



José Benlliure y Gil (1855–1937), "Mass in the Chapel"

BLOGS

The Joys of Not Understanding the Mass

“The criterion that assures unity amid the diversity of liturgical traditions is fidelity to apostolic Tradition.” (CCC 1209)

By Angelo Stagnaro – Posted 12/31/17 at 6:21 AM

Robert Louis Stevenson once said, “There is no foreign land; it is the traveler only that is foreign.”

The epigraph comes to mind every time I go abroad. I’ve traveled, performed, worked and/or studied in 73 countries. As a stage magician, I’m very grateful that God has given me a profession that I love and that is fun, profitable and of reasonable morality. I make people smile, and not just because of the occasional stupid thing I might say and/or inopportune, unadvised thing I might do to embarrass myself.

I have a meager and functioning understanding of some of the more popular languages in the world by virtue of study and experience, but there are a great deal more languages I don’t know. Anthropologists estimate that there are 12,000 languages in the world but Wonder Woman can speak only 5,000 of them. I know fewer.

And, as I travel for work, I turn my trips into pilgrimages as I can. This, of course, means attending Mass in languages I don’t understand.

I’ve learned two things after attending Masses around the world. First, the beauty of the Church’s universality—its *catholicity*—is shown by the fact that the Mass is the Mass. The Mass by any other name would still be as sweet. Second, all altar boys are universally bored and fidgety.

Some Catholics might consider it distracting or confusing to listen to a Mass in an otherwise indecipherable language. There are certainly rites which will be different from the Latin Rite but I find them intriguing and mesmerizing rather than off-putting.

But, for the most part, Westerners won’t be traveling in nations like India, which often uses the Syro-Malabar Rite, or Egypt, which uses the Coptic Rite. Both are fascinating and lively. If you have a chance to attend Catholic Mass in either of these rites, or indeed, in any of the 22 rites other than our own Latin Rite, I highly recommend it.

No matter how embarrassed you are at “not fitting in,” you’ll find yourself falling into the by now familiar rhythms of the Mass very quickly and start noting the tiny differences between how Mass is celebrated at home and abroad.

I’ve attended the Mass in Gaelic, American Sign Language (truly a beautiful language to behold), Chinese, Thai, Cambodian, Tamil, Swedish, Arabic, German, Dutch, Japanese and Djoula (from the Ivory Coast) among others, including Latin Mass. Some warned long ago that the suppression of the Latin Mass could lead to disunity. They have a point but the truth is, the rhythms of the Mass are written on our very souls and so, like trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword — or speaking in the vernacular — nothing can separate us from each other or from the love of God. (Romans 8:35)

The Jews have a beautiful legend that teaches that when we are still *in utero*, the Archangel Michael visits us and, after introducing himself, recites the entire Bible and tells us about all the wonders of the universe and, once done, presses his finger to our upper lip to form our philtrum—the little indent between our nose and upper lip. Though we might forget the knowledge he imparts to us, we get sparks and hints throughout our life. What Freud called “oceanic feelings.” It is such a feeling that we can experience by going to Mass in an unknown language. We get glimpses, signs, hints and flashes of insight of the beauty of God.

I love being carried away by the prayers of the Mass in a foreign language—simultaneously unknown and familiar. I recall a Mandarin Mass, a language I do *not* speak at all, in Singapore many years ago which I attended. For those unfamiliar with Chinese languages, they are sing-songy, and tones and inflections are very important to their correct pronunciation. The effect to listening to several hundred Chinese voices singing in an exotic and delightful choir is mesmerizing and transportive.

The Mass continued until a point after the consecration, when the priest raised his hands in prayer seemingly inviting the congregation to pray along with him. The congregation responded by chanting the Mandarin words *Shan Shan, Shan* which I immediately understood to be the *Sanctus*—“Holy, Holy, Holy Lord. God of Power and Might.” And so, I just jumped on that particular Catholic bandwagon and prayed along as best I could—in *English*. Knowing the prayer afterward was the *Our Father*, I recited it when my fellow congregants did.

And there we all were, one in Christ.

When one travels, one can witness firsthand the Church’s catholicity. Don’t worry about standing out like a sore thumb. If your racial type is in marked contrast to that of the people around you, you will be singled out for excessive warmth, gentility and kindness, and not a few people who want to practice their English on you. And, that’s a part of our Catholic Church also. At a recent Mass in Bangkok, I was mobbed by every kid in the church so they could practice their handshaking skills. Thais traditionally bow to each other during the Sign of Peace rather than shake hands, so I was the attraction *de jour*.

You step into a church that is easily identifiable as being Catholic. Centralized altar. Correct liturgical colors. Everyone warmly nods and smiles as they realize you are here from somewhere—everyone recognizes you as a Catholic because they watched if you genuflected at the right spots.

They are just as interested in you as you are in them.

The Mass is not only universal, as befitting a Universal Church, but so are the feelings and sensations one experiences when attending Mass. You’re listening and *not* listening—rather, you *feel* and *intuit* the Mass. You’re riding the familiar waves and rhythms and noticing the slightest differences from what we would call the “norm.” But, of course, they aren’t the norm—not *there* at least. And then the fullness of the word “Catholic” hits you and you have to bite your tongue so as to avoid crying out, “Ah! Now, I understand!” and everything falls into place and everything around you is sweetness and light—perhaps because Sweetness and Light have come upon you. And there you are, sharing these glorious mysteries with your brothers and sisters you didn’t even know you had. They smile at you in welcome and God’s peace is finally palpable and delicious.