced to one form of the Mass with only very minor variations, usually in music and things of that sort. In the past it was understood that there were different feasts and occasions as well as priests who offered the Mass, and so one should offer different Masses as well as use different items suited to the Mass and the state of the priest who offers the Mass. While it is true that we can use different



Romanos Chalice of St. Mark, detail

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decora, even the simplest ought to be truly beautiful.³⁸ Often those who offer the new rite use ugly items because they think to do so pleases God. They argue based on the notion of simplicity (which we have already shown in a prior article is not a valid argument).³⁹ Simplicity is not the same thing as ugliness.

Often priests feel obligated to use ugly liturgical items they receive from laity who may not have properly developed aesthetic senses. The first mistake is accepting ugly liturgical items in the first place. The second mistake is giving the laity the idea that they should go out on their own and purchase these items for the church. The laity should be told that if they want to donate an item, the priest should select the item based upon proper aesthetics

in relation to the style of the church in which they will be used. The third mistake is the priest's belief that he is obligated to use an ugly item donated by a layman. While it is true that priests often do not want to offend the laity, nevertheless, those laity who donate ugly objects must be taught that such things do not suit the liturgy precisely because they detract from the extrinsic merit of the Mass. They affect not only the others in the church, but even the layman who donates it because he is getting less merit from the Mass as a result.

The relative merit regarding the decora consists in the people, through a holy intention, donating a liturgical object which may not have the best material or best artistry but is still the best that they can afford. I am not speaking here of ugly objects, but simply ones that may be more simple and less ornate. Nevertheless God looks with great favor on these because of the faithful's sacrifice in donating what they can afford. We see this in relation to Christ's parable of widow's mite.⁴⁰ On the other hand those, who have money and yet out of miserliness do not seek to give God the best, detract from the extrinsic glory and, in the end, will not merit more for themselves or others. This is why the virtue of magnificence plays such an important role in church as well as other liturgical design.⁴¹ Those who are miserly will never produce anything magnificent. The truly magnificent church or liturgical object pleases God both in itself and because a magnificent item more easily moves people to lift their minds and hearts to Him.

Objectively, then, we can say that offering Mass in a magnificent church with the vestments and sacred vessels that suit the level of Mass offered will derive the most extrinsic merit regarding the decora. This does not mean that we should always say the highest level of Mass all the time but whenever we offer any level of Mass, the decora ought to fit that level of Mass. On the other hand, lack of beauty in the decora will reduce the extrinsic merit. Also, not saying Mass in a church will reduce the merit of the Mass. This does not mean that a priest should forego offering Mass if he cannot get to a church, since there are all kinds of circumstances which may warrant not saying Mass in a church. Nevertheless, a Mass offered in a beautiful church is more meritorious.

On a practical level, the laity and clergy must insist that the church and other decora be beautiful and properly suited to the Mass. This is not just a matter of aesthetics. As this section shows, it is a matter of spiritual import since it can directly affect the merit of the Mass. This is so not only because the objects themselves merit more or less in the eyes of God but also because they will affect

the clergy and the laity when they attend Mass. There is probably no layman who has not noticed the differences in their experiences of the Mass when they attended an ugly church as opposed to a beautiful one.

II. The Merit of the Ritual Itself

We come now to the last area of extrinsic merit, the ritual of the Mass itself.⁴² The general contention among many who offer the new rite of Mass is that since it is valid it is

just as meritorious as the old rite. Intrinsically, it must be conceded that this is true, and it is also true with respect to certain extrinsic aspects of merit.

However, with respect to the ritual itself, given the traditional theology, Gehr argues that it

is possible that one ritual may be more meritorious than another:

The Church not only offers the Sacrifice, but she moreover unites with its offering various prayers and ceremonies. The sacrificial rites are carried out in the name of the Church and, therefore, powerfully move God to impart His favors and extend His bounty to the living and the dead. By reason of the variety of the formulas of the Mass, the impetratory efficacy of the Sacrifice can be increased in an accidental way, and the efficacy be directed in a special manner to different objects. – The sacrificial fruit to be obtained by petition, through the mediation of the Church, is neither as to kind nor degree previously determined and limited. Therefore, the Church herself in her prayers is accustomed so to express her intentions and desires, that it can be known what benefits she wishes to obtain by the Mass and to whom she wills to apply them. Hence special prayers are more useful and more beneficial than general ones. Not only the degree of holiness of the Church, but also the nature of the prayers of the Mass and even of its whole rite exerts accordingly an influence upon the measure and nature of the fruits of the Sacrifice. – From what has been said there follow several interesting consequences. Among others, that, on the part of the Church, a High Mass solemnly celebrated has greater value and efficacy than merely a low Mass; – and also with regard to the Church's impetratory power a Votive or a Requiem Mass for a special intention is more valuable and efficacious than a Mass harmonizing with the Office of the day. At a Solemn High Mass the external display is richer and more brilliant than at a low Mass; for at a solemn celebration the Church, in order to elevate the dignity of the Sacrifice, manifests greater pomp, and God is more glorified thereby.⁴³

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The full content of this passage needs careful unpacking. The different fruits are rooted in the very nature of the prayers. What the prayers ask for determines the fruits that will be derived. The very nature of the prayers and gestures that comprise the rite constitute the foundation for the merit of the ritual and therefore determine whether one ritual is more efficacious or meritorious than another. We shall return to this discussion in the next section.

This passage also notes that since different rituals have different fruits, we can say that it is not always best to offer the Mass that is generally the most efficacious. In other words, while a solemn high Mass said on the feast of the Immaculate Conception may have a greater efficacy when compared to a low Mass for the dead, it does not necessarily mean that one should offer a votive Mass of the Immaculate Conception as opposed to a Mass of the Dead. The prayers of the Mass of the Dead are ordered specifically to aid the dead. This is why the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* of the new rite of Mass is problematic when it said that Masses for the dead should be said sparingly because the dead are already remembered during the Mass.⁴⁴ The actual Mass for the dead has fruits which specifically benefit the dead. In effect, this means that sometimes it is better to offer the ritual of the Mass more suited to the needs of the faithful, both living and dead, than to offer the Mass that is in general more meritorious.

Another reason one ritual can be more efficacious than another is that it is offered with greater solemnity or, as Gíhr puts it, pomp. The solemnity and pomp give greater glory to God, and are eminently suited to Him since He is the Majesty or Ruler of the whole universe. He is greater than any earthly king and therefore deserves a greater ritual than any earthly king.

Yet since a ritual is a combination of the prayers and gestures, then the more the gestures suit the one who



The Nave of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome

On a pastoral level, this means that the holier the congregation, the more they will be able to merit and therefore the better will be the pastoral life of both priest and faithful. Conversely, if any of the faithful are in the state of mortal sin, it affects everyone else since they are able to merit neither for the rest of the congregation nor for themselves.

St. Thomas describes additional conditions necessary to render prayer efficacious. As mentioned, prayer must proceed from charity,⁴⁸ and since it is a lifting of the mind and heart to God, it must have God as its end. Since charity is the virtue in the will which makes it possible to love God,⁴⁹ then charity directs us to God. The person praying must also have the requisite virtues, two of which St. Thomas names: humility and faith. Humility is necessary because we must recognize our unworthiness. Faith is necessary in order for us to know Who and What God is, so that we act rightly. Here the principle of *lex credendi lex orandi* plays a key role. St. Thomas says that prayers must be offered to God and with devotion.⁵⁰ Lastly, for the prayer to be meritorious, the person must be in the state of grace.

Applying these principles to a ritual, we conclude that

offers the Mass, the action one is performing, and the person to whom it is directed (that is, God), the more meritorious it will be.⁴⁵ Prayer itself has governing principles that make it meritorious, and these principles can likewise be applied to the ritual of the Mass. St. Thomas observes that vocal prayer is done in order to render God His due and to move man's mind and heart to Him.⁴⁶ Since prayer is an act of the virtue of religion, which is a part of justice, we pray in order to render to God His due.

The same principle can be applied to the ritual of the Mass. The ritual of the Mass ought to be ordered to God and not to man, except insofar as man is served in order to serve God. In other

words, God is the end of the ritual, not man. This follows from the order of charity in which we love God and our neighbor for the sake of God.⁴⁷ The ritual should not have man as its finality, but God, for if it has man as its finality, it goes contrary to charity, which has God as its end. It will also go contrary to justice since one will not render to God through the prayers of the ritual what is due to Him.

it should inculcate love of God in the faithful as well as proceed from charity. In this way, the prayer will flow from a love of God. Since charity is directive of all of the other virtues⁵¹ and since virtues moderate our actions,⁵² a ritual that flows from charity will be a rightly ordered and moderated liturgy. It will neither be too long nor too short; St. Thomas observes that the measure or length of the prayer is ordered toward inciting interior devotion.⁵³ If it is too short, one does not have sufficient time to incite the devotion. If it is too long, it becomes difficult for man in his current condition, laboring under the effects of original sin, to sustain. The ritual must manifest the faith of the Church clearly and must dispose the people in such a way that they lead lives of grace. In the ritual, humility will be served and grace will be increased when the faithful make the proper acts of sorrow for their sins at the appropriate times. The ritual must seek to remove sin from the faithful so as to make them more pleasing to God and thereby increase the merit.

The prayer must also be said with attention,⁵⁴ and this

also applies to the ritual, which is a collection of prayers. The people must be sure that they remain attentive to the sacrifice and the sacred mysteries that are occurring. This does not translate, necessarily, into being more physically active. Because man is a creature of habit, it is entirely possible to be physically active in something (because the physical acts are governed by habit) while the interior life is not at all connected to the activity. Therefore, a ritual must be one designed to maintain the attention of the faithful. Again, this does not mean it must be active and verbal. Rather, the ritual should be one of profound beauty that will naturally draw the worshipper to its contemplation. It should not be chatty and activist in nature so as to cause distractions that make it difficult for someone to maintain a focus on God. While activity can draw our focus since motion by nature draws our faculties, nevertheless the attention is drawn to the motion, not to God. This is why a ritual should not be activist in nature. Since all of the attributes necessary for prayer may also apply to the ritual, these conditions of prayer as they are rooted in the ritual will

increase or decrease the ritual's merit intrinsically.

Given these points, it is possible to see the truth of what Gehr said many years ago:

The essential fruit of the Mass has its immediate and only source in the self-immolation of Christ, and is, therefore, independent of the contents of the formulas of the Mass Rite of the Church. Hence there is here a question only of the accidental, or subordinate, fruit, arising from the liturgical prayers of the Mass, but added to the essential fruit, and benefitting directly those for whom the Mass is celebrated.⁵⁵

The accidental fruit derived from the ritual of the Mass is something real and consequently is something that must be taken seriously by those whose task it is to protect and administer the sacraments, namely the Magisterium.

III. Is the old rite of Mass more meritorious than the new rite of Mass?

As mentioned above, since the new rite is valid, as to the intrinsic sacrifice, the agency of the Church and the agency of the priest as a public person, it is the same as the old. Also as mentioned, we cannot pass judgment on the priests or faithful who go to these respective

Masses since we do not have access to their interior lives and cannot judge with certitude who is more holy. It is possible to have beautiful decora in the new rite of Mass, even though the decora used by many in the new rite is often lacking. However, when we consider the rituals themselves, it is possible to arrive at which is more meritorious.

The new rite is "streamlined" in the sense that those who wrote it sought to simplify the ritual. This resulted in less pomp, so in this respect we may say the old rite is more meritorious than the new. We have mentioned in a prior article⁵⁶ that the old rite excels the newer rituals with regard to the virtues.

Specifically, the old rite proceeds more from charity than the new insofar as the old rite is more ordered to God and less ordered toward the people. This is manifest not only in altar orientation (the new rite can be said oriented) but also

The ritual of the Mass ought to be ordered to God and not to man, except insofar as man is served in order to serve God. In other words, God is the end of the ritual, not man.



The Mass of St. Martin by an unknown Hungarian master

in the fact that references to the supernatural were reduced in the propers. Also, the new calendar reduces the glory of the saints. Since charity is love of neighbor for the sake of God, it is hard to see how charity could govern a reduction of the glory of God through the saints. The readings are said toward the people in the new rite, rather than as something offered back to God by facing God the Son Who shall rise in the east. In the old rite, the epistle and the Gospel are read facing God as in the form of a sacrifice offered back to Him. Many parts of the new rite are said facing the people (such as the introductory and penitential rites) rather than to God, as in the prayers at the foot of the altar in the old rite. In these and in other ways, the new rite is less ordered to God and therefore does not manifest the virtue of charity as well.

Some parts of the new rite are the same as the old. It is possible, provided the manners and gestures associated with these parts remain the same, that the new and the old rite can have the same merit in respect to these. Yet most of the parts that remained the same in the new rite (here we are thinking at least about the Latin versions of the prayers) had the gestures changed from the old rite. The Gloria in the old rite contains gestures that were dropped in the new rite, and the Gloria is not said facing God externally since the prayer is not said oriented. The first Eucharistic canon, which is in large part taken from the canon in the old rite, has had a vast majority of its gestures stripped away. These gestures constitute an additional merit, such as the gestures of the signs of the Cross made over the *oblata* and things of this kind.

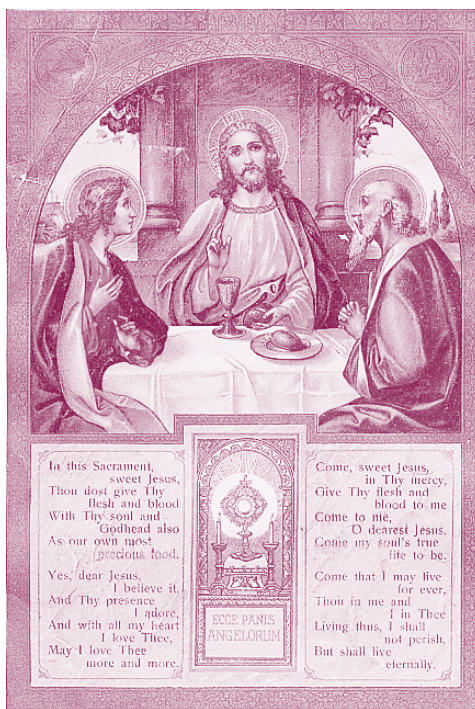
The new rite, as a form of prayer, is hard to pray mentally since there are more things said out loud, and the general tenor of Vatican documents on the subject encourages a form of active participation that requires more things occurring on the side of the laity. The old Mass, since it is less activist on the side of the laity, tends to make it easier for them to pray the Mass. While the old rite stresses a more interior active participation, the new rite, with a lack of periods of silence

as exist in the old rite, makes the ritual less meditative. In fact, the periods of meditation in the new rite are somewhat artificial and are not integral to the ritual as such but serve to stop the ritual rather than being a part of it. In other words, the priest stops the rite so the people can meditate, rather than having the people meditate while the ritual is in progress, as is the case in the old rite. As a result, in the new

rite it is harder for people to lift their minds and hearts to God. The requirement of attention as part of prayer is more difficult and so, in that respect, the new rite is less meritorious than the old because God is more pleased with those things that easily draw us to Him.

We have already noted elsewhere⁵⁷ that the old rite fosters greater humility than the newer rituals. This means that the newer ritual as a prayer has less of one of the conditions that make prayer efficacious. In this respect the old rite is more meritorious than the new. We have also mentioned elsewhere⁵⁸ that the old rite manifests the Faith more clearly. In this respect the old rite is more meritorious than the new, since prayer has an efficacy based upon how the Faith is manifested in the prayer itself. In connection to the clarity of faith, we have also seen⁵⁹ that the old rite is more beautiful than the new. The more beautiful a thing is, the more it pleases God. The more beautiful it is, the greater glory it gives to God. Because the old rite is more beautiful than the new, it is more meritorious than the new. In effect, the prayers of the old rite of Mass better express the desires and intentions of an authentic Catholic faith, since they contain the faith in a clearer fashion. The prayers of the old rite of Mass foster a greater sense of our unworthiness and need

for humility and sorrow for our sins. The prayers are more ordered toward God and suit Him better since they contain a proper supernatural dimension.



First Communion souvenir artwork, 1913

The first Eucharistic canon, which is in large part taken from the canon in the old rite, has had a vast majority of its gestures stripped away. These gestures constitute an additional merit, such as the gestures of the signs of the Cross made over the oblata and things of this kind.

Conclusion

It is safe to say that, objectively speaking, with respect to the ritual itself the old rite of Mass has an ability to merit more than the new rite of Mass. While this merit is accidental, since the essential or intrinsic merit of the Mass, which is the Sacrifice of Christ, is the same in both rites, it is nevertheless something serious. Since the faithful are the beneficiaries of the fruits derived from this aspect of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we have a grave obligation to consider the impact that this factor may be having

on the life of the Church. While it is not our intention to denigrate the new rite, we must recognize that the ritual of Mass used in the old rite is more meritorious and therefore more beneficial for the people who assist at it and for the priests who offer it. ✠



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Notes

1. For example, when a priest offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for five people, does each person receive the full benefit of the Mass or is the value of the Mass divided into five equal fruits given to the five people?
2. Here we are not speaking of those priests who are incapable of offering a more efficacious ritual due to matters of obedience and/or circumstances.
3. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (The Gilmary Society, New York, 1913), vol. 10, p. 17. Henceforth, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* will be referred to as *CE*.
4. See also, Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 414 and St. Alphonsus Ligouri, *Theologia Moralis* (Roma: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1905), lib. VI, tract. 3, c. 3, d. 1.
5. One of the fundamental presuppositions of this article is that the pope enjoys infallibility in the promulgation of the official Latin texts of liturgy. In other words, it is presupposed that the new rite of Mass is valid.
6. *CE*, vol. 10, p. 17.
7. See also Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 414.
8. Nicholas Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; Dogmatically, Liturgically and Ascetically Explained* (St. Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1935), p. 141.
9. See *CE*, vol. 10, p. 17; Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 414 and St. Alphonsus Ligouri, *Theologia Moralis*, lib. VI, tract. 3, c. 3, d. 1.
10. Ott, loc. cit.
11. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 141. See also ST II, q. 82, a. 6.
12. The foundation for merit of a human agency will be discussed below in relation to the priest and the faithful.
13. ST III, q. 82, a. 6.
14. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 143.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
16. *CE*, vol. 10, p. 19.
17. See ST III, q. 82, a. 6.
18. Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, para. 15.
19. *CE*, vol. 10, p. 18.
20. *CE*, Vol. 10, p. 19. These same distinctions and observations are made in Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 147 and Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 413f.
21. See works cited in prior footnote as well as ST III, q. 79, a. 5.
22. ST III, q. 82, a. 6.
23. II Sent., d. 26, q. 1, a. 5.
24. ST I-II, q. 114, a. 1.
25. *Ibid.*
26. ST I-II, q. 114, a. 2.
27. ST I-II, q. 114, a. 3 and Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 74.
28. ST I-II, q. 114, a. 2.
29. All of these can be found in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 265ff.
30. Obviously, the blessed in heaven and those in purgatory can offer prayers for us that will aid us. However, those in purgatory and in heaven cannot merit an increase of happiness in heaven through their works. Also, a distinction must be made between merit in the stricter theological sense, which means that a person is able to raise his reward in heaven, and merit in the broader sense, in which we can perform actions and derive fruits applicable to ourselves and others. The merit in regard to heaven is not transferable to someone else, but the fruits or merits of our works here on earth can be applied, by right intention, to the temporal and spiritual welfare of others.
31. These four can be found in Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life* (Belgium, 1930), nn. 237-243.
32. St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 1980), p. 115 (para. 222).
33. This section on merit comes in substance from the forthcoming book by this author on the sacred and spiritual causes of mental health and illness.
34. The fact that virtue is necessary will be discussed in connection to the merit of the ritual and of the faithful.
35. *CE*, vol 10, p. 19.
36. Ott observes (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 415) that the merit derived from the Mass on the part of the faithful does not work mechanically but is based upon the dispositions of the faithful. Also, the liturgical writers also indicate that the fruits of the Mass can be received more efficaciously by those properly disposed than by those not properly disposed. In this respect, for whom the Mass is offered also affects how efficacious the Mass may be.
37. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 147.
38. The reader is referred to the work by the same author in *The Latin Mass* (Spring 2002) entitled "Christian Art and Culture."
39. See article referred to in footnote 35.
40. See Mark 12:42-44.
41. For a discussion of the virtue of magnificence, see ST II-II, q. 134.
42. There are a number of other distinctions made regarding merit but they will not be covered here.
43. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 144. Gihl, in support of what he has said here, notes the authors Quarti and Pasqualigo. Hence, it is not merely Gihl's opinion.
44. *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*, 4th edition, 1975, para. 316.
45. Some monastic rites contain less "pomp" because the rite is tailored or suited to the one who offers it, i.e., the members of the monastery. In other words, the degree and kind of pomp in monastic rites is based upon the particular spirituality of monks of a particular religious order. Hence, in the case of the monastic rites, the merit may be based more on suitability than pomp.
46. ST II-II, q. 83, a. 12.
47. ST II-II, q. 25, a. 1.
48. All of these conditions can be found in ST II-II, q. 83, a. 4.
49. ST II-II, q. 23.
50. See also *CE*, vol. 10, p. 18.
51. ST II-II, q. 23, a. 8.
52. ST II-II, q. 64.
53. ST II-II, q. 83, a. 4.
54. ST II-II, q. 83, a. 13.
55. Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, p. 146.
56. "The Spirituality of the Ancient Liturgy," *The Latin Mass*, vol. 10, no. 3 and 4.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. "Aesthetics and God," *The Latin Mass*, Fall 2002.