

Fr. Perozich comments —

Dr. Kwasniewski's article is informative for me as a priest in order to call to mind the depth of the truths that I am expressing when I celebrate Holy Mass as I do in the Mass of Paul VI.

When Summorum Pontificum was promulgated, it is my understanding that the usus antiquior was to inform the modern rite.

In seminary a priest taught us how to celebrate Mass. A layman, who had been a monk but never ordained a priest, taught liturgy. I can't teach what is not in the depth of my being, but only reveal what my mind has been able to grasp and my faculty of recall able to repeat. The good layman tried, but he could he give what was not a part of his soul.

Dr. Kwasniewski reveals the depth of the usus antiquior, its holiness, its truths which help me as a priest who celebrate 995 of 1,000 Masses in the new form.

His article may be totally new to lay people, but it opens my mind and soul to the depth of holiness that I celebrate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

The Priest Praying for Himself at Mass



Peter Kwasniewski, PhD [September 8, 2021](#)

What might have been “self-evident truths” once upon a time are no longer evident to many clergy, to their superiors, and to their flocks. One of these truths is staggeringly obvious, yet its implications seem to be

not only ignored, but suppressed: *the priest, too, has a soul to sanctify and save.*

Stated baldly, this truth is obvious. One might as well say that water is wet, or fire is hot. But one may genuinely wonder if it's taken as seriously as it ought to be. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, pastoral activism has threatened to turn the priest into a [glorified social worker](#), a man so much oriented to others that he ceases to be oriented to God. The *versus populum* stance at Mass, so far from being just a groundless bit of false antiquarianism, becomes emblematic of a way of life: the celebrant is not so much offering a sacrifice to God on behalf of the people *and of himself as a member of the Church*, but rather offering a service *to* the people, with himself in the role of teacher (at best) or showman (at worst). This dynamic has been analyzed so many times (see, e.g., [this article](#) and [this one](#)) that it hardly needs elaboration.

In this article, however, I wish to focus on the extent to which the Order of Mass in the classical Roman Rite makes the priest pray for himself in a deliberate and earnest way. Not for someone else; not for the people; not for a vague set of intentions; but specifically *for himself*.

After the sign of the Cross, the first words: "I will go in to the altar of God." The whole of Psalm 42 is recited, alternately with the ministers, as a personal preparation. Here are the priest's own verses:

Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy; deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man.... Send forth Thy light and Thy truth: they have conducted me and brought me unto Thy holy hill, and into Thy tabernacles.... To Thee, O God, my God, I will give praise upon the harp: why art thou sad, O my soul, and why dost thou disquiet me?... Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.... I will go in to the altar of God.

Then comes the priest's *own* Confiteor—not a shared and therefore comfortably untargeted confession, but a personal one to which the rest of the Church bears witness:

I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever virgin, to blessed Michael the archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul, to all the saints, and to you, brethren, that *I* have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and

deed: [the priest strikes his breast three times saying:] through *my* fault, through *my* fault, through *my* most grievous fault. Therefore *I* beseech the blessed Mary ever virgin, blessed Michael the archangel, blessed John the Baptist, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, all the saints, and you, brethren, to pray to the Lord our God for *me*.

As the priest mounts the altar steps, he prays in the plural, but surely with himself most of all in mind: “Take away from us our iniquities, we beseech Thee, O Lord; that, being made pure in heart we may be worthy to enter into the Holy of Holies. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.” Then bowing to kiss the altar, he prays in the singular: “We beseech Thee, O Lord, by the merits of those of Thy saints whose relics are here, and of all the saints, that Thou wouldst vouchsafe to pardon me all my sins. Amen.”

Before the Gospel, the priest recites these prayers at the center of the altar:

Cleanse my heart and my lips, O almighty God, Who didst cleanse with a burning coal the lips of the prophet Isaias;

and vouchsafe in Thy loving kindness so to purify me that I may be enabled worthily to announce Thy holy Gospel. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. Vouchsafe, O Lord, to bless me. The Lord be in my heart and on my lips, that I may worthily and becomingly announce His gospel. Amen.

Perhaps the most striking example of a priest's prayer for himself is to be found in the traditional Offertory of the Mass, which [emerged in the early Middle Ages](#) and is to be found, with similar texts, in all Western liturgical rites.

Receive, O Holy Father, almighty and eternal God, this spotless host, which I, Thine unworthy servant, offer unto Thee, my living and true God, for my countless sins, trespasses, and omissions; likewise for all here present, and for all faithful Christians, whether living or dead, that it may avail both me and them to salvation, unto life everlasting. Amen....

The *Lavabo* is found in its full form:

I will wash my hands among the innocent, and will cleanse compass Thine altar, O Lord. That I may hear the voice of praise, and tell of all Thy wondrous works. I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwelleth. Take not away my soul, O God, with the wicked; nor my life with men of blood. In whose hands are iniquities: their right hand is filled with gifts. But as for me, I have walked in my innocence; redeem me, and have mercy on me. My foot hath stood in the right way; in the churches I will bless Thee, O Lord. Glory be to the Father...

Of course, many other prayers in the Order of Mass would *include* the celebrant, but I am keeping my gaze on those that tie in more personally with the priest's own role, his sinfulness and sanctification. The next obvious candidate, then, would be the "Nobis quoque peccatoribus" of the Roman Canon, when he strikes his breast and gently lifts his voice in humble confession:

To us sinners, also, Thy servants, who put our trust in the multitude of Thy mercies, vouchsafe to grant some part and fellowship with Thy holy apostles and martyrs; with John, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas, Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicitas, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia, and with all Thy saints. Into their company do Thou, we beseech Thee, admit us, not weighing our merits, but freely pardoning our offenses: through Christ our Lord.

The embolism after the Lord's Prayer:

Deliver us, we beseech Thee, O Lord, from all evils, past, present, and to come: and by the intercession of the blessed and glorious Mary, ever a virgin, Mother of God, and of Thy holy apostles Peter and Paul, of Andrew, and of all the saints, graciously grant peace in our days, that through the help of Thy bountiful mercy we may always be free from sin and secure from all disturbance.

The three prayers of preparation, *all* of which must be said:

O Lord Jesus Christ Who didst say to Thine apostles: Peace I leave you, My peace I give you: look not upon my sins, but upon the faith of Thy Church, and vouchsafe to grant her peace and unity according to Thy will: Who livest and reignest God, world without end. Amen.

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, Who, according to the will of the Father, through the co-operation of the Holy Ghost, hast by Thy death given life to the world: deliver me by this Thy most Sacred Body and Blood from all my iniquities, and from every evil; make me always cleave to Thy commandments, and never suffer me to be separated from Thee, Who with the same God, the Father and the Holy Ghost, livest and reignest God, world without end. Amen.

Let not the partaking of Thy Body, O Lord Jesus Christ, which I, all unworthy, presume to receive, turn to my judgement and condemnation; but through Thy loving kindness may it be to me a safeguard and remedy for soul and body; Who, with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, livest and reignest, God, world without end. Amen.

At the moment of communion, the priest prays privately, still facing east, head bowed to the Lord—and crucially, in the midst of *a communion rite of his own* that completes the offering of the sacrifice, before he turns to hold aloft the Lamb of God for the congregation:

I will take the bread of heaven, and will call upon the name of the Lord. Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof; but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed [thrice]. May the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ keep my soul unto life everlasting. Amen.

What shall I render unto the Lord for all the things that He hath rendered unto me? I will take the chalice of salvation and will call upon the name of the Lord. With high praises will I call upon the Lord, and I shall be saved from all mine enemies. May the Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ keep my soul unto life everlasting. Amen.

Having distributed the Body of Christ, he recites two prayers after communion:

Into a pure heart, O Lord, may we receive the heavenly food which has passed our lips; bestowed upon us in time, may it be the healing of our souls for eternity.

May Thy Body, O Lord, which I have received, and Thy Blood which I have drunk cleave to mine inmost parts: and do Thou grant that no stain of sin remain in me, whom pure and holy mysteries have refreshed: Who livest and reignest world without end. Amen.

Of greatest importance in grasping the theology and spirituality of the Roman Mass is the last prayer said by the priest prior to his giving the final blessing:

May the lowly homage of my service be pleasing to Thee, O most holy Trinity: and do Thou grant that the sacrifice which I, all unworthy, have offered up in the sight of Thy majesty, may be acceptable to Thee, and, because of Thy loving kindness, may avail to make atonement to Thee for myself and for all those for whom I have offered it up. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Mass does not suddenly end but merges into the Last Gospel, a gentle moment of meditation, gratitude, and farewell, when the Beloved Disciple proclaims the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, whom we have just offered and received.

Nearly all of these prayers were simply struck from Paul VI's Order of Mass, which is denuded and exiguous by comparison, and which, practically speaking, is almost totally extroverted and procedural in nature. It barely addresses the subjective disposition of the one offering or his need for preparation. It hardly touches on his unworthiness and need for purification and mercy. It includes remarkably few signs by which an observer unfamiliar with the

Catholic Faith could detect that something wondrous, astonishing, and awesome is taking place, before which angels veil their faces and men beat their breasts.

What were the reformers thinking? For them, the prayers of the priest for himself must have looked like exaggerated medieval piety and devotionism, too introspective and clericocentric; the liturgy is “for the people,” after all. But this is manifestly a false view both of what liturgy is and of what these specific prayers are meant to accomplish.

The liturgy is above all God’s work on behalf of the people, [with the priest at their head](#), serving *in persona Christi capitis*—and, as a consequence, he must be especially solicitous for himself, that he may offer the oblation in holiness, in atonement for his own sins and for the sins of the people, and for the strengthening of the inward man, the new Adam, in everyone. To remove or downplay this dimension is to gut the liturgy of that quest for righteousness that makes it serve the foremost need of every Christian, regardless of his place or role in the Mystical Body of Christ.

[Looking over the Order of Mass](#), we cannot help noticing that the Novus Ordo has largely purged this element of the priest praying for himself. While we can readily admit that moral and doctrinal problems existed among clergy before the Council, we have nevertheless seen an exponential rise, a tidal wave, of clerical dereliction and corruption *since* the Council, and particularly since the introduction of the modern rite of Paul VI. If we actually believe in the power of

prayer, can we not attribute much of our current crisis to the fact that priests (with the exception of the 1% or so that are celebrating the traditional liturgy) are not habitually praying *for themselves* and making confession and reparation for their sins in the context of the Church's highest and most powerful prayer—that very sacrifice of the High Priest to whom their ordination configured them and for the offering of which they have been separated and empowered? Such sacerdotal prayers are meant to guide and inspire the priest to offer the liturgy “in spirit and in truth,” imbuing him with the gravity and grandeur of what he is daring to do. When God says to St. Catherine of Siena: “I am *He who is*, you are *she who is not*,” He is stating a basic truth of the spiritual life—one that must be forgotten neither in one's private rooms nor in the Church's public worship.

In his book *Cor Jesu Sacratissimum*, Roger Buck quotes a priest who sent him the following description:

Unlike the Mass of Vatican II in which a dialogue between celebrant and congregation carries most of the ritual, the prayers and rituals of the Tridentine form demand that the celebrant be continually attentive to the rites he is enacting. His voice varies from being audible to a quiet whisper; his eyes regularly turn to the

crucifix; the movements of his hands are conscious and deliberate. Even when he turns to the congregation the greetings are brief, his glance downward, his gestures precise. The Priest is servant of the ritual, and the rubrics foster a mindfulness and self-awareness which not only focus his own attention, but also that of the faithful, as they kneel once more at the foot of the cross of Calvary. Each time before he turns to the congregation the Priest kisses the altar. Priest, altar and sacrifice are at the core of Catholic worship. When he is at the altar offering the sacrifice a Priest's ministry finds its most sublime expression. His kiss of the altar is not only a sign of honor and respect for the source of his identity, but also an expression of his own affective attachment to his vocation. (303-4)

It is no form of clericalism but simply Catholic truth to say that the priest is indeed given to the people as a model and a guide. All Christians in their baptism—and priests in a new way in their ordination—are ontologically configured to the priestly office of Christ

(1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1). The priest above all should be setting the example of pursuing the holiness of a priestly people, that we, in turn, might catch fire from that example. The liturgy ought to be the image of the Christian life, not a mere “filling station” where the tank is filled (as a popular Catholic online personality actually had the cluelessness to say!), or a meeting place where we exchange greetings and announcements. Thus, in keeping with what I argued last week, the priest’s offering the sacrifice devoutly and earnestly *for himself* models to the entire congregation how they, too, must offer the sacrifice of themselves with Christ upon the altar. What *he* does and says in the liturgy is exemplary for *all* of us. Lay Catholics who follow along in their missals learn how to apply these “priestly” prayers analogously to themselves, too.

In short, as prays the priest, so pray the people. If the liturgy is reduced to a priest’s engagement with the people, the people’s liturgy will be reduced to their engagement with the priest. If the liturgy is oriented to God, with the priest offering intense pleas for his own forgiveness and purification and earnest appeals for sanctification and salvation, the people, too, will ask for the same—often with the same words and even with the same or similar bodily attitudes; they will be habituated to seeing liturgy as the locus of God’s work of salvation among us.

I am reminded here of a statement attributed to Pope Pius X: “If the priest is an angel, the people will be saints; if the priest is a saint, the people will be good; if

the priest is good, the people will be lukewarm; if the priest is lukewarm, the people will be bad; if the priest is bad, the people will be beasts.” Some might roll their eyes at the “clericalism” of this sentiment, but to me, and I imagine to many others, it expresses a fact about our communal life as Christians that we would be hard-pressed to deny or refute. There will *never* be an orthodox Christianity in which the priest does not have the primary role in liturgy, as the mediator and the model of our approach to God. *This cannot but have ripple effects in every aspect of the Christian life.*

What I have described in this article is simply another illustration of the general principle enunciated by so many over the years: catechesis is more or less worthless if the signs of the liturgy contradict it. To put it positively, the first and most elementary catechesis is *how we act in the liturgy*. How we act, in turn, shapes and is shaped by what we *say* we are doing in the liturgy—and I mean, not what we say *about* the liturgy outside of it, but what is said *within* it and *by* it. Of Jesus Christ, we read: “He began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). The doing precedes the teaching.

In its *acta et dicta*, the traditional form of the Mass more fully expresses and more intentionally inculcates the virtues at the heart of the Christian life than does its 1969 replacement. If we want to take Christianity seriously—if we believe in truth, virtue, prayer, holiness, and eternal life—we will return, as swiftly as we can, to a liturgical rite that takes these things seriously and, in its texts and rubrics, *imposes* them on

the celebrant, as a sweet yoke and light burden uniting Him with Christ. The traditional Latin Mass is the ideal form of liturgical prayer not only for the laity but also, in a very special way, for the priest.

May more and more priests discover this truth and embrace it wholeheartedly, for *their* benefit, as well as for the benefit of the faithful, living and dead. A holy and zealous priest, plunged into the mysteries of Christ, united with the Savior's own prayer before the throne of grace, will always benefit the people of God far more than the people-centered or outward-oriented priest that the postconciliar era sought and still seeks to produce.

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