

layout for an hour, a crowd something like a hundred strong gathered to gape and bleat.

The place I visited is not the old utopia of gangsters' craps-shooting molls, of wedding chapels and cash loans, of tail fins and bail bondsmen. It is the new America, a place where actuary tables and shopping malls are churches, museums, and concert halls, a state of mind where the lowest common denominator of the chemically tranquilized millipede defines all beauty, all culture, and all history. *There are 127,000 hotel rooms, more than New York or Paris. The finest collection of owner-operated restaurants in the world. Premier gaming in a Venetian palazzo.* It has nothing to do with gambling—that is to say, with risk—and everything to do with the pursuit of idleness, which is the true revolutionary ideal of mankind. More than once during my sojourn, I was reminded of the scene in Lampedusa's *The Leopard* when the Prince is approaching Palermo besieged by Garibaldist rabble, passing the shuttered convents and the domes of the darkened monasteries:

And at that hour, at night, they were despots of the scene. It was against them really that the bonfires were lit on the hills, stoked by men who were themselves very like those living in the monasteries below, as fanatical, as self-absorbed, as avid for power or rather for the idleness which was, for them, the purpose of power.

The idleness to the pursuit of which the city—and the rich and powerful state, richer than Babylon in the Revelation and armed with nuclear missiles, that emulates, inspires, and sustains it—is dedicated is officially called *entertainment*. Here, even two-bit hookers may only advertise in the Yellow Pages as “entertainers,” which, the taxidriver explained, is not really that confusing after all, since you are probably looking up “escorts” under “E” anyway. He had a *Taxi Rider's Bill of Rights* posted in his cab, I noted, which included “Air Conditioning on Demand.” At the Venetian, *entertainment* was available on similar terms:

Bringing high art and culture to Las Vegas, the Venetian is proud to be home to not one, but TWO prestigious Guggenheim museums. The 63,700 sq. ft. Guggen-

heim Las Vegas, designed by Pritzker-prize winning architect Rem Koolhaas, debuted in October 2001. Also open is the 7,660 sq. ft. Guggenheim Hermitage Museum which combines rare works of art from both the Guggenheim and the State Hermitage Museum from St. Petersburg, Russia. The initial exhibit features 45 masterpieces from the Impressionist and Early Modern eras, some never before seen in the United States. Visitors can also take in headlining acts at the state-of-the-art, four-level Venetian Showroom.

“If the CIA can merge with the KGB,” Gusov murmured ruefully when I pointed to the press release, “I do not see why the Hermitage cannot merge with the Guggenheim.”

Indeed, why not? And, while you're at it, why not *recreate with painstaking exactness*, against the picturesquely lunar backdrop of the atomic testing ground that is the Nevada Desert, *the famous landmarks that make Venice the most beloved, romantic city in the world?* Let us be serious, lady and gentlemen! Did not the wise men who built Yale University, for instance, so reason, aiming to *recreate with painstaking exactness* what they supposed was the ageless Gothic of Euford and Eurbridge, and all the things that made them *the most beloved, romantic seats of higher learning on earth?* Did not the instigators of the American Revolution so reason, wishing to *recreate not one, but TWO great chapters of history, from the excitement and the high drama of Runnymede, with King John and the valiant band of barons that rise up against him in authentic period costume, to the great upheaval of the English Revolution and the prestigious ambience of Sir Oliver Cromwell?* And did not the CIA so reason, when it decided to merge with the KGB in all but name, *to recreate with painstaking exactness the democratic structures of a free country in totalitarian Russia, culminating in an award-winning, 63,700 sq. ft. political façade behind which any number of dirty deals could be done between us and them?*

Lady and gentlemen, I will go further than my gambling friend Gusov. This is not the beginning of the end. This is the end.

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Letter From France

by Michael McMahon

Out With the New



On March 12, I was kneeling at the back of the vast 11th-century abbey church of Fontgombault, France, where I formed exactly one third of the congregation at a mid-week, mid-Lent, mid-morning Mass. At the other end of the nave, the monastic community had processed in with identifiably Benedictine decorum, taken their places in the choir stalls, chanted the morning office of Terce, and begun the introit of the Mass of the day—the Mass and the day being those set down in the missal minimally reformed in 1965, before the liturgical revolution that followed the Second Vatican Council. Fontgombault is anomalous, but not unique: It is one of a small number of religious communities that have managed to remain fully within the Roman discipline while staying loyal to the immemorial liturgical traditions so shamelessly abandoned by Rome. God is worshiped at Fontgombault in Latin. On high days and holidays, the church is packed.

So the Mass had not begun with a “good morning,” the celebrant had not introduced himself by his Christian name, and the elderly woman who had arrived late and hovered behind me as I knelt at the very back of the building had not been exhorted to come on down to the front to “join in.” There had been no warm-up wisecracks, no comments about the weather, no instruction as to when to stand or sit, and no announcement listing the various pages the congregation would have to fumble through in order to follow whichever liturgical options might be in store. No. The Mass had simply begun. The monks had silently taken breath and sung the Introit; and their singing was as natural and easy as breathing itself. And it was beautiful. The voices of 60 men were as one, the sound they made ebbing and flowing, rising and falling, lifting to touch the ancient stone vaulting of the roof and dropping to roll round the massive pillars along the nave: “*Exaudi, Deus, orationem meam, et ne despexeris deprecationem meam: intende in me, et exaudi me.*”

("Hear, O God, my prayer, and despise not my supplication: Be attentive to me, and hear me.")

I followed them in my missal and in my heart. They sang a simple Kyrie, as suited the season; the Epistle was chanted from the Book of Exodus and told of Moses appealing to God to be merciful to His people, even though they had fallen into the ways of false worship. Then came the Gradual: "*Exsurge, Domine, fer opem nobis: et libera nos propter nomen tuum. Deus, auribus nostris audivimus: et patres nostri annuntiaverunt nobis opus, quod operatus est in diebus eorum, et in diebus antiquis.*" ("Arise, O Lord, bring help to us: and deliver us for Thy Name's sake. O God, we have heard with our ears: and our fathers have declared to us the work Thou hast wrought in their days, and in the days of old.") The Gospel told of Jesus preaching in the temple: "*Quid me quaeritis interficere?*" ("Why do you want to kill Me?")

At the washing of hands at the Offertory ("*Domine, dilexi decorum domus tuae: et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*"—"I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house and the place where Thy glory dwelleth"), I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. It was the woman who had arrived a fraction late.

"Excusez-moi, monsieur," she whispered. "*A quelle heure commence la Messe?*" I was a little surprised by her question.

"*Mais voilà la Messe,*" I said, gesturing toward the sanctuary. She sat down a few rows in front of me.

It was a moment of unexpected comedy. An anecdote flew distractingly into my head. In Evelyn Waugh's description of Emperor Haile Selassie's interminable coronation service, an American academic expert gives a running commentary for the benefit of the baffled European guests. For some hours, he interprets for them the ancient liturgical language and arcane ceremonial, identifying and commenting on the principal parts of the Mass. "Then," runs Waugh's punch line, "the mass began."

I attempted to return to my prayers, but the woman's question had left me unsettled. She was, I guessed, about 60 years old. She must have been 30 or so when the Church's ancient liturgical books were burned and replaced by those mundanely mistranslated bundles of options that pass for missals, each ring-bound alternative more gratingly prosaic than the last. Had it really come to this,

that the timeless Latin rituals of Western Christendom could have become as foreign to a contemporary European as the ancient Ethiopian rites?

The answer is, evidently, "yes," and we are much poorer for it. The totality of this break with the past is disconcerting, and the dishonesty through which the faithful—and, for that matter, the unfaithful—have been robbed of their inheritance is astounding. We were told that the liturgy was to be in the vernacular so that we could better appreciate the truths that it expressed; we were then presented not with the old rite translated, but a new rite, which was then mistranslated, and mistranslated on purpose. (A schoolboy who offers "*credo*" for "we believe" is required to correct it; if he writes "for all men" for "*pro multis*," his teacher puts a line through his answer. And no schoolboy at any time in history can have imagined he would get away with translating "*Et cum spiritu tuo*" as "And also with you.")

We were told that we were being given the new Mass because we had asked for it; but groups pressing for the vernacular before the Second Vatican Council had been small, and those petitioning for Latin afterward, much larger. We were told that this "renewal" of worship would fill seminaries and pews and reap converts, but the seminaries are closed, the pews have been replaced by stacking chairs that can be arranged informally by the fewer and fewer people who come to sit on them, and though we now do indeed live in a great age of conversion, it is of conversion to Islam, not to Rome.

We were told that the old, stuffy clericalism was to go and that there would once more be recognition of the "priesthood of the laity"; but for all the lay readers and eucharistic ministers we now have (and don't need), we have a new, worse kind of priestly bossiness. The nonpersonal authority of a celebrant acting ritually has gone. His impact now depends upon his personality. He feels he must impress the people he faces in order to lead them in their prayer to God. The result is usually a performance that would make a daytime talk-show audience cringe. Father Quizmaster jollies, badgers, hectors, upbraids, and hassles his congregation into the kind of "full and active participation" he requires. "That 'amen' wasn't loud enough! Come on, you can do better than that!" The sheep bleat their answer again. Father Paraphrase sees it as his life's mission

to avoid ever saying exactly what is written on the service book in front of him. If his parishioners knew he would say "The Lord be with you" at any point, they might become too relaxed in their response—which they, however, are not allowed or able to embroider. So "The Lord be with all you good people!" it is—once—and "The Good Lord, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, be with each and every one of you!" the next time—but never the same variant twice.

Attending Mass at Fontgombault reminded me of just what it is that we have lost. The machinery of prayer has been smashed, and now, almost everywhere, each liturgical "celebration" is assembled from a rummage-box containing a few of its half-broken, dislocated parts, mixed up with the cultural cast-offs of the 1960's. Which brings me to Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., the recently disgraced archbishop of Milwaukee. It is a long way from the middle of France to Milwaukee, and an even greater distance separates Fontgombault's 12th-century founder, Pierre de L'Etoile, from the precipitately retired American archbishop. L'Etoile founded a spiritual family that still flourishes and endowed it with a home that is timelessly beautiful. Weakland is the wrecking-bar renovator of Milwaukee Cathedral, which he has re-ordered to fit better with the contemporary liturgy he so admires.

What brings Weakland to mind is not his self-indulgent expenditure of five million dollars of church monies to rip out his cathedral's tabernacle, altar, altar rails, and baldachino in order to create a modernized interior overlooked by his own portrait. (Though, in a Church drowning in a sea in which long-sunken child-abuse cases keep bobbing to the surface, commissioning such architectural evisceration is like asking the band on the Titanic to stop playing "Nearer My God to Thee" so that the ship's fitters can move the bandstand into the middle of the ballroom and hang a painting of the ship's architect on the wall. The amount of money already spent on "reordering" church interiors all over the world has never been calculated, but if even a tenth of it had been spent on the starving or the homeless, Christ's saving presence would have been more widely asserted than by all that destructively ignorant tinkering.) Nor did I think of Weakland because of the revelation that he spent \$450,000 of his diocese's funds to buy the silence of a man with whom he had had a sexual re-

lationship. No: I mention Weakland because of an article he wrote (before his fall) in *Commonweal*, in which he acknowledged that “the Second Vatican Council’s reforms have been implemented with mixed results,” and attacked a group he identified as “restorationists”—those who want to restore what has been lost, rather than rework what is new and has been found wanting.

Unfortunately for his argument, the very publication of his article is evidence that the reforms he would improve upon are beyond hope. Every few months—sometimes more often—the English Catholic press is filled with letters to the editor from people parroting half-digested paragraphs from the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Some will quote lines that can only reasonably be construed as requiring the preservation of the ancient language, rites, and practices of the Church; others, equally convincingly, cite texts that call for the introduction of the vernacular and liturgical change. Such fruitless correspondences invariably include a censorious, self-important and heavy-handed put-down of those daring to express discontent at the *status quo* by the likes of Bishop Hugh Lindsay, whose observations in the March 16, 2001, issue of *The Tablet* are made with “my sharply observant bishop’s eye.” (Sharply observant? *My eye!* If his eye were even half as sharp as his tongue, that would really be something to brag about.) These tedious and iterative arguments 40 years after Vatican II simply wouldn’t be happening if the reform had even halfway worked.

One of Weakland’s principle points is that “restorationists” have effectively disqualified themselves from contributing to liturgical progress because they reject contemporary culture and art, which he believes capable of sustaining the transcendent. For good measure, he attributes to the “restorationist” movement a selective appreciation of the common artistic and cultural inheritance: He mocks them for forgetting that Mozart was influenced by the Enlightenment (though he fails to score the obvious Freemasonry point) and for having a “pick-and-choose” approach to the past. (“Seldom do they speak of Renaissance religious paintings or the saccharin devotional compositions of the French Romantics.”)

In nearly 30 years of association with various aspects of what might be called the “Catholic traditionalist movement,” I

have never encountered anyone corresponding to this type. Had I done so, I would have not found much sympathy with them: They might be almost as boorish as Weakland himself. He appears to know as little about people as he knows about culture—contemporary or otherwise. I have, however, met many folks who have remained doggedly devoted to the Mass of their forefathers, for any number of combinations of reasons. I have met those who cling to a simple, penny-catechism understanding of their faith and find that contemporary liturgy fails adequately to express it. I have met others whose devotion to the old Mass is motivated by aesthetics. I have met intelligent and cultivated people who would laugh to scorn the naive and simplistic value judgments implicit in Archbishop Weakland’s arguments, take issue with his lightweight reference to Renaissance painting, and point out that one of the most universally admired and uplifting requiem Masses was written by a French romantic, Gabriel Fauré, who was hardly an exemplary Catholic. I have known devotees of traditional liturgy who are tone deaf, who have written music for it, who follow football (the definitive European contemporary subculture) or who write devotional or secular poetry. I have met lovers of the old liturgy who I guess might be bad, and people I can more confidently say are like saints. I have met those for whom attendance at the old Latin low Mass first thing in the morning, muttered or mumbled in the half-light, is the highest of spiritual experiences. (I agree with them.) And I have met some thoroughly decent folk who are quite fond of the contemporary liturgy they have encountered, and even more, just as decent, who are indifferent.

My trip through France took me to many more churches, but any prayers that I said in them were private. In a wood miles from anywhere in the Limousin, I came across a tiny Norman chapel that resembled a barn. Sunlight leaked through the imperfect roof, and there were feathers and bird mess on the floor, but a vase of fresh flowers stood before the altar, which had been left in its original place. I had Limoges Cathedral almost to myself, and I lit a candle to the Virgin before wandering about to admire it. In the middle of the nave, I saw a young man of about 25, carefully reading a sign describing the building’s history. He looked Middle Eastern; poorly dressed, he had his hands in his pockets,

and wore a tight-fitting woolen hat on his head. I dismissed an uncharitable judgment that began to form in my mind, avoided his eye, and carried on my visit. Later, while I was admiring the stained glass in the apse, I sensed that somebody was standing beside me. It was the young man. I thought he was going to ask me for money—or even, perhaps, to demand it. But he didn’t. He just wanted to share his exultation at the inexpressible beauty of the building. After we had spoken a little, he took me by the arm and led me to a handsome tomb from which the detail had been hacked by revolutionary zealots in the past. “How could anyone destroy something so beautiful?” he asked. And there were tears in his eyes as he spoke.

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Letter From the Countryside

by Mary Berry Smith

Educating for Jeopardy



In 1986, I enrolled my oldest daughter in the same public school that my husband and I had attended. I knew from my experience in public education that there were problems, but I was hopeful that, with our participation in her schooling, she would be fine. During the next few years, I went from being an interested, excited parent and taxpayer to a disillusioned and, finally, angry parent and taxpayer.

Our daughter, Katie, went all the way through public school and is now a sophomore in a small, independent liberal-arts college, finally out of the system. Our second daughter, Virginia, is 16. She finished the second grade in public school and is now homeschooled. Tanya, who is 11, has never attended public school. The idea of, and faith in, public education is hard to give up, but we’ve come to the conclusion that there is no choice for us but to get out.

How long can a failed bureaucracy continue? It is clear to me that the educational system in Kentucky exists to serve itself and the marketplace. And, be-