

Can the pope legislate 'reverence'?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 10, 2011 | Bulletins from the Human Side

COLUMN

Folklore grinds out the grains of truth that are found in such notions like: "If an Irishman is given a choice of water or whisky, the water will go untouched."

With Pope Benedict XVI's latest plans for time traveling the church back to another era, we recall another claim: "If a German is offered a choice between justice and good order, he'll take the good order any day."

That may not apply to all Germans, but it certainly does to the present pope who is currently devoting a lot of time to battling what he terms "relativism" and to bolstering his "Reform of the Reform," a.k.a., turning Vatican II back into Vatican I.

[Catholic Culture reports](#) [1] that in promoting "reverence and a sense of sacred in the liturgy," Benedict is issuing a *motu proprio*, the Vatican version of a presidential executive order, "that will turn responsibility for canonical questions about the administration of the sacraments over to the Roman Rota."

It is said that this will allow the Congregation for Divine Worship "to devote its entire work to the promotion of liturgical reform." Its prefect, Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera, says that the Pope wants to encourage "a new, clear, and vigorous liturgical movement throughout the Church."

In short, if Benedict has a choice between worshipping humanly -- as when prayer responses overlap like orchestra violinists not finishing in the same split second -- and praying in exactly matched cadences and with perfect timing, the pope will apparently take the latter any day.

Handing the administrative questions about the sacraments to the Roman Rota, the quasi-Supreme Court for all canonical cases such as those seeking to make a marriage null, only immures these symbols of mystery in the stale courtroom air of legalism that withers flowers and puts the judges themselves to sleep.

The pope feels that relativism is at the root of all our moral problems and, perhaps after listening to too much Wagner, has claimed that this appreciation of the ambiguity of human motivation and choice is responsible for the sex abuse crisis in the church.

It is one thing for a pope to offer an inapplicable theological theory in an attempt, howsoever incorrectly, to explain the complex psychological and sociological origins of sexual conflicts in the clergy. It is quite another to sponsor a "Reform of a Reform" that, to develop "a new, clear, and vigorous liturgical movement" is willing to turn worship into a well planned war game by deploying believers as if they were charged to march, salute, and, of course, pray and obey.

The pope's heritage makes him feel more comfortable if you remove all of the doubt, mistakes, and spontaneity from life as if that would remove sin. He apparently wants to do the same with worship that, as a human

activity, is bound to express the incompleteness, the ever unfinished edges, the heartbreak and the unfulfilled hopes, that, along with their simple joy and gratitude, human beings express in their prayer lives.

The sacramental order is meant to grasp and reflect not the stilted perfection, but the glorious imperfection of human beings. If they were not imperfect, there would be no need for faith, hope, or love, because these virtues are not required in that non-existent universe in which people are always so well ordered and perfect that they don't need anybody to have faith in them, they have no need for hope, and they can survive very well, thank you, without somebody's loving them.

How interesting that the pope insists on complete clarity in addressing Mystery when the word's root, *mu*, refers to being mute or silent, the only response we can have to the ineffable and inexplicable nature of religious mystery.

It is striking that mystery is therefore related to "mutter," a word that describes the way the prophet spoke when he could not find the right words, or the ecstatic prayer of the gift of tongues or our own struggles to pray. It does not match phrases minted like coins of Bismarck's empire, each one perfect, each one the same, and not one of them worth anything today.

The pope seems to want to revive *awe* but that is defined as "an emotion of mingled reverence, dread, and wonder inspired by something majestic or sublime." That sounds perilously close to the relativism of everyday human existence in which we seldom get things right the first time and in which, with no lawyers or imperious liturgists present, we can suddenly be in awe of a great event, a beautiful day, or of the person with whom we fall in love.

Perhaps the pope should observe an average Catholic family getting ready for church on the weekend, the parents having gathered the children together in the charming disarray of family life.

The children will be trying to squirm free or, in church, to inspect the pew in front of them. The mother will be tucking one son's shirt tail in while another son pulls his out. A daughter may be searching for crayons to draw on the Parish Bulletin.

They do not bring well ordered prayers to church, but bear their preoccupations and distractions to the altar as the Wise Men brought frankincense and myrrh to the cave of Bethlehem.

This, Holy Father, is a revelation that would guide you better than your plans to impose order on life that is, in fact, random, relative, and spectacularly transcendent all at the same time.

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Kennedy's column, "Bulletins from the Human Side," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: [E-mail alert sign-up](https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/bulletins-human-side/can-pope-legislate-reverence) [2]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Kennedy to your list.

Links:

[1] <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=9195>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>