

The New Code of Rubrics

Joseph Loew [Consultor of Sacred Congregation of Rites]
The Furrow; Vol. 11, No. 10 (Oct. 1960), pp 667-675

Translated from the Italian text in *L'Osservatore Romano* (2/9/1960) by Father Gerard Watson.

The last number of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* contains the new Code of Rubrics of the Breviary and of the Roman Missal, promulgated by Pope John XXIII with the *Motu Proprio Rubricarum instructum* of 25 July 1960. This marks a decisive step towards a definitive systematization of the rubrical legislation of the Breviary and of the Roman Missal. So it could be called the crown on all the work of regulating the public worship of the Church which was begun after the Council of Trent, at the instance of Saint Pius V, carried on by the Holy See through the Sacred Congregation of Rites, and most recently taken up again by Saint Pius X and by Pius XII. And indeed, all this work is comprised and summarised in the new Code of Rubrics for the Breviary and Missal, which the *Motu Proprio* of Pope John XXIII approves and proposes to the Latin Church.

It seems worthwhile to dwell for a moment on the directives in the pontifical document and on some aspects of the new Code of Rubrics, which is promulgated by the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

Origin and Scope of the New Code of Rubrics

One of the principal features of the new Code is that it recapitulates clearly and systematically all the rubrical legislation gradually formulated down the centuries and “not always—as the *Motu Proprio* itself points out—with a systematic order, and therefore not without a certain loss of the primitive simplicity and clarity”.

The original nucleus of the Church's rubrical legislation were the *Rubricae generales* of the Breviary and Missal of Saint Pius V, which we still find at the beginning of those liturgical books. In the course of the succeeding centuries, there were added the numerous decrees and replies to queries which are assembled in the seven volumes of the *Decreta authentica* of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. More recently, when in 1911 Saint Pius took in hand the restoration of the liturgy, his liturgical directives were collected in the *Additiones et variationes in rubricis*, which were not fused with but juxtaposed to the preceding texts.

That was the situation when Pope Pius XII decided on a first simplification of the rubrics, with the Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites dated 23 March 1955. But it was only a partial simplification; and the Decree relating to it, received universally with such great favour, was added once more to the corpus of already existing rubrics, replacing them only in part.

After this first simplification, the Sacred Congregation of Rites, at the wish of Pius XII, and having in mind a reform of the Breviary which would fit into the wider plan of a general restoration of the liturgy, set in motion a consultation of the Episcopate to get a better idea of the problems and most pressing needs in regard to the Divine Office.

In that way Pius XII wanted a start to be made at once on the work of studying for a complete and systematic simplification of the rubrics.

In the meantime Pius XII died; and his successor, Pope John XXIII, not only confirmed what Pius had begun, but expressed the wish that it should be completed as soon as possible. And that too even after the announcement of the calling of an Ecumenical Council. For a

Council, as was the case at Trent, will be able to examine and discuss general principles of liturgical reform and give directives, but it will be difficult for it to come down to the determination of individual rubrics. And so a compilation of rubrical legislation, already simplified and systematically presented, can lighten in no small way some tasks of the Fathers of the solemn Ecumenical Assembly.**

**COMPILER'S NOTE: It should be noted that when this statement was made, it was presumed that the authentic reforms undertaken by St. Pius X and then Pope Pius XII (and following the norms established by his Pian Commission and expounded in *Mediator Dei*) would simply be continued by the Second Vatican Council. In this respect, Fr. Loew's observation is correct, and hence how it should be regarded even in hindsight of what actually occurred (for more details, see Michael Davies, *Liturgical Time Bombs in Vatican II*).

The new Code of Rubrics is then the result of the work begun under Pius XII. Its purpose is to bring together the rubrical legislation contained in numerous different texts, to set it in order, simplify it, and reduced it to a system. Its systematic order, its clarity and its organic quality will allow an easier and more certain knowledge of the law. Just as the Code of Canon Law brought a new order and a new clarity, replacing the whole less systematic collection of earlier laws, so too the new Code of Rubrics should prove a first concrete and decisive step towards the preparation of the Code of Liturgical Law, which would collect all the liturgical legislation and put it in its proper order.

The New Code of Rubrics

The rubrical legislation in its new form is divided into three parts. First come the *Rubricae generales*, which refer both to the Breviary and the Missal, and comprise the general norms regarding the distinction and classification of the various liturgical days and the relation of precedence between them. Then come the *Rubricase generales Breviarii Romani*, or the norms which govern the

disposition of the Divine Office on the different liturgical days and in its individual constituent parts. And finally there are the *Rubricae generales Missalis Romani*, with the regulations for the various kinds of Mass and parts of the Mass.

The union of the three parts makes a whole of 530 canons, numbered consecutively and independently of the parts, so as to facilitate the citation of individual regulations. It is clearly impossible to plunge into a minute examination of the richness of detail contained in the new Code. It seems more important to stop to underline the system on which the various parts and the individual chapters are drawn up. For in contrast with the system on which all the earlier texts of rubrical legislation were drawn up, contenting themselves with a bare enumeration of the regulations, the new Code puts forward along with the regulations those principles which serve to illuminate the practical deductions arrived at in the various articles. In that way we see clearly not only the text of the law, but also the inspiring principles and the very spirit of the law. Let us take, for example, the rules which determine the extension of the celebration of the individual liturgical days. They are governed by the general principle that the liturgical day is simply the natural day sanctified by the liturgical actions, in particular by the Divine Office and the Mass. Consequently the liturgical day too will have an extension corresponding to the natural day, beginning with Matins and ending with Compline. Only the Sundays and the feasts of the first class, the most solemn days, have a more extended celebration which begins with first Vespers on the evening of the preceding natural day. The regulations on the times of saying the Office, whether in choir or alone, derived from the same principle, complemented by that which states that the canonical hours by their very nature and structure are meant to sanctify the different hours of the natural day.

The Liturgical Gradation

An aspect of the Code which completely new is the liturgical gradation. First of all, the double classification of the liturgical days on the basis of the degree and rite of the Office disappears. That is the consequence of the regulation stating that the whole antiphon is always to be recited before and after the psalm at all hours. We will no longer have, then, the distinction of the days into doubles and simples.

The numerous denominations so far in use will be replaced by the simpler classification of the liturgical days into four degrees, applied wholly or in part to the different categories of liturgical days. So, we will have the *Sundays* divided into Sundays of the first class (Advent and Lent) and Sundays of the second class (all the others). The *feasts* which in the calendar are now called “doubles of the first or of the second class” will be simply “feasts of the first or second class”; and the others, now called doubles and simples, will be collected in the “third class”. The less full form of celebration, consisting simply of a commemoration made in the Office of the day occurring, will always be retained for the feasts.

The ferias too will be divided into four classes, in this way: ferias of the first class: Ash Wednesday and all Holy Week; ferias of the second class: Quarter Tense [Ember Days—Ed.] and the second part of Advent; ferias of the third class: the ferias of Lent and the first part of Advent; ferias of the fourth class: the ferias of Christmastide, Paschaltide and the ferias *per annum*.

The application of this classification in four grades to the different kinds of liturgical days makes it easy to reckon the precedence between them, since a day from an inferior class cannot outrank one from a higher class. Earlier criteria will be abolished and that precedence will be regulated solely on the basis of an adjoined “table

of precedence” which assembles and orders the various liturgical days on the basis of their class and the importance of single days in the same class.

Remaining in the sphere of the liturgical gradation, the application of these four degrees or classes to the Votive Masses and Masses for the Dead is also completely new. On this division Votive Masses and Masses for the Dead are arranged on the basis of their importance or the importance of the aim for which they are assigned. Moreover, the very settling of which class a Votive Mass belong to already establishes of itself those liturgical days on which it is or is not allowed. For the rank of the day on which a Votive Mass or Mass for the Dead is allowed corresponds to the class to which the Mass itself belongs. So for example, a Votive Mass of the second class is a Mass that can be celebrated on a day which is also of the second class; a Votive Mass of the third class is a Mass which is allowed on all the days of the third class; and a Votive Mass of the fourth class is a Mass which can be celebrated only on days of the fourth class, that is, on the ordinary ferias.

The rank or class of the individual liturgical days has an influence too on the arrangement of the Office. Let us say at once that the structure of the Office remains the traditional one, with the whole “*cursus*” of the seven canonical Hours, from Matins to Compline. An eventual rearrangement of the daily “*cursus*” of the official prayer of the Church may possibly be included in the “*altiora principia*” concerning the liturgical reform which, as the Holy Father indicates, will be proposed for the consideration of the Fathers of the future Council; but it was certainly not included in the rearrangement of the rubrical legislation.

The Arrangement of the Office

Another feature which has remained unchanged is the single form of the Office, both for choral and individual recitation. One hears requests constantly and from all sides for the suppression of the strictly choral sections, such as the responsories, the versicles and the benedictions. It is perhaps too easy to forget the value of details which induce us so much towards reflection and are so efficacious in spiritual formation. The one difference between the choral and private recitation will be the introduction of the versicle “*Domine, exaudi orationem meam*” in place of the “*Dominus vobiscum*”. Here it is a question of a substitution which already has a precedent in the recitation of the Office by those who are not deacons.

The part which will be subject to greater modifications at once is Matins, which for the greater part of the year will have one Nocturn with nine psalms and three lessons.

More precisely, the following will have Matins with one Nocturn of nine psalms and three lessons: all Sundays; all ferias except those of the Triduum Sacrum; vigils; feasts of the third class; days of the Octave of Christmas, and the *Officium S. Mariae in Sabbato*. On the other hand, the feasts of the first and second class and the ferias of the Triduum Sacrum will retain the Matins with three Nocturns, and therefore the nine psalms and nine lessons. Easter and Pentecost with their respective octaves retain the traditional arrangement of Matins with three psalms and three lessons.

This reduction of Matins is the shortening the Holy Father alludes to in the Motu Proprio as an easing of the daily *pensum* of the Office, an alleviation sought by many bishops in their concern above all of the many priests who are every day more and more burdened with pastoral cares. It is the same spirit as inspired the first simplification of 1955, when the semidoubles were reduced to simples with the

consequent reduction of Matins to one Nocturn: and that was inspired by the necessity of giving more opportunity for prayer made in calm and tranquility of spirit. Now that principle has been extended to almost all the days of the year, Sundays included.

In practice, then, Matins will have: on Sundays, two lessons from Scripture and a patristic lesson or commentary on the Gospel of the day; on feasts, two lessons from Scripture and one from the life of the saint; while the ferias will retain their arrangement of three lessons either from Scripture or of commentary on the Gospel of the day.

As we have indicated, the feasts of the first and second class, and the ferias of the Triduum Sacrum retain Matins with nine lessons. These are days of greater solemnity, on which the reduction of Matins would have involved the sacrifice of some of the finest patristic passages in the liturgical year.

The Calendar

Attached to the new Code of Rubrics is the new edition of the Calendar of the Breviary and of the Roman Missal, revised on the basis of the new classification of the feasts.

The same spirit that guided the compilation of the Code of Rubrics has presided over the revision of the Calendar: there was no desire to create anything new, but simply to present what already existed in a simpler and clearer form, always carefully considering anything that could make the earlier regulations more in accordance with modern needs.

So in practice we still find in the Calendar all the feasts that were in it up till now. The exceptions are feasts in honour of the same mystery or the same saint which occur twice. On the basis of that

principle, one of the two feasts of the Chair of Saint Peter (18 January), one of the two in honour of the Holy Cross (3 May), one of the two in honour of Saint Michael the Archangel (8 May), and Saint John before the Latin Gate (6 May), are removed. Also eliminated are the feasts of Saint Leo II: a feast deriving from a wrong interpretation of texts referring to the “second feasts” of Saint Leo I, that is, the translation of the holy Pope; and the feasts of Saint Anacletus (13 July), which no different from that of Saint Cletus, celebrated on 26 April together with Saint Marcellinus.

Other feasts are reduced to a simple commemoration, because of their local character, or rather uncertain historical elements; among them the feast of the Seven Dolours of Our Lady on Friday of Passion Week, the feasts of Our Lady of Carmel and of Ransom; the feast of the Stigmata of Saint Francis; the feast of Saint George, Saint Alexius and Saint Eustachius.

Some Pastoral Aspects

A work which was based on the principle of criticism of the sources would have certainly demanded other enactments; but, we repeat, there was no desire to create anything new, but only to redraft and revise what already existed, or perhaps simply touching up where it appeared necessary. The only substantial modification is the new classification of feasts, into three ranks; and the regrouping of all the feasts up till now double or single into single class, the third.

We have referred to some new or special aspects of the new Code of Rubrics. It would not indeed be possible to review even briefly all the details in which the Code abounds.

But it would be an incomplete and inexact view of the new Code to consider it merely as a dry collection of rubrical laws whose end is themselves, or as limited simply to a precise and prudent ordering

of the external form of the rendering of worship. It would be the same mistake as wishing to consider the Liturgy as limited simply to a knowledge of the rubrics, excluding completely its dogmatical, historical and doctrinal, and ascetical elements.

And it seems indeed that one of the essential aspects of the new Code of Rubrics is just that of having united a determination of the form of worship which is precise and regulated even in detail to a pastoral vision of the Liturgy. In that way it offers the priest an instrument for pastoral work which is certainly not to be despised. One first feature of this pastoral aspect is the precedence which Sunday takes over all the feasts which are not of the first class. It is the crown of the work of reform begun by Saint Pius X to restore its regular celebration as the “day of the Lord”, with the double significance of weekly commemoration of Easter and of Baptism.

A second feature of pastoral value is the realisation of a distinct predominance of the cycle of the Time, with the celebration of the mystery of the Redemption, over the cycle of the Saints. In this way is assured the observance of the periods which are, as it were, the fulcrum of the liturgical year. Quarter Tense will almost always be assured, giving way only to the feasts of the second class. A like pre-eminence will also be enjoyed by the last period of Advent, from 17 to 24 December, the ferias characterised by the “O” antiphons. All Lent, too, with its ferias raised to the rank of third class, will take precedence over the ordinary feasts of saints, which will be reduced in practice to simple commemorations. Above all, the full celebration of Lent, with the Office and Mass of the Time, which is obligatory every day even in choir, takes on a special value because of the richness of ascetical elements which are meant for the spiritual life of the priest himself, and the catechetical riches which the liturgy of the time contains as a timely preparation of the faithful for Easter.

A third and new feature in this pastoral aspect is the institution of a group of Votive Masses meant to emphasize certain special celebrations, such as anniversaries of the parishes or of the parish priest, or for special institutions or occasions, such as missions to the people, or particular assemblies. In this way the celebration of the Mass, with its own chosen and appropriate content, is no longer a merely decorative element, but of real vitality through the immediacy it acquires by its nearness to the sentiments which the particular celebration awakes in the participants.

A final feature we would like to stress is the part allotted to the bishops in the ordering of the Liturgy in their respective dioceses. This tendency, which was begun with the reforms carried out in recent years, finds an even wider field in the new Code of Rubrics. The bishop no longer stands merely as the guard who sees that the law is observed, but he becomes its soul, applying the law to concrete cases on the basis of the needs and necessities of his flock. He no longer has merely the power of imposing an *oratio imperata* or allowing or ordering a Mass *pro re gravi*, but has the duty of studying the particular concrete conditions of his territory, and of applying the general rules. On the basis of the principle, for example, bishops are given the power to fix for the celebration of the Lesser Litanies another date more suitable to the circumstances and to the traditions of the people, even though as a general rule they remain fixed for the three days before the Ascension. It is easy to see the pastoral value of a rule of this kind, which allows the restoration of vitality to an institution which had lost all its importance in some nations because of their geographical position, for the time of celebration was completely at variance with its aim, that is, to implore God's blessing on the ripening crops. And the bishop is given full faculties to arrange as he thinks best, without having direct recourse to the Holy See.

As is obvious, we have here a work of no ordinary importance and value, which will render liturgical prayer more flexible and vigorous, and will enable priests to carry it out with that “*tranquillitas animi*” which is indispensable for spiritual efficacy and fruitfulness.

And every priest will be very grateful to the Holy Father John XXIII for this new indication of his great solicitude for the most chosen portion of his flock and for this delicate and paternal reminder to live and pray more intensely with the Church.

Joseph Loew
Rome