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Traditional Clergy: Please Stop Making “Pastoral Adaptations”

Peter Kwasniewski

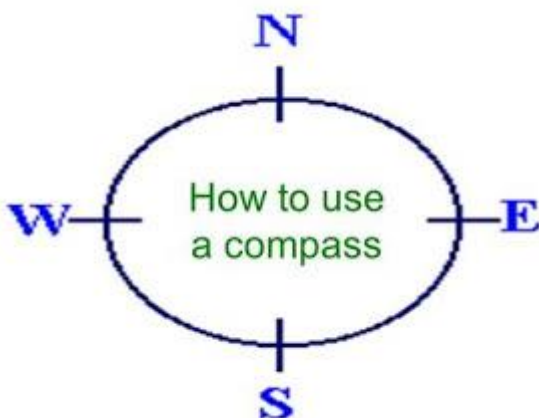


The Gospel being read in French, *versus populum*, at the Solemn Pontifical Mass

Over the past twenty-five years, I have assisted at traditional Latin Masses in many states and countries. What I have seen has largely been edifying: clergy who love the liturgy, offering it in accord with its Roman spirit and the appropriate rubrics, and faithful who are grateful to have access to this powerhouse of sanctity.

But there are some shadows as well.

A friend shared with me [the video](#) of the traditional Pontifical Mass celebrated by Robert Cardinal Sarah in Chartres cathedral. It was going along magnificently, as one would have every reason to expect from this crown jewel of the Latin liturgy — until we reach the Lesson and the Gospel (the Epistle may be found at the 1:08:50 mark, the Gospel at 1:17:40, of the above video). At this point, the subdeacon faced the people rather than the East, chanted *only* the title of the reading in Latin, and proceeded to speak aloud a French translation. The Latin reading was never chanted *ad orientem* in its ancient and thrilling tone. Then along came the deacon, and instead of chanting the Gospel in Latin facing northwards, he again faced the people, and after singing the title, proceeding to read the Gospel in French.



This practice is contrary both to the spirit of the ancient Roman liturgy and to the rubrics that govern its celebration. Most recently, in 2011, the [Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae*](#) of the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei states:

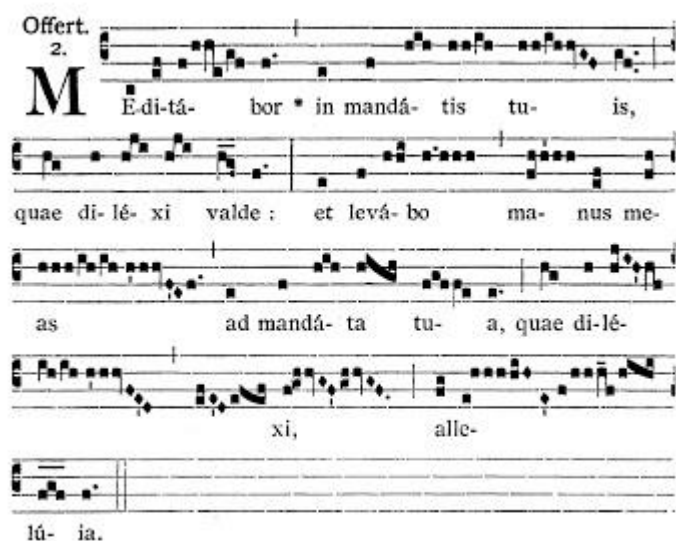
26. As foreseen by article 6 of the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum*, the readings of the Holy Mass of the Missal of 1962 can be proclaimed either solely in the Latin language, or in Latin followed by the vernacular or, in Low Masses, solely in the vernacular.

Only in a Low Mass, therefore, is it permitted to substitute vernacular readings for Latin — and note, it is permitted, not required or recommended. In fact, it is always better practice to read the lessons in Latin first, and then read them in the vernacular from the pulpit if it is judged pastorally wise. But at a High Mass, *a fortiori* a Solemn High Mass, *a fortiori* a Pontifical Mass, the readings are always to be sung in Latin, with the correct ceremonial and orientation. What we saw in the Chartres Mass is a liturgical abuse, no different in kind from the host of abuses with which the Novus Ordo is plagued.

This violation of rubrics was no doubt intended as a “pastoral adaptation” or “accommodation.” Nevertheless, it is an example of exactly what we must be careful *not* to do. Many of the worst aberrations and deviations in the 1960s, when the old Mass was already being subjected to torture and dismemberment, and subsequently the ruinous missal of Paul VI, arose exactly from such supposedly “pastoral considerations.” Fr. Louis Bouyer, who worked at the Bugninan abattoir before regretting his complicity, already caught the whiff of a weird pastoralism in the 1950s. For Bouyer, liturgy is first of all

a given, a *traditional given*. From a material point of view it is a precisely circumscribed object: the whole of the rites and ceremonies, of readings and prayers that are written down in the books called the Missal, the Breviary, and the Ritual. It is something we can desire to enrich, as every living Christian generation enriches Christian spirituality, Christian morals, even dogma; but it is something that has first to be *received*, received from the Church.[1]

A major difference between the theology of the classical Roman Rite and that of Paul VI’s modern rite is the difference in how lections are understood. The lections at Mass are not merely instructional or didactic. They are an integral part of the seamless act of worship offered to God in the Holy Sacrifice. The clergy chant the divine words in the presence of their Author as part of the *logike latreia*, the rational worship, we owe to our Creator and Redeemer. These words are a making-present of the covenant with God, an enactment of their meaning in the sacramental context for which they were intended, a grateful and humble recitation in the sight of God of the truths He has spoken and the good things He has promised (in keeping with Scripture’s manner of praying to God: “Remember, Lord, the promises you have spoken!”), and a form of verbal incense by which we raise our hands to His commandments, as the great Offertory chant has it: “Meditabor in mandatis tuis, quae dilexi valde: et levabo manus meas ad mandata tua, quae dilexi.”



The chanted Latin lection is an expression of adoring love directed to God *before* it is a communication of knowledge to the people, and the form in which it is done should reflect this primacy. In the ancient liturgy, always and everywhere God enjoys primacy. Nothing is done “simply” for the people. Holy Communion,

which is clearly for the benefit of the people, is treated with adoration, reverence, care, and attentive love, being distributed exclusively by the anointed hands of the ordained, on the tongues of the kneeling faithful, with a paten held underneath, and, perhaps, a houseling cloth. All eyes are thus fixed on the Eucharistic Lord, giving Him the primacy that is His due. It should be no different with the utterance of the divine words, in which we find a symbolic incarnation of the Word of God which nourishes our souls in preparation for the divine banquet of the Most Holy Sacrament.[2]

Vernacularization and recitation of the lessons at High Mass betrays the rationalism and utilitarianism of the Synod of Pistoia. The chanting of the Word of God is not just for instruction but also a quasi-sacramental action in and of itself (as Martin Mosebach argues with regard to the use of incense, candles, and the prayer “Per evangelica dicta, deleantur nostra delicta”).[3] It is part of the activity of *worship*, and like the other prayers of the Mass, it should be set apart by words of a sacral register, hallowed by tradition. No one will complain if this formal liturgical chant, which takes only a few minutes in any case, is followed up with a recitation of the vernacular texts before the homily. But the latter should never be substituted for the former.

I have learned about priests in France and Germany who, in keeping with this cavalier pastoral attitude, also change the “Ecce Agnus Dei” and “Domine non sum dignus” into the vernacular. Seriously: has it ever really caused difficulty for the faithful to understand what is meant by these phrases, which are repeated at every Holy Mass? Additionally, some clergy in Germany, who have apparently learned nothing from the past fifty years, persist in recycling the old saccharine Schubert Masses and other German paraphrases, which they fob off on the people instead of sharing with them the riches of Gregorian chant, as every Pope has urged from 1903 to 2013.[4]

Deutsche Messe

„WOHIN SOLL ICH MICH WENDEN“

VON

Franz Schubert

Then there are practical concerns, those stubborn little things known as facts. Congregations who attend the *usus antiquior* today are often made up of faithful of diverse linguistic backgrounds, because in many locales only a single Latin Mass is available, and all the people of the surrounding territory gather for it. I was recently visiting St. Clement’s in Ottawa, in which about 40% of the faithful are Francophone and 60% are Anglophone. Latin is the common liturgical language that unites them. In the United States, when Hispanic Catholics attend a Latin Mass, the Latin is closer to their native tongue than English. In another city parish of which I am aware, there are families who speak English, Romanian, Polish, Russian, Czech, Italian, and Spanish. Quite apart from fidelity to the rubrics, such situations present a *genuine* “pastoral” reason for the consistent use of Latin!

In this respect, the Chartres Mass afforded us a spectacular lack of pastoral common sense. This is an international pilgrimage of people for whom French is certainly not a common language. To read the lessons only in French reveals a nationalist, regionalist, and culturally imperialist attitude. As Pope John XXIII noted in [*Veterum Sapientia*](#), only the use of the venerable and universal Latin tongue is exempt from such problems.

It would be opportune for the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei, as well as religious congregations and societies of apostolic life that utilize the *usus antiquior*, to monitor such liturgical abuses and correct them before they spread. How can clergy expect the faithful to show due obedience to their fathers in Christ, if these same fathers are not faithful to the inherited liturgy? **Is it too much to ask that priests follow the**

spirit and the letter of the Roman Rite as it has been passed down to us, without introducing the deviations and creative adaptations of the Liturgical Movement? We have seen where those ended up: the Novus Ordo.

The faithful [deserve and have a right to](#) a traditional Mass offered in accordance with the wise slogan “Say the Black, Do the Red.” After decades of confusion, the Church is being given an unparalleled opportunity to restart the celebration of the liturgy with a correct attitude and praxis. If we mess it up this time with short-sighted pastoral adaptations, we will have no one to blame but ourselves when we slide into a second liturgical reform, from which Divine Providence may not rescue us.

[1] “Après les journées de Vanves. Quelques mises au point sur le sens et le rôle de la Liturgie,” in *Études de pastorale* (Paris: Cerf, 1944 and Lyon: Abeille, 1944), 383, cited in John Pepino, “Cassandra’s Curse: Louis Bouyer, the Liturgical Movement, and the Post-Conciliar Reform of the Mass,” *Antiphon* 18.3 (2014): 254–300, on 270.

[2] For a more extensive treatment of the topic, see my article [“In Defense of Preserving Readings in Latin.”](#)

[3] Another confirmation of this thesis is found in the traditional rite for the ordination of deacons, as a commenter at Fr. Zuhlsdorf noted (and here I quote):

After the bishop vests the new deacon in the stole and dalmatic, he presents the Gospel book and says: “Accipe potestatem legendi Evangelium in Ecclesia Dei, tam pro vivis, quam pro defunctis. In nomine Domini.” “Receive the power of reading the Gospel in the Church of God, both for the living and for the dead. In the name of the Lord.” The part about reading the Gospel for the dead would be nonsense if the reading were merely a practical instruction for those members of the Church Militant who happen to be present at a particular Mass. (The rite for subdeacons has a similar formula with the Book of Epistles, with reference to power to read them both for the living and the dead.)

[4] I would not necessarily object to vernacular hymns being sung at a High Mass, *provided that* the Gregorian Ordinary and Propers were sung first, and the hymn functioned as a kind of popular motet. But to supplant what is liturgical with what is non-liturgical is Protestant, not Catholic or Orthodox.