



3rd Order SSPX

Letter to Members: District of Australia & New Zealand



10th April 2017

Phone: (03) 5629 1045/0488211664

Email: jordiestephens@hotmail.com

Mass Unplugged

Dear Postulants and Professed members,

In my younger days I remember pop and rock bands doing sessions before a live audience that were called 'unplugged'. Amplifiers were abandoned, synthesizers were softened, and a more relaxed atmosphere prevailed. Among other things, it was an opportunity for groups to convince their fans that behind the hundreds of electrical cords and dials there did in fact lurk real people with real musical skills.

The artificial and synthetic surrounds us, from our phones to our freezers. It is becoming increasingly novel to breathe un-air-conditioned air, to eat food from the garden instead of the packet, to see pictures without pixels and hear music without microphones. But both in body and soul we ourselves are far from synthetic: we are God-made, not man-made. We are designed by a mind dwelling not in time, but eternity. There is thus always a certain refreshment and invigoration when we encounter objects similarly God-made.

What has this got to do with Holy Mass? Well, if ever it were necessary to get away from the artificial and part with the plastic, to get 'unplugged' from the synthetic, it is certainly at Holy Mass.

To approach the tabernacle is to come into the presence of God in a unique way, since both His divine *and* human nature meet us. Now God dwells not in time but eternity. He is above, beyond and behind time. He is thus no more bound and conditioned by it than was Tolkien by the time scale and history of his Middle Earth. God lives in the perfect 'all-at-once' world of eternity, whereas we live in the imperfect 'one-thing-after-another' world where everything is still 'on the way' to its goal.

To enter a Catholic church, and especially to step into the Catholic sanctuary, is to approach at close quarters this timeless and eternal world of God. Everything in it and approaching should therefore taste of the timeless. Until the 1960's, every traditional Catholic church and its liturgy savoured of this timeless and eternal atmosphere.

Just think of the timelessness of church objects. Flowers and floral designs; beeswax candles; marble, stone and wood; gold and silver; flowing robes; plant-based linen for altar cloths; sermons on timeless topics; timeless and ancient Latin. All these are 'unplugged' from any specific time or culture and are meant to help transport us into eternity.

This not to deny that all these natural objects are touched up and refined artificially. The flowers are arranged artificially, the stone, marble and wood are carved and cut elaborately and sometimes exquisitely. But these artistic modifications enhance and elevate the merely natural, redeeming it. True art always imitates nature, ensuring that

the human touch should follow the contours and colours indicated by nature herself. Although nature is not the good God, she is a good guide.

Before electricity, the church and sanctuary were also quite literally 'unplugged'. Until the 20th century Mass (excluding Midnight Masses of course) was celebrated only in the morning. Without electric lights to compensate one can imagine the semi-darkness that pervaded Mass for twenty centuries. This may be seen in the many artistic depictions of Mass, full of shadows and subtle plays of light. The morning sun is weak much of the year, even without taking into account any overcast days. One can thus understand how the two candles stipulated for Low Mass was more than just for decorative and symbolic purposes. They helped the priest to see.

Is there not a tendency sometimes to overuse electric lights in our churches? Granted, flipping a switch is easier than lighting a host of candles, which is both time-consuming and messy. We moderns want efficiency, and instantaneous light without labour is one more welcome time-saver. We are also compulsive consumers, with switch-flipping and packet-scrunching a significant part of our day. We like turning things 'on'. It makes us feel in control.

Our ancestors, however, saw a candle-lit church as mysterious and wonderful. We moderns perhaps more likely to see the semi-darkness as somehow deficient, as needing 'fixing'. So we turn on all the lights to remove all shadow. It is a symptom. We are far less mystical. We are accustomed to snow-white bathrooms and perhaps hypnotized by the sterile and lifeless light emitted by LED's.

But Holy Mass is precisely a place of mystery. Banishing all shadow and obscurity is just what the New Mass and all its paraphernalia is about. Latin was removed precisely for its 'obscurity'. The blaring lights of modern English were better, apparently. The revolutionaries applied this principle to every aspect of the liturgy as well as the church itself. As we know, all this removing of obscurity resulted paradoxically in the total obscurity and even eclipse of the Faith itself. This desire to see and understand everything at Mass is a novelty, unknown to Catholics who went before us. To conceal is to reveal. Less is more.

The availability of electric light coincided with the availability of the missal for the faithful at the end of the 1800's. To read demands light, and naturally artificial light comes to the rescue. But our ancestors came to Mass often bringing nothing but themselves. Even after printing was invented in the 1400's, a missal would have been useless for most, since only the minority could read. Many of us, however, feel uncomfortable and perhaps even guilty coming to Mass missal-less. We should not be. Yes, it may help us or our children concentrate and not fidget. As I have noted before, Mass is not primarily an instruction but a sacrifice. Neither Latin nor English can clarify the infinite mystery of Mass. Just like those standing at Calvary, the essential thing to know is that 'My God is suffering and dying for me, a sinner'. We should often remind ourselves that the vast majority of Catholics attending Mass throughout history were armed with little more than this.

Attending Mass or making a visit is to enter an 'unplugged' world, the threshold of God's timeless eternity. As much as possible let us leave the latest fashions and technologies at the door. Our clothes and gestures should likewise be affected by this breaking free of time. A buzzing mobile phone or a t-shirt with an offensive logo are inappropriate in church not just because of the irreverence: rather, they simply have nothing of the timeless.

This sacred space and sacred time into which we step is designedly opaque and shadowy, from its Latin to its lighting. It all ignites our sense of wonder and humility in the presence of eternal realities far, far beyond us and our particular time. May we love and treasure this sacred semi-darkness and dimmed divinity. It is eminently *dignum et justum est*, 'meet and just', that in God's presence we are unplugged from the profane and plugged into the perpetual.

In the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary,

Fr Jordie Stephens

Spiritual Director of the Third Order of SSPX for Australia

