



Fœderatio Internationalis *Una Voce*

Positio N. 1

THE SERVICE OF THE ALTAR
BY MEN AND BOYS

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From the General Introduction

These papers, commissioned by the International Federation *Una Voce*, are offered to stimulate and inform debate about the 1962 Missal among Catholics ‘attached to the ancient Latin liturgical traditions’, and others interested in the liturgical renewal of the Church. They are not to be taken to imply personal or moral criticism of those today or in the past who have adopted practices or advocated reforms which are subjected to criticism. In composing these papers we adopt the working assumption that our fellow Catholics act in good will, but that nevertheless a vigorous and well-informed debate is absolutely necessary if those who act in good will are to do so in light of a proper understanding of the issues.

The authors of the papers are not named, as the papers are not the product of any one person, and also because we prefer them to be judged on the basis of their content, not their authorship.

The International Federation *Una Voce* humbly submits the opinions contained in these papers to the judgement of the Church.

The Service of the Altar by Men and Boys: Abstract

The tradition of men and boys, to the exclusion of females, serving Mass is a specific instance of the ‘ancient Latin liturgical tradition’ of whose ‘riches’ Pope Benedict XVI has spoken. Its value lies most fundamentally in its relation to the Church’s teaching, clearly expressed by Pope St John Paul II, on the complementarity of the sexes in the economy of salvation, a teaching intimately connected with the teaching that the ordination of women to the priesthood is impossible. Women, more perfectly than men, represent the Church as Bride; men, more perfectly than women, represent Christ as Bridegroom, particularly in his priestly role. This teaching is manifested not only in men, to the exclusion of women, being ordained to the priesthood, but also in those closest to the priesthood in the service of the liturgy, also being exclusively male. This distinction is reinforced by the identification of the sanctuary of a church as heaven, the liturgy carried out there a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy, and the nave of the church as earth, the dwelling place of the Church militant. For these reasons the practice of male service of the altar serves to reinforce, teach, and ‘incarnate’, a fundamental theological truth, according to the principle *lex orandi lex credendi*.

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Introduction to the series.

The Instruction *Universae Ecclesiae* (2011) made clear what was implicit in the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum* (2007), that Masses celebrated according to the Missal of Pope St John XXIII must be said in accordance with the liturgical law appropriate to that Missal. This is a logical consequence of the Holy Father's stated purpose in the Motu Proprio, to create a space in the Church for the 'ancient Latin liturgical tradition', both for the sake of those Catholics attached to it, and because of the value it has in itself. The 'ancient Latin liturgical tradition' has many features which, in different ways, contribute to its special character, and its value for the Church. The point of these position papers is to explicate these features, their rationale, their interrelationship, and the contribution they make to the value of the liturgical tradition as a whole. We hope in so doing to contribute to a debate which will inform the future development of the 'Extraordinary Form' of the Roman Rite.

The Service of the Altar by Men and Boys

1. The issue of men and boys, to the exclusion of females, serving Mass in the Extraordinary Form is an appropriate place to start this series of papers, since on this issue the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei* has already spoken authoritatively, in favour of the binding nature of the rules in force in 1962. It is also very evident that permission for females to serve Mass in the Ordinary Form takes the form not of a recommended policy but a concession to 'specific local reasons' (as expressed in the Congregation for Divine Worship's 1994 ruling),¹ and the Congregation for Divine Worship (CDW) has expressly praised the 'noble tradition of having boys serve at the altar', following which is 'always very appropriate' (Letter, July 27th 2001).² This is very evidently an example of a tradition, characteristic of the 1962 Missal (as well as of the 1970 Missal as originally conceived), which the Motu Proprio is concerned to preserve and foster.
2. The 'noble tradition' of men and boys serving Mass, to the exclusion of females, is notably supported by canon 44 of the Collection of Laodicea, dating from the late fourth century, as well as by innumerable later documents. The value of the tradition does not derive solely from its antiquity. The concern of Popes and bishops to preserve this tradition over so many centuries derives from profound theological and pastoral considerations.
3. The pastoral consideration mentioned by the CDW in both the documents already cited is that the intimate collaboration of the server with the priest in the divine service frequently fosters priestly vocations, a point noted by Pope Pius XII in his great

¹ Notitiae 30 (1994) 333-335

² Notitiae 37 (2001) 397-399

encyclical *Mediator Dei*.³ The CDW is concerned that this source of vocations may be undermined by the admission of females to the service of the altar; a statistical study relevant to this question is considered in the Appendix to this paper. This pastoral problem follows from an issue of theological principle, which is that, properly understood, lay servers are substituting for the traditional minor order of acolyte: they are symbolically, and often causally, closely connected with the clerical state.

4. The theological reasons are related to the Church's irreformable doctrine that only men can be ordained to the priesthood. That teaching, as emphasised by Pope St John Paul II (*Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988); *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994)), is based on the distinct and complementary roles of the sexes in the economy of salvation.
5. Early in *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope St John Paul II reminds us of the principle 'Grace never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects and ennobles it.'⁴ The role of the sexes in the Church, as willed by God, does not overturn but builds upon and perfects the complementarity found in human relationships, and the special charisms of each sex,⁵ notwithstanding the damage done by Original Sin.⁶ Pope St John Paul II speaks of the 'naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality', which is exemplified not only in marriage but in virginity, as a form of self-giving.⁷ God relates to the Church as Bridegroom to Bride, an analogy found notably in Ephesians 5, and also in numerous passages of the Old Testament.⁸
6. Pope St John Paul II goes on to explain that the Blessed Virgin Mary can be described as 'a "figure" of the Church', in the phrase of St Ambrose⁹ quoted by *Lumen Gentium*¹⁰ and reiterated in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.¹¹ Pope St John Paul II concludes that women have a 'prophetic' role in the Church, inasmuch as they 'manifest this truth', of the relationship between God and the Church.¹² This has implications for female religious, who can more perfectly represent the Virgin Bride, the Church: as Pope St John Paul II wrote,

³ Pope Pius XII Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) 200: 'If these youths [sc. altar servers], under the watchful guidance of the priests, are properly trained and encouraged to fulfill the task committed to them punctually, reverently and constantly, then from their number will readily come fresh candidates for the priesthood.' ('Quodsi opportune hi iuvenes excolantur, ac vigilantia sacerdotum cura ad creditum sibi ministerium statutis horis reverenter constanterque obeundum excitentur, tum facile eveniet ut novi ex iisdem sacerdotii candidati oriantur;')

⁴ Pope St John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) (MD) 5: 'Sed gratia, seu Dei actio supernaturalis, numquam naturam excludit, quin immo eam perficit et nobilitat.'

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2333

⁶ On Original Sin see MD 10

⁷ MD 20: 'Natura proin ac sponsalis inclinatio ipsius personae feminae'

⁸ MD 23 mentions Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.

⁹ S. Ambrosius, Expos. Lc. II, 7: PL 15, 1555

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium* 63

¹¹ MD 27 'Mariam Nazarethanam Ecclesiae esse "figuram"' Cf. Pope St John Paul II Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987) 44: Mary is a 'model and figure of the Church' ('exemplar ac typus Ecclesiae')

¹² MD 29

This spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.¹³

We may further observe in this regard that Consecrated Virginity is a vocation unique to women.

7. The analogy of Bridegroom and Bride has its corollary in the relationship between the clergy and the *Christifideles*, and between the Sanctuary and the Nave of a church building. On the first, Pope St John Paul II cited *Mulieris Dignitatem* in his ruling on the impossibility of the ordination of women.¹⁴ If women are able to represent most perfectly the Church as Bride, it is men who are called to represent Christ, particularly in his priestly role.¹⁵ In recognition of the priest's role *in persona Christi*, the priest's collaborators and assistants, his living tools, so to speak, are to be understood as being on the same side of the analogy *vis-à-vis* the Christian faithful, and this is underscored by the long tradition of seeing the sanctuary of a church as representing the heavenly realm, and the nave the earthly one. As the scholar Fr Michel Sinoir writes:

The [Eastern] iconostasis symbolically is Heaven, and its liturgy, which anticipates Heaven, is celebrated only by members of the clergy. The nave is symbolically the earth, the abode of men and women who are preparing themselves to enter into Glory. This is by analogy the same mystery as that of Christ-the-Bridegroom, renewing in the sanctuary His sacrifice, which is gratefully received by the Church-His-Bride who is still in pilgrimage here below.¹⁶

8. This in turn makes sense of the long-standing prohibition, not only of female service at the altar, but of any female presence in the sanctuary during the liturgy. Thus we find that choirs including women are not allowed in the sanctuary by *Musica Sacra* (1958),¹⁷ and female readers are excluded from the sanctuary by the 1975 edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.¹⁸
9. What is at stake is the liturgical representation of theological principles, as we would expect, on the principle *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*.¹⁹ These principles are not simply reflected by the liturgy, they are illustrated, taught, and in time made second

¹³ Vita consecrata 34: 'Hac in sponsali ratione quae praecipua est omnis consecratae vitae, mulier, propriam quasi indolem detegens suae cum Domino coniunctionis, se reperit ipsa.' This could be rendered more literally: 'In this spousal way of thinking, which is the foremost consideration of all consecrated life, woman, discovering the as it were particular character of her union with the Lord, finds herself.'

¹⁴ Pope St John Paul II Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) 2

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI has reiterated the identification of the priest with Christ as Bridegroom of the Church in explaining the meaning and value of celibacy in the priesthood: 'This choice [of celibacy] has first and foremost a nuptial meaning; it is a profound identification with the heart of Christ the Bridegroom who gives his life for his Bride.' Post-Synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) 24; cf. Bl. John Paul II Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* 43.

¹⁶ Fr Michel Sinoir, 'La Question de L'Admission des Femmes au Service de L'Autel', Paris, Pierre Téqui, 1994, p26, translated by Fr Brian Harrison OS.

¹⁷ Instruction *Musica Sacra* (1958) 100

¹⁸ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (1975) 70

¹⁹ Pope Pius XII *Mediator Dei* (1946) 47

nature to the assisting faithful: the liturgy can be said to ‘incarnate’ them.²⁰ It is for this reason that a special value attaches to the preservation of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite in its integrity, since this Form is the liturgical articulation of a set of theological principles which are the Church’s own. The ‘noble tradition’ of male service of the altar gives the Church an apprehensible presentation of the teaching of the Church on the role of the sexes in the economy of salvation, and Christ’s relationship with the Church, as Bridegroom to Bride, which itself mirrors God’s relationship with Creation.

²⁰ Cf. Christoph, Cardinal Schönborn *Loving the Church: Spiritual exercises preached in the presences of Pope John Paul II* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996) p205: ‘Yet how important such signs are for “incarnating” the faith.’ (He is speaking of liturgical orientation in this passage.)

Appendix: Service at the Altar and Vocations to the Priesthood

The importance of service at the Altar in fostering vocations, which has been consistently mentioned in official documents, is not easy to quantify. At certain times, and in certain contexts (such as boarding schools run by communities of priests), a large majority of boys would have served the Altar. Today, for a number of reasons, this is not so. Far fewer priests are to be found saying private Masses in Catholic schools, for example. Serving in parishes is generally the preserve of a limited number of children, and many of these children are now girls.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), which is based at Georgetown University in the United States, conducts an annual Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood with a view to determining the most important influences upon them. An overwhelming majority were altar servers during their formative years. Surveys over recent years provide the following numbers:

2010: 70% percent of the respondents had been servers.

2011: 71%

2012: 75%

2013: 67%

2014: 80%

Participation in other parish roles was very much less significant, the next most common being Lector, a role experienced in 2014 by 52% of ordinands. Among prayer practices, the most common, Eucharistic adoration, was 'regularly used' by 70% by ordinands before entering the seminary, and the Rosary by 68%.

In this context the very high percentage who had served the Altar before entering seminary is at least very suggestive.