

# Response to the Frederick R. McManus Award

By Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Robert Taft, S.J.

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ of the FDLC, colleagues in the liturgical apostolate of God's Holy Church. I am deeply moved by this signal honor you confer upon me today, the McManus Award for 2007, an award, as you yourselves describe it, "to recognize the work of someone who has made a significant difference in the Liturgical life of the church."

I deeply regret that prior unchangeable commitments have made it impossible for me to be present in person to accept this prestigious award, and I express my gratitude to my former doctoral student and friend, Ukrainian Catholic priest Father Mark Morozowich, professor of liturgy and Associate Dean for Seminary and Ministerial Programs at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, for agreeing to accept the McManus Award in my name. Mark is one of my success stories.

It is special source of pride for me to receive an award named for my dear friend of many years, Monsignor Frederick R. McManus, one of my heroes, one of the great Catholic priests of modern times, with so many feathers in his cap that he must have entered the Heavenly Kingdom looking for all the world like an Indian chief!

Fred was renowned for many reasons. He was a superb canonist who knew that church law was not about legalism, but about facilitating Christian life in accord with Catholic tradition. He was a kind and astute academic administrator, who saw that position as one of service, not command. He was a pioneer of the Church's liturgical renewal. He was a friend of the Christian East, and, as such, an ecumenist before most people knew what the word meant, one who strove all his life to knit up the rent fabric of Christ's seamless robe. Some of these tasks and interests I had the privilege of sharing with Fred and, as a younger colleague, I learned from him. One of these tasks was, of course, liturgical renewal, on which I shall concentrate my remarks here.

For over a century now the Christian Churches have been preoccupied with liturgical renewal, under the influence of "The Liturgical Movement," a worldwide effort dedicated to making Christian liturgy better. But good liturgy is liturgy that glorifies God and sanctifies those glorifying him, and that is God's gift to us, not ours to him. So if it is God who does it, how could the liturgy be better? It could be better from our side, for we too have a part in the liturgy, which is neither magic nor unconscious. So God's part would better achieve its aim if we would drink more fully from the saving waters he offers us in the liturgy via a participation that would be *more active, more conscious, more communal*, as *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the 1963 Vatican II Constitution on the

Sacred Liturgy<sup>1</sup> said forty-four years ago, and which the decrees and documents that flow from it have reiterated and paraphrased time and again. For Vatican II this was not just a question of esthetics: the Council boldly asserts that full lay participation in worship *is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy and of the assembly of the baptized which is the Church* (§14).

In one of his last articles, Fred McManus wrote lyrically of this liturgical renewal's "fresh breadth and flexibility" flowing "from a genuine return to evangelical and patristic sources...a return to the "venerable traditions of the early post-biblical centuries."<sup>2</sup> This echoes the mandate of the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, that the rites "be restored to the vigor they had in the tradition of the Fathers" (§50). Has this promise been fulfilled? Was the liturgical reform mandated by Vatican II a success? From where I stand as an historian of Christian worship down through the centuries, it has been an overwhelming, resounding success!

Then why have we now entered into a period of darkening storm clouds, when the liturgical renewal of the Roman Rite is under attack, the gearshift has been put into reverse, and the order of the day seems to be full-speed backwards? The short answer is that those who want that don't know much about the history and theology of liturgy. One anecdote will suffice to illustrate that. A reliable eye-witness reported to me that during the 2006-2007 academic year, the graduate students of liturgy from the Pontifical Liturgical Institute Sant' Anselmo in Rome, during their customary annual courtesy visit to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, were informed by a high official there that the purpose of the Mass was the devotion of the priest! That would be simply funny, were it not also rank heresy.

Having sunk so low, all roads must lead up. So my wish for you today, fellow-workers in the Catholic liturgical ministry so marvelously renewed at Vatican II, is to be of good heart! We are passing through a bad patch, as often happens in the history of an organization so complex and huge as the Catholic Church, which may occasionally stumble, as I believe it has recently with regard to liturgy. But in this time of shockingly mediocre liturgical leadership on the part of some of our Church authorities, we should take courage that the People of God and the vast majority of our bishops throughout the world are with us—even if not all of them have the courage and integrity to exercise the leadership we have a right to expect of them by speaking up like Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, PA.

Let me illustrate popular sentiment on these issues by what took place on December 11, 2003 at the Symposium "*Sacrosanctum Concilium* Forty Years Later," in the basilica of the Pontifical Liturgical Institute Sant' Anselmo in Rome. In his talk, the recently deceased Catalan Servite priest Fr. Ignacio Calabuig, OSM, spoke with deep emotion about the "greats" of the Liturgical Movement he had known. Towards the end of his paper, he turned to Cardinal Francis Arinze, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments seated to my right in the presidium, and, in a trembling voice, departed from his written text, saying (in Italian of course) something

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<sup>1</sup> Esp. §§11, 14-30.

<sup>2</sup> F.R. McManus, "Back to the Future: The Early Christian Roots of Liturgical Renewal," *Worship* 72 (1998) 386-403, here 386-87.

like this (I am paraphrasing what I recall, not translating literally): “I feel I must tell the Prefect [Cardinal Arinze] that the devastating impression the Congregation [for Catholic Worship] seems to be spreading throughout the Church, that men of great culture in their own lands are not capable of translating liturgical texts into their own mother tongue, is causing great discontent and concern in the Church”—at which point the entire audience, some 600 strong crowding the basilica, spontaneously exploded into prolonged, enthusiastic applause that thundered on for about three minutes. It was an historic moment, the message was crystal clear, and even Cardinal Arinze himself finally joined in the applause that went on and on and just would not stop. This is my 43rd year in Rome and I have never seen anything like it before or since.

Such a resounding affirmation of the Vatican II mandated liturgical renewal by God’s Holy People does not mean, however, that our work is over and done with. For the Council also taught us that the Church is “semper reformanda.” So let me add my wish list to your own ideas regarding what remains to be done or redone.

1. First, in seeking solutions to problems new and old, the “Magisterium doctorum”—i.e., the common teaching of reputable Catholic scholars and theologians—must be returned to its proper and fully traditional place in the “ordinary magisterium” of Catholic theological discourse. The Magisterium is not a substitute for a brain, or for a solid formation in the history and teaching of the Church across the entire continuum of its history, and not just what happens to be in vogue today, or was at Trent.
2. Second, as for what some call “the reform of the reform,” I continue to maintain that the western liturgical renewal in the wake of Vatican II was a great success, returning the liturgy to the People of God to whom it rightly belongs. The Vatican II reform was not perfect because only God is perfect. But we have a saying: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” So we should stop tinkering, leave alone what has been done already, and concentrate on what was not done well or not done at all. Done well were the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the Mass, the translations into the vernacular, which are certainly not to be redone according to the norms of that unfortunate document *Liturgiam authenticam*—at least not until one has read the absolutely devastating scholarly critique of Prof. Peter Jeffrey of Princeton in his book *Translating Tradition: A Liturgical Historian Reads “Liturgiam Authenticam”*<sup>3</sup> So instead of messing eternally with already finished business, I think it is time to turn to unfinished business. The Vatican II reforms were done as well as was humanly possible at the time, and we owe an enormous debt of gratitude and respect, not denigration, to those, some of whom are now with God, that had the courage to carry them out and implement them. The problems in ritual and language came not from the language and the restored rites, but from implementing them poorly or employing them abusively, and one does not change a language because some of its native speakers and writers are incapable of using it well. This demands not “reform of the reform,” but better liturgical formation.
3. Finally, the unfinished business not done well or not done at all would include, in my view, the Liturgy of the Hours, some aspects of the Lectionary, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Collegetville: The Liturgical Press 2005, based on a series of four articles that appeared in *Worship* 78 (2004).

Calendar, especially the Sanctoral, where more space should be given to local saints over against the centralized cult favored by the overly-centralized canonization process with its unfortunate “political canonizations” directed at the self-glorification of the ecclesial nomenclatura. And above all, one must restore the Roman Rites of Christian Initiation of infants to their traditional sequence and unity, because the way they are structured now is little better than ridiculous.

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Historians are inveterate story-tellers Let me conclude with a final story, one that testifies to what I have tried to do with my life. Not too many years ago I received a letter from one of my students, a Latin rite missionary in the Middle East. As a westerner who had studied eastern liturgy, he had to celebrate a liturgy he did not study, and study one he did not celebrate not only because it was not his, but because he had no desire to make it his. He found it overburdened, deadeningly monotonous, stupefyingly long. Besides, the members of that Oriental Church would never tolerate a foreigner meddling in something so close to their whole being and self-identity as their rite. Maybe he should have studied Sacred Scripture instead he mused? I answered with the following lines that sum up, as well as any artifice I could compose to close these reflections, what I hope my life’s work is all about.

“*Carissimo amico.*

Believe me when I say I have often read and reflected on your *cri du coeur* concerning your future in liturgical studies...

“I can only give personal testimony to the enormous amount of good one can do by the objective, honest, scientific study of liturgy. As a teacher one can change people’s lives forever by bringing them into living contact with the wellsprings of tradition after the layers of later, unhappy developments and misunderstandings have been stripped away. As a writer one can also have a profound effect even on those who are such jealous guardians of their heritage. Of course this can be done only with the utmost objectivity, and with no ulterior motive but the desire to serve God by serving his people. I know perfectly well what I would do to change, restore, reform certain liturgies I study, but I have never put myself forward as a reformer. What the scholar has to offer is knowledge, from which comes understanding. With a few exceptions, because of the present situation of most Eastern Churches, this is a service that we in the West can best provide.

“I do not say this with arrogance, or any idea that we are better or more intelligent than the orientals. But we are not oppressed by Communism or Islam, and we have the level of economic and educational development necessary to provide this service, which is a true ministry of God’s Church. This is an ecumenical service that Catholics can offer the Eastern Churches with no self-interest or attempt at fishing in their waters. Every Christian ministry, like that of our Redeemer, is one of reconciliation and service. That includes the ministry of scholarship, which serves nothing but the truth, in the service of *the Truth*.

“So you are wrong in thinking that a stranger like yourself will never be able to involve himself in such matters. For there is no one else to do it... I think you are especially mistaken in thinking that, perhaps, you should have selected another area of

concentration. Nothing could be further from the truth. The key to the heart of the Christian East is its liturgy. As you yourself say, it is only through the liturgy that Scripture, tradition, the Fathers, piety, spirituality—everything—is transmitted and lived. Sometimes, as you recognize, this expression of a living faith can become sclerotic, overgrown, too heavy. But underneath the overgrowth of centuries lie the jewels of a people’s incarnation of the gospel, waiting to be uncovered by someone willing to cut back the brush.

“I cannot imagine a more fitting, immensely rewarding ministry than to study the heritage of a people—and in the East that heritage is conserved and transmitted through the liturgy—in order to uncover its riches for the good of that same people, and of all peoples, to the unending glory of God’s eternal name. Of course it is not an easy ministry, and the results do not appear immediately, but I really could not imagine doing anything else. Apart from the intellectual and spiritual satisfaction it can give, and the good it can do, it is also good clean fun.”<sup>4</sup> .

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Thank you for your attention, and especially for the honor you do me this evening.

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<sup>4</sup> Abbreviated from R.F. Taft, *Beyond East and West. Problems in Liturgical Understanding*. Second revised and enlarged edition (Rome: Edizioni Orientalia Christiana 1997) 303-5.