

Can the Liturgy be both Simple and Beautiful?

The liturgy ultimately exists for one reason alone: to glorify God. A very close second, and one that is in fact instrumental to giving God glory, is our own holiness. For the holier we become, the more is God glorified.

Because we are called to be transformed by our participation in the liturgy, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council called for liturgical rites to be marked by a “noble simplicity” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n.34). The rites of the Mass should be “short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation” (*ibid.*). If we cannot comprehend, at least at some level, the meaning of the rite being celebrated, then our own growth in holiness is made more difficult.

This simplicity that ought to characterize the Mass and other liturgical celebrations does not mean, however, that our celebrations should be stripped of everything mysterious and made to become as familiar as our everyday encounters. Rather, the simplicity called for by the Second Vatican Council is to be “noble,” a simplicity that possesses outstanding qualities (*CSL*, n.34). The original text in Latin uses the word *fulgeant* to describe this noble simplicity, meaning the rites should “flash” or “lighten” (as lightening—*fulgor*—does). The call to noble simplicity is similar to that call of Jesus to become like “little children” (Mt. 18:3). Our response—as many homilies have told us—is not to become childish but child-like, having trust and confidence in God our Father on whom we depend. Our liturgies, similarly, should not be mundane and simplistic but noble, radiant, outstanding, and simple.

The sacred art and architecture found in our churches are described in a similar way. While on the one hand our churches are not to show “mere sumptuous display” (*CSL*, n.124), neither are they to be without beauty, characterized by a “lack of artistic worth [or] mediocrity” (*ibid.*) On the contrary, those involved in the design and construction of art and architecture “should strive after noble beauty” (*ibid.*). Sacred art and architecture, “by their very nature, are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray,” and they should “worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship” (*CSL*, n.122).

The Council Fathers’ call for “noble beauty” in art and architecture has often been confused with their call for “noble simplicity” in the *rites*. Such confusion has resulted in churches that have been cleared of images, walls that were whitewashed, and edifices made to resemble many secular buildings. Even if the *Constitution on the Liturgy* had called for “noble simplicity” in art and architecture (rather than in the rites only), such actions could not be justified.

Like the Council, many have emphasized that the People of God are the true Church, rather than the church building. While this is true, the claim that the church building, both internally and externally, should be de-emphasized or considered unimportant is certainly not true. The logical consequence to the fact that the People of God are the Church is that their church building and those things used by them ought to be noble and beautiful. The “living stones” that form the Church of God ought to be represented by noble, worthy, and beautiful stones that form their church building. A “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of [God’s] own” (1 Pet 2:9) worships in a noble and beautiful building because it, since it belongs to God, is noble and beautiful.

Nobility, simplicity, and beauty: these ought to be evident in our Sunday celebrations of Mass. They should, furthermore, be evident of the Church’s members, both collectively and individually.

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