

## ‘THE MASS THAT TAKES ITS TIME’

*Jean-Marc Furnon*

IT IS A SUNDAY EVENING and there is a mass for young people, allowing them more time to ‘listen to the Word’ as they joyfully sing the praise of the Lord and enjoy a little friendship at the close of the day: such is *La Messe qui prend son temps* (known as MT), ‘The Mass that Takes Its Time’. This evening there are 300 gathered in the church of St Ignatius in the sixth *arrondissement* in Paris—and there will be perhaps as many as 2,000 different participants over the course of the year—but there were only fifty when it all began nine years ago. Every Sunday evening since October 1999 students (about a quarter of the congregation), young professionals starting their careers (about half), and others who come along because they enjoy listening to the Word, gather together to pray and celebrate the Eucharist. It is a mass in which the liturgy has been extended to include biblical teaching, some twenty minutes of personal prayer in silence, and seven minutes of sharing in small groups.

This pastoral initiative is based on a conviction which Cardinal Martini expressed when he started his ‘School of the Word’ in Milan:<sup>1</sup>

Personally I am quite convinced that for a Christian today, living in such a complex, difficult and secularised Western society, it is practically impossible to persevere in the faith without receiving personal nourishment from Scripture.

<sup>1</sup> The ‘School of the Word’ began in Milan for the benefit of young people in 1980. It is a celebration of the Word during an evening of prayer. The idea has been taken up in Switzerland and France, and has inspired ‘The Mass that Takes Its Time’; see Gabriel Ispérian, ‘Qui est le cardinal Martini?’, *Christus*, 216 (October 2007), 482–491.

Without a chance to listen in depth to the Word, how can the Christian memory be illuminated by the Spirit about the person of Jesus Christ? Certain conditions can help.

### ***Experience of the Heart***

#### *Discovering Others in Order to Discover Silence*

One of the conditions that allows this listening in depth is the joy, often subtle, of finding other men and women, brothers and sisters, who share this desire.

They come in ‘togetherness’<sup>2</sup> under the Word of God. They form a temporary community that welcomes, that is punctual, and that accompanies each individual along an interior path of listening, in silence, while the Lord utters his Word. At the heart of this celebration of the Word during ‘The Mass that Takes Its Time’ there is a long period without music, without any sound, in complete silence: ‘Those twenty minutes of silence, that is why I come, simply to take time’. One often hears the remark, ‘It’s really necessary to just stand still’. Cardinal Martini explains it as follows:

Well then, in order to be able really to welcome the Word of God, one has to enter into Silence; that is where one starts. But my experience is precisely this—that in our modern city there is very little silence.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of others, of one’s brothers and sisters, is a support against distraction and also helps to open one’s heart. Their presence calls out. It is a reminder that a real effort in common is taking place, quite apart from the celebration: the place has to be prepared, hymns and songs practised, volunteers found to take care of the singers and arrange a friendly drink after the mass. As with all celebrations, a considerable effort is needed to facilitate this coming together and this individual meeting with the Lord. It is the Church that ‘calls’ its members to listen: ‘O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!’ (Psalm 95:1) On this particular

<sup>2</sup> ‘We decided to come together in order to listen to the Word of God. There God was the one who was speaking and one had to get into the habit of listening in silence, yes, of “listening”!’ (Carlo Maria Martini, *Communication et spiritualité* [Paris: Éditions du Chalet, 1991])

<sup>3</sup> Martini, *Communication et spiritualité*.

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evening, the local Church may not be aware of what it is doing, but this is really its work and in this way it is fulfilling its vocation.

*Tested by Suffering*

'The rock of our salvation' invoked in Psalm 95 reminds us of another feature of these meetings: the expectation of healing. Many of those who attend are young people at the start of their careers.<sup>4</sup> Many are acquainted with suffering. For the most part they are not married,<sup>5</sup> but would like to be so, or feel an ill-defined longing. This is a genuine distress shared by many of them.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the early experiences of holding down a job are not always easy, and often there is a nagging uncertainty, even for the highly qualified among young professionals.

This uncertainty about the future has a part in the suffering which leads them to turn towards God and to seek the company of those who,

<sup>4</sup> These so-called 'young professionals', aged between 22 and 35, are either already professionally employed or engaged on further studies.

<sup>5</sup> Marriage and the birth of a child, coupled with moving home, are the most usual occasions for no longer attending the MT.

<sup>6</sup> Some couples come together at the MT and this is a joy for all. Others will have a happy encounter elsewhere, yet all experience this sense of waiting while they are there in the presence of God.

over the course of history, have called out, 'O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me'. For it is about healing, and so the Psalm goes on, 'You have turned my mourning into dancing ... and clothed me with joy' (Psalm 30:2, 11). A cry like this can be offered up from the heart of the disciple in the course of the Sunday Eucharist. A cry born of suffering, it receives the touch of the Word.

#### Lectio divina

In preparation for the silence in which the Word is united with the heart of the disciple, in its joy and pain, there is the repeated listening to a gospel reading in the course of the Liturgy of the Word. Certain passages are heard so frequently that they can be known by heart. After the singing of the responsorial psalm, a member of the congregation reads out aloud the Gospel of the day, from wherever he or she happens to be in the church. Initially all simply listen; then the presiding priest invites the congregation to read the text quietly to themselves which is made available for them on a printed sheet. He asks them to pay special attention to a question that he puts before them. Next there is the solemn proclamation of the text preceded by the Alleluia. This is followed by a short period of silent personal reflection. Then, in preparation for listening in depth to the Word, the presiding priest gives a meditation.<sup>7</sup>

This talk is intended above all to bring out with great simplicity what is said in the gospel text. It is not a question of 'What I want to say about this text?', but rather 'What does this text really say?'. Once the message contained in the text is clear, and only then, each person is invited to ask him- or herself, 'What am I to say to Jesus, who is speaking to me in this text?'. The person giving the meditation tries to put the listeners in the presence of Jesus speaking to them; and to do this a phrase may be underlined, or an image, or the historical context in which the scripture speaks and which deserves to be known. At this stage there is no attempt to develop the doctrinal dimension nor to introduce a moral lesson. These various stages in listening to the Gospel make up the *lectio divina*.<sup>8</sup> Some

<sup>7</sup> 'Meditation' is the key word here, as the reflection keeps closely to the text. It can be given by someone other than the priest, for example a Sister or a Jesuit student not yet ordained, who is involved in pastoral ministry with the young.

<sup>8</sup> 'The secret of the success of this venture has been that we did not present the young with a catechesis, or even a homily, but gave them the tools by which they could engage directly with the text and become familiar with *lectio divina*' (Carlo Maria Martini, 'Lire la Bible', *Documentation Catholique* [July 1995]).

words from the Prophet Isaiah can best illustrate the effect of these successive listenings:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10–11)

A gradual impregnation, which becomes more and more simple, is what helps one to listen to the Word. And as Christ says in the Gospel of John: 'Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life' (John 5:24).

### ***Experience of the Church***

#### *Tradition and Freedom*

Those who come into this church on a Sunday evening for the MT are taking part in a normal Roman Catholic Sunday mass, with its Liturgy of the Word and its Eucharistic celebration. The gospel passage they will hear is the same passage that is read out on a Sunday in all the Catholic churches of the world. Thus they participate in a tradition that stretches back into history, and this tradition is handed on to them by priests, often Jesuits, but at times secular priests or members of other religious orders, and also by lay sisters or laymen who draw on the Ignatian tradition to pass on one method of preparing to listen to the Word. It is a method which has borrowed from the monks the *lectio divina*. It is based on Ignatius' conviction that,

... the Creator and Lord communicates himself to the faithful soul, inflaming that soul in his love and praise, and disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve him in the future (Exx 15).<sup>9</sup>

While the MT is a help to the participants along their way to the Word, from a certain moment they have to be left on their own with the One who speaks. Ignatius hints at this when he adds:

<sup>9</sup> The MT can be considered an 'adaptation' of the Exercises, as St Ignatius encourages in Annotation 18.

Hence the giver of the Exercises [the one handing on the tradition] should not be swayed or show a preference for one side of a choice rather than the other, but remaining in the centre like the pointer of a balance should leave the Creator to deal with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord (Exx 15).

The complete silence observed during the MT after the proclamation of the Gospel is that sacred space—such as Sinai was for Moses or Mount Horeb for Elijah—in which two freedoms meet: that of the Creator and that of the creature. There is a mystery here that recalls that of the annunciation:<sup>10</sup> the mystery of the incarnation of the Word of God in our humanity. The tradition of the Church now takes on, like St John the Baptist, the role of ‘the friend of the spouse’ and rejoices at the encounter of the Saviour with his disciple. The Church can say here with the Baptist,

I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. (John 3: 28–29)

Once the Church has led the person towards the Mystery and towards personal freedom, his or her duty is to join in prayer and respectful silence. After the proclamation of the Gospel, the presiding priest and all the other priests, deacons, robed acolytes and elders adopt attitudes of prayer like everyone else in the congregation. They meditate the Word of God on their own. They represent the Church which remains in prayer before God, interceding for all those, men and women, who are called—in their freedom—to meet the Lord, so that they can listen to and speak with him.

At the MT the twenty minutes of silence allow the inner life to develop; a space is formed where the uncertain and the unfinished can come into play.<sup>11</sup> The style of the MT does not emphasize the ‘solemn’ aspect of a classical liturgy. The teaching is in a more informal register than is customary in a homily, without this detracting in any way from

<sup>10</sup> ‘With St Irenaeus I believe that the Word came forth from the Silence; it was from the Silence of the Father that the Word reached us. So in order to be truly able to give welcome to the Word of God, one must enter into the Silence: that is the starting-point.’ (Martini, ‘Lire la Bible’)

<sup>11</sup> For a sociological analysis of the MT, cf. Marie Balas, ‘Des exercices spirituels dans une Eucharistie: la Messe qui prend son temps’, *La Maison-Dieu* (September 2008).

biblical and spiritual depth. In preparation for the personal meditation, the presiding priest reveals as simply as possible the biblical resonance of the Gospel and its echo in the experience of those hearing it. Each is called to take part in the search for God, developing a personal path of prayer that leads into the Eucharist and eventually into the meeting with others (the cup of friendship shared after the MT). In this way there is an active side to the participation, even if it may be simply in the use of space: at the moment of the proclamation of the Gospel the congregation gathers round the ambo, but after this they all scatter to any part of the church and each person finds a spot conducive to meditation. Through their baptism, each can feel 'at home' in the church. It is important that they feel themselves in a church setting. They are not in school; they are at home.

***Each is called to take part in the search for God***

The interior of the church of St Ignatius in Paris has been rearranged so that a wide elliptical space in the centre invites the congregation to gather round the ambo to listen to the gospel reading, and then around the altar for the Eucharist. The moquette carpet of the ellipse is suitable for sitting, and there is a variety of side-chapels for more solitary prayer during the twenty minutes of silence. The church is no longer a lecture theatre, with the pulpit acting as the professor's desk and an altar far away at the back: the church has become a place of movement and communal assembly.

The use of albs by the priests, deacons and acolytes provides the young with a visible support and sign: here are believers and their albs signify a commitment to a faith and a way of life. So, here I am—a student or young professional, not very sure of my faith—able to 'lean' on them and on those who share a responsibility with them, so that I can take the risk of venturing into prayer. Something similar happens in Taizé: people find their support in those men in white united in prayer. The MT is a pedagogical process that builds upon a firm theological conviction which has deep ecclesial roots: the Creator Himself communicates with His creature.

***Listening to the Word and the Eucharist***

We may ask how it is that the story of each individual who 'listens to the Word' and the stories that we share in common are united by the Spirit of Christ in the Eucharist. In the memorial prayer of the Second



Eucharistic Prayer we ask: ‘May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit’. By taking part in the Eucharist, we follow in the steps of Jesus Christ. He heard the Word of God, and by entering into that listening allowed himself to be called to the complete self-offering. He was consecrated, ‘the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world’ (John 10:36). In anticipation of his passion, he offered himself: ‘As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.’ (John 17:18–19) By listening to the Word, we then enter into the thanksgiving:

Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation gives you praise. All life, all holiness comes from you, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit. From age to age you gather a people to yourself, so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name. (Third Eucharist Prayer)

When we enter with Christ into his Eucharist and have a share in his body and in his blood, we allow him to live in us and to unite in his body those members of the human race who, with all their differences, are already brought together in this Eucharist. The priest, praying in the



name of the congregation, asks the Father, on behalf of us all, that we may be truly gathered by the Holy Spirit 'into the one body of Christ' and become ourselves 'a living sacrifice of praise' (Fourth Eucharist Prayer).

By listening to the Word, and then passing through the transforming fire of the Eucharistic mystery, the Christian community is empowered to recognise the call sent out today. The Church's mission must spring from the Spirit of Christ calling out from the heart of a loving community, which has listened to the Word of the Lord and celebrated the Eucharist. How important, then, to care for the well-being of this community which we are all called to form! We need to pay attention to those signs of compassion shown by individuals to those who are suffering both within and beyond the community. The community itself can strengthen such individuals in their inner prompting to compassion. It may itself want to take over some need identified by an individual. It is not a question of inventing a mission, but rather of accepting one, in the silence and prayer and reflection that we share, even if it may not be immediately obvious what pastoral measures need to be undertaken.

When we hear the words 'Go in the peace of Christ!', we leave with the word of Jesus dwelling within us: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (John 4:34). On occasions that 'will' may take very definite forms, discerned after listening to one person speak and then acknowledged by all or some of those gathered together. In fact the young people who take part in MT are involved in other activities in addition to the weekly mass. There are four musical groups who help once a month with the masses celebrated in the Prison of Fleury-Mérogis (some sixty people take turns to do this). A certain number heard that call, and others took it to heart and felt that it was one way of doing the will of God and of 'being sent'. The Gospel says:

After [Jesus] had washed their feet ... he said to them, 'Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.' (John 13:12-17)

One final reflection: this is a way of moving deeper into the mystery of the Trinity and allowing oneself to be guided by the Spirit: 'But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will

teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you' (John 14:26). And, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us: 'prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Dei verbum*, chapter 6, n. 25.