

October 26, 2007

Dear Father Jeff,

First, let me please give you a little background:

I am a product of catholic schools ran by nuns from kindergarten through high school, a Dominican University in college, and a dormitory ran by Carmelite sisters. After college, somewhere along the way, the devil tried to steal my soul. I was drawn where, in principle, I did not wish to go. Through deep prayer, EWTN and all catholic spirituality books or articles I could get my hands on and a good confession, I have come out 'with peace and serenity of conscience'. As someone who wish to make progress in holiness, I need more grace and strength to live a holy life.

To help me describe how I feel, I will refer to a question posed by Fr. Martin Fox to his audience of a group of Cursillo leaders (Art. Oct 18, 2007) at his parish: "If you were at Mass outside your own home parish anywhere in the last month, raise your hand. Keep your hand up if you did that twice in the last month. Keep your hand up if three times." Had I been present at that meeting, my hand would have been up the whole time. And, if he had continued to one year or so, my hand would have been up until it ached.

In previous years, when my younger brother (who is very particular about rubrics), who lives in a different state, comes to visit (usually during the Holy Week or at Christmas time), he would ask that we go either to St. Margaret Mary in Oakland or St. Thomas Aquinas in Palo Alto for services. One time in 2005, he asked that we go to St. Edward's in Newark (he came across your blog from one of the catholic blogs he visits). Although I wondered why (I haven't been there since the late 2003) I went along. To my surprise, you were the celebrant and it was 'different'. To make a long story short, although I am not listed as a parishioner yet, I have been coming to St. Edward's ever since. Although I live in a nearby city, the 20-25 minute drive is a small sacrifice.

At St. Edward's you have proven that, despite some problems, the dignified, prayerful, and truly artistic celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not beyond the reach of the contemporary Church. Despite some difficulties, you have avoided allowing the assembly to determine the way a liturgy should be celebrated, but instead have demonstrated, that "Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church". (EE 52)

All the elements, the tabernacle placement, the ringing of the church bells before a Mass begins, the altar, the ambo, the vessels, the credence, the candles, the incense on special masses, etc, contribute to create a beautiful, worthy and solemn atmosphere of the sacred.

I am extremely blessed to have experienced the ancient form of the Latin Mass in my younger years. One simply has to wonder how the catholic liturgy in some areas has developed over the past forty years. But I won't go into that. There are two articles (among many) I will refer to which really express some of my sentiments on this: 'Weary with holding in' by Fr. Mark, Vultus Christi, 8/29/07 and 'Bad Habits...' by The Rev. Vincent Capuano, SJ, Adoremus B, Feb06).

As Latin is still the language of the church, your willingness to celebrate a 'Missa Cantata' on Sundays helps the lay faithful to be able to recite the common prayers and sing parts of the liturgy in Latin. You help us to gain an ever deeper devotion and understanding of the centrality of the liturgy. Even young people, who had never before experienced the profoundness and the beauty of the Liturgy celebrated with some parts in Latin, are able to experience the celebration of the Eucharist, carried out with due dignity.

Providing the faithful with booklets printed in English and Latin with English translation make it clear you want to include the congregation whenever possible. Since the congregation is already familiar with the Mass in English throughout the year, there should be no question of the congregation's knowing what the words are and what they mean when from time to time Latin is substituted.

Most Catholics know the form of the Mass well enough to understand the meaning of the texts of the Ordinary parts of the Mass by their position in the Mass, regardless of the language in which they are sung. From my observation, here at St. Edward's, there is already an increasing participation of a growing number of the faithful when the ordinary prayers are sung or chanted in Latin. (I thank the parishioners of St. Edward's for the charity they have shown in welcoming the changes.)

"To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence" (SC 30).

I have given a special preference to the Sunday 'Missa Cantata' (which is my favorite) but I do want to emphasize that any NOVUS ORDO Mass, when celebrated according to the full rubrics and with great reverence in harmony with the liturgical directives, can lead us to a deeper love for our 'Eucharistic Lord'. (One can tell a priest who treats the Eucharist with due respect by the way he worships and, just as well, one can tell when a priest has forgotten all he ever learned about the Real Presence.)

Your decision, that musical selections have text based on solid theology, is commendable. Although, in the beginning, this looked like it cannot be accomplished overnight, you had given your 'pastoral' guidance in slowly bringing back the dignity of the sacred.

In a short time, the Music Director and the Choir, who sacrifice their time for practice, had willingly learned some musical settings from the Gradual. If I may say so, they are really doing an excellent job, considering all the circumstances.

"Liturgical action is given a more noble form when sacred rites are solemnized in song" (SC 113). Singing or chanting the Mass lets the people have a feel of authentic liturgical music.

"Gregorian Chant is marked by a moving meditative cadence. It touches the depths of the soul." (C. Arinze)

“Good music helps to promote prayer, to raise the minds of the people to God and to give people a taste of the goodness of God.” (C. Arinze)

“It should be just normal that parish churches where there are four or five Masses on Sunday should have one of these Masses sung in Latin.” (C. Arinze)

The care and extra effort that you put in all the preparation for each celebration (the weekly bulletins, the pamphlets for the Sunday Mass celebrations), updating the contents of your parish website, etc) despite your busy schedule and limited resources, show your dedication and devotion to the ministry you have chosen.

“As a Church we are facing frightening challenges. We must bring them into the light and look at them squarely for what they are. Otherwise, we will never find the right path. Each one of us has a role to play here according to our vocations and means, each in our own time and place. One person or group can't do it all. When even one person or group drops out, we all suffer the loss. We must all of us do everything we are capable of doing, even as we call upon God for help. All good things are of God. He gives us our good work to do. When we cooperate with His will and reach our hands out to the task, He then makes our hands strong enough for the labor. So, our successes are at the same time ours, everyone's and His, in Whom they have their origin and their goal. “

(by Fr. John Zuhlsdorf - May 9, 2007)

There is still much to do, but leave the rest to God's grace.

Perhaps in time, we will get a chance to have at least one extraordinary form of the Mass in the near future ☺ .

May the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary be with you always and keep you in the shelter of their love.

Happy Anniversary and enjoy Priesthood Sunday. Thank you, Father Jeff.

Sincerely yours,
(Signature removed)