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Twentieth-Century Changes in Catholic Liturgy and the Place of Truth in Religious Culture: A Discussion with Chantal Delsol

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative changes in Catholic liturgy during the twentieth century and their implications for the stability of religious meaning and cultural identity in the West. In critical dialogue with Chantal Delsol's diagnosis of the decline of *Christianitas*, this study argues that the reform of ritual following the Second Vatican Council, rather than political entanglements, played a decisive role in weakening the public credibility of Catholic truth claims. Drawing on Roy A. Rappaport's theory of ritual as a stabilizer of cultural meaning, the author analyzes how this postconciliar liturgical reform altered the semiotic structure of Catholic worship—shifting communication from indexical to symbolic forms and reorienting the liturgy from a vertical–concentric order to a more decentralized horizontal dynamic. The chosen method combines theoretical reflection with liturgical anthropology to assess how changes in the Roman Missal, ritual posture, and spatial arrangement disrupted the transmission of canonical messages. The conclusion suggests that this semiotic transformation undermined the liturgy's capacity to ritually confirm the truths of faith, contributing to the broader civilizational disintegration observed by Delsol. Ultimately, this article contends that any future revitalization of Catholic culture will depend less on political influence and more on recovering the liturgy's ritual capacity to sustain belief in transcendent truth.

Keywords: Catholic liturgy; ritual theory; Chantal Delsol; Roy A. Rappaport; postconciliar reform; truth in religion; Christian civilization; Christendom



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1. Introduction

Over the past one hundred and fifty years, numerous initiatives undertaken within the Catholic Church have aimed to renew Christian civilization, among which those focused on liturgical reflection and reform hold particular significance. Beginning at least in the mid-nineteenth century, as pastors became increasingly aware of a crisis of faith and religiosity among the faithful, the idea gradually took shape that one of the root causes of this crisis lay in the atrophy—or even disappearance—of liturgical piety (Reid 2005, pp. 62–67). As a result, a central aim of many figures associated with the early Liturgical Movement was to revitalize this form of piety, which they regarded as a key remedy for the Church's pastoral and spiritual challenges. In a well-known passage from Pope Pius X's 1903 *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini*, issued on sacred music—a passage that would later become a foundational point of reference for the Liturgical Movement—we read the following:

Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, We deem it necessary to

provide before anything else for the sanctity and dignity of the temple, in which the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. And it is vain to hope that the blessing of heaven will descend abundantly upon us, when our homage to the Most High, instead of ascending in the odor of sweetness, puts into the hand of the Lord the scourges wherewith of old the Divine Redeemer drove the unworthy profaners from the Temple. (Pius X 1903–1904; English version 2023)

Even if, in a certain sense, Pius X appears to make this point in passing, he nevertheless articulates a fundamental thesis: active participation in the Church's public and solemn prayer—the liturgy—is the primary and most essential source of the “true Christian spirit.” The pope expresses the hope that this spirit might “flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful” (*rifiorisca per ogni modo e si mantenga nei fedeli tutti*).¹

As Christopher Carstens (2023) observes, Pope Pius X's line of reasoning followed a distinct theological logic: the active participation of all Catholics in the liturgy → the formation of each person in the true Christian spirit → the restoration of the world to God (*instaurare omnia in Christo*)—that is, the renewal of social and cultural life in accordance with the Gospel and divine law. One may agree with Carstens that this vision continued to inform the thinking of the authors and signatories of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the document that initiated the process by which, between 1964 and 1975, the Catholic Church underwent a radical and far-reaching transformation of its ritual life in the form of the postconciliar liturgical reform. Drawing—at least rhetorically—on the notion of *partecipazione attiva* (rendered in SC §14 by the slightly different expression *participatio actuosa*), a broad group of bishops and experts, with the approval of the Church's highest authority, undertook a reform of cultic forms. Their aim was to design rites that would facilitate and foster such a participation and thus—echoing once again the vision of Pius X—ultimately contribute to the renewal of the Christian character of social and cultural life.

With the benefit of more than half a century of hindsight, it is difficult not to observe that if the reform of the liturgy and its broader civilizational effects were indeed intended as a realization of Pius X's fundamental vision—a kind of ecclesial “project”—then one must conclude either that the basic assumptions of this project were gravely mistaken, or that something in its implementation went profoundly awry. Whatever else might be said about the societies and cultures of traditionally Catholic countries today, it can hardly be claimed that Catholicism functions as a defining marker of their collective identity—except, perhaps, in a negative or residual sense. A more accurate description might be that these are now regions shaped by a post-Christian condition (Milcarek 2019).

In this respect, my diagnosis converges with that of the French philosopher Chantal Delsol, as set forth in her recent book *La fin de la Chrétienté. L'inversion normative et le nouvel âge* (2023). At the same time, I diverge from Delsol in my interpretation of the causes and conditions that have led to the current state of affairs—particularly with regard to their more recent phases—and read them somewhat differently than she does. Delsol argues that these processes, like all phenomena that have constituted the civilizational form of Catholic Christianity,² are rooted in the relationship between religion and power. Over the past century, she maintains, this relationship contributed significantly to the corruption of the ritual dimension of religion and, consequently, to a radical weakening of belief in the truth of the Catholic symbolic universe. While I agree that the erosion of such belief lies at the heart of the crisis, I contend that Delsol's interpretation overlooks a crucial factor: namely, that the ritual dimension of Catholicism underwent a series of transformations in

the twentieth century that were not the result of political entanglements but were instead internally driven by a theoretical vision of comprehensive renewal.

In my view, the liturgical and civilizational failure of the project initiated by Pius X and the early Liturgical Movement—and, at least formally, carried forward by the Second Vatican Council—can be traced to the trajectory adopted by ecclesial elites and decision-makers in their approach to the liturgy, especially in the post-World War II period and in connection with the postconciliar reform. The reflections that follow will attempt to identify the flaws in this approach and trace their consequences, engaging in dialogue with Delsol while drawing on Roy A. Rappaport’s theoretical account of ritual as a “stabilizer of meanings” essential to the durability and internal coherence of any cultural system (Rappaport 1999).

2. Ritual and the “Symbolization” of the Truths of Faith—A Critical Approach to Delsol’s Perspective

The *Chrétienté* (*Christianitas*, Christendom) that lends its title to Delsol’s book refers to a civilization whose essential “steering subsystem” (Wierciński 2010, pp. 119–23) is the Catholic religion. According to Delsol, this civilization is now in a state of terminal crisis—the final stage of an irreversible process of dissolution that began during the Enlightenment. As noted above, I consider Delsol’s diagnosis of this condition to be largely accurate. However, at other levels, my assessment of the structure of her reasoning and the course of her argument is more critical. I would therefore like to treat her theses as a starting point for further discussion—one that conveniently opens the way for a “Rappaportian” line of inquiry aimed at identifying what may be one of the most significant factors in the aforementioned failure: namely, the problem of “truth” in religious culture and its relationship to ritual.

Every culture or civilization makes, at an original and decisive moment in its history, fundamental ontological choices upon which everything else is constructed and anchored—morality and customs, laws and practices. For Christendom, this defining moment was the era of the early councils, which delineated the essential truths upon which sixteen centuries of Christian civilization would be built: God, the human person and morality [...] Every civilization rests on the prestige and enduring authority of its founding principles—established in antiquity—which it seeks to continually renew in order to endure across the centuries. When belief in these principles fades, the consequence may be collapse and ruin—or at the very least, a cataclysmic upheaval.

There comes a moment when faith in these foundational principles disintegrates. As far as we are concerned, we are currently living through such a moment of rupture, in which the fundamental ontological choices—regarding the meaning and place of the human being in the universe, the nature of the world, and the nature of the divine—are being overturned.

I am aware that those within my own milieu (namely, traditionalist Catholics) may be inclined to accuse me here of a form of relativism. Yet one can only think clearly by maintaining a certain critical distance. My sole intention is to emphasize that every civilization—along with its laws and customs—is rooted in primordial beliefs. When those beliefs collapse, the laws and customs may persist for a time, sustained by inertia and habit, but this persistence cannot be indefinite. Eventually, they too will disintegrate under the weight of lost legitimacy.

What constitutes the foundation of a civilization is not *truth itself*—for every civilization lays claim to it—but *belief in a truth*. And it is only this belief that

ensures the lasting endurance of its original choices. (Delsol 2023, pp. 91, 92–94; my translation and emphasis)

In my view, it is difficult not to concur with Delsol’s central thesis concerning the fundamental importance of original beliefs—or, as she terms them, fundamental ontological choices—for the constitution of any civilization. Equally persuasive, or indeed simply correct, is her observation that when such beliefs or choices collapse or disappear on a large scale—when disbelief in them reaches a critical threshold within the social body that once upheld them—civilization, in its existing form and character, inevitably disintegrates. Of course, in the case of human cultures and their decline, total destruction is rare (as it would require, in effect, the extermination of a given population), and we never witness a return to some pre-civilizational or pre-cultural state. Delsol neither asserts nor predicts such an outcome for Christian civilization. Rather, she speaks of a profound transformation marked by two reversals: one ontological, the other moral. The conceptual and axiological foundations of *Christianitas* are comprehensively and deeply denied and revalued, giving rise to a new civilizational entity—one which Delsol, in my view mistakenly (though a full polemic with this position must be left for another occasion), characterizes as a kind of resurrected pre-Christian pagan world.

While I agree with the central insight of *La fin de la Chrétienté* regarding the role of belief and unbelief in fundamental truths as key determinants of civilizations’ endurance and vitality, I contend that she is profoundly mistaken in locating the decisive moment of Christian civilization’s ontological commitments in the era of the ecumenical councils, beginning in the fourth century. This position reflects a particular orientation—one which she articulates in the book more or less explicitly—toward a rather narrow conception of “civilization” and its foundations, rooted in the nexus between religion and political power. The advent of the first ecumenical councils, from the fourth to the eighth century, coincided with the relatively swift process by which Christianity went from being a persecuted sect into, first, a legally tolerated one and then the officially sanctioned religion of the *Imperium Romanum* a few decades later. One might argue that this was the period in which Christian ontological choices received their definitive articulation, supported by a broad consensus and political sanction. But this does not mean that such choices were made only then. On the contrary, the creeds, dogmatic definitions, and anathemas of the ecumenical councils would not have taken the form they did without the foundational decisions made during the first three centuries of Christianity’s existence—at the very least, since the so-called “Council of Jerusalem” (ca. AD 49).

These early developments include the Christological hermeneutic of the Jewish Scriptures; the adoption of the Greek version (the Septuagint) as the basis for exegesis; the composition of early Christian writings and the emergence of the New Testament canon; the formation of the basic contours of orthodoxy in the first and second centuries—primarily through the rejection of Judeo-Christian and dualistic interpretations of Christianity—which laid the groundwork for later theology, soteriology, anthropology, and ecclesiology; the forging of deep connections between Christian thought and Greek philosophy in the second and third centuries; the trinitarian and Christological controversies of the same period (e.g., modalism, adoptionism); the ecclesiological and disciplinary disputes of the third century (e.g., the Novatian schism, the case of Paul of Samosata); and the emergence of the main currents of biblical exegesis (from the second to the fourth centuries)—to name only the most significant (on these topics, see e.g., Pelikan 1971; Pietras 2007, 2022). The enduring relevance of these developments is attested by the later conciliar sources themselves, which frequently refer back to the condemnation or rejection of authors and ideas originating in this earlier period.

Delsol thus misplaces in time the process through which the ideological and doctrinal foundations of Christian civilization were established. The Arian trinitarian controversies, which marked the early decades of Christianity's new political status and gave rise to the first doctrinal definitions later regarded as universally binding, were themselves a continuation—or renewed phase—of debates in which fundamental decisions had already been made, long before not only the Edict of Thessalonica (380), but even the Edict of Milan (313), could have been conceived.

Although numerous sources from that earlier, formative period have come down to us—testifying to debates surrounding early Christian ontological and normative choices—very few contemporary witnesses mention large-scale controversies concerning religious ritual. The only significant dispute of this kind known to us (apart from relatively marginal examples of the liturgical practices of dualist sects, some of which may have had a magical character; see, e.g., [Joncas 1990](#)) concerned the dating of the Easter celebration. This became the subject of conflict between Pope Victor of Rome († ca. 199) and the Quartodeciman communities of Asia Minor.³ While caution is warranted in drawing conclusions from the absence of sources, there is no doubt that early Christians celebrated the liturgy, in obedience to Jesus's command, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:25). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the liturgy already functioned as a privileged space for the celebration and ritual enactment of the ontological and moral foundations of the faith—even while some of those foundations, such as the nature of the Trinity or the Incarnation, remained subjects of dispute.

One piece of evidence supporting this assumption is a fragment preserved by [Eusebius of Caesarea](#) (2019, pp. 266–67) from a letter of St. Irenaeus of Lyons to Pope Victor concerning the aforementioned Easter controversy. The bishop of Lugdunum—who, as is well known, came from Asia Minor—recounts a visit to Rome by his teacher, St. Polycarp. During this visit, Polycarp celebrated the liturgy together with the then bishop of Rome, Anicetus, and their differences in ritual and calendrical practice did not prevent them from doing so. The very possibility of jointly celebrating and participating in a shared Eucharistic rite—or more broadly, in the liturgy—appears here as a fundamental expression and operative sign of agreement in matters of ontology and normativity. It thus stands as one of the early structural pillars of Christian civilization, long before the era of the ecumenical councils.

This situation underwent a fundamental transformation in the later period, particularly with the emergence of confessional divisions. Within these divisions, the rites of individual denominations—and participation in them—came to function not only as frequent causes of schism but also as markers of insurmountable boundaries of affiliation to specific communities. Consequently, from a Catholic perspective, the question of *communicatio in sacris* is today subject to numerous serious restrictions (see [Code of Canon Law 2017](#), can. 844 §2, 908, 1365; cf., e.g., [Lanne 1987](#)).

It should be emphasized, however, that this perspective includes a differentiation regarding the possibility of participating in sacred rites with various Christian communities. To borrow the language of Delsol, one might argue that the collapse of ritual communion resulted from the embodiment—within the liturgical sphere—of divergences at the level of ontological and normative commitments. Where such divergences are—again, from a Catholic point of view—less pronounced, as in the case of the Eastern Churches (see [Santus 2014](#) for a historical overview), the restrictions on *communicatio in sacris* are correspondingly fewer. Where these divergences are more substantial, as with Protestant communities, the level of restriction increases accordingly (cf. [Fabris 2008](#), p. 353).

It appears, however, that such divergences were not easily embedded in ritual practice from the outset, and that the shared celebration of rites could at once serve to harmonize differences and lay the foundations for a common religious civilization.

Interestingly—and perhaps symptomatically—the relationship between faith and ritual appears in Delsol’s argument only in a single, one-dimensional passage, found in a section tellingly titled “From Faith to Rite” (*De la foi au rite*), in which she offers a critical assessment of twentieth-century attempts to restore Christian civilization:

Christendom, as a distinctive cultural formation, was ultimately undone by the collapse of its very foundation—faith in a transcendent truth, namely belief in a single God who entered the world.

Faith, of course, is an intimate and complex reality. Often even the individual cannot fully discern, in the depths of conscience, whether they truly believe; one may awaken a believer and retire an agnostic. Those who survey religious belief thus traverse profoundly ambiguous terrain. Yet since the [French] Revolution, deism and atheism—now openly and unapologetically proclaimed—have steadily gained ground. In this context, ritual has frequently borne the weight of unbelief, with profound consequences for what would later be called postmodernity.

In the Catholic twentieth century across many Western countries, Maurrassism (*maurrasisme*) left a deep imprint. Rome’s 1926 condemnation of Action Française targeted a form of agnosticism that, while overtly professed, had insinuated itself into the Church like a Trojan horse. What did this mean in practice? Maurras embodied the posture of one who performs the gestures without the faith—practice without belief. Within such circles, faith was dismissed as the province of fools, children, and women—three interchangeable categories. Maurras’s success in the first half of the twentieth century thus signaled a profound shift from faith to ritual, foreshadowing the transformations yet to come.

This religious impoverishment, which relegated faith to the margins of ritual gesture, both prepared the ground for and actively contributed to the great wave of symbolization that swept the 1960s. At that juncture, the radical moral revolt that would ultimately dismantle Christendom was accompanied by the reduction of the truths of faith to the status of symbols. With respect to the Eucharist, for example, the doctrine of transubstantiation came under question even in some seminaries. One might speak of a Protestantization of parts of Catholicism. Scholars of religion now refer openly to a “metaphorization” or to a “total or partial elimination of references to supernatural powers.”

Metaphors, symbols, and rites—but without faith: this shift, whose consequences are difficult to overstate, harks back to pagan religions, to a time before the notion of truth had been firmly established. Inevitably, the void left by Christianity has been, at least in part, filled by a multiplicity of new paganisms. (Delsol 2023, pp. 39–41; my translation)

As in the previously cited passage, several of the convictions expressed here are difficult to contest. These include

- (a) The link between the collapse of Christendom as a distinctive cultural form and the gradual erosion of faith in the truth of the Gospel as a socially dominant condition;
- (b) The depiction of personal religious faith as a state that is inherently unstable—subject to oscillation between various forms of certitude and radical doubt. While this observation reflects well-known dynamics within the spiritual life, Delsol appears to use the notion of “loss of faith” not to describe doubt as an integral element of that

dynamism but rather as a foundational structure within it. This raises the question of whether she would endorse the view that faith, so understood—as intrinsically unstable—cannot serve as the basis for any public or civilizational order (cf. [Rappaport 1999](#), pp. 122–23);

- (c) The correlation between the general weakening of faith as a shared social reality and the contemporary crisis of that reality, with, on the one hand, the moral revolution (a normative inversion), and, on the other, the *reduction of the truths of faith to the status of symbols* (an ontological inversion). It is important to add, however, that this reduction has not occurred primarily among those who explicitly reject Christianity—as superstition or as an instrument of domination—but rather, and above all, among those who formally and nominally remain within the Church.

The argument advanced by the author of *La fin de la Chrétienté*, despite the precision of many of its insights and diagnoses, is nonetheless marked by two fundamental weaknesses. One is explicitly acknowledged in her text; the other, by contrast, operates as an unarticulated—perhaps even unconscious—negative presupposition that underlies her entire account of the collapse of Christian civilization and obscures a factor of immense significance in the very processes she seeks to describe.

Regarding the first weakness, in her account of the causes and consequences of the disintegration of the civilizational form of Christianity in the West,⁴ Delsol, in my view, commits an error analogous to the one previously noted in her identification of the “alpha” point of *Christianitas* with the era of the ecumenical councils. This mistake appears to stem from her particular conception of what constitutes a civilization. Specifically, she locates the “omega” point of the Christian world in a fusion of religion and political power, exemplified by the authoritarian (restorationist, fascist–corporatist, Maurrassian) ideologies and regimes that emerged in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. In her account, these regimes represented a decadent, epigonal attempt to salvage a civilization rooted in Christianity by consciously sidelining—or even outright negating—the centrality of faith, which they perceived as irrational and ephemeral. In its place, the Maurrassians allegedly installed “gesture” or “ritual”: that is, they sought (if I understand her correctly) to reconstitute a Catholic civilization through external actions—gestural, liturgical—divorced from the belief in the metaphysical truths that, according to Delsol’s narrative, had sustained that civilization for sixteen centuries (beginning, again, with the conciliar era). She interprets this performative turn as a decisive blow to Christian culture itself, insofar as it led to the treatment of the content of faith—stripped of its inner gesture—not as a set of truth claims in any robust sense but rather as a series of metaphors or symbols, more palatable to minds already emptied of belief.⁵

I do not intend to verify or falsify Delsol’s thesis concerning the relationship between faith and gesture in the context of *maurrassisme*; I accept her account on its own terms. Nonetheless, it seems to me that she significantly overestimates the influence that such ideologies or political theories exerted on Catholicism—particularly with respect to its doctrinal and epistemological dimensions across the broader historical territory of *Christianitas*. Their actual political impact, aside from a few specific contexts (notably Spain and Portugal), was minimal. Charles Maurras himself, though regarded as an intellectual authority by a segment of the elite—not only in France but elsewhere—exerted little actual influence on political practice, even within his own country ([Bartyzel 2015](#), p. 167). In this light, the conceptual framework of religion and power, which Delsol uses to interpret both the origin and the demise of the era in which Christian ontological and moral commitments held sway, appears insufficient. Neither the formation of those commitments nor their eventual loss of normative authority can be meaningfully explained through the paradigm of an alliance between throne and altar.

The second of Delsol's key weaknesses lies in a kind of implicit *a(anti)ritualism* that pervades her analysis—an attitude shaped, at least in part, by her critique of efforts to establish Christian civilization through political means (on this phenomenon, see [Douglas 2003](#)). This perspective, which sometimes manifests in her work as a stark opposition between faith and ritual, may help to explain her complete neglect of the ritual dimension of Catholic faith and, more specifically, of the radical transformations that Catholic liturgy underwent in the twentieth century. This constitutes the unspoken negative presupposition mentioned earlier: namely, that ritual, as such, plays no essential role in the life of Christian civilization, and that, once appropriated by political regimes, it becomes a dangerous instrument for constructing an externally imposed, formalized order—one in which belief in the truths traditionally expressed through ritual becomes, at best, secondary and at worst, altogether irrelevant.

Without denying that ritual, when instrumentalized in this way, may indeed become destructive, it must nevertheless be emphasized that—given the relatively minor impact of fascist–corporatist theories on Western Catholicism, particularly in its ritual dimension—Delsol's claim that such ideologies were the principal agents behind the “symbolization” or “metaphorization” of the truths of faith is difficult to sustain. At the same time, during precisely the period when, according to her account, these processes converged with a broader moral and cultural revolution to produce the collapse of Christendom as a distinct cultural form, the Catholic Church was undergoing a profound transformation of its entire ritual system—an event to which Delsol offers no reference, not even in the form of a question regarding its possible relevance to the condition she diagnoses. And yet, whereas the influence of *maurrassisme*, to which she attributes considerable importance, remains debatable, the liturgical reform initiated in the late 1940s and culminating between 1964 and 1975 undeniably affected the entire Catholic world. It is difficult to argue that this reform had no bearing on how the truths of faith were received and understood. That influence, I suggest, may be fruitfully examined through the lens of Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual, to which I now turn in the following section.

3. The Postconciliar Liturgical Reform Through the Prism of Rappaport's Ritual Theory

Rappaport's concept represents perhaps the most comprehensive recent attempt to articulate a general anthropological theory of ritual and religion ([Lukken 2005](#), pp. 78–83; [Szyjewski 2007](#), pp. xx–xxxii). He first gained prominence through his ethnographic research among the Maring people of New Guinea, which initially reflected an ecological approach—interpreting cultural phenomena and peculiarities through their interaction with the natural environment ([Rappaport 1968](#)). However, by the late 1970s, drawing on his fieldwork and incorporating other theoretical perspectives, he began to articulate a broader anthropological theory of ritual and religion ([Rappaport 1979](#)), which was ultimately synthesized in his posthumously published *opus magnum* ([Rappaport 1999](#)). Although he never entirely abandoned the ecological and adaptational framework for understanding religion, his later writings increasingly emphasized semiotic dimensions, particularly the role of language and communication within ritual contexts. As a result, his theory constitutes an anthropological synthesis of ecological thought and linguistic theory, resonating with cognitive–structural trends in contemporary religious studies.

In this way, Rappaport's conceptual framework transcends the empirical specificity of its original context, offering a theoretical tool applicable to the analysis of ritual across diverse cultural settings. In my view, its core elements—especially those related to the problem of language—are particularly useful for analyzing changes in ritual, such as those

represented by the Catholic liturgical reform (for a detailed analysis of this issue, which forms the basis of the following three sections, see [Dekert 2018, 2022](#)).

3.1. Rappaport's Concept

For the American anthropologist, the human being is above all a creature whose world—including its social and cultural structures—is constituted by language, the adaptive tool *par excellence*. Language is a highly specific medium, shaped above all by two essential properties: its symbolic nature and its grammar. Rappaport interprets the symbolic dimension of language through the lens of Charles S. Peirce's typology of signs, in which a symbol is defined by the fact that the connection between signifier and signified is conventional. Precisely because of this conventionality, a symbol—especially a word—can carry a broad and often ambiguous range of meanings. It is not constrained by any necessary or fixed reference to empirical reality and therefore may signify not only what is perceptible in the here and now, but also what lies beyond present experience: realities of different temporal or spatial orders, as well as entities that are non-empirical or even entirely non-existent.

This symbolic nature of the word—the foundational unit of language—gives rise to the first major danger inherent in language: the possibility of falsehood. Grammar, by contrast, is the system that governs the ordering of symbols into coherent utterances. Yet precisely because the human world is structured by language, grammar itself can serve as the basis for mutually exclusive and even contradictory visions of reality. Thus, the second danger inherent in language is not merely deceit but the emergence of alternative semantic orders. Returning briefly to Delsol's reflections, one might interpret the "great inversions" she identifies as symptomatic of our cultural moment as precisely such an alternative reordering of the world, arising from the potential embedded in grammar to shape new, rival ontologies.

In Rappaport's view, human communities have developed mechanisms to counteract these dangers—strategies designed to preserve the coherence of meaning in the face of falsehood (i.e., semantic disintegration) and resisting the centrifugal pull of alternative worldviews. Foremost among these mechanisms is ritual, which he defines as "*the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*" ([Rappaport 1999](#), p. 24; original emphasis).

Ritual functions by integrating two communicative streams that, during its performance, become fused: what Rappaport terms the *self-referential* and the *canonical* messages. The former are present in all rituals, including those observed in animal behavior. These messages are largely stable and often extend beyond the ritual context, continuously conveying information about the performer's physical, psychological, or social condition. Their medium is typically what Peirce classified as an index—a sign in which the relationship between signifier and signified is immediate and physical. Indices operate primarily in physical space and include such phenomena as presence or absence in a given location (already a form of communication), bodily posture, or involuntary micro-movements that signal emotional states.

Canonical messages, by contrast, encompass all elements of a ritual that constitute its predetermined structure of action and speech—the forms into which participants enter and through which they perform. These messages belong primarily to the symbolic register (especially verbal) and serve to express and transmit the foundational truths concerning the sacred, the world, and the human being, as understood within a given religious or cultural system. An intrinsic paradox is at play here: on the one hand, these truths are regarded within their own systems as timeless; on the other, they are articulated through

language—a medium inherently susceptible to semantic instability, grammatical ambiguity, and falsification.

Ritual mitigates these risks precisely by conjoining the self-referential and canonical streams of communication. In this conjoining, the performers begin, to some degree, to self-referentially embody the canon: through their physical presence, gestures, and vocal expressions, they signal their own inclusion in—and affirmation of—the order of meaning articulated by the ritual’s canonical content:

In conforming to the orders that their performances bring into being, and that come alive in their performance, performers become indistinguishable from those orders, parts of them, for the time being. Since this is the case, for performers to reject liturgical orders being realized by their own participation in them as they are participating in them is self-contradictory, and thus impossible. Therefore, by performing a liturgical order the participants accept, and indicate to themselves and to others that they accept whatever is encoded in the canon of that order. (Rappaport 1999, p. 119; original emphasis)

Public acceptance of the content encompassed within the canonical layer constitutes the dimension of ritual that enables it to serve as the foundation of social and public order. These orders are thus communicatively confirmed as true—so to speak, by the very bodies of the performers who enact them. Such an acceptance does not presuppose faith in the sense of a deep cognitive or psychological conviction regarding the truth of the canon, nor does it imply that all who publicly affirm, for example, the moral order derived from it actually follow it in practice. Rather, it establishes the framework for collective assent to the truth of the canonical content and the full range of obligations it entails. In this way, it creates a conventional space in which the meanings operating within a given religious–cultural system are not only comprehensible and acceptable but also recognized as true and binding (cf. Rappaport 1999, pp. 124–31). For ritual to function in this capacity, however, it must retain all of its constitutive elements: performance, the perceptible invariance of sequences and utterances, formality, and encoding not wholly determined by the performers themselves.

3.2. Interpreting Liturgical Change Through Rappaport’s Framework

From this perspective, the principal aims and defining features of the liturgical reform implemented after the Second Vatican Council merit close examination (on this topic, see e.g., Bugnini 1990; Marini 2007; Milcarek 2009; Chupungco 2016a, 2016b; Reid 2016). A key modification was the revision of the liturgical books—that is, the texts that determine both the content of the prayers and the norms governing ritual action—which had functioned as vehicles for the canonical message. Although the reform encompassed the entire corpus of Roman Rite books, the present analysis will focus exclusively on the Missal. This choice is justified by its particular significance: on the one hand, the Mass occupies a central place in the Catholic ritual system; on the other, limitations of scope necessitate narrowing the discussion. Despite assertions that “nothing has been changed of the substance of our traditional Mass” (Paul VI 1969), the reform was widely perceived—both intuitively and practically—as a profound and far-reaching transformation. Importantly, this transformation was extended beyond the declarations of novelty present in theological and media interpretations of the Missal of Paul VI. Its radical character is already evident in the establishment of a new structural framework for organizing the canonical message. It is the implications of this structural change that the following section will address, though without claiming to exhaust the complexity of the issue.

The very act of promulgating a new Missal corresponds to two of Rappaport’s fundamental definitional features of ritual: “more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances” and “encoding not entirely by the performers.” Invariance is one of the essential

properties of canonical messages. Rappaport emphasizes, however, that what matters is not absolute invariance—which, in practice, is never fully achievable—but rather its semiotic function.⁶ Every liturgical performance inevitably contains a self-referential dimension, meaning that each enactment, no matter how formally constrained, always differs in some respect from others. What is decisive is not invariance in a literal sense but the *effect* of invariance. And this effect, as Rappaport notes, is far more difficult to sustain in literate societies than in oral cultures. In contexts where the canonical message has been stabilized in written form for centuries, and where changes have been rare and incremental—as was the case with the Missal of Pius V⁷—the introduction of a radically revised version, subject to further modification from the outset, erodes the perceived stability of the ritual in the minds of its participants. In short, what was presumed to be unchanging now appears manifestly subject to change.

A second, equally significant aspect of this situation concerns the moment at which the canonical message becomes encoded. Admittedly, even in liturgies celebrated according to the new Missal, the criterion of encoding “not entirely by the performers” continues to be fulfilled to a considerable degree. Nevertheless, the fact that the process of encoding—whether through the revision of existing texts or the creation of new ones—is precisely known and situated in the recent past renders the canon vulnerable to a sense of historical contingency. While it is broadly acknowledged that every element of the liturgy has undergone development and bears a human genealogy, in the framework of ritual as understood by Rappaport, the distinction between imperceptible or obscure encoding and encoding that is clearly identifiable and historically localized is of critical significance. In the latter case, the canonical message becomes subject to an inevitable relativization that undermines its canonical authority—since canonicity, by definition, requires freedom from relativity.

Although official ecclesial statements maintain that the new structure of canonical transmission preserves the quality of “immutability”—both in terms of content (i.e., continuity with tradition and legitimate development therefrom) and the obligation to enact it faithfully—one cannot overlook the evident and perceptible change in form. Previously, the immutability of the liturgy was largely self-evident and required no explicit justification. Today, its preservation demands institutional reinforcement through interventions by the Magisterium, papal documents, theological commentary, juridical acts, and regulatory reiterations of the need for fidelity to liturgical norms. This shift marks a significant transformation in the internal semiotic balance of immutability. In its traditional configuration, the form of the rite itself served as its most direct expression. In the current context—where this relationship is disrupted or substantially weakened—“immutability” is displaced from the level of performance to that of declarative assertion, from the liturgical act to the realm of metalinguistic reflection, interpretation, and theological exposition. This shift is further exacerbated by the structural features of the new Missal itself, which permits a broad range of prayer options and ritual forms (including within the Eucharistic Prayer, the very heart of the Mass) and grants celebrants a degree of creative discretion.

In this light, one can draw general conclusions regarding the changes introduced by the Missal of Paul VI, noting a clear shift in emphasis toward symbolic communication, occurring at the expense of indexical communication.

Examining the text of the Missal itself, beyond the comprehensive transformation of its prayer content, one notes a significant reduction in the number of obligatory gestures and liturgical postures required of the celebrant, as well as a kind of “unified” redistribution of canonical messages compared to their precise and hierarchical arrangement in the earlier form. In the classical Roman liturgy (as well as in other traditional usages and rites), the sanctuary functions as the central locus of canonical communication. The rite

—meticulously prescribed and saturated with indexical signs such as gestures, postures, and movements—is binding in its entirety upon both celebrant and ministers. As a result, the channel of canonical communication merges with the that of self-referential information—the very manner of celebrating the liturgy becomes one with its content, rendering the entire communicative act highly unambiguous (though not devoid of multiple layers of meaning) and internally coherent.

Thus, truths central to the Catholic worldview—concerning God, the human person, the world and the history of salvation—are not merely articulated but confirmed as unconditionally true and conveyed in a manner that maximizes clarity and is free from interpretive ambiguity.⁸

For liturgical participants, the obligation to perform certain ritual behaviors differs somewhat from that of the clergy: it functions more as an ingrained practice than as a formal norm.⁹ The faithful primarily express themselves through gestures and bodily postures—that is, through indexical signs—which layer onto the self-referential stream of communication and interact with it dynamically. In this way, the participation of the laity is oriented toward the reception and affirmation of the central message emanating from the sanctuary. This message is thus not only transmitted but also reflected and reinforced by the community's responses.

The spatial distribution of the canonical message during the liturgical celebration—both in terms of its quantity and quality—renders the ritual center an “objective,” “independent” and “timeless” point of reference toward which participants' actions are oriented. These actions, rooted in self-referential communication, remain open to the message emanating from the center and constitute a distinctive form of participation—not as co-creation of the rite but as entry into a reality that transcends the participants themselves. Interestingly, although the spatial arrangement of the older liturgy may be interpreted as emphasizing the priest's mediating role (following an “arrow” model with the celebrant at the tip and the faithful behind him), the communicative structure of the ritual is better characterized by a vertical–concentric axis—one in which the center is positioned “above” the community yet exists for its sake.

The new Missal and its actual implementation in liturgical practice clearly transform the previously described structure. Within the sanctuary, the substantial reduction in prescribed gestures and liturgical postures—combined with their partial optionality—leads to a weakening, if not a complete dissolution, of the mechanism that formerly enabled the ritual to communicate the canonical message in a self-referential manner. As a result, this canonical message loses its formal strength: it is no longer capable of dominating the flow of information contained within the ritual event. This process is further intensified by the spatial reorientation of the liturgy—namely, the turning of the celebrant “toward the people”—which, though not originally mandated by conciliar documents, quickly came to occupy a dominant position in practice. In the reconfigured ritual structure, the role of the word increases: expanded dialogue, euchology spoken aloud, lengthened biblical readings, and the central place of the homily become the primary vehicles of meaning.¹⁰ Moreover, the celebrant may offer personal introductions to various parts of the Mass, encourage specific postures, and even employ the assistance of a commentator (CDW 2003, §§31; 105b). As a result, a large part of the celebration unfolds within the linguistic sphere—the ritual is not so much enacted as explained and verbally described. The emphasis shifts from “what is done” to “what is said about what is done.” The principal sign becomes the word, and the participation of the faithful increasingly comes to be identified with its intellectual reception (Usher 2010, p. 129; Folsom 2018, pp. 39–40; cf. also Grimes 2013, pp. 5–6).

Although new regulations were introduced to govern the behavior of the faithful, which may be seen as a form of official standardization,¹¹ modifications concerning gestures

and bodily postures were relatively minor. Nevertheless, certain practices that emerged in different parts of the world had a significant impact on the structure of the rite. These include, for example, the abandonment of kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer, the reception of Holy Communion while standing and in the hand, and the delegation of authority over such matters to local episcopal conferences (regulated through provisions in national editions of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, see [CDW 2003](#), §§43 and 160-1). Though seemingly technical, such changes have a profound effect on the semiotic structure of the Mass—particularly on how the hierarchy of meaning is expressed through the body. The abandonment of kneeling diminishes the liturgy's capacity to convey, via sensory signs, the hierarchical order of events unfolding during the celebration. Furthermore, the clarity of communication regarding the relationship of the celebrants and the faithful to the liturgical act—and to the canonical truth it contains—is blurred. When participants' bodily behavior remains constant throughout the rite, the message becomes "mute," illegible, and susceptible to conflicting interpretations. Beyond gestures, another significant change was the expansion of verbal interaction between sanctuary and nave.¹² This mode of communication was intended to serve as the main indicator of "conscious" and "full" participation (*actuosa participatio*), which in practice depends largely on the ability to understand and engage with language.

3.3. From Index to Symbol, from Canon to "De-Canonization"

Summing up the considerations thus far, when comparing the two ritual forms—the one around the Missal of Pius V and the one introduced by the Missal of Paul VI—in light of the changes that are under examination, two key observations emerge. First, during the reform process, the ritual gradually shifted toward the dominance of symbolic communication. Second, this shift was accompanied by a transformation in the "topography" of the ritual: the former structure, based on a vertical–concentric model with a clearly marked transcendent center, gave way to a more dispersed, horizontal and decentralized configuration. This may sound paradoxical, especially since one of the rationales for the change in liturgical orientation (celebrant versus *populum*) was precisely the desire to make the altar and its function more visibly the center of the assembly. Yet, in light of Rappaport's theory, it is not the placement of the altar or other liturgical artifacts that determines the communicative structure of the ritual. Rather, what proves crucial here are the relationships between self-referential signals and the canonical message. If the above analysis of these relations in the older rite is correct, then in the reformed liturgy promulgated through the Missal of Paul VI, the center of meaning becomes much less tangible, more relative and dependent on the participant's subjective "awareness" of the content. In other words, there is a shift from a ritual of a substantial character to one more symbolic in nature—where conceptual meaning, rather than bodily and indexical meanings, dominates.

Broadly speaking, the liturgical reforms led to a fundamental shift in the semiotic structure of the celebration: the ritual increasingly lost its function as a means of "testing" and confirming the religious reality it communicates. Consequently, its role as a tool for the "cognitive stabilization of religious beliefs" ([Grad 2020](#), p. 360) was diminished. As a result, the ritual begins to resemble a "terrain without a map"—a space where the inherent ambiguity and malleability of language assume a dominant role. Although this does not mean that its power has been entirely abolished, it does become significantly easier to assign new interpretations to the ritual—including those that challenge its most fundamental assumptions. One of the earliest effects of this weakening was a decline in the ritual's impact—and in some places, its complete disappearance.

Up to this point, I have focused on the consequences of changes within the ritual as celebrated according to the official norms contained in the liturgical books. However, it is

impossible to overlook the fact that an integral aspect of implementing the reformed liturgy has been the emergence of phenomena situated along a continuum between permitted flexibility and outright arbitrariness. In practice, this means that liturgical celebrations often include practices ranging from the use of options foreseen by the Missal to the total abandonment of the prescribed form in favor of liturgical creativity—whether on the part of the celebrant or the entire community.¹³ From the point of view of canon law, there is a clear boundary between what is permissible and what is illicit. Yet from a ritual perspective, in line with Rappaport's conception, both phenomena belong to the same order—they represent different degrees of the same tendency. Importantly, such practices are not limited to a single region: they are global in scope and have appeared—and continue to appear—in very diverse contexts of the Catholic world.

In light of Rappaport's understanding of ritual, the phenomena described above lead to varying degrees of blurring of the canonical message. In extreme cases, the distinction between the canonical message and the self-referential communication collapses: the liturgy becomes an expression of what its performers say, rather than a vehicle for conveying a transcendent content. The more the celebration shifts toward spontaneous creativity, the less it can be described as a ritual in the strict sense. In the most radical instances, the basic condition of rituality disappears: there are neither "more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances" nor any "encoding not entirely by the performers." Such actions fall outside the definitional boundaries of ritual as such. They lack both a formal structure and rootedness in something external to the performers. As a result, not only is coherence with the canonical foundation lost but so too is the very possibility of interpreting such a celebration as a liturgical event in the proper sense. Thus, when liturgy becomes merely a form of self-expression for individuals or communities, it not only ceases to function as ritual but also forfeits its capacity to communicate that which is meant to be immutable and transcendent in relation to the participants. In consequence, a situation may arise in which the canonical message is entirely supplanted by the self-referential communications of a particular community—precisely the inverse of ritual's defining purpose.

4. Conclusions—Ritual, Truth, and the Decline of the Christian World

In light of the foregoing considerations, the conciliar reform—an imposed, top-down deconstruction and attempted reconstruction of the ritually defined boundaries of the Catholic universe of meaning—must be viewed as an intervention that inevitably carried consequences for the civilizational creative forces of Catholicism. Even if the old ritual was immediately replaced by a new one, and even if the diverse modes of that replacement mitigated its effects in some contexts—so that the boundaries of that universe did not collapse completely—the collapse nevertheless occurred on another level. Most notably, it manifested in the weakening or loss of the liturgical system's capacity to stabilize meaning by maintaining a continuous and unshaken process of convention forming, through which the truths of faith would receive ritual confirmation of their truth.

To put it most directly, one consequence of the reform—and a corollary of the varying degrees to which it was received, rejected, or, conversely, intensely developed (e.g., through creative innovations)—was the emergence of multiple, often mutually competing, ways in which contemporary Catholics understand the truth of the Catholic universe of meaning (assuming they accept it at all), and the manner in which that universe is true. The problem of truth necessarily entails questions of meaning and the translatability of that universe into life praxis, ethics, human decision-making, social engagement, and so on. As Delsol aptly observes, "What constitutes the foundation of a civilization is not truth itself—for all civilizations claim it—but belief in a truth. And only such belief ensures the lasting endurance of the original choices" (Delsol 2023, p. 94). Yet belief in itself and by itself—

as the author of *La fin de la Chrétienté* also rightly notes, even she does not fully draw out the consequences—does not constitute a stable disposition. As we might echo with Rappaport, it cannot serve as a foundation for public—and therefore civilizational—order. According to his framework, it is ritual that provides belief with the publicly recognized and professed framework of truth, necessary for the order built upon it to function vitally, rather than drifting toward relativization and eventual disintegration (from a theological perspective, the role of the Eucharistic ritual as a fundamental force in building community and fostering ecclesial unity is described by [John Paul II 2003](#), §23). But if the ritual system is transformed in such a way that this function is weakened or nullified, then *sola fide* will reveal its full instability.

Returning to the problem raised at the outset—the question of why Pius X’s “project,” taken up by the early Liturgical Movement, ultimately failed—one should point to the process by which their deeply insightful intuition about the significance of liturgy for the revitalization of the Christian world was transformed. Over time, this intuition gave way to a conception of ritual increasingly understood as a sphere governed primarily by symbolic communication, and ultimately to its transformation according to this logic. This process culminated in the postconciliar reform, but its roots lie much deeper, perhaps in broader transformations of modern consciousness (see, e.g., [Robinson 2005](#); [Hemming 2008](#); cf. also [Dekert 2017](#)). Through this process, the Church itself contributed to what Delsol—linking it to entirely different causes—describes as “a reduction of the truths of faith to the status of mere symbols” (2023, p. 40). In other words, to the “de-realization” of the truths of faith in the consciousness of the Catholic faithful.

Delsol, in keeping with her own premises (or, one might say, with her fundamental intellectual commitments), sees the condition for the continued functioning of Catholic Christianity in the West as its withdrawal from the public sphere, above all from aspirations to shape it politically. According to her, this is due to the fact that contemporary Catholics have entirely rejected the logic of power and the possibility of its applicability in the realm of faith. All civilizational ambitions have not only been abandoned by them, but they ought to be—as [Delsol \(2023, p. 179\)](#) writes, “It would probably be better if we remained merely silent witnesses—and, in the end, secret agents of God.”

Without wholly rejecting her critical stance on the Church’s entanglement with power (also as a subject exercising institutional violence), it seems to me that, in the final analysis, her demands are mistaken. Significantly, I take issue with the idea that the Christianity’s civilizational or cultural significance is conditioned by its political power and influence. While the Church’s historical association with power is undoubtedly one of the key factors in the disintegration of the “secular” dimension of the functioning of Catholicism, it is not, in my view, decisive for the inversions identified: moral and above all ontological (the former, in my view, being largely a consequence of the latter). Naturally, a phenomenon as vast as the “decline of Christianity as a distinctive cultural form” cannot be traced to a single cause. It is the result of a hugely complex network of various interdependencies. Nevertheless, I would argue that the problem of the change in ritual of the Catholic Church represents one of the primary systemic factors of this decline in the form it has taken over the last decades. Any possible civilizational revival of Catholicism—which does not necessarily depend on Catholics occupying the highest offices or the Church’s influence over political and social institutions—will hinge, to a significant extent, on the fate of its ritual dimension. This dimension is currently in a kind of impasse, connected primarily with the process initiated by Benedict XVI and his *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* ([Benedict XVI 2007](#)), which Francis decided to block through his own *motu proprio Traditionis Custodes* ([Francis 2021](#)). What direction this question will take under his successor, Leo XIV, remains open.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ASS/AAS	<i>Acta Sanctae Sedis/Acta Apostolicae Sedis</i>
CDW	Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
SC	Second Vatican Council, Constitution on Sacred Liturgy <i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>

Notes

- ¹ The original and canonical version of the document is the Italian text, although a Latin version was published in the same issue of *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (36 [1903–1904]). Certain ambiguities and differences exist between the two versions. For example, the Italian phrase *partecipazione attiva* is rendered in Latin simply as *participatio*, which may be explained by the translator’s assumption that the pope was not referring to a specific or distinctive kind of participation, but merely to the general fact of being “present at Mass” (see [Belsole 2023](#)). Another divergence—more difficult to account for—is the translation of *rifiorisca* simply as *floreat*, thereby omitting the nuance of renewal or revitalization conveyed by the Italian prefix *ri-*. This substantially alters the meaning of this part of the document, suggesting the continuation of an already existing state rather than the reawakening of something that has waned or disappeared. Since, however, the Italian version expresses the proper intention of Pius X, it must be concluded that the latter sense is what he had in mind.
- ² Delsol generally associates “Christianity as a civilization” with Catholicism (see 2023, p. 10).
- ³ The principal source on this matter remains *Ecclesiastical History* (V.24) by [Eusebius of Caesarea](#) (2019, pp. 264–68), written more than a century later.
- ⁴ I add this clarification because, as it seems to me, it is notably absent from the author’s own line of thought. Her perspective is markedly Eurocentric and, more specifically, shaped by the particularities of the French experience, while simultaneously generalizing its conclusions to the entirety of the Christian world. I do not mean to suggest that the processes she describes are not observable on a broader scale. Nevertheless, the “end of *Chrétienté*” so authoritatively proclaimed in her book undoubtedly refers primarily to the Western—especially European—world. Whether it also applies to other regions (Asia, and especially Africa) remains an open question.
- ⁵ If I understand Delsol correctly, she is referring here to widely observed developments within Catholic circles—particularly from the second half of the twentieth century onward—in which the fundamental articles of faith have undergone multivalent reinterpretation. These doctrines increasingly come to be regarded not as intrinsically true, but as meaningful, and moreover as open to being infused with new and previously foreign meanings. For instance, the consecrated Eucharistic bread may no longer be understood and treated as the Body of Christ, but rather as a symbol of the people’s struggle to free themselves from political and economic oppression, as seen in the more radical currents of liberation theology (see [Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei](#) 1984, p. 902). Similarly, the resurrection of Christ is no longer professed as a historical event attested in the New Testament; instead, such testimonies are reinterpreted—not as accounts of real, empirical encounters with the Risen One, but as metaphorical expressions of experiences such as the forgiveness felt by Jesus’ first disciples. See, e.g., [Camley](#) (1987, pp. 201–2), on the views of Edward Schillebeeckx: “For Schillebeeckx’s view the crux of the faith is not an acknowledgment of the truth of certain statements which assert that the original disciples of Jesus had experiences of an outward, visual, and quasi-empirical kind, but rather that their faith was essentially an inner and more clearly religious conviction of knowing themselves to be forgiven by Jesus who, on the basis of this experience, was declared to be risen. This religious experience of understanding oneself to be forgiven and to be a member of the community of the forgiven-by-Jesus is then said to be the essence of the Easter experience, not only of the first believers but of Christian believers through the ages.”
- ⁶ “If we are concerned with the significance of invariance it is *apparent* invariance that finally counts. The *actual* changelessness or antiquity of an element is semiotically important only insofar as it affects the perception or understanding of that element as ancient, changeless or eternal” ([Rappaport](#) 1999, p. 342; original emphasis).
- ⁷ For the changes introduced between the promulgation of the Missal of Pius V and the pontificate of Pius X, (see, e.g., [Reid](#) 2005, pp. 39–71; see also [Crouan](#) 2005, chap. 8; [Milcarek](#) 2009, pp. 83–85). The far-reaching invariance of the liturgical foundation—that is, of the prayers and norms contained in the liturgical books—did not imply the identity of all celebrations or of the variants

foreseen by that foundation, in this case the Missal. As Bullivant (2019, p. 147) notes, it is simply not the case that the pre-conciliar mode of celebrating Mass was characterized by strict homogeneity. Depending on a range of factors, Masses were celebrated in different ways; however, “these were all self-evidently variations on a common theme—variations, moreover, with a decidedly low standard deviation.”

8 Naturally, this is not to suggest that disruptions in the fusion of the canonical and self-referential communication cannot occur. Illness, psychological distress, or loss of faith may impair the celebrant’s ability to engage meaningfully with the ritual. Nevertheless, the highly formalized and obligatory nature of the rite ensures that—short of outright refusal to perform it (which, as Rappaport notes, constitutes a significant self-referent message)—only explicit violations of liturgical norms or extreme negligence would visibly disrupt the communicative effect. In most cases, the act of entering into the ritual produces an informational outcome nearly indistinguishable from that of a celebration conducted with full conviction and interior engagement. Incidentally, the convergence of the autoreferential and canonical messages in the ritual action performed at the level of the presbyterium—which, in light of Rappaport’s analysis, constitutes an irreplaceable form of confirmation of the truth of the Catholic world of meaning—corresponds closely to the theological understanding of the principle of *ex opere operato* and the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharistic Species. Rappaport himself refers to *ex opere operato* as an example of a speech act possessing illocutionary force (1999, 479n6; see also Pasek 2012).

9 The absence of normative rubrics for the faithful’s behavior has led to a pluralism of participation modes, structured around idiomatic, unwritten sets of canonical conduct. These included commonly practiced and customarily obligatory gestures or bodily postures—such as kneeling during the Canon (Eucharistic Prayer)—as well as occasional short spoken responses or dialogues, and a range of devotional practices shaped by custom and left to individual discretion.

10 It is worth noting that the “textualization” of the liturgy—the shift of ritual emphasis toward the text—has deep roots in the Roman tradition. This process began already around the turn of the first and second millennia, as liturgical practice gradually moved away from a sung mode of celebration toward one based on recitation. In this transition, the text of the liturgy lost one of the key elements contributing to its ritual character (Usher 2010, pp. 191–200, especially pp. 197–98). This trait, however, remained largely latent so long as the liturgy continued to be governed either by rigorously observed custom or—following the post-Tridentine reform—by codified law.

11 The directive to introduce such regulations—specifically, to account for the role of the laity within the rubrics—was already articulated in the SC §31.

12 The enduring influence of this approach to understanding the liturgical reform is evident in the work of the Benedictine Adrien Nocent (1993 as cited by Nichols 1996, pp. 94–95). In this book, Nocent advocates, for instance, the reduction of the introductory rites in favor of lengthening the biblical readings and the homily, as well as the elimination of certain ritual elements that had been retained in the reformed liturgy, such as the *lavabo* and the elevation at the moment of consecration.

13 Numerous accounts of such “liturgies”—often based on media reports from the time of the liturgical reform’s implementation—are documented in works like Davies (1980) and Hitchcock (1974). Importantly, this approach to the liturgy was not limited to spontaneous initiatives by small, dissident lay groups frustrated with the reform’s lack of democratic character (see Henold 2001; Kautzer 2012), nor was it solely the result of overzealous priests attempting to attract youth back to the Church. The push for a “desacralization of the liturgy”—often rooted in incarnation-centered theologies of secularization or radical demands for acculturation to modern secular culture—was in fact advocated by well-established theologians and pastoral leaders, see, e.g., Schmidt (1971) and Grzeškowiak (1975; here one can find a comprehensive bibliographic overview from the 1950s to the mid-1970s). A comparable, though more theologically refined, perspective appears in more recent literature as well, notably in Geldhof (2015).

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