

Interview with Archbishop Piero Marini

December 15, 2007

Archbishop's House, Westminster

NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. interviewed Archbishop Piero Marini Dec. 15. For 20 years, Marini was the pope's chief liturgist, first for John Paul II and until October for Benedict XVI. He has just written a book *A Challenging Reform: Realizing the Vision of the Liturgical Renewal* (Liturgical Press). Following is the text of Allen's interview.

NCR: Change is always disconcerting. In very basic terms, why is liturgical reform necessary?

ARCHBISHOP MARINI: Liturgy is linked to tradition, which has two elements. One comes from the past, which is its content. For us, the liturgy of the Mass is an encounter with Christ. The reading of Holy Scripture is an essential part of the liturgy. We celebrate what is contained and described in the Holy Scriptures. In that sense, the liturgy is inevitably tied to the past. But our understanding of tradition also has a second element, which is 'today.' In the liturgy, there's a word in Latin that's repeated often: *hodie*, meaning 'today.' What does this mean? It means that the facts of the past are represented, realized for us today. Think about the encounters of Christ with persons in the gospel ... for example, the meeting with the woman who wanted to be healed by Christ, who said, "If I touch your cloak, I will be healed." It's important that this become our encounter today. Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever, but we change, and it has to be us today in the liturgy who touch the body of Christ, with our sensibilities.

It's clear that there's something in the liturgy that never changes ... Christ, his action of salvation, the acts of salvation that we read in the Scripture, the Old Testament, that are repeated for us today, in the liturgical sense of a memorial rather than materially. The liturgy gives us the possibility to meet anew the acts of salvation that Christ accomplished in his own time. Yet the liturgy is done for us, for today. Therefore, the concept of tradition in the liturgy necessarily implies adaption to our times, because the liturgy is for the women and the men of our time, not for the past.

How do we ensure that reform enriches the liturgy rather than detracts from it?

First of all, the liturgy is not something private. The liturgy belongs to the whole church, to the whole body of Christ, the entire community. In the end, the decisions about the liturgy have to be made by the appropriate authorities, but always keeping in mind the needs of the community. That's what happened at the Second Vatican Council. There was a need to adapt the liturgy to our own time. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Pius X made changes. Experts around the world were proposing a renewal, an adaptation of the liturgy to the needs of our times, such as Romano Guardini, Pio Parsch, Odo Casel. There was a great movement, which was embraced by Pope Pius XII, who restored the Easter Vigil, reformed the rites for Holy Week, and published the encyclical *Mediator Dei*.

Vatican II was not a revolution. It wasn't a novelty in the church. It was the continuation of this need to adapt the liturgy to the situation of our time, to be 'today' for us. At Vatican II, for the first time in history, we had a council that was very concerned with the liturgy. It was the first time that an ecumenical council produced a fully composed document on the liturgy, on the necessity to reform the liturgy. At Vatican II, for example, the council affirmed precisely that the liturgy isn't someone's private property, but it belongs to the entire church. It belongs to the celebrant, but also to the faithful.

Yesterday you called on the church to “take up with enthusiasm the liturgical path traced by the council.” How would you describe that path?

First of all, I spoke about a 'path,' one that I believe is irreversible. We cannot turn back. I often think about the journey of the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament. It was a difficult journey, one with many difficulties, and sometimes the people became nostalgic for the past, for the onions and the good harvests of Egypt and so on. In other words, sometimes they wanted to go back. But, the historical journey of the church is one which by necessity has to move forward. Look, we're in the liturgical season of Advent right now, which tells us that the Lord is in front of us, not behind us. If you want a lesson about the dangers of going back, I'll limit myself to the woman from the Old Testament who turned around and became a pillar of salt! In the Bible, the Lord is always in front of us. We're a people on a journey towards our meeting with the Lord, who is always in front of us, never behind us. That's why I say that the path set out by Vatican II is irreversible.

What's the essential content of this path, in your view?

The content is what was expressed by the council itself. On that point, I have no doubts at all. What we have to do now as we follow this path is to keep in mind two fundamental principles. First is the relationship with Scripture, because in the liturgy we celebrate what's contained in the Bible. That's why the liturgical reform gave so much space to Scripture. We have to keep this bond with Scripture strong if we want to stay on the right course. Second, we have to always be grounded in the church of the fathers. The council said to us, *secundum normam sanctorum patrum* ["according to the rule of the holy fathers"]. The church of the fathers, the way of living the liturgy, of participating in it, of the church of the fathers, is absolutely critical. I'm talking about the era of Augustine, Ambrose, the early period of the church. For us, that's a normative element. In every era, the church must measure itself by this formative period in order to have the guarantee that it's moving in the right direction.

Then, of course, there are the other elements emphasized by Vatican II. First of all, the priesthood of the faithful is something that we can't afford to forget. Of course, we know that the Protestants thought they had 'discovered' the priesthood of the faithful, because they saw that in the Bible the word 'priest' referred only to Christ and to the holy people of God, not to the apostles. For that reason, the church of the Reformation practically rejected the idea of an institutional priesthood. The Catholic church naturally defended this form of priesthood, and created a liturgy, the Tridentine liturgy, which made a sharp distinction between the priest and the people of God. The liturgy became something priests do. Today, Vatican II helped us to rediscover the idea of the priesthood as something universal. The faithful don't receive

permission from priests to participate in the Mass. They are members of a priestly people, which means they have the right to participate in offering the sacrifice of the Mass. This was a great discovery, the great emphasis, of the council. We have to keep this in mind, because otherwise we run the risk of confusion about the nature of the liturgy, and for that matter, the church itself. Obviously, the liturgy and the church go together.

Your book creates the impression that you're concerned about the current liturgical direction of the church, warning of a return to a 'pre-conciliar mindset.'

Concern for the future has to be part of every era of church history. It can be stronger in one moment than the next, of course, but I would say, 'Woe to us if we're not concerned!' We should always be concerned about how well we uphold these great points of reference in the Bible, the fathers, the church of the fathers, priestly ministry and the possibility of adaptation to the needs of our times.

That said, I have to add that today I'm a bit more concerned than in the past, because I see a certain nostalgia for the past. What concerns me in particular is that this nostalgia seems especially strong among some young priests. How is it possible to be nostalgic for an era they didn't experience? I actually remember this period. From the age of six until I was 23, in other words for 18 years, I lived with the Mass of Pius V. I grew up in this rite, and I was formed by it. I saw the necessity of the changes of Vatican II, and personally I don't have any nostalgia for this older rite, because it was the same rite that had to be adapted to changing times. I don't see any step backward, any loss. I'm always surprised to see young people who feel this nostalgia for something they never lived with. 'Nostalgia for what?' I find myself asking.

How do you explain this nostalgia?

In part, I suppose, because implementation of the liturgy of the council has been difficult. It's true that many times there were exaggerations, which happened for the most part in a time when we could say there was disorder in the church. This was the period of great debates over new Eucharistic prayers, private adaptations, and so on. The danger today, on the other hand, is a 'neo-ritualism,' meaning a sort of exhaustion that one sees in many priests who celebrate the rite almost as if it's a magical formula rather than a real participation of life. I see, therefore, a certain separation between celebration and life. Obviously, this separation can induce nostalgia for the past, for a time when everything was easier ... when we used a language that no one understood, the rites were often incomprehensible, there were signs of the Cross everywhere, and so on. There wasn't the same expectation that liturgy should speak to life. If one doesn't insist on the link, it's easy to see the liturgy more in terms of theatre. I believe this, to some extent, is the basis of the nostalgia we see today.

I also ask myself, what sort of instruction is being given on liturgy in the seminaries? How much time is devoted to it? It ought to be a principal subject, but speaking at least about Italy, including the great seminaries in the largest urban areas, sometimes no more than two hours a week are devoted to the liturgy. It's impossible to form priests in a deep experience of the liturgy this way.

Would you see Benedict XVI's motu proprio of July 7, granting wider permission to celebrate the old Mass, as part of this nostalgia?

Look, I don't really want to get into this subject. I'll just make two points.

First, the pope said that he was motivated to issue the *motu proprio* out of a concern for unity. The aim of the *motu proprio* is to restore unity to the church. We know that the pope has this precise mandate, to be the center of unity. The church of Rome is the one that presides in unity. In that sense, the basis of the *motu proprio*, the desire that forms its basis, has a positive aspect. One has to respect the pope, who certainly has to keep this concern for unity close to his heart. Obviously I'm not in his position, and while I might have different ideas, as Catholics we must respect the role he plays.

Second, the pope himself wrote in the letter that accompanied the *motu proprio* that it takes nothing away from the authority of the Second Vatican Council. For me, therefore, the *motu proprio* does not in any way call into question the validity of the council. In the same way, the pope himself said that this in no way detracts from the validity of the liturgical reform launched by the council. It doesn't express any judgment against the reform, which continues to have the same value it had before. From my point of view, therefore, the *motu proprio* does not change the need to keep moving forward with renewal of the liturgy.

You're probably aware that an English journalist has interpreted your book as an 'attack' on the liturgical philosophy of Benedict XVI. Is he wrong?

As far as I'm concerned, he's wrong. Obviously people are free to say what they want and to publish their opinions. Sometimes those opinions have a solid foundation, and sometimes they're just gratuitous. In reality, this book was written well before the pope issued his *motu proprio*.

You wrote the original manuscript in the 1990s, before Benedict was even elected?

Yes, that's right. I worked on it in the 1990s, and some portions were published in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* [a journal of liturgical thought published in Rome.] For that reason alone, it can't be read in the way that this journalist suggests.

Why did the book come out first in English?

It's very simple. I'd already published a number of articles in Italian, separately, but from the beginning I had also thought that eventually they might be published in English as a book. I had a translation of the book done in English, and at a certain point Fr. Keith [Pecklers] offered to help with the project.

Do you anticipate translations in other languages?

I don't know, though there are no plans right now. It could be done in Italian, also because there are more texts that could be included in the appendix.

You said that you don't want to discuss the *motu proprio*, but let me ask one technical question that arises from your book. One controversy about the *motu proprio* concerns the use of the old Mass during Holy Week, and specifically the Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews. Some argue that because that prayer was modified by Pope Paul VI for Holy Week in 1965, before the new Mass was issued, it is those modifications which should be used for Good Friday and not the text of the '62 missal. Do you have an opinion on that?

I'm not an expert on the technical details, in part because the *motu proprio* doesn't interest me personally. I'm also not a diocesan bishop, who would have to study these things to decide how to apply them. But my general impression is that the *motu proprio* refers to the missal of 1962. This is the point of reference, not modifications made afterwards.

Even if these modifications were never abrogated?

It's true that in 1965, a number of pamphlets were issued, including one called *Hebdomadae Sanctae*. But this change already belonged in a sense to the new Mass. It was a reform of the old rite, but we were already in the period of transition from the old to the new. When *Inter oecumini* entered into force on March 7, 1965, the first instruction on the liturgical reform, the Consilium issued these first steps for embodying a new spirit while still maintaining most of the old texts. The idea was to insert some variations into Holy Week so that the celebration was not in contrast with the decisions taken by the bishops at the council, or with the spirit of those decisions. This is already pointing towards the new rite.

Those who wish to celebrate the old rite must refer to the Missal of 1962. That's what I think, though I don't wish to impose that view on anyone. In any event, it's clear that it's the Missal of 1962 to which the pope refers in the *motu proprio*, and that has to be the norm for those who wish to follow it. They can't move towards what came afterwards, because what happened afterwards was the council.

Your book tells the story of the Consilium, the organism created during the council for carrying forward the liturgical reform. You seem to suggest that the Consilium actually has an importance that transcends the liturgy, in that it offers a model of a different way for the Vatican to operate – in your view, more collegial, more international, more open. Am I reading you correctly?

I'm in perfect agreement. What you're talking about is the problem of the reform of the Curia, which is the Curia created after the Council of Trent. That council didn't publish a document on the liturgy like Vatican II, but it left the pope the task of reforming the liturgy and reforming the church. In order to carry out this reform, the pope constituted the Roman congregations. Before the Council of Trent, the congregations didn't exist. The church had lived for more than 1,000 years without Roman Congregations. How was it possible?!

After the Council of Trent, the congregations, such as the Congregation for Rites, were instituted by the pope in 1588 in order to deal with the various problems of the church in the

spirit of Trent. Therefore, they had the limitations of that era. In terms of the liturgy, it was one in which the People of God didn't really have a place. The Missal of Pius V nowhere makes reference to the 'People of God.' The problem of the day was unity, and of being able to recognize the unity of the church, in the wake of the division created by the Protestant Reformation. Hence the emphasis was on a common language, the same fixed rubrics, norms that had to be followed by everyone, and the absence of much capacity for adaptation. It was a liturgy crafted in that time for that situation. All the congregations were shaped by the same circumstances.

Today, after Vatican II, we now have, for example, national bishops' conferences, which didn't exist at the time of the Council of Trent. In my view, there's a problem of adjusting the operation of the congregations to this new situation after the council. Paul VI tried to carry out such a reform in 1967, with a reform of the Curia. He also wanted the Synod of Bishops to be part of this reform, to help the pope in the governance of the church. John Paul II carried out another small reform with *Pastor Bonus*, changing the names of some congregations and creating some pontifical councils. While big changes may not be possible right now, personally I believe that eventually it will be necessary to take up the Consilium as an example of how to streamline the congregations, so that they're not just organisms bound by certain rigid norms, but more flexible bodies for resolving the problems of the world of today. Among other things, the bishops should be more involved in the decisions that concern the church, including those that concern the liturgy. Precisely because the liturgy belongs to the whole church, before taking decisions it's important to involve the bishops and the bishops' conferences.

How or when, I don't know, but in my view this is a problem that sooner or later has to be addressed. The same is true of the Synod of Bishops. As presently structured it's an office for creating documents and for giving the pope advice, but this was perhaps not the intention that Paul VI had when he created the Synod of Bishops. It's a problem that remains open.

For those such as yourself most committed to liturgical reform, these can be difficult times, as you indicated a moment ago with respect to a growing nostalgia for the past. Where do you find hope?

Before anything else, hope lies in the past. We had an ecumenical council which, together with the pope, approved this document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, on the liturgy. They launched a movement which is irreversible, because the principles expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* are perennial. They aren't principles bound to a certain historical period. The priesthood of the faithful, the primacy of Scripture, the return to the church of the fathers, the possibility of adaptation in language and the other elements of the rites, are permanently valid.

The other basis of hope is the liturgy itself, because celebrating the liturgy is itself the primordial source of renewal in the church. We learn the liturgy by celebrating it. The more we succeed at celebrating the liturgy, the more we'll live the Christian life fully and the more we'll succeed in transforming the church. As we know, the liturgy and the church live together. The great ideals of the church are in crisis today in part because there's a crisis in the liturgy. The great ideals of ecumenism, of internal reform of the church, are all connected. The crisis of the liturgy places in crisis these other great values, because the council wanted to confront these

challenges of the mission of the church, of reform, of dialogue with the world, by beginning with the liturgy. If the liturgy is the source and summit, then we foster in the liturgy the kind of life we need to meet these great goals. If these great movements of the church are in difficulty today, we have to look to the difficulty in the liturgy.

These other ideals are crystallized in the liturgy?

They're crystallized, and they receive strength and life from the liturgy.

Is it possible to say that the success of any liturgical reform can be judged only years, maybe decades, after the fact?

First of all, any change that's made in the liturgy is visible immediately, because it's a change intended to ensure that the liturgy today is alive, not dead. With time, the passage of years, you can begin to judge whether the change was carried out more or less well.

We're awaiting a translation of the Third Edition of the Roman Missal. Will this be a change for the better?

For me that's a difficult question to answer, because I don't yet know what the translation will be like. I hope that it will be a better translation than the previous one. With more experience in the use of the vernacular language, we now have the chance to do a better job. How to employ language in the liturgy isn't something that can just be worked out at a desk, but it has to be used, lived with, and only after that experience can we improve it. Moreover, with the passage of time language itself evolves, and thus the translation has to be updated.

It's obvious, of course, that not everyone is going to agree on everything, because we have an enormous community of faith. Precisely because the liturgy is something public, something that involves all of us, we have to accept what the authorities of the church offer us, what they give us. Our role is to be of help, which of course can include constructive criticism designed to help produce the best texts, the best translations, possible.

What personal memories have stayed with you from the death of Pope John Paul II?

From a personal point of view, for me these were the sort of moments that all of us live through when we lose someone in our families with whom we've been very close for a long time. I remember not only the great public celebrations, the funeral rites, but also much more private moments. For example, I remember the last time I saw the pope. It was the day before his death, Friday. He was in his bed, with the respirator, and he reached out for me, wanting to take my hand in his. He couldn't speak, but he wanted to make contact.

I remember when we had to vest his body after he died, and when his body was moved, first into his private chapel and then into the Sala Clementina. That night, I entrusted the body to doctors in a room near the Sala Clementina so they could do the work necessary to conserve it. I also remember the next morning, I saw the body of the pope covered with a sheet. I took it off and I saw his face, which was still his face, but it seemed different because of the conservation

process. I remember when we closed St. Peter's Basilica and I was standing there with the pope's secretary, now Cardinal Dziwisz ... All of these are images that will remain in my eyes, and inside my heart, for the rest of my life.

Of course, I didn't just live these moments as a private person, but I also prepared them as rites. It was the first time that certain rites I had prepared were actually used, and that was a great responsibility.