

BOOK REVIEW

The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy by Martin Mosebach (Ignatius Press, 2006). 210 pages.

THE *Heresy of Formlessness* is a collection of essays and meditations on the ancient Roman (“Tridentine”) Mass and the post-Vatican II liturgical reform in the Roman Catholic Church, by the renowned German novelist and essayist Martin Mosebach.

The basic thrust of Mosebach’s book is by no means new, and should be familiar to enthusiasts of the traditional Western Rite. Like other traditionalists, Mosebach argues that the liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council were ill-founded and defective; that the New Mass (*Novus Ordo Missae*) is artificial and inferior to the ancient Roman Mass; and that many of the contemporary Church’s problems and crises can be traced back to the ruthless suppression of the old liturgical forms and their substitution with new revised forms (allegedly closer to the worship of the “primitive Church”).

The post-Vatican II period has produced mountains of “Traditionalist” literature arguing these same basic points, condemning the reforms and exalting the traditional forms of worship. I myself have devoured a fair amount of this literature, and while I am sympathetic with most of it, I am also somewhat mystified and put off by certain aspects of the polemic. But I must say that I have never read a book quite like Mosebach’s, and I would not hesitate to place it far above the vast majority of “traditionalist” literature, too often marred by an excessively polemical approach, lacking in depth, moderation and nuance.

At first glance, the full title of the book, *The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy*, seems polemical and negative to the extreme. Again, judging this book only by its cover, one might conclude that it’s just another angry traditionalist screed. There are angry and polemical aspects to be found here for sure; but Mosebach is not preoccupied with these things. He has so much more to teach us in his profoundly beautiful and moving meditations on the Liturgy and the inescapably incarnational/liturgical nature of Christianity itself.

Mosebach, by his own admission, is not a professional theologian. This, of course, could lead some crit-

ics to conclude that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Likewise, some might point out that Mosebach is not a “trained liturgist” when he speaks of the meaning of Christian liturgy and its development through the centuries. (This, of course, is the same accusation made against Pope Benedict XVI by opponents of his recent *motu proprio* allowing greater freedom in the celebration of the traditional Roman Rite). But, in fact, Mosebach’s very lack of these credentials is precisely what makes his words so fresh and interesting to me. He approaches the topic of the liturgy, not only as a poet and artist, but also as a man who has returned to the Church through the re-discovery of the old rite of Mass which he experienced, but never really understood, as a child. He knows the Mass, not as an academic, but as a man who has come to experience it and believe in it as the very foundation of his faith and Christian existence. Though Mosebach does not possess a doctorate in divinity, it seems to me that he represents a far better class of theologian, the only class recognized by the fourth-century desert father Evagrius Ponticus: “*If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.*”

Mosebach is well aware that his love of the ancient liturgy makes him something of an unsophisticated troglodyte in the eyes of many. He does not dispute this accusation; in fact, he delights in identifying himself as a “Stone Age materialist.” Because he holds “the assumption that material actions have effects in purely spiritual regions,” (the highest material action, of course, being the act of sacrifice), Mosebach admits that he is something of an “animist” still “on the lowest rung of mankind”, for whom “all matter is so full of spirit and life that they simply pour from it” (p. 22). Mosebach believes that Christians, in experiencing the Mass, are participating in the very fulfillment of the aspirations of all religious cultures, primitive, Jewish, or Gentile (it’s no accident, by the way, that the traditional Canon of the Mass references three mysterious sacrificial figures from the Book of Genesis – Abel the primitive human sacrifice, Abraham the father of the Israelite animal sacrifices, and Melchizedek the Gentile king who sacrificed bread and wine). “It was clear to me,” Mosebach writes,

that the Catholic Mass in its traditional form – unchanged for more than 1500 years – should be seen, not as the rite of one particular religion, but as the fulfillment of all religions, having absorbed and enveloped them all. I was uniting myself with all men who had ever lived, from the most distant times until the present, because I was doing what they had done. Participating in the traditional Sacrifice of the

Mass, I felt that I was a human being doing something befitting a human being, that I was fulfilling the most important duty of human existence – perhaps for the first time – and that I was doing this for all the others who did not want to, or could not, fulfill this duty. (p. 23)

Mosebach believes that the liturgy has greatly suffered at the hands of academics and experts. The liturgy has been analyzed to death from a purely historical point-of-view, to the point where it has lost all sense of mystery and transcendence. It has come to be seen as a mere human artifact, a product of the vicissitudes of history, a thing that can be tampered with to fit the mentalities and habits of changing societies. The result of this meddling by specialists is that “all have lost something priceless, namely, the innocence that accepts [the liturgy] as something God-given, something that comes down to man as gift from heaven” (p. 25).

In this connection, Orthodox readers will be intrigued by Mosebach’s frequent references to the example of the Orthodox Church and her liturgical tradition as being relatively untouched by this modern madness. “The idea that we [Roman Catholics] have something to learn from Orthodoxy,” Mosebach admits, “is not a popular one. But we must accustom ourselves to studying – and studying thoroughly – what the Byzantine Church has to say about sacred images and the liturgy” (p. 91). Early in the book, Mosebach quotes the twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian and martyr Pavel Florensky: “Our liturgy is older than us and our parents, even older than the world. The liturgy was not invented, it was discovered, appropriated ... *Our liturgy comes, not from man, but from the angels.*” (p. 23).

Likewise, Mosebach cites the famous passage from the Treatise *De Spiritu Sancto* of Saint Basil the Great, wherein the holy Doctor tells us that many of the Church’s liturgical traditions (such as prayer facing the East, or the invocation of the Holy Spirit) are not found explicitly in Scripture, or invented by men, but were received by the Church directly from God himself. And if the liturgy, even in its most intricate details, is a revelation from heaven, it must be treasured and respected, just as we treat Sacred Scripture. Even the rubrics of the liturgy are sacred, according to Mosebach, and cannot be ignored or jettisoned without dire consequences for Christian faith and worship. “The Hasidic Jews ... said that every word in their holy books was an angel. That is how I want to regard the rubrics of the Missal: for me, every prescription of the Missal is an Angel.” (p. 36). This, for Mosebach, is exactly the right attitude that Christians

should have when approaching the liturgical tradition of the Church. It is not a thing created by mere mortals, which can be dissected or experimented upon. It is a divine mystery that can only be entered into with reverence, fear and humility.

It is this approach to the Liturgy, according to Mosebach, that has been almost completely lost with the introduction of the modern Roman Catholic Liturgy, a committee-produced product, tailor-made specifically for modern man’s own peculiar habits and prejudices. Annibale Bugnini, the architect of the *Novus Ordo Missae*, admitted that his goal was to conform the Liturgy to the standards of modern secular man as the perfect and normative and final man. It is not hard to see why nothing less than the complete suppression of the ancient Liturgy was necessary to bring this about. Bugnini was perhaps right about one thing: modern man has somehow lost the natural ability to worship and sacrifice. As Mosebach says, once we were all *homines religiosi*, “the kind of man who believes he can make a connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm by means of sacral acts, who sees the material form as a mirror of transcendence, and who lives in the presence of God (or of the gods)” (p. 54). We have not been the same since the Enlightenment, and what we need are not new forms reflecting to our inability to worship, but the old forms to teach us how to worship like proper human beings, like our ancient fathers did.

The “heresy of formlessness” to which the title refers is the idea that Christianity is some sort of religious philosophy or system of ethics that is entirely separate from, or indifferent to, its historic and traditional forms of liturgical and artistic expression. Christianity is not really a system of ideals or moral precepts, most of which can be found clearly in other religions and philosophies. “The only new thing in Christianity,” writes Mosebach,

and what distinguishes it from all other religions – what makes it, so to speak, the capstone of all religions – is not the doctrine, but the Person of the God-man, his birth from a Virgin, his sacrificial death for the sins of mankind, his Resurrection from the dead. It is a historical person, not a mythical one, and the historical events of his life can be fairly precisely dated from the reports of the officials of an obscure Roman province ... At the center of Christianity, however, stands the miracle of the Incarnation. Only against the background of the Incarnation do all the words and deeds of Jesus exercise their binding claim upon us. (pp. 66-67)

There simply cannot be a Christianity without Liturgy

and Sacrifice. Form and content are inseparably wedded in Christianity; therefore, in Mosebach's understanding, "a loss of form implies a loss of content." Too often the Church's historic forms of worship and art are dismissed as merely external, ornamental, and therefore dispensable or superfluous. Hence the need of self-appointed reformers to strip these elements away to find some sort of pure, disincarnate Christian philosophy. This, for Mosebach, is nothing less than heresy and the contradiction of authentic Christianity. And the notion that the traditional and historic forms of the Liturgy are merely human artifacts, an add-on to "basic" Christianity, which can be rearranged, adjusted or updated every once in a while by experts, has been nothing short of disastrous to the Faith itself. The core of the traditional Mass is "the revelation of Christ, and therefore the religious man will want to treat the Mass in its entirety as revelation" (p. 36). We do not tamper with revelation. We can only receive it with humility, or reject it as unpalatable.

This "heresy of formlessness" to which Mosebach refers is actually a new form of a very old thing – the heresy of iconoclasm, which is "characterized by both the destruction and inability to create images" (p. 85). Iconoclasm has appeared periodically throughout the history of Christianity, most notably in the eighth and ninth centuries in the Byzantine Church, and in the sixteenth century in the Western Church. Mosebach, however, believes that today's iconoclasm is a far more destructive and virulent strain than the classical Byzantine or Protestant varieties. At least the great iconoclastic movements of the past were based on some sort of theological principle: both Byzantine and Protestant iconoclasts, for instance, appealed to a particular interpretation of the Second Commandment regarding "graven images." The new iconoclasm does not make these sorts of arguments, and does not display the same "holy rage." Mosebach believes that we have in our time "the first example of a liturgical iconoclasm that has come from a religious anemia, an anti-ritualism on the basis of a religion that is feeble" (p. 63). This is one of the major enemies that threatens traditional Christianity in the twenty-first century, which can only be resisted by an utter refusal to abandon or adulterate the worship of our fathers.

In such a short space, it is impossible even to touch briefly on all the brilliant passages of *The Heresy of Formlessness*. Instead, I will merely whet the appetite of potential readers with a short preview of chapter 10, "Revelation through Veiling in the Old Roman Catholic Liturgy." For me, this is the most intriguing

sections of the book. According to Mosebach, in traditional Christian liturgy, "to veil something is to reveal it." In the traditional Mass, we veil the sacred ministers, the sacred vessels, sacred words, sacred actions, and sacred images. Mosebach traces this mysticism of veiling in the Christian liturgy back to "three strands of tradition" – "the Jerusalem Temple, with its curtain veiling the Holy of Holies"; "the ritual of the epiphany of the monarch" in Byzantium (apparently derived by the Eastern Roman imperial court from the Persian Empire); and the liturgical practice of the *Anastasis*, or Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

In the Western Rite, the rubrics direct us to cover the crosses in our churches and our homes with veils during Passiontide. And in the Liturgy of Good Friday, there is a very elaborate and dramatic ceremony of the unveiling of the Holy Cross before it is solemnly adored by the faithful. Why all of this veiling and unveiling? According to Mosebach,

Here the purpose of the veiling was not to withdraw the cross from sight: it was so that the cross would be treated like the real Cross; from being a devotional object, a cultic object, a sacred symbol, it would once again become the real instrument of torture on which Christ died. Thus we see that the veiling of the crosses is intended only to stress the historical nature of the work of Redemption, just as the name of Pontius Pilate – that modestly successful provincial administrator – is used in the Creed: it speaks of a real death on real cross in a concrete place at a precisely identifiable hour of world history (p. 170).

Mosebach further explains the purpose of liturgical veiling with reference to the consecrated Host:

Veiling ... becomes a visible sign of the nimbus of grace and holiness that has become invisible to human eyes. Veiling, in the liturgy, is the halo that is by nature appropriate to the sacred vessels and their even more sacred contents ... Veiling, in the liturgy, is not intended to withdraw some object from view, to make a mystery out of it, or to conceal its appearance. The appearance of the veiled things is common knowledge anyway. But their outward appearance tells us nothing about their real nature. It is the veil that indicates this. If one draws this veil aside, and the veils that lie behind it, like peeling an onion, and penetrates to the core of the mystery, one is still confronted with a veil: the Host itself is a veil ... (p. 172).

The theology of liturgical veiling is expressed beautifully in the ancient Roman Mass, but it is even more beautifully expressed (as Mosebach points out) in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy. The Eastern Orthodox iconostasis, deriving from the early Christian practice

of enveloping the altar behind a curtain during the Canon, is a perfect example of a liturgical veil. Though many medieval Western churches had “rood-screens”, Mosebach observes that even without this feature, in the traditional Western Rite, “the celebrants’ backs, clothed in vestments of the same color, also formed a wall in front of the sacrificial action” (p. 165). And in both the Eastern and Western Rites, for instance, the Canon/Anaphora is traditionally recited silently, thus forming a sort of auditory veil.

(As an aside, it never hurts to emphasize that the rubrics of the Western Rite assume a silent recitation of the Canon and many of other prayers of the Mass. Yet I fear that the silent Canon is becoming the exception, rather than the rule, in many of our churches. The Western Rite assumes certain nuances in the recitation of prayers. Not everything is “belted out” as a radio announcer or auctioneer might do. Some parts of the Mass are intoned or said in a loud voice, some are said in a subdued but audible voice, and some are said in the secret or mystic voice. In this, the Latin tradition is no different from the Byzantine. One wonders, then, how monstrous *Novus Ordo* style sound systems and perpetually “miked” clergy have found their way even into Byzantine Rite Orthodox churches! All of this is inimical to the traditional liturgical ethos, as explained by Mosebach).

Modern liturgists (Catholic, Protestant, and even some Orthodox), however, have done their best to discourage and eliminate the practice of veiling, almost suggesting that it’s a clerical conspiracy to keep the laity from the “real action” (hence the *Novus Ordo*’s insistence that the laity be able to hear and see absolutely everything that goes on at the altar). Such scholars have generally missed the entire point of veiling in the Liturgy. Veiling is not meant to be a clerical shield to protect holy things from the profane gaze of the somehow “unworthy” laity. Rather, holy things are veiled not to *conceal* but to *reveal* exactly what they are to the faithful. In reality, this is nothing more than the theology of the Eucharist, the Divine Body and Blood of Christ hidden beneath the veils of bread and wine.

The Heresy of Formlessness, though a brief and somewhat disjointed collection of literary odds and ends, is truly the best defence, not only of the classical Roman Mass, but also of the traditional orthodox catholic attitude and approach to the liturgical and sacramental life. Mosebach, in such a short space, has captured the spirit of the traditional Liturgy in a way that few modern authors have been able to do. I believe that this is an immensely important book, written at a very crucial time. It was written, of course, for a Roman Catholic audience, but I believe that Orthodox Chris-

tians, regardless of rite, will find much to admire and learn from here. Though Mosebach is a member of the Church of Rome, I would venture to say that what he is really explaining and defending (without knowing it) is what we know and love as Western Orthodoxy.

At the risk of sounding preachy, I would not hesitate to say that this book should be required reading for all Western Rite Orthodox clergy, who endeavor to keep the riches of the ancient Latin liturgical tradition alive within the bosom of Orthodoxy. This is a gargantuan task, and one that requires not only great determination but also great humility and faithfulness. The Western Rite is not some human artifact, or a product of some ecclesiastical bureaucrat’s brilliance or ingenuity. We talk about its “revival” or “restoration” or “approval” in the modern Orthodox Church, and defend its historical development. But if we are to survive and succeed, we must believe that the Western Rite has been given to us a gift, even a revelation, by God himself. “*Ego enim accepi a Domino quod et tradidi vobis*” (I Cor. 11:23). That means that pet theories, armchair theologies, private revelations, personal improvements, fresh infusions from exotic sources, or ideological axes-to-grind (even in the name of one’s perception of what constitutes authentic “Orthodoxy”) take a back seat to the received and objective fact of the rite, as expressed in its authoritative texts and rubrics. The Holy Spirit is the pilot of the Church, and the author of the Liturgy. Likewise, the only personality in the Liturgy that matters is that of our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. What a relief to the human celebrant of the liturgy that, from the moment he has begun Mass, he

has surrendered his personality to take on a far greater role – and more than a role: he has taken on objective embodiment. The priest’s face is seldom seen, for when he briefly turns to the congregation with his greeting “*Dominus vobiscum*”, he keeps his head slightly bowed. It is the Crucified, towering over the altar, who looks at those praying; he is the one who is acting, while his sufferings are recalled, in the tradition’s authentic formulae, to the minds of the participants (p. 50).

Remember: Every word, every rubric, is an Angel. Every action is a revelation from heaven. “*Si quis apposerit ad haec, apponet Deus super illum plagas scriptas in libro isto ... Et si quis diminuerit de verbis libri prophetiae hujus, auferet Deus partem ejus de libro vitae, et de civitate sancta, et de his quae scripta sunt in libro isto...*” (Apoc. 22:19-20). Let us obey what we so often hear in the divine gift and revelation that we call the Byzantine Rite: “Wisdom! Let us attend!” – **Benjamin J. Andersen, B.Phil. M.Div. (Br. Benedict, OSB.Obl.)**