

The Holy Mass - Preface

Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875) was ordained to the priesthood in 1827, in the France of the restored Bourbon monarchy. France, and particularly the Church, was in the painful process of recovering from the French Revolution and responding to a century of rationalism inimical to spiritual values. Monasticism and liturgy—both fundamentally alien to the Enlightenment mentality—were to play a pivotal role in re-establishing the primacy of the spiritual and in bearing witness to the reality of the supernatural order. Guéranger's chief glory was in being at the fountainhead of both.

In 1836, with four other priests, he reopened the ancient priory of Solesmes, and the next year it was elevated by Gregory XVI to an Abbey, and established as the head of the Congrégation Française de l'Ordre de Saint Benoît. Guéranger was appointed the Abbot of Solesmes and Superior General of the Benedictines in France. From that point on, Solesmes was to be the engine-room of the Benedictine revival in France and England, and of the liturgical revival throughout the world. For the remainder of his life, Guéranger devoted himself to liturgical scholarship, polemics, and the establishment of Benedictine communities in France. His influence was powerfully felt by such men as La Cordaire, Montalembert, Veuillot, and Bloy, as well as in the formulation of papal infallibility at Vatican I, although he himself was unable to attend the Council.

His greatest legacy is, however, undoubtedly in the field of liturgy. His monumental series, *l'Année Liturgique*,—a

comprehensive study of the calendar of the Church—is probably the most famous work ever written on the Liturgy, and can be said to be the foundation of the whole modern liturgical movement, which reached its apogee in the 1930s and 40s. His work in restoring the place and norms of Gregorian chant has also had an incalculable influence and its ideals are enshrined in St Pius X's 1903 *motu proprio* on sacred music.

Nevertheless, even though Guéranger can be seen as the founder of the modern liturgical movement, his work fell into disfavour with liturgists in the two decades preceding the Second Vatican Council, for its supposed romanticism and “neomedieval irrelevancy.” However, the shortcomings of modern liturgists have been cruelly exposed in the years following the liturgical changes of the 1960s. Many of these scholars were animated by a reactionary hatred of the nineteenth century not unlike that found in the secular academic circles of the same era. They lie open to the charge (many of them) of a new rationalism, whose effect on contemporary liturgy and spirituality bears a disconcerting resemblance to that of the eighteenth century. In the wake of these liturgical disasters, and the renewal of a sympathetic interest in the culture of the nineteenth century, Guéranger's work is being restored to its rightful place. As Fr. Aidan Nichols remarked in his now classic *Looking at the Liturgy*, “Guéranger conceived his work as monastic founder and liturgist precisely as a response to the social and cultural *anomie* and individualism of post-Revolutionary France, not in some kind of ‘precious’ abstraction from the same. The question he faced was: How is Christian community to be re-created? ... In the prayer of the Liturgy ... the supernatural

unity of the many in Christ is established and realised.”

Guéranger’s return to favour as a major liturgist is only one aspect of a general reappropriation of important elements of Catholic tradition in recent years: not only the nineteenth century, but also the Baroque and the fourfold interpretation of Sacred Scripture. *The Holy Mass* is not only Guéranger’s most extensive treatment of the heart of the liturgy, but also a fine example of the fourfold interpretation. The fourfold interpretation means employing the four different sense of Scripture when one reads the Bible. Thus every passage of Sacred Scripture is understood to have four senses: the *moral* sense (conveying truths about the Christian life), the *allegorical* sense (conveying truths about Christ), and the *anagogical* sense (conveying truths about Heaven). This form of Biblical interpretation has been reasserted as normative by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see “The Senses of Scripture“, nos. 115-119). We should read the Scriptures prayerfully - in effect, we should pray the Scriptures. The Mass is supremely a scriptural prayer: thus Guéranger’s use of this method in *The Holy Mass* is particularly appropriate.

By turns devotional, exegetical and historical, this is therefore a timely publication of one of the great treasures of Catholic liturgical spirituality.