

Richard Major

THE  
EPIC  
OF GOD

*Orabo spiritu orabo et mente :  
psallam spiritu psallam et mente.*

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# PREFACE

**T**HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the Most Holy Mass, as it has been celebrated throughout the Western Church for a thousand years, and as it is still celebrated in the remarkably traditional parish of Ascension and St Agnes, in Washington D.C.<sup>1</sup> I wrote it when serving as assistant priest there

The book is not meant to be scholarly. Nor is it exactly devotional. I'm merely asking exactly what is happening as the massive and elaborate rite runs along on its stately progress: asking precisely what goes on, and why, and what each bit suggests we are to think and feel and pray about – and then, I hope, answering these questions.

That means slowing down the rite (which in different senses goes both slowly, and very quickly), so that we can examine it almost frame by frame, as they do the Zapruder film. In the same way, music-lovers sometimes open the score of a symphony on their laps to see how the harmonies work, bar by bar. But the goal of their probing is to throw the score aside and listen to the symphony again, more intensely than before. So with us. I hope when we've finished poring over these twenty still-photographs of the Mass we can forget about them, and attend to the gorgeous motion of the rite undistracted, but with a more vivid sense of what is going on. This seems to me the proper Christian method:

*Orabo spiritu orabo et mente : psallam spiritu psallam et mente.*

*With the spirit I shall pray, and with the mind;  
sing psaltries with the spirit, and with the mind also.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> 1217 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington D.C. 20005; [www.ascensionandstagnes.org](http://www.ascensionandstagnes.org)

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians xiv<sup>15</sup>.

### **The Mass as prayer.**

**T**HE MASS IS PRAYER: the best prayer of all.

The Mass is also the world's greatest work of art: the biggest (because millions of Christians, dead and living, have contributed to its development by their preferences, dislikes, inspirations, reactions); the oldest (it has a continuous history of twenty centuries); the richest (in the sense of its uncountable echoes and layers); and the most important. It is therefore, like all serious art, not easily understood at first glance: how could it be? Why should it be?

### **The Mass as art and artefact**

**I**F YOU WANT A SCHOLARLY AND TECHNICAL account of the Mass, very beautifully written, the best book on the Mass written in the twentieth century was by an Anglican monk, Dom Gregory Dix, and called *The Shape of the Liturgy*. It was published as long ago as 1945, but is still read and is still influential in the Roman Catholic communion, as well as our own. Dr Dix was a convert from Wesleyan Methodism, which I suppose is why he maintained such an enthusiasm for the Mass, and also why we worked so hard to understand it, and to understand why it is as it is. He tells the story of his sweet old Methodist grandmother, who reluctantly showed up at Nashdom Abbey for his profession as a monk. She watched with silent horror the ceremonies of High Mass. Afterwards she divulged to her Methodist friends – who passed it on to Dix – her theory that the priest had released from its cage (the tabernacle) a large crab which he then toyed with, for some sinister and unguessable reason. Of course what she had seen were the elaborate hand gestures of the celebrant during the Canon of the Mass, which do, indeed, once you think of it, look like attempts to stop a crustacean getting away. She refused to believe, even when her grandson assured her, that this occult performance had anything to do with the simple (indeed gaunt) little service of Holy Communion occasionally practised at her Wesleyan conventicle.

There's an old saying that the Christian Faith has mysteries, but not secrets. In other words, it is full of truths too deep for human reason to

plummet, but there is no confidential information. Anyone is allowed to ask anything – which is what Dix’s grandmother ought to have done. We never mean to mystify; the quality of Christian life is liberty. I was also a convert, like Dix, from a Protestant sect, and had the same experience as he had, and his grandmother had, of confronting a ceremony clearly sumptuous and significant, but inscrutable in its detail. I was lucky: when I first saw these things and pointed at them with stupid awe, asking like a child, *What?* and *Why?*, my friends were patient in explaining. Not all converts have been so lucky, and feel shy about asking. They go on for decades with questions they’d like to have answered, but don’t like to put to people who have gone to Mass all their lives, for fear of seeming too shockingly *naïve*. But you know the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes. You have heard of the False Crab. The other category of person with questions to ask is (I have discovered as a parish priest) precisely People Who Have Gone to Mass All Their Lives. They are even shyer about asking.

In both cases, this reticence is a shame. We can spend our whole lives – indeed, ought to spend our lives – plunging deeper and deeper into these bright mysteries. It’s a pity not to begin by knowing what can be known merely by asking. *Say, what is that thing on your left arm doing?* (it’s a *maniple*; it used to be a handkerchief; it doesn’t *do* anything now; but what it is about is ...).

### Liturgiology

**T**HE STUDY OF LITURGY is a noble branch of learning, and if you are interested in it, I suggest you start with Dix’s great and delightful book. Liturgiology (as it is called) is fine antiquarian knowledge, with a delightful fragrance of dust to it – although dust is an intoxicant, and like all fragrant knowledge, liturgiology can be dangerous. The danger is that we forget the Mass is *work*: it is undertaken because it is true, not because it is charming and culturally important. The core of its proper grandeur is the stark fact that God reveals Himself to us in it. Christ “has obtained a better liturgy” (Hebrews viii<sup>6</sup>) for us to live by.

Liturgiology is mainly interested in studying the evolution of the Mass, especially the 'shape' or structure of the Mass. This achieved its culmination in the Greek East a thousand years ago. In the Latin West, the Mass kept evolving for much longer, reached its rich completion with the Roman Rite, perfected in the 1570s. That is the classic shape, and it is essentially the rite we use here at Ascension and Saint Agnes – still partly in Latin.

### **A manifesto.**

**H**ERE'S THE CONTROVERSIAL PART.

In the late nineteenth century Christians of both the Roman and Anglican communions rediscovered the excitement of ritual, and began to read and think about ritual intelligently and carefully. Scientific liturgiology was born, or reborn. The origins and history of rites were untangled; plainsong and other glories of mediæval worship were recovered and purified; a few awkward late ritual developments were reversed.

But after this pious infancy, the 'Liturgical Movement' turned rabid in its old age. After the Second War, the Movement, succumbing to the spirit of the age of Le Corbusier and Beckett, declared for Modernism in Christian worship. It demanded a thorough return to what it thought (or guessed, or hoped, or pretended) to be the spirit of first century Christian worship – and certainly *is* the spirit of popular culture in the 1960s: informality, populism, 'audience participation', gaunt and stripped-down simplicity.

Unfortunately, this odd fashion in liturgiology coincided with the Roman Catholic Church's great loss of nerve. Suddenly, rather shyly and pathetically, she yearned to be up-to-date. At the Second Vatican Council Roman Catholic worship was revolutionised. For the Liturgical Movement was happy to write off as 'corruptions' whatever mediæval or Counter-Reformation developments in the Mass it found uncongenial. By unhappy imitation, the worship of much of the Anglican Communion has also largely been revolutionised. And hence a lot of what I'll be

describing in these chapters has been scrapped throughout much of the Church.

But it hasn't been scrapped here; and what has been scrapped can be recovered – and will be. I am sure that Ascension and Saint Agnes is in the historical mainstream. The Liturgical Movement is a dead end. The classic Mass, as it has grown and aged, is an old song, a love-duet between man and God, worn more deep and subtle with each century. The experimental liturgy of the 1950s and 1960s sounds like a jingle. That style of worship already feels as quaint, as brutal, as inexplicably drab as buildings of the same era.

In the Church of England's new liturgy, *Common Worship (2000)*, a reaction is under way, back toward richer language and more elaborate, traditional forms. A century from now, I predict, antiquarians will titter over documents retailing the quirky and dated 'modernised' ceremonies of the late twentieth century. By then, the real Mass will be alive again throughout Christendom – evolving no doubt, but evolving organically: growing out of all its centuries of sonorous and mellow tradition. The Church can no more successfully cut off the traditions of the Mass than society can scrap the complexity of real languages, and begin again with stark Esperanto.

Therefore these chapters will describe the real thing – the living and traditional Mass, still celebrated here: an art-work which is so elaborate *because* it is valid. Life is intricate, and humanity is iridescent, *therefore* the Mass is diverse as a rainbow.

The over-simplifications of everyday life, as well as the obscure confusions of everyday life, stop now. We are in the realm of perfect, and therefore ornate, order. Rough slog gives way to the soaring of reason, here made visible in rich, intelligent gesture and old strong words. The organ stops, a bell rings, dramatically, eyes turn to the sacristy, and, as it were, the curtain goes up.