

The Gateway to Eternity ©

The Classical Roman Rite and its meaning for the Church

By Msgr. R. Michael Schmitz

The Classical Roman Rite, for many years hidden and unnoticed, each day draws more and younger people into its sphere. The Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest is deeply grateful to the Holy Father for his plans focusing on the worldwide liberation of a Rite that belongs to the genuine heritage of the Church.

I. The Atmosphere of the Classical Roman Rite

To better understand what great gift the Classical Roman Rite is to all we want to draw attention to some fundamental points regarding the ritual of the Church highlighted by this most recent decision, before we present several essential characteristics of the Rite itself. As a matter of fact, this permission – *a motu proprio*, meaning by the own initiative of the Roman Pontiff and engaging his official authority – underscores a few very important characteristics of the general atmosphere of the classical liturgical life of the Church: divine freedom, lasting youthfulness, harmonious multiplicity, transcendent universality, supernatural beauty.

a. Divine Freedom

The Roman Rite dates back to the beginning of the Church and has seen a long organic and fruitful development over two millennia. However, the Indult does not deal with something old from a forgotten past or with some ancient antiquity discovered in the basement of Holy Mother Church by a group of nostalgic people. On the contrary, the General Indult simply establishes the possibility of free access for everyone to the full liturgical treasure of the Church. This treasure has never aged. More and more, younger and very young people asked the Church's authorities why this venerable Rite was no longer accessible to the greater public. If nothing else, they argued, this Rite is a shining monument of musical, linguistic and artistic culture. Great Masters like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Mozart,

Verdi, Tiepolo, Chagall, Chaucer, Goethe, Tolkien, to name only a very few among many thousands, have been inspired by it or have worked for it. The younger generations no longer wanted to be closed off from this heritage of perfection, excellence, and beauty. Furthermore, many young people exposed to the Classical Roman Rite through information on the Internet or through an occasional visit to a so called “Traditional Latin Mass,” felt spiritually uplifted and were able to experience the awe and holiness permeating the Classical Rite. Alongside those who still had memories of this unique source of inspiration, they insistently requested a general liberalization of the Rite and the generous application of previous steps taken by the Holy See to encourage permission for its celebration.

Thus, a more general permission for the Classical Roman Rite can only be perceived as an act of freedom and greeted with intense relief. It would be a satisfaction for so many to finally enjoy full and true liturgical liberty and to participate in a Rite that, with few changes over the centuries, has been the heart of the Church for more than fifteen hundred years. Now, everyone will be able to feel free to discover the continuity of the liturgical life in the Church and study the depth of its theological meaning. The Classical Roman Rite was never forbidden or abolished, but somehow seemed to have slipped into what the Romans called the “damnatio memoriae,” an interdiction of memory. The living memory of the Church, though, is based on the liberty of grace. Nothing divine can be erased from it. The liberty of grace is stronger than short-lived ideological forgetfulness. With the Indult, Divine Liberty has opened a door. This door may have been momentarily blocked, but the treasure behind it was always present and alive.

b. Lasting Youthfulness

Consequently, the General Indult is not about forms of worship from yesterday, but it is about a divinely inspired liturgy linked to the very youth of the Church. This liturgy has kept its youth unchanged to this day. The Church herself begins the Mass after the sign of the Cross with the words: “Introibo ad altarem Dei, ad Deum qui lactificat iuventutem meam; I enter to the altar of God, to God who rejoices my youth.”

The Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest is a good example of this youthful spirit of the Liturgy. As a matter of fact, we could not be farer away from being a bunch of nostalgic people. The great majority of our priests are well under forty, and we have so many young vocations that we can not accept them all in our International Seminary. The branch of religious sisters we have just added to the Institute has no sister over thirty. We certainly welcome all ages at our Liturgy and we are especially grateful to those who have been always faithful to it, but it is noticeable how many young families and young single adults come to the Masses celebrated in the Classical Roman Rite. The number of teenagers and children are likewise impressive. Many have told us they feel the Rite we celebrate contributes to the rejuvenation of the Church, and visitors are impressed by the many young faces they see in our Sunday services. Again, the Rite we celebrate shows very clearly that it can not be identified with one age group or one specific time period in the past. Nothing about it is dusty, musty or old fashioned. The Classical Roman Rite appears as timeless as a great piece of art, as the never changing expressions of love, as the ocean, the mountains or the starred sky. God's grand and eternal gestures are present in its rituals and reveal a depth and a beauty which can not become shallow or fade. The youth of the Rite is a reflection of the youth of God who never changes.

c. Harmonious Multiplicity

Multiplicity in unity is a great gift. The Catholic Church, during her long life, has fostered many cultures which all have been growing in the seed bed of the unity of faith. Great numbers of the population of the United States, Italy, Spain, the Philippines, Germany, the countries of South America, France, Ireland and many, many other nations have worshiped in the unity of the Catholic Faith, and yet their cultures were as diversified as can be. Frequently, the Church has been compared to a great garden with many different trees, shrubs and flowers displaying innumerable forms, colors and smells while all showing the same harmonious movement toward one focus. The thousands of exceptionally heroic and holy men and women, of groups and orders, of movements and historical events influenced by the Church are proof of this variety reflecting the unfathomable abyss of God's opulent magnificence.

The splendor of the liturgical life of the Church has revealed the same harmonic diversity in many possible forms that became more expressive and richer through the centuries. The array of liturgical expressions among the so called “families of Rite” in the Catholic Church is impressive, if we only think of the Maronites, the Ukrainians, the Greek-Catholics, the Syro-Malabars, the united Chaldaens, Armenians and Copts. All these rites are venerable monuments of ecclesiastical antiquity, and they have survived even under the most difficult circumstances and keep the faithful attached to them strong in their faith and youthful in their Christian hope. Up until recently, this variety was also part of the Latin Rite, and many Dioceses and religious orders had their own ritual which they considered as yet another possibility to display the great richness of Catholic culture. It is true that the Roman Rite has known an increasing tendency for unification, though never by excluding anything “dignified and reasonable” but by including it into a more and more diversified wealth of liturgical expressions in the one Roman Rite. Over the ages the Latin Rite has grown to become a perfectly unified kaleidoscope of the Roman Catholic multiplicity integrated into one Rite through an organic process that has always been understood as a gift of the Spirit of God.

d. Transcendent Universality

The Roman Rite is universal. It has always had a global dimension in time and space. First of all, it has never been accepted on the basis of being a purely human invention. Nothing in the Church is venerated or kept simply because it is old. The Church relates always first to the present and not foremost to the past or the future. The presence we relate to is the presence of Christ and His Redemption. It is a meta-historical presence, meaning that the Lord and His grace do not depend on time or history, but reach out to the everlasting eternity of God. The God-Man Jesus Christ does not belong to any time period, but time belongs to him. Though having lived as a true man in a certain historical moment in which he has operated our Redemption, His Godhead has made Himself and His actions present to all times which through Him are forever changed. This timeless presence of Christ is the very Mystery of the Church which she celebrates on Her altars. For this reason, the Rite of Her celebrations, initially formed by the Lord and his first disciples, and then further developed under the guidance of the Holy Ghost by the “sensus fidelium,” the harmonic sense of faith of the entire Church, does reveal the timelessness of Her Spouse. Through His

timeless action, the Church can make Him present at all times on Her altars. Her Rite is like a window to eternity.

The Rite is celebrated in a historical moment which is transcended by the very Rite itself. Likewise, the Rite has a dimension of space because its celebration depends on the local circumstances. Again, however, the local is transcended, like time, since the space itself is sacred because consecrated by the Presence of Christ through His Church and Her Rite. The supreme act of obedience to the will of the Father on the Cross with which the Lord willed to operate our Salvation is placed out of time and space by Divine power. Therefore, this act will be present to any time and space, consecrated to Christ through the Rite instituted by Him and celebrated by the Church.

Accordingly, the Rite itself, though rich of single elements from various times and spaces, on the whole exhales the Divine breath of everlasting presence. Having preserved in a long organic development only the shapes most adapted to contain the Divine in human signs and gestures, the visible structure of the Rite was transformed in one unique instrument of the Divine Presence in this world. The “otherworldliness” of the Classical Roman Rite - noticed also by the inexperienced and perhaps estranged observer - comes from the fact that the Rite is molded not after fashions and tastes of certain times and spaces, but after what it realizes and celebrates, the Sacrifice of Redemption, celebrated on the Cross by the One-Who-is-Priest-and-Victim, Jesus Christ, the Apocalyptic Lamb of God.

e. Supernatural Beauty

The aforementioned elements create an atmosphere of intimate communication between the human and the Divine. The mystery of Incarnation is thus prolonged into the ritual Christ Himself has left His Church as a legacy of salvation to be perpetuated unto the end of history. The human nature of Christ is the “organon divinitatis,” the instrument of the Divinity, as Cyril of Alexandria formulates in the fourth century and Thomas Aquinas explains nearly eight centuries later. Not an instrument, though, exterior to the agent, like a mere tool, a hammer for instance, but an instrument united with the agent through divine grace, the grace of union, which let the human nature of Christ totally be penetrated by the

Godhead, even more than oil moistens a cloth or fire glows forth in a red-hot iron, to use the examples of the Greek Fathers of the Church. In Christ, everything human is divine, for which reason His earthly life is the continuous revelation of divine truth, the sacrifice of the Cross the random price of our salvation, His bodily resurrection, the triumph of everlasting life and His very heart, the altar of Redemption.

This law of Incarnation, of unity between nature and grace, between humanity and Divinity, is visible in His mystical Body, the Church. Not that the grace of perfect union is continued inconsiderately in all of her members or actions. The second Divine Person became one individual historical man and did not incarnate in a collectivity. However, his grace gives an indestructible union to the human element in the Church and is particularly dense in the moments He has promised His presence to her actions. For this reason, her voice is infallible when she teaches definitely in His Name, her actions are divine when she faithfully celebrates the sacramental rites He instituted for the salvation of the multitude, and her laws speak His will when she directs on the way of the commandments. If the Blessed Lord's human body has been rightly called the instrument of His Divinity, His mystical Body with no less meaning has been addressed as the "Christ expanded on earth." Sadly, it is too obvious that not all that is human in the Church can be considered divine, but the center of her life, her divine doctrine, liturgy, and law are supported by the supernatural action of Christ and enjoy the full consequence of the pattern of Incarnation, which has connected the humanity with the Trinity forever.

This intimate unity seems directly tangible in the Church through what has been called over and over again "source and climax" of her life, that is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Here, Christ is substantially present with His Humanity and His Divinity, with His Body and His Soul. Everything in the life of the Church is focused on this Presence and the celebration of the Sacrifice which renders this life possible. Consequently, the liturgical action surrounding the very moment of the Sacrifice in the words of the consecration instituted by the Lord during the Last Supper, reveals the divine power which transforms human signs into beacons of heavenly light. The banal has no place in this mysterious conversion. Every syllable, each gesture, even the measured spaces of silence, repeated through the ages in

obedience to the Divine will of salvation, have a meaning directly leading to the Immensity of the Divine and escaping all human disparagement.

The clear light of eternal freedom, the fresh joy of lasting youthfulness, the exquisite harmony of unified multiplicity and the otherworldly transcendence of time and space are fused into one action of unspeakable beauty that can not be reduced to mere words. The sacramental sign veils and reveals the act of the God-Man Jesus Christ, because it displays elements of His own existence concentrated in a moment of transfiguration from the human to the Divine. The Sacrifice of Christ's humanity glorifies it for eternity and thus, Mount Calvary and Mount Tabor are merged in the one Moment of Redemption in which the rays of resurrection cannot be quenched by the shadow of the Cross. The splendor of this instant is captured by the sober purity of a Rite shrouding the divine in silence and disclosing the truth of the Sacrifice in the simple gesture of elevating the white host in the triumph of resurrection.

God is beautiful. His creation sparkles in unending facets of his majesty. The Victory on the Cross followed by the triumphant Resurrection is the exaltation of this Majesty in the face of death. Nothing is of a more essential beauty than this Redemptive Gesture of Divine Love. This same Divine Gesture, under the form of divinized human signs, is repeated on our altars day for day. All of a sudden, one understands why every detail during its celebration is of inexorable weight and why, through supernatural influence, the totality of the human gestures in the Mass form an entire sacramental action whose beauty cannot be explained other than by constant divine intervention. The Sacrament of the Altar cannot be reduced either to its intellectual meaning, its pure words, its actions or to its spiritual effect. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass forms a unity in which every element takes part in the beauty of the whole. The grandeur even of a low Mass consists in the fact that God has elevated nature through grace, and foremost in the core of the liturgy that celebrates His glory and our redemption. Beauty is therefore not a negligible decoration for a crude action whose only sacramental validity matters, but an unmistakable indication of the Divine presence. That is the reason for which God himself has given us a Mass which is a glimpse of heaven.

II. Essential Characteristics of the Classical Roman Rite

The description of the general atmosphere by which the Roman Rite was developed and in which it has lived since is only part of its unique attractiveness. If so many have asked for the freedom to assist at the Rite the Church has coined as the expression of her very essence, this astonishing demand is also linked to the characteristics of the Rite itself in the various steps it unfolds before the onlooker. Our presentation would be incomplete, if we would not discuss at least some of the more important elements displayed by the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass according to the venerable tradition of the Church.

a. Two Essential but not Exclusive Elements

However, let us dissipate some notorious misunderstandings right in the beginning. Two characteristics normally associated with the Rite we speak of are essential, but not typical only for the Classical Roman Liturgy since they are patterns of the catholic liturgy as such up to this day, at least in theory: the liturgical language and the position of the celebrant during the Mass. A Latin Mass is not exclusively a Mass celebrated in the traditional form, but can still be any catholic celebration of the Mystery of the Altar. The Church never changed her conviction that the Latin language is the most appropriate expression of the liturgical word in the Latin Church and considers this language of great parts of the early Church to be her very own mother-tongue. Up to this day, the Roman Pontiff celebrates the liturgy frequently in Latin, and is followed in this custom by quite a large number of Bishops in the more solemn occasions of the liturgical year. Never has any Council or Synod abolished the Latin language as the language of the Church, so much less, as the most important documents of Holy Mother Church, including the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, are written in Latin. Here is not the place or time to explain all aspects of this habit, which certainly is a sign of agelessness, but it may be mentioned that through Latin the Church has been able to preserve its over-national universality, its orthodoxy, its unity, and the depth of its cultural quality over two thousand years.

The Latin of the Mass is clear, sober and very structured. As the fundamental texts are repeated every day, even those who do not have a deeper knowledge of this classical

language can recognize the meaning of the words and participate at Mass independently of national or cultural circumstances or difficulties. At the same time, by the use of the Latin as a liturgical language, the supernatural character of the Holy Mysteries is underscored and their celebration is safeguarded from willful changes or purely subjective preferences and tastes. Besides, many consider the ecclesiastical music based on the Latin Mass texts – chanted in the Gregorian form or performed in a polyphonic style according to famous compositions of great masters – as particularly uplifting and spiritually nourishing. These are only a few reasons why the Roman Church has kept the Latin, totally independently from the question of Rites, as her preferred liturgical language up to this day.

Another misunderstanding arises oftentimes in regards to the position of the celebrant at the Altar. The so called “altar of Sacrifice” which as a norm means a freestanding altar at which the priest faces the congregation was never mentioned by the Second Vatican Council and is actually a later introduction. Some of the rubrics of the newer Rite seem still to presuppose that the celebrant faces the same direction as the people, whether he celebrate at a freestanding Altar or at a High Altar with a reredos. In any case, important studies have shown that the early Church did celebrate the Holy Mysteries facing east as a sign of the resurrection of Christ symbolized by the rising sun. The congregation and the priest would have the same position, regardless whether the priest would stand before or behind the faithful. This unity would also show that on the one hand the priest represents the Church offering the gifts to God, and on the other, that he represents Christ immolating himself for the Church. One of the most recent scholarly research books dwelling on various facts favoring the eastward position of the priest, features a preface of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who endorses the theological quality of this thesis. On a more practical level it can be noticed that many popular sanctuaries worldwide still use the so called High Altar and that even the private Chapel of the Popes in the Apostolic Palace used by His Holiness every day does not have an “altar of sacrifice” at which the Celebrant faces the people. Again, this is not the place to discuss the question in depth, but what has been said will suffice to show that the position of the priest facing east together with the congregation is not exclusive to the Classical Roman Rite.

b. Essential Elements Typical for the Classical Rite

While the aforementioned elements, the Latin and the position of the priest at the altar, against a wide spread prejudice are not exclusively typical of the Classical Roman Rite alone, other structural elements of the Rite can be recognized as pertaining more precisely to its distinctive essence. This essence is enveloped in the prayerful atmosphere of awe described at the beginning of this talk, but can be identified in the rubrics and texts of the Rite as contained in the Roman Missal which by itself can be considered as a cultural monument.

1. Organic growth and inspired detail

Before we analyze some of the ritual practice, it is important to note that the ritual pattern displayed in the pages of the Roman Missal as a whole is not the result of any specific individual study or of a scholarly effort, and has not been conceived at one given historical moment by a identifiable group of people. No one has “invented” the Mass or any of its parts. The development of the Missal is the result of a most extended temporal process to which members of hierarchy and notably the Roman Pontiffs have contributed not very frequently through some reordering or purification of the Rite that remained unchanged in general and even in most of its details. If anything, more ritual elements were added to the whole because they had already been accepted in wide regions of the Church as fitting expressions of the liturgical Mystery.

Historically, one can notice how the growth of the Rite is more a result of what we call theologically the already mentioned “*sensus fidelium*,” meaning the sense of true faith of all faithful under the guidance of the Holy Ghost not limited to one specific period of Church history only. Under the prudent and careful direction of the hierarchy, this “*sensus fidelium*” allows a continuous osmosis of liturgical elements during the centuries and guarantees the conformity of the Rite to its doctrinal base in Divine Revelation. Thus, the Rite becomes an ever more faithful visible form of the faith, especially when it comes to the Sacrifice and Eucharistic Presence of the Blessed Lord. Most recently, a book, again warmly welcomed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, has pointed out with renewed emphasis that the modeling of the Roman Rite can best be summarized by the word “organic.” In his recommendation, the

then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now Pope Benedict XVI formulates: “Just as a gardener cares for a living plant as it develops, with due attention to the power of growth and life within the plant, and the rules it obeys, so the Church ought to give reverent care to the Liturgy through the ages, distinguishing actions that are helpful and healing from those that are violent and destructive.” The Classical Roman Rite shows the Church and all her members cultivating the Liturgy with loving care through time and space. Thus, the Rite knows a continuity of meaning and ritual that has never been disrupted. It has not been “constructed” from ready-made blocks of concrete like a modern building, but has slowly and harmoniously grown in the soil of Revelation under the light of God’s grace like a plant which blossoms richer in the sun if deeply rooted in the ground.

As a necessary consequence of the above exposed organic structure in the liturgy, the Rite shows great continuity in its pattern and reflects a true concern for all detail. Even in human life everything that truly matters has an unchanging routine, and yet is always new and exciting. The expressions of deep love, the forms of respect, the civil ceremonies, even birth and death have their fundamental conventions but do never lose their greatness and awe. Repetition is boring only when it comes to banalities. The Rising sun, though, the incoming tide, the winds and storms, the seasons and many other natural phenomena are continuously repeated displays of grandeur and never tire because they point to their author, the Almighty God. Likewise, the detail of a leaf, the wing of a butterfly, the symmetry of a crystal are always fundamentally the same according to the species they belong to, and it is just this faithfulness to the detail repeated over and over again that creates the breathtaking beauty of a forest, of a swarm of flying monarch butterflies or of snowflakes falling from the wintry sky. Like God, its author, the perfect does not need change and its apparition gives always new delight.

For this reason, faithfulness to the liturgical pattern, the daily repetition of the identical words, movements and gestures, the reading of the same texts during the year, the recurring liturgical seasons and feast-days, the exactness of the rubrics indicating every detail of the Rite, the precise description of the altars, vessels, instruments, vestments and colors to be used show the perfection of a Rite matured through continuous molding by the Divine. God is the ultimate author of the Liturgy. We know how very important detail is in a human

relationship. A smile, the tone of a voice, the blinking of an eye, all the rituals of human affection are rubrics of friendship and love neglected only with grave consequences for our daily life. How much more detail matters in our relationship with God, not in the first place for Him, but for us! Can it be astonishing that He has shown His Church how to keep this fundamental relationship, on which all depends, whole and sound? Would He not have been aloof and distant leaving us alone with our incapacity to find the right words and gestures which already has destroyed so many human bonds of love? Now, God is not distant and aloof. He became man to celebrate the definite gesture of redeeming love on Calvary, which He wants to have repeated in sacramental form for all ages.

Thus, the form of the sacrament, all important for our salvation, has been instituted by Him in its fundamental pattern, and He has sent His Spirit to teach His Church how to penetrate all her gestures of worship with the same Divine perfection over the centuries. Hence, unchanging faithfulness to the general sacramental pattern and to the organic liturgical detail is not spiritual poverty or lack of creativity, but respect and love for the presence of the Divine in perfect human forms. The Rite has organically grown to greater perfection with the help of God and may still do so, but it does not need daily change or purely human innovation, for the Lord lives in it, “who is the same yesterday, today and in eternity.” Christ is always new and the same, and so is the Liturgy of His Church.

2. Loving Realism

While being a mirror of God’s presence in this world and a translation of His perfection in human gestures, the Roman Rite shows loving realism when it comes to the human condition. Glory and Cross, Grace and nature, light and darkness are familiar to the pattern and the detail of the Rite. As it would take much too long to explain the total wealth of expression related to this truth, we will limit our reflections to only a few striking examples.

After having begun the Mass with the sign of the Cross, the Classical Roman Rite proceeds to the so called “prayers at the foot of the Altar.” Instead of entering the sanctuary immediately, the priest remains standing before the first altar step and, together with his assistant, recites an introductory psalm with an antiphon. The psalm is clearly intended to

prepare the priest for the celebration of the holiest: “Judge me, o God, and distinguish my cause against an ungodly nation.” This becomes even clearer with the alternate recitation of the *Confiteor* with which the priest and the assistant confess their sinfulness to God, to the heavenly court, and to each other. Two absolutions and additional verses show that the Liturgy is very conscious of the need of purification before the Holy Mysteries can be celebrated in a dignified way. When finally the priest ascends the altar steps, he silently adds prayers that date from the early Mass of the Roman Pontiff and make allusion to the Papal Chapel “Sancta Sanctorum” in the Lateran Palace in Rome and its famous relics: “Take away from us our iniquities, we beseech Thee, o Lord, that with pure minds we may worthily enter into the holy of holies” and “We beseech Thee, o Lord, by the merits of all saints, whose relics are here, and of all the saints, that Thou wouldst vouchsafe to forgive me all my sins.” Only then, he kisses the altar, which also contains relics of saints, and proceeds with the Mass.

The priest and the people are clearly reminded of their need of spiritual cleansing, and the liturgy seems even to indicate that the celebrant needs this purification more urgently. With all the beauty and elegance visible in the Rite from the very beginning, it never forgets the human condition and, while it assigns to the priest the role of his hierarchical state as representative of the Church and Christ, it does not allow him to forget that he also is a sinner. The same clear realism is evident in the prayers of the offertory where the celebrant speaks of himself as of God’s “unworthy servant” and professes that he offers the host for all present, but also for his own “countless sins, offenses, and negligences.” Again, during the silent prayer of the Mass-canon, this silence is only broken when the priest beats his breast after the consecration and loudly says: “And to us sinners also....” Likewise, in his private prayers before communion, the priest implores God to deliver him by His most holy Body and Blood from all his “transgressions” so that what he “unworthy” presumes to receive does not turn to his “judgment and condemnation.” Even at the very end of the Mass, just before he imparts the final blessing to the faithful, this realistic view of human frailty is reiterated when the celebrant asks the Almighty to accept the sacrifice just offered by him though he is “unworthy.” Without any clericalism, the Roman Rite makes it very clear that the priesthood is given to men needing the merciful clemency of God just as much as everyone else.

The same realistic outlook on life is presented in all the instances where the Missal speaks of the human condition in general. Every necessity of our existence is addressed, not just the common sinfulness with which we are used to struggle. God's grace, mercy, generosity and support are requested in nearly every collect of the Mass - as the introductory prayer after the preparation at the altar-steps and the *kyrie eleison* is called - and many a human issue of spiritual and material want and indigence is mentioned. It is impossible to enumerate all single prayers in this context. Let it be enough to point to the special or votive Masses for times of war, to implore peace, to avoid death, for travelers and for those who are sick, for a good death and for thanksgiving. There is a wide option of prayers to be added to the Mass, such as prayers for the Church, the members of the hierarchy, the family, for enemies and wrong-doers, against famine, earthquake, storms, animal diseases or bad thoughts, prayers to implore rain, serene weather, the gift of tears, the forgiveness of sins, prayers for the tempted, for chastity, humility, patience, and charity, and finally prayers for our friends, our adversaries, for those who are in prison, on the High Seas and for all the living and dead.

The Classical Roman Rite with all its elevated forms of Divine worship does not forget the details of our day-to-day reality and seems to mirror the motherly care of the Church for her children by not neglecting even the most extravagant situations to which our difficult way on earth may lead us. Material and spiritual requests alike are present in the Rite, and we can feel the love of the incarnated God who has experienced human need and does not fail to remember our deprived condition. The realism of the Rite is not cynical, but full of tenderness, and while "the world is growing cold," as the collect for the Feast of the stigmatization of St. Francis of Assisi fittingly expresses our present state, the kindness of God's attention for us in the Rite of the Classical Liturgy is still warming our hearts.

3. Sacrifice of Praise and Redemption

Having examined the Roman Rite in the light of the human position, we are well aware of the fact that another view-point is much more important if we want to understand the Classical form of the Liturgy. The Holy Eucharist is frequently called the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. This title is most appropriate as it expresses the dogma of the Church stressing the

numeric identity between the Sacrifice of Calvary and the Sacrifice of the Altar. “The Eucharist is in the first place a Sacrifice.” These words of the late Pope John Paul II in his document *Dominicae coenae* summarize the Church's doctrine repeated by the Roman Pontiffs and Ecumenical Councils throughout history. The Sacrifice of the Cross is the center of the plan of salvation. The human race alone could not accomplish the re-establishment of the Divine balance in creation, destroyed by prideful disobedience. This act of reparation had to be realized in a merciful act of self donation by the Triune God whose second Person became man in order to expiate for our sins in a sacrifice of love. It would be the worst misunderstanding to believe that a despotic god postulated a human sacrifice to calm his wrath. On the contrary, only because God Himself became involved in the sacrifice through the Incarnation, a human act could suffice to take away the malediction human pride had shaped for itself by turning away from its Creator. Through the God-Man Jesus Christ it is the Divinity who makes true salvation possible, in which the humanity does not simply get imposed on, but participates through the human nature of Christ in the redemptive power of the Godhead. Divine Love acted through the Sacrifice of the Cross in order to guarantee human freedom in the final plan of our deliverance from evil.

By Divine will, the Sacrifice of the Cross was already present at the Last Supper when the Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist and it is present every time the Church celebrates the Sacrament of the Altar according to the form confided to Her care by the Blessed Lord. The sacrificial intention which transformed the human death on the Cross into the sacrifice for our salvation is a perfect union between the human will of Jesus and the divine will of the second person of the Trinity. Hence, it is timeless and can be actualized in any historical moment when the Rite is celebrated, to which this sacrificial intention was attached to forever by divine might. The youth and timelessness of the Rite already mentioned before have their very source in this over-historical sacrificial reality that is at the very center of the Church and Her liturgical life. God's love for us never ceases. This love has become visible in Jesus Christ whose supreme act of charity, the Sacrifice of Redemption, remains forever alive in His Church made into the instrument of continued Redemption.

As a consequence, the supreme liturgical act of the Church is an effective re-presentation of the Sacrifice of Christ. Renewed under the sacramental signs of the ecclesiastical ceremony,

the Sacrifice is not multiplied but made present over time and space. The presence of Christ which we venerate under the Eucharistic species of bread and wine is the sacrificed presence of the Lamb in His Body and Blood. The Classical Roman Rite of the Mass cannot be mistaken for anything else than a Sacrifice. All other elements it may have, come from there or lead there. The need of purification, the praise of God's deeds in the solemnly proclaimed liturgical and scriptural texts, the ritual preparation of the altar, the priest and the gifts and many other elements indicate that the Church is going to represent the Sacrifice of Christ. Again, we can not discuss all the details of the sacrificial dimension of the Holy Mass, but the following three elements should clearly denote the weight of the above mentioned.

The offertory of the Rite we celebrate has been compared to the canon or Eucharistic prayer of the Mass. In fact, from the moment the priest presents the gifts of bread and wine to God, the sacrificial intention of the Church is made evident. When he elevates the oblation of bread, also called host which comes from the Latin word *hostia* meaning sacrificial victim or simply sacrifice, the priest prays: "Receive, O holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host, which I, Thy unworthy servant, offer unto Thee, my living and true God, for...my own and their salvation unto life eternal." Again, when he elevates the chalice with wine, the celebrant prays: "We offer unto Thee, o Lord, the chalice of salvation...for our own salvation and for that of the whole world." He then bows deeply and continues: "In the spirit of humility and with a contrite heart receive us , o Lord, and grant that the sacrifice which we offer this day in thy sight, may be pleasing unto Thee, o Lord God." After that, the priest invokes with a gesture the Holy Ghost and blesses the offerings saying: "Come, o Sanctifier, almighty and eternal God, and bless this sacrifice prepared for Thy Holy Name." Finally, after having presented the oblation of the Church to the Holy Trinity, he turns to the faithful and invites them to prayer with the following words: "Brethren, pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Father almighty," to which the people respond: "May the Lord receive the sacrifice at thy hands, to the praise and glory of His name, to our own benefit, and to that of all His holy Church." Thus, it becomes patent that the Church understands her oblation as the initiation of the one mysterious Sacrifice of Christ offered for God's glory which then brings our salvation and welfare. The gestures which accompany all these prayers show likewise a palpable sacrificial character which is still

underscored by the fact that faithful and priest look into the same direction when they present together, but in different ways, the offerings to God.

A second unmistakable token of the sacrifice the Church is celebrating during the Holy Mass is to be found in the very prayer surrounding the act of consecration -- the Canon or Eucharistic prayer whose words go back into the dawn of the Church. Right at the beginning of this venerable text, which for over a thousand years was the only canon used by the Roman Missal, the Church implores God's blessing in marked sacrificial terms: "We therefore humbly pray and beseech Thee, O most merciful Father, through Jesus Christ Thy Son, our Lord, that Thou wouldst vouchsafe to receive and bless these gifts, these offerings, these holy and unblemished sacrifices." Shortly afterwards she adds the reason for the sacrificial act: "...we...offer up to Thee this sacrifice of praise for themselves and all those dear to them, for the redemption of their souls, the hope of their safety and salvation..." After having requested the gracious acceptance of the oblation for deliverance from eternal damnation, the Church implores God's benediction and ratification over it, so that it may become the Sacrifice of Christ, His Body and Blood. Now the Divine action begins. The Church still relates the circumstances of the Last Supper, but then the Blessed Lord himself speaks directly and in the first person through the voice of the priest: "Take and eat ye all of this, for this is my body....for this is the chalice of my blood....which shall be shed for you and for many unto the remission of sins."

The sacrifice is accomplished and now the Church hastens to present the Victim to the Divine Majesty: "...we, thy servants, offer unto you...a pure Victim, a holy Victim, a spotless Victim, the holy Bread of eternal life and the Chalice of everlasting salvation." Therefore, she can compare this eminent sacrifice to the sacrifices of old and ask God to accept it for the dead and the living in community with the saints. The Victim of the supreme Sacrifice becomes a blessing for the Church who, in a final gesture, elevates the host and the chalice again with the will to give through Christ glory to God. The whole canon renders the sense of the sacrifice more than obvious. The Son, who has freely offered himself up to reconcile the sinners with the Father, through this very act re-establishes the honor and glory of the Trinity in the creation and enables the Church to combine the sacrament of the Altar into a sacrifice of honor, praise, expiation and invocation to God for the human race.

One conclusive element among many others may still be mentioned, because we are not always aware of it. Through the Rite, it becomes very apparent that also Holy Communion possesses a sacrificial meaning. Sure, the traces of a banquet after the model of the Last Supper are more marked during this last part of the ceremony, but the preparation to it by the priest and by the people shows that even the communion banquet takes the form of the continuation of the sacrifice. Not a communion prayer, but a parallel to the preface and hence part of the solemn framing of the canon, the Lord's Prayer is recited by the priest alone. Only after it begins does the liturgical segment of sacrificial communion, and most significantly it initiates with the breaking of the host followed by the invocation of the merciful Lamb of God that has just been sacrificed. In two of the subsequent silent preparatory prayers to the priestly communion, Christ's Blood and Body are mentioned whose sacramental separation Pope Pius XII has identified as the sign of the sacrifice. Again, the assistant makes a public confession of sin followed by two absolutions to prime the faithful for the reception of the sacrificed Lamb which is then solemnly shown and announced as the one "who taketh away the sins of the world." Even the age old form of communicating kneeling and on the tongue reveals that the banquet is unworldly and belongs to the sacrificial rite as a whole. The aforementioned prayer previous to the final priestly blessing recapitulates like a summary this sacrificial tenor of the overall action of the Mass and even states again its expiatory effect: "...grant that the sacrifice which I...have offered in sight of Thy majesty may be acceptable to Thee and through Thy mercy be a propitiation for me and for all those for whom I have offered."

There can be no doubt of the sacrificial nature of the Roman Rite, which could be shown in even more detailed facets, but appears with clear evidence during the offertory, the canon and Holy communion. The Classical Rite announces plainly that the core of the sacramental liturgy of the Church is the Sacrifice of the Cross, and this with such peremptoriness that all those who historically rejected the identity between the Sacrifice of the Altar and the Sacrifice of the Cross finally saw themselves constrained to reject the Liturgy of the Catholic Mass as a whole. This unmistakable sacrificial statement, on the other hand, seems also the reason why so many have found the faith in Christ and in His redemption only by assisting to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The astonishing phenomenon of people brought to

believe in God's merciful love through the liturgical mysteries celebrated by the Church does not belong to the past only. On the contrary, today, the number of mainly younger people touched by Divine Grace while present, even for the first time, at the Classical Roman Rite, is overwhelming and grows every day. This striking power of the Rite draws its influence on souls mainly from its unmistakable identification with Christ's supreme sacrifice.

Conclusion: Theo-centric worship

As a final conclusion from all these characteristics of the Classical Roman Rite appears its Theo-centricity which means its concentration on God as its center, cause and goal. Already the less typical features of the Rite, as the liturgical language and the position of the altar, hint at the fact that the human sphere is transcended into another realm and toward a higher goal. The meaning of the signs and details used is obviously changed from the level of our day-to-day experience into the supernatural world where every gesture reflects eternity. The realism of the Roman Missal does not end at the basic needs of humanity, but turns them toward God and places them in the greater vision of the need for salvation by the Lord. The link to the Divinity is the leading thought of the Rite even if it brings our wants and desires to the attention of the Almighty. The sacrificial dimension is yet another and perhaps the most powerful expression of the same Theo-centric direction of the Rite, as the sacrifice reestablishes the divine glory in His creation from whence comes our redemption.

The Rite unfolds indeed in an ascendant sense through the preparatory prayers, the reading of God's powerful deeds, the offering of the immaculate host up to the sublime moment of consecration when our human reality becomes the vessel of His divine presence. Thus the recitation of the Gloria, the Creed and the Sanctus do appear as coherent parts of a whole ritual event whose goal is to lead the worshipper up to the ultimate meeting with the Divine touching the world it created. Also after the consecration the focus of the Rite on the Divinity does not cease, because what other goal has Holy Communion than to make the faithful partake in the divine union between Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The fact that the glorious moment of that intimate participation is wrapped into a humble gesture of kneeling receptivity only underscores once more that God is the source of all action in the liturgical celebration. The anabatic and the katabatic movement, that is both the upward as the

downward direction of the Classical Rite of the Mass, are intrinsically focused on the Divine Presence which is first prepared, then realized and afterwards gratefully received.

There can be no question of the importance of the Rite for human existence, and the divinization of many human signs and symbols goes without discussion. There is absolutely no doubt about the anthropologic depth of the human elements of the Rite and their anchoring in human nature and its requirements, either. However, the fulfillment of the human side of the Rite lies in the Divine and not vice versa, because it is God who has created the human race, it is God who has established the way of its final redemption and it is God again who has shaped a Rite adapted to re-present the graces of Redemption during the human history. It is the merit of the Roman Rite, by combining all the discussed features into a sublime harmony, to omit nothing to enhance the glorification of the Divine in this world without even minimally belittling the dignity of the human. The Rite of the Mass continues the Mystery of the Incarnation which is to be found at the very origin of the notion of a Theo-centric sacrifice. Penetrating the human reality with divine power, the Incarnation of the Blessed Lord has elevated this reality for ever. Thus, everything in the Rite proclaims that the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is intended to open our minds, hearts and senses toward the Lord who is the immortal King, the God to whom belongs all honor and all glory for ever and ever.