

The Paulus Institute

for the Propagation of Sacred Liturgy

THE ANCIENT NORM OF THE HOLY FATHERS

(*pristina sanctorum Patrum norma*)

AS THE CRITERION FOR AN AUTHENTIC RENEWAL OF THE SACRED LITURGY

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LECTURE

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1. Ever since apostolic times the Church showed deep concern to offer a type of worship which would meet the exigency of God's utter holiness. Therefore, she always prayed to God the Father, particularly in the Latin tradition, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, since Our Lord Jesus Christ instructed us to adore God "in Spiritu et Veritate" (John 4:23). In fact, it is only "in the Holy Spirit" that one can truly adore Christ, that is, recognize His Divinity, according to the words of Saint Paul: "Nemo potest dicere, Dominus Iesus, nisi in Spiritu Sancto" (1 Cor 12:3). In the Lord's Prayer, we pray first of all that God's name be hallowed: "sanctificetur Nomen Tuum". This means that when the faithful pray and worship God, they must be conscious that He is the All-Holy God, and must behave accordingly. Jesus Christ Himself in His "High Priestly Prayer" (John 17) began by asking for the glorification of both the Son and the Father (John 17:1) and He referred to His Father as "Holy Father" (John 17:11).

2. Hence awareness of God's deep holiness is the first condition and is typical of Christian worship. And, naturally, it demands typical gestures of adoration, such as bowing, prostrations, and also silence, which expresses an interior attitude of awe and reverence. The most authoritative witness to these fundamental attitudes of Christian worship is the Book of the Apocalypse, which presents to the eyes of Christians the heavenly liturgy as the real model for worship on earth. The reference to the model of the heavenly worship (specifically the allusion to the angels) is the main and constant characteristic of the liturgy throughout the two millennia, from the Apostolic Fathers up to the Magisterium of the Second Vatican Council. From the mul-

iple witnesses to this attitude from the most ancient times are to be mentioned here St. John Chrysostom (4th – 5th century), witnessing the liturgical tradition of Antioch and Constantinople. The liturgy of the Church has to be modeled by the heavenly liturgy of the angels. Therefore the Church on earth in worshipping and adoring the Divine Majesty mostly in the Eucharistic liturgy has the duty to imitate the angels in the interior disposition (purity of heart) and in the exterior gestures. The following witnesses from the Patristic time demonstrate that this was the conscience of the universal Church (Rome, Carthage, Jerusalem, Antioch/Constantinople), being consequently an indispensable and constant criterion for an authentic liturgical tradition.

3. To Saint John Chrysostom, also known by the title "doctor eucharisticus", the tradition of the Byzantine Church attributes the authorship of the liturgy or the anaphora called after his name. In his sermons this Saint repeatedly stresses the presence of the angels in the earthly liturgy and invites the faithful to worship God in spiritual union with them. St. John names the angels "con-servants" (*syn-douloi*, this expression is found already in Apoc 19:10 and Apoc 22:9) of the faithful who celebrate in joy the paschal Eucharistic liturgy (cf. *Sermo adversus ebrios et de resurrectione*, 2: PG 50, 435). In his homilies on Isaiah the "doctor eucharisticus" describes the spiritual union of the worshipping faithful with the angels in such a way as if there would be no difference between the voice of the faithful and the voice of the angels, as if they would sing with one identical voice the hymn of the *Sanctus*. The fundament of this union is Christ himself through the sacrifice of the

Cross. Only thanks to the Incarnation of the Son of God, the *Sanctus*, which before was sung only by the angels in heaven, is now also sung by the faithful on earth. Christ Himself brought the angelic hymn down on earth and therefore the church on earth is able to sing this hymn in her liturgy in union with the angels. The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy of Vatican Council II, “Sacrosanctum Concilium” refers to the same thought in the following affirmation: “Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Everlasting Covenant, assuming human nature, brought to this earthly exile the hymn which is sung for all eternity in the heavenly dwellings. He gathers around Himself the universal human community in order to sing together with her this Divine song of praise” (n. 83).

Saint John Chrysostom exhorts his faithful, giving them concrete indications how to imitate spiritually the worshipping angels. We can try to paraphrase his words in this way: in the same manner as the angels sing, sing also you together with them, in the same manner as the angels stand upright, stand reverently with them, in the same manner as the angels extend their wings, extend also you the wings of your soul, in the same manner as the angels flow around the throne of God, in your thoughts you also have to circle around God. Let us listen to his words: “Have you recognized this voice? Is this voice our voice or the voice of the seraphim? This voice is at the same time our voice and the voice of the seraphim, thanks to Christ who has broken down the dividing wall, who has reconciled heaven and earth, making both being one. Indeed this hymn was sung before only in heaven. But since the moment when the Lord has deigned to descend on earth, He brought this song also to us. Therefore the great pontiff standing at this sacred table to offer the spiritual worship (*logiken latreian*), to offer the bloodless sacrifice, does not invite us only to listen devotedly, but after have remembered first the cherubim and then the seraphim, he exhorts all of us to send up to heaven this tremendous song as we belong to their choir (*synchoreuónton*). Then he invites us to lift up our thought from the earth and cheers up every one with these or similar words: sing together with the seraphim, stand up together with the seraphim, together with them extend the wings of your mind, together with them encircle the throne of the King” (Hom. in Is. 6, 3).

What represents the concrete and last fundament of the sacred, transcendent, and tremendous character of the liturgy is not an elevated idea or a religious feeling, but the gift of the love of God which is visibly laid down on the altar of the sacrifice, and that is the Eucharistic Body of

Jesus Christ filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit. In the same homily on Is 6 Saint John Chrysostom speaks about the “gift of love” (*charis tes philanthropias*) and about the “fire of the Spirit” (*pyr pneumatikon*). This visible gift of the love of God which the faithful see and receive during the Eucharistic liturgy demands from the faithful an attitude of awe and of veneration according to the example of the seraphim described by the prophet Isaiah. The holiness of God in itself is inaccessible and invisible to the human eyes. But God admits the angels to adore His immense holiness in heaven. In heaven, in the presence of the unfathomable holiness of God, there is the model and the example (*typos*) of all holy realities and of all holy gestures which the Church on earth is possessing and practicing. The most holy reality in the Church on earth is the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ and after Him then the altar, upon which His Body and Blood become really and substantially present through the act of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ are united to the Divinity in the person of the Eternal Son of God. This Divine person is therefore the ultimate fundament of the holiness of the Eucharistic species. Christ’s act of the redemptive sacrifice on the cross is the revelation of the immense and unending love of God to men, of His “*philanthropia*”, and this is symbolized in the Bible by the fire. Therefore the ultimate model and example (*typos*) of the altar of the cross and of the altar of the Eucharist is the fire of the Divine love in eternity, in heaven. In the sacrifice of the altar and in the Eucharistic gift of the Body of Christ the eternal, heavenly, and Divine fire becomes visible and really present, and even touchable. No angels, even the highest seraphim dares to touch the Divine fire of the Eucharistic Body of Christ. The prophet Isaiah explains this behavior using the symbol of the tongs, with which the angel took the burning coal from the altar (Is 6, 6). Whereas weak and sinful men can take the burning coal of the Eucharistic Body of Christ directly with their hands and without tongs. This aspect refers firstly to the priest, because his hands had been consecrated in order to be objectively more suitable to touch and to distribute the most holy sacrament, the “*sancta sanctorum*”, the Eucharistic body of Christ. This aspect Pope John Paul II explains in his Apostolic Letter “*Dominicae cenae*”: “We should also always remember that to this ministerial power we have been sacramentally consecrated, that we have been chosen from among men “for the good of men.” We especially, the priests of the Latin Church, whose ordination rite added in the course of the centuries the custom of anointing the priest’s hands, should think about this” (n. 11).

In his magisterial work on the priesthood (*De sacerdotio*) Saint John Chrysostom is saying that the hands of the priest have to be sacred, because they touch the Body of Christ: “Consider how [holy] have to be the hands which touch so saint things, how [holy] has to be the tongue which pronounces those words, and how much more purity and sanctity must have the soul who welcomes such a great Spirit” (*De sacerdotio* 6, 4). The following words from the homily on Isaiah illustrate very clearly this aspect of the liturgical and Eucharistic theology of Saint John Chrysostom: “What a wonder is the fact that, although you are standing in the liturgy together with the seraphim, God permitted you to touch those things which the seraphim don’t dare to touch. The prophet says: Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. That altar is the prefigure (*typos*) and the image (*eikon*) of this our altar, in the same way as that fire is the prefigure (*typos*) and the image (*eikon*) of this spiritual fire. The seraphim didn’t dare to touch the coal with his hands, but took it with the tongs, whereas you take it with your hand. When you consider the dignity of the gift which is laid down on the altar, this is greater than the contact with the seraphim. And when you reflect about the love which God has towards men (*philanthropia*), then you will recognize that He has not despised our weakness when he laid down on the altar the gift of His love” (Hom. in Is. 6, 3).

4. The more the faithful recognize that the Eucharistic Body of Christ is the greatest sign of the sanctity and of the love of God, the more they have to answer to this gift in an interior attitude of gratitude, of humility, and of love. From this interior act illuminated by the faith flows naturally an exterior behavior which expresses adoration and loving reverence. Therefore the exterior gestures of adoration and reverence in the liturgy cannot be considered secondary. The very suggestive examples of the behavior of the worshipping angels as described in the Bible (especially in the book of the prophet Isaiah and in the book of the Apocalypse) remain a point of reference for the manner in which the Church on earth has to worship when she desires to worship God in the Truth (in Christ) and in the Spirit. According to the teaching of the Fathers of the Church these angelic examples are given in order to be imitated by the faithful. And these examples are very concrete and accessible to men. The first thing is this: to be interiorly orientated toward God and His glory, toward His Face, and His Face is ultimately seen in Jesus Christ on the Cross and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Then fol-

lows this: to recognize God’s majesty, God’s holiness and His love. Then comes this important condition: to ask the merciful God the grace of interior purity. From this flows the exterior act, that means to make himself also exteriorly small: to bow, to genuflect, to prostrate. Then follow other typical exterior acts of loving reverence and of awe such as: to pronounce worthy words of praise and adoration like the *Sanctus* of the angels, to protect the sacred with a veil or behind steps and rails (iconostasis, communion rails), to kiss the holy objects (firstly the altar), to keep silence during liturgy, to touch the most sacred reality (the Eucharistic Body) with consecrated, anointed hands.

The faithful have the unique privilege to see and touch the incarnated God in the Eucharistic mystery. Therefore they must show a special reverence towards this unfathomable mystery. And again the faithful find in the angels an example for imitation in their exterior behavior. In mentioning the reverent attitude of the angels in front of the empty tomb of Christ, Saint John Chrysostom exhorts the faithful to consider the angelic example, taking into account that in the Eucharistic liturgy there is not the empty tomb of Christ, but the presence of the living Lord himself. Consequently, the behavior in the presence of the Eucharistic Body of Christ should be even more reverent than in front of the empty tomb. In his homily about the cemetery and the Cross he gives this explanation: “I exhort you to approach the immolated Lamb with fear, veneration, and awe. You certainly know in what manner the angels stood in front of the empty tomb, even though the body of the Lord was no longer there. Nevertheless the angels showed great reverence towards the place that received the body of the Lord. When the angels, who by their excellence greatly exceed our human nature, behave in front of the tomb with so great reverence and awe, how can we approach, not the empty tomb, but the sacred table upon which has been laid down the Lamb, with noise and chatter?” (Hom. in coemet. et crucem, 3).

Even though Saint John Chrysostom lays stress very much upon the interior purity of the soul as the first important condition for an authentic participation in the liturgy, he nevertheless exhorts the faithful surprisingly often about the exterior gestures of adoration and the reverent exterior behavior. In doing so he adduces the example of the reverent gestures of the angels to be imitated by the faithful when they enter the church and when they participate in the Eucharistic liturgy. The church building Saint John Chrysostom calls “the place of angels, of archangels, the

kingdom of God, the heaven itself” (*topos angelon, archangelon, basileia tou Theou, autos ho ouranos*: Hom. 36, 5 in 1 Cor). He continues to explain and illustrate that the church is already heaven on earth: “The church is heaven. You can imagine this in this way: if someone would introduce you to heaven, certainly you would not dare to speak to anyone, even when you would see there your father or your brother. In the same way here in the church one should speak only about spiritual things, because here is heaven! You should be completely filled with great fear and reverence even before the tremendous moment of the consecration. Be awefilled and attentive before you will see the holy veils extended upon the altar and the choir of the angels preceding the priest. I tell you even more: ascend in this moment to heaven!” (ibidem).

5. The above-presented short overview of the liturgical teaching of Saint John Chrysostom manifests unequivocally the truth that the first and fundamental characteristic of the Christian worship is the awefilled adoration of the majesty of the triune God in the Eucharistic liturgy. This awefilled adoration finds her concretization in the adoration of the Eucharistic Body of Christ in the moment of His offering as the immolated Lamb upon the altar and in the moment of receiving Him in the holy Communion. The revealed word of God itself in the Holy Scripture presents us this characteristic as the indispensable norm of the true worship, as it is particularly evident in Is 6 and in the Book of the Apocalypse. The Church of the Apostles and of the Fathers implemented faithfully and clearly this first and basic characteristic of the liturgy: and this is the vertical, transcendent, Theocentric, and Christocentric dimension, which is expressed through the acts of adoration, of the “*proskynesis*” with all the variety of their exterior manifestation. The creatures who as first creatures and in a most perfect and exemplary manner realize such a worship, are the angels.

When the word of God and the Church Fathers stress the sacred and transcendent dimension of the worship they preferably mention the angels as examples to be imitated. The letter to the Hebrew describes the angels as “*liturgical spirits*” (*pneumata leiturgika*: Hebr 1, 14). They are the first adorers of Christ, the Incarnate Son of God: “When He brings the Firstborn into the world, He says: Let all God’s angels adore (*prokynesatoson*) Him” (Hebr 1, 6). The angels lead the Christians to adore God alone, because they categorically reject a worship centered and oriented upon creatures. This mind one can recognize in the fol-

lowing scene from the Book of the Apocalypse: “When I heard and saw them, I fell down to adore at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me: You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book, adore (*proskýneson*) God!” (Apoc 19:10). The same scene is repeated in Apoc 22:9. From that fact one can recognize the importance of this liturgical law: when you celebrate the liturgy you must not put the creatures in the centre, nor the angels, nor the human being, not even the human celebrant of the liturgy, but God, the Incarnate God, the Eucharistic Christ.

6. The magisterium of Vatican Council II on liturgy remembers precisely this perennial law of the Christian worship insomuch as the liturgy has to reflect the very nature of the Church: “The human has to be directed to the Divine and subordinated to him, the visible has to be directed to the invisible, the action has to be directed to the contemplation, and the present things have to be directed to the future city which we seek (Hebr 13, 14)” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). This first and most important principle of the liturgy, of the *lex orandi*, which is rooted in the Word of God, was not only faithfully transmitted by the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, but was concretely realized in the manner the liturgy was celebrated in their times. Every time when the Church tried to reform the liturgy, sometimes renewing and improving it when there were practices alien or contrary to the very nature of the Divine worship, she applied as criterion the “ancient norm of the holy Fathers” (*pristina sanctorum Patrum norma*). The reform of the liturgy or, better said, the renewal of the liturgy as desired by the Council of Trent and Vatican Council II established this very criterion. Saint Pius V publishing the Roman Missal in 1570 was referring in his bull “*Quo primum*” to the “ancient norm of the holy Fathers”. The same phrase was used by Vatican Council II establishing the norms of the reform of the Roman Missal (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 50) and the same criterion is mentioned in the General Institution to the Roman Missal (n. 7). The ancient norm of the Holy Fathers is precisely the norm which stresses the sacred, the Divine, the heavenly, and eternal by acts of adoration and their exterior expressions.

All practical norms in the liturgy and even more those that should be revised or changed must have this aim: to express more clearly the sacred, as demanded by Vatican Council II: “In the renewal of the liturgy the texts and rites have to

be ordered in such a manner, that they express more clearly the sacred (*textus et ritus ita ordinari oportet, ut sancta, quae significant, clarius expriment*)” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 21). The same phrase was cited by Pope Paul VI in the Apostolic Constitution “*Missale Romanum*” (1969) with which he approved the new Roman Missal. The return to the Fathers without doubt should not have as an effect the impoverishment of the sacred, of the transcendent, and of the acts of adoration in the liturgy, but exactly the contrary: the return to more acts and gestures of adoration and of sacred awe. To impoverish the liturgy by reducing the signs of adoration and of the sacred, justifying such a reform as a return to the norm of the Fathers is not only an evident contradiction to the patristic witnesses, but represents also an attitude which the universal Magisterium of the Church condemned as “liturgical archeologism” in the encyclical “*Mediator Dei*” of Pope Pius XII.

Two decades before the last liturgical reform in 1969 Louis Bouyer rightly observed, that in order to understand rightly the witness of the Fathers, “in order not to confuse our perception of its permanent value with any attempt to mimic and copy childishly what they had and what they did that was peculiar to their time alone, it is probably safer not to consider the Fathers in isolation. What we should do rather is to take an all-inclusive view of the development of the People of God, from the first beginnings of this development to its final achievement in those lasting institutions and living ideas which constitute the Fathers’ legacy to us as to all ages” (*Life and Liturgy*, London 1950, p. 21).

7. It would be meaningful to conclude this short overview of the patristic witness on the sacredness of the liturgy with an actualization of their teaching and of their examples, presenting some concrete suggestions for an authentic renewal of the liturgy according to the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church, especially of the Council of Trent and of Vatican Council II, the more so because both Councils substantially concord in their teaching about the nature of the sacred liturgy. A liturgical renewal that would stress more the Christocentric and transcendent character of the liturgy and acts of adoration, as shown also by the examples of the angelic worship, would certainly come closer to the spirit of the Bible and of the Fathers, closer to the “ancient norm of the holy Fathers.” Concretely this could be realized by practical norms like the following which are besides already proven by centuries-old experience:

1. The tabernacle where Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God, is really present under the species of bread, should be placed in the center of the sanctuary. Because in no other sign on this earth is God, the Emmanuel, so really present and so near to men as in the tabernacle. The tabernacle as the sign indicating and containing the real presence of Christ; it should therefore be closer to the altar and constitute with the altar the one central sign indicating the Eucharistic mystery. The sacrament (tabernacle) and the sacrifice (altar) should therefore not be opposed and separated too much, but be both in the central place of the sanctuary. Toward the tabernacle and the altar together all attention should be directed spontaneously.
2. During the Eucharistic liturgy, at least during the Eucharistic prayer, when Christ the Lamb of God is immolated, the face of the priest should not be seen by the faithful (the seraphim cover their face when adoring God), but instead it should be turned toward God in the sign of the icon of the Crucified Lord.
3. There should be more signs of adoration by means of genuflections, especially every time the priest touches the consecrated host, the Lamb of God.
4. The faithful approaching to receive the Lamb of God in Holy Communion should greet and receive Him with an act of adoration, of kneeling down. Such a gesture would be a little biblical and angelical “*proskynesis*.” Indeed, which moment is for the faithful more sacred than this moment of the encounter with the Lord?
5. There should be more room for silence during the liturgy, especially during those moments which mostly express the mystery of the redemption, especially when the sacrifice of the Cross is made present during the Eucharistic prayer.
6. There should be more exterior signs which express the dependence of the priest on Christ the High Priest, which would more clearly show that the words of greeting (“*Dominus vobiscum*”) and blessing of the celebrant depend and flow out from Christ the High Priest. And such signs could be (as it was practiced for centuries) the kissing of the altar (which symbolizes

Christ) or the bowing toward the altar or toward the Crucifix every time before the priest says “The Lord be with you (Dominus vobiscum)” and every time before he blesses the faithful.

7. There should be more signs which express the unfathomable mystery of the redemption. This could be achieved for example through the veiling of the liturgical objects, because the veiling is an act of the liturgy of the angels (cf Is 6): veiling the chalice, veiling the paten with the humeral by the subdeacon, the use of the bursa which hides the corporal (which is a sign of the linen shroud which covered the Body of Christ), veiling the hands of the bishop when he celebrates solemnly, the use of Communion rails as a mean of veiling the altar. Similar signs could be also the signs of the Cross made by the priest during the Eucharistic prayer and by the faithful made in other moments of the liturgy (for example at the end of the “Gloria” and of the “Credo”).

8. There should also be a constant sign which expresses the mystery by means of the human language, that is by the use of the Latin as sacred language as demanded by Vatican Council II (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 36 § 1). In the celebration of every holy Mass and in each place a part of the Eucharistic prayer there could be said always in Latin.

9. All those who exercise an active role during the liturgy, such as reading the Word of God (the lectors) and pronouncing the Prayer of the Faithful should always be dressed in the liturgical vestment (amice, alb, and cingulum or cassock with surplice) and stay during the liturgy in the presbyterium in order to stress the sacred and non-earthly character of this concrete liturgical action.

10. The music and the songs during the liturgy should reflect more truly its sacred character. Therefore they should come closer to the song of the angels as this demands the common song of the “Sanctus” in every Holy Mass. In order to be really more able to sing with one voice with the angels not only the song of the “Sanctus” but the entire liturgy of the Holy Mass, it would be necessary that the heart, the mind, and the voice of the priest and of the faithful were directed toward the Lord and that this would be manifested by exterior signs and gestures as well.