

LICITNESS OF THE NOVUS ORDO: TWO CONTRASTING APPROACHES

In or about the year 2000 the late Fr Gregory Hesse S.T.D., S.J.D., in a number of audio and video tapes, insisted that the *novus ordo missae* of Pope Paul VI was not a licit exercise of the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church.¹ Recently, Canadian philosopher and theologian John R. T. Lamont BA (Hons), S.T.L., D. Phil. (Oxon), published a paper in which he has arrived at the same conclusion.²

Fr Hesse had argued that the Second Vatican Council was not an ecumenical council and —

- that in the bull *Quo primum* of July 14th, 1570 Pope Pius V – as instructed by the Council of Trent – had canonised the form of Mass in the Roman rite forever;
- that this bull, since it addressed a matter of faith, not one of discipline, was accordingly as binding on the faithful as any doctrinal definition, an interpretation which was supported by the conduct of the 33 popes who had succeeded Pius V, three of them explicitly in complementary bulls;
- that in purporting to alter the *Missale Romanum* of Pius V Paul VI had rejected the explicit directions and anathemas of the Council of Trent and Pius V's anticipatory condemnation of anyone, including a pope, who would attempt to do so;
- that Paul VI had, in any event, failed in his obligations as a lawgiver to promulgate his 'new' Roman Missal, the *novus ordo*; and
- that there were real doubts as to the validity of the sacraments purportedly confected pursuant to its terms.

John Lamont, in contrast, has accepted that Vatican II was a valid ecumenical council and appealed to certain of its provisions in support of his position. He has accepted —

- that how the sacred liturgy is conducted is a matter of discipline, and therefore within the Pope's jurisdiction;
- that Paul VI had promulgated his 'new' Roman Missal as required by Church law in the Apostolic Constitution *Missale Romanum* in 1969; and
- that there can be no doubt about the validity of the sacraments confected thereunder.

The question for his consideration was the licitness of the *novus ordo*; whether the act of establishing it was an act that fell within the legal powers of the Pope, and hence whether or not the legal form that established it had the intended effect of making the *novus ordo* licit. He reduced the question to two issues, here listed in reverse to the order he gives:

1. Is the *novus ordo* of Paul VI a form of the Roman Rite?
2. Does the Pope have the authority to establish a ritual that is not a form of the Roman Rite or of any other traditional rite of the Church?

¹ Cf. <https://archive.org/details/FatherHesse> audiotapes nn. 6 & 12 inter alia.

² Cf. *Is the Mass of Paul VI licit?* At <http://dialogos-institute.org/blog/wordpress/disputation-on-the-1970-missal-part-1-dr-john-lamont/>

Lamont relies on a distinction asserted in the Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that the sacred liturgy is comprised of elements divine and human, the former immutable, the latter subject to change. The asserted divine elements, he says, indicate limitations of papal power but he concedes that the pope may be constrained in meddling with even the human elements of the liturgy. He confines himself to the divine elements, however, arguing that focus on these produces a stronger argument, which may be stated as follows:

The Roman Rite itself, not just some of its components, is of divine origin.

But the *novus ordo* is not the Roman Rite.

Therefore the rite is illicit.

Organic development of the liturgy is legitimate, he avers, provided it accords with the maxim of St Vincent of Lerins concerning the development of doctrine. It grows and matures like a natural body: it does not change into something else. (Cf. *Commonitoria* 23, 28) The term 'organic development' is used illegitimately, however, when it refers to the development of one organism from another, as postulated by evolutionary theory. The Roman rite reached its maturity under St Gregory the Great. In contrast to this, which is the Church's understanding of her liturgy, is that of the reformers under Paul VI. He writes:

"Evolutionary development of one form of life from another is supposed to occur as an adaptive reaction to the external environment; the change from the old to the new form occurs and succeeds because the new form has an advantage in coping with its environment. This evolutionary goal was explicitly upheld by the designers of the Novus Ordo, who stated that the liturgy needed to adapt to modern circumstances... Adapting the liturgy to the people is a negation of its purpose of sanctification. The whole point of the liturgy is that it should adapt people to itself, not vice versa."

He responds to objections to the divine input based on human involvement over the centuries:

"[A]lthough some components of the liturgy were originally the personal productions of individuals, the liturgy as such is the work of the Church, and anything that is included in it thereby becomes part of the worship of the Church and not simply an individual creation..."

This appeals to the theological reality adverted to by Belloc in a famous essay 100 years ago when he said "there is one thing in this world which is different from all other" — the Catholic Church.³ It is different from all other because it is a divine thing in the midst of the mundane. This understanding is one which seems to have been largely lost since Vatican II, namely, *that the Catholic Church is of God; it is not something invented by men.*⁴

Lamont concludes—

"that the Roman Rite itself, not just some of its components, is of divine institution... [accordingly] it is clear that not only does the pope not have the legal power to abolish it, he also does not have the legal power to permit the use of a ritual of human origin in its place. If God has gone to the trouble of providing a liturgy of divine origin for the Church, it is because he intends that this liturgy should be used for his worship, and no-one, including the pope, has the right to attempt to frustrate this intention by replacing it with a ritual that is a human invention."

³ Cf. https://www.superflumina.org/PDF_files/belloc_inge.pdf

⁴ To go on, *the Head of the Church is not the pope but the God-man Jesus Christ Who founded it; the soul of the Church is the Holy Spirit; the end of the Church is the union of each of her members with God the Father.*

Those who have listened to the arguments of Fr Hesse will recall that this agrees with his contention as to the effect of the determinations, and anathemas, of the Council of Trent, and the language of Pope Pius V in *Quo primum*.

In weighing the character of the *novus ordo* Lamont says this:

“[R]eferences to sacrifice, sin, guilt, penance, punishment, hell, the necessity of grace, and divine anger have been almost entirely removed from the Novus Ordo, and the subordination of this world to the next is no longer emphasised or clearly presented in it... This amounts to a complete removal of the theology of the traditional rite, since the expressions of this theology that are preserved in the Novus Ordo have their meanings fundamentally changed by the new context... The meaning of God’s love, for example, is entirely different in a context where sin, guilt, divine punishment, expiation, and hell are present, as opposed to a context in which they are absent. There is thus no doubt at all that the theology of the traditional liturgy is not present in the Novus Ordo, and hence that the Novus Ordo cannot be a form of the traditional Latin rite...”

This concurs with Fr Hesse’s citation—in his criticism of the *novus ordo* as teaching a doctrine other than that of the Catholic Church—of the maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of what is to be prayed determines the law of what is to be believed.

Lamont completes his criticism with the following passage:

“We can therefore conclude that the promulgation of the Novus Ordo by *Missale Romanum* has no legal force, and that the Novus Ordo is illicit. It is not permitted for any Catholic priest to say it, and it is not permitted for any Catholic to attend it, except perhaps under the most exceptional circumstances (as perhaps at a funeral, where it is clear that attendance at it is not intended to be an act of worship but is simply an act of respect for the dead). Nor, according to the current Code of Canon Law, can attendance at the Novus Ordo satisfy the Sunday obligation; that obligation requires attendance at a Mass of a Catholic rite, and the Novus Ordo does not belong to a Catholic rite.”

Fr Hesse would generally have agreed with these conclusions. He would have gone further. Not only was the *novus ordo* an illicit rite, he maintained, it was a schismatic one because what its liturgy conveyed was not the teaching of the Catholic Church but that of a counterfeit and, just as Catholics are prohibited from attending the Russian or Greek Orthodox Churches—even though the sacraments they celebrate are valid—because they are schismatic, so are they precluded from attending the rites of the *novus ordo*.

Those who avoid the *novus ordo* to attend the Mass God’s Holy Church has celebrated for 15 centuries will find adequate reasons for their position in the thinking of these two theologians. Popes and bishops may seek to impede their desires but in following them they are following the advice of St Peter in *Acts* 5: 29:

“We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Michael Baker

April 3rd, 2022—*Passion Sunday*