



REVIEW

The Roman Mass: From Early Christian Origins to Tridentine Reform by Uwe Michael Lang, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2022, pp. 456, £89.99, hbk

Like so many conflicts of the twentieth century, the conflict over the liturgical life of the Catholic Church has become seriously entrenched. This is something which can be seen throughout the Church today, and especially in those places which act as flash-points for the wider stalemate, the local parish. In general, the world of scholarship on the liturgy is something more akin to a cold war, where occasional publications are thrown across the lines of the conflict, either in print or online, most of which rehearse the same old arguments in slightly amended ways. It is easy to over emphasise the problems of the liturgy in our contemporary situation, and certainly there is more to the Church than the particular manner of celebrating the liturgy, but at the same time we must admit that it takes up a considerable amount of the time and imagination of contemporary Catholics, as even a cursory perusal of the letters pages of the Catholic press illustrates. This should not surprise us given the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the centrality of the liturgy to the life of the Church – its source and summit (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §10) – and the long and drawn out question about the way in which the work of the Liturgical Movement in the years leading up to the Council was and was not properly implemented.

Given the difficulties caused by this entrenchment, it is a real joy to read Fr Michael Lang's history of the development of the Roman Rite from its Scriptural and Sub-Apostolic roots and sources, through to the Tridentine reforms of the sixteenth century. The standard view of the history of liturgical development is that a purer and simpler liturgical life of the ancient Church was increasingly embellished, especially in the medieval period. This era of liturgical decadence caused such stress to the Roman Rite that cracks began to show in the edifice, requiring the reforms of the Council of Trent. Fr Lang shows that while there was a desire at the Council of Trent to renew the liturgy in lines with the ancient liturgical patrimony of the Church, the standard account of liturgical excess – read as liturgical degradation – in the medieval period is perhaps a misrepresentation. Other reviewers of Fr Lang's work have compared this book with the life's work of Professor Eamon Duffy on the history of the Reformation in England, showing that the traditional history of a burgeoning nation throwing off the shackles of a foreign power and superstition is far from the whole story. In this respect, those who work to question, critique, or problematise the all too standard history of liturgical development will rejoice in the publication of a professional and scholarly work in an area of study often characterised by more haphazard scholarship and private publication. Those seeking to uphold the standard history of liturgical development would do well to engage fully with the arguments made in this book.

Fr Lang's focus on continuity in the development of the Roman Rite takes its starting point from the scholarship of the late Pope Benedict XVI in his works on the liturgy. Here, once again, the desire for a return to a pure, simple, or pristine liturgical celebration is critiqued. While parishes and the Catholic press often feature calls to return to the simplicity of the Last Supper, such a vision of the liturgy is challenged in the early chapters of Fr Lang's book. This, not only the basis that we do not have the evidence to know much about, let alone construct, such a primitive liturgy, but also because, with Pope Benedict, Fr Lang reminds us that the Last Supper gives us the dogmatic content of the liturgy, not its basic form, and certainly not a form to which we must slavishly return again and again lest we betray the Lord's wishes.

Fr Lang leaves us in no doubt that there were certainly problems with the Church and its liturgical life in the Middle Ages: that there were many liturgical abuses, that the clergy were often poorly educated and received little or no formation, and that many of these situations led to the Protestant Reformation, and also, therefore, made the reforms instituted by the Council of Trent urgently necessary. All the same, his chapter on the liturgy in the Middle Ages offers a more generous picture where the life of the Church was something of a mixed bag: in some places the liturgy flourished, in other places it dwindled and was not in good shape. (In this respect, *plus ça change!*)

Of particular interest for a Dominican audience is the way Fr Lang draws from the research of Claire Taylor Jones and her work on the liturgical piety of German Dominican nuns of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Again, in this research, an all too readily accepted standard history is challenged. The interpretation of the visionary and mystical experience of nuns and other female religious as a resistance to, or a coping strategy against, a liturgical life which was male, Latin, and other is, Taylor argues, drawing a false opposition. Under the influence of the observant reform of the Dominican Order, the mystical and visionary experience of these female religious was very much a part of a wider liturgical piety. Taylor, herself drawing on research into the libraries of houses of female religious, suggests that we have underestimated the linguistic proficiency of female religious in the medieval period. While far from all bilingual and fluent in Latin, there was a high level of proficiency which enabled the active participation of the sisters in the liturgical life of the Church, something positively encouraged and facilitated by the friars. In this sense, we can situate Fr Lang's work on the medieval liturgy within the broader context of a more careful and sensitive regard for the interplay between the Latin of the liturgy and the vernacular of the people in the liturgical life of medieval Europe.

Perhaps, one of the greatest merits of Fr Lang's work is the way in which it brings a range of contemporary German and French language scholarship to an English-speaking audience, offering a good overview of this material for those who may not have access to these sources. This makes it a valuable introduction for the scholar, but also for anyone interested in the Sacred Liturgy of the Church. That Fr Lang uses such a wide range of sources shows us that there are valuable insights in contemporary liturgical studies which cannot be simply dismissed as some who critique the twentieth century reforms might suggest. If we can think of the liturgical studies of the twentieth century as a prism refracting the single light of the liturgical tradition into its many and varied constitutive parts, Fr Lang helps us to get a full grasp of the spectrum of light, and avoid being caught up in just one colour. In short, in a situation of

entrenched disagreement, Fr Lang offers a calm, moderate, and reasonable voice which presents a clear vision of the continuity of the Roman Rite across its many periods of reform.

Albert Robertson OP 
Blackfriars, Cambridge
Email: albert.robertson@english.op.org