

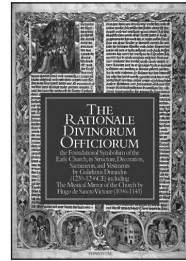
The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum: The Foundational Symbolism of the Early Church, its Structure, Decoration, Sacraments, and Vestments

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“The parables of knowledge are in the treasures
of wisdom” (*Ecclesiasticus 1:25*)



The world has seemingly been turned on its head—for we live in a time of great parody and confusion with conflicting and deceptive voices as alluded to by Biblical passages that tell of “[men] speaking perverse things” (*Acts 20:30*), “vain talkers and seducers” (*Titus 1:10*), “erring and driving into error” (*2 Timothy 3:13*), all trademarks of modernism. In 1907, Pope Pius X (1854-1914) astutely diagnosed modernism as “the synthesis of all heresies.”¹ The French metaphysician, René Guénon (1886-1951), exposed what he termed the “modern deviation” in an unparalleled fashion in 1927 in his work *The Crisis of the Modern World*:

[T]here can be nothing but antagonism between the religious spirit, in the true sense of the word, and the modern mentality, and any compromise is bound to weaken the former and favor the latter, whose hostility moreover will not be placated thereby, since it can only aim at the utter destruction of everything that reflects in mankind a reality higher than the human.”²

¹ Pope Pius X, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (September 8, 1907).

² René Guénon, “A Material Civilization,” in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne, Marco Pallis and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p.95.

Intellectual myopia is today a proliferating symptom due to the eclipse of the Sacred, and so how does the contemporary mind go about understanding a medieval liturgical treatise such as *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* at a time when the forces of a desacralized world appear to be gaining momentum?

To do so, one has to suspend, if not, unlearn all that one has allegedly learned about the Middle Ages. In this process, it will become apparent how profoundly biased the contemporary mind is regarding its history and how many misconceptions prevail in particular about the Middle Ages, portraying it in negative terms as a backward and dark age. In contrast, the post-medieval world is celebrated, with the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment, being glorified as the forerunners of the modern and post-modern world. These events ushered in the secular outlook that dominates today, which is essentially non-Christian, even though the contemporary West continues to be mistakenly characterized as “Christian”. Rather than promoting coexistence and tolerance between religions, hard secularism is in effect an attack on all religions: “The modern West is said to be Christian, but this is untrue: the modern outlook is anti-Christian, because it is essentially anti-religious”.³ Consider for a moment if what we thought we knew about the past, such as the Middle Ages, consisted more of half-truths and inaccurate conclusions, and if the past was actually something quite different from what we have imagined it to be.

If we can be receptive to this suggestion of open-mindedness, works like *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* will provide many insights about the nature of reality as it was known in the pre-modern world. This work is also important beyond the scope of the Western Church or the Roman Catholic Church, as it captures a world infused with the Sacred, which has analogous expressions across the diverse cultures of the pre-modern or traditional world.⁴ Let us not forget that it was in the Middle Ages of the Christian West that the Latin term *philosophia perennis* or perennial philosophy was likely coined by Agostino Steuco (1497-1548). The Middle Ages produced mystics of the highest caliber such as Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), and many saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Francis of

³ Ibid. p. 95.

⁴ See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006).

Assisi (1181/1182-1226), Bonaventure (1221-1274), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). The modern reader should consider a preliminary question: Why is it that the contemporary world has not in its own right produced such exemplars of the Christian tradition?

Even though *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* was written at a time when the sense of the Sacred pervaded the human collectivity, there nonetheless were signs that a spiritual decline was beginning to take root. This decline is documented in the Proeme to the treatise written in 1284 (slightly before the late medieval period):

[H]ow sad, in these times there are many who seem to hardly have any understanding of things they daily engage in, pertaining to the practices of the Church or her divine worship. Nor do they know what they signify or why they were instituted. (p. xx)

This intellectual atrophy that marked the post-medieval era has now, in the contemporary world become a new norm, yet it was not unforeseen, as illustrated by the following scriptural texts: “their eyes be darkened, that they may not see” (*Romans 11:10*); and, foretelling that even the clergy would be indistinguishable from the laity: “And there shall be, like people, like priest” (*Hosea 4:9*).

In January 1959 the Church’s decline reached its nadir with Pope John XXIII (1881-1963) announcing the creation of the Second Vatican Council, marking in the eyes of faithful Catholics a turning point. The Vatican II that occurred between 1962 to 1965 was in fact one of the defining events of the latter half of the twentieth century as it clearly exposed the secularist objectives within the highest reaches of the Church’s hierarchy, which was attempting to reconcile the Church with the modern world. Consequently, a mass exodus occurred, some estimating that 50% of Catholics fled the Church since the Vatican II, including numerous clergy, and it is estimated that merely one in four Catholics now attends mass. After five decades, the legacy of the Vatican II has demonstrated that it has been a disaster, marking not only a continued crisis within the Church, but an assault on the Church’s Magisterium. On the question of where contemporaries are to place their obedience if betrayed from within the Church, Saint Peter instructs: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (*Acts 5:29*)

Given the current crisis facing the Catholic Church what *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* offers to both Catholics and non-Catholics is the spiritual meaning underlying the Western Church and its myriad rites so that contemporaries can deepen their understanding of the Christian tradition: “Everything that pertains to divine worship, the practices and vestments used by the Church are full of divine meanings and mysteries.” (p. xix) It is through the inner or mystical dimension of religion that the outer dimension can become more intelligible, as Hugo de Sancto Victore writes: “Behold ye these things mystically: for not one is there without meaning.” (p. xxviii) Our return to God requires all of what we are, yet this is challenged by the weakening of the sense of the Sacred in today’s world, which has been replaced by an unbalanced psyche that is always multitasking and paying attention to everything except the Presence before it: “For the mind that is divided in several trains of thought hath less power in each.” (p. 124)

Durandus’s monumental opus *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* now made available to English audiences translated from the original Latin text is arguably the most important medieval treatise on the symbolism and ritual of the Western Church available. Gulielmus Durandus or William Durand (1230-1296) was a French canonist and liturgical writer, the pope’s secretary, subdeacon, papal governor, and dean of Chartres. This volume contains translations from three of the eight books of *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* consisting of *Book I: The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments* (translated by John Mason Neale and Benjamin Webb), *Book III: The Sacred Vestments* (translated by T.H. Passmore) and eight chapters from *Book IV: On the Mass* (translated by Rama P. Coomaraswamy).⁵ This volume includes the Proeme by Gulielmus Durandus (translated by Rama P. Coomaraswamy) and an elaborate introductory essay from the 1893 edition of *Book I: The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments* entitled “Sacramentality: A Principle of Ecclesiastical Design.” Also included in this volume are two chapters

⁵ See Rama P. Coomaraswamy, *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006); Rama P. Coomaraswamy, “The End of Tradition,” in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Soares de Azevedo (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 291-303; Rama P. Coomaraswamy, *The Problems with the New Mass: A Brief Overview of the Major Theological Difficulties Inherent in the Novus Ordo Missae* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1990); Rama P. Coomaraswamy, *The Problems with the Other Sacraments: Apart from the New Mass* (San Rafael, CA: Reviviscimus Press, 2010).

from *The Mystical Mirror of the Church* by Hugo de Sancto Victore (1096-1141). The book is beautifully illustrated allowing the reader to be visually guided through the sacred landscape of the Christian tradition. Doyen of the world's religions, Professor Huston Smith, regarded this treatise to be a "true treasure".

Durandus explains from the outset what is signified by the term "church" which is worth recalling anew: "The word church hath two meanings: the one, a material building, wherein the divine offices are celebrated: the other, a spiritual fabric, which is the collection of the faithful." (p. 3) A corresponding relationship was known since ancient times between the human body and that of the Church: "[F]or the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." (*1 Corinthians 3:17*) It has been said that "Our altar is our heart: for the heart is in a man what the altar is in a temple." (pp. 97-98) Hugo de Sancto Victore speaks to this theme: "[W]hatever things be here done visibly, the same doth God work by His invisible power in the soul, which is the true Temple of God" (p. xxxv). Durandus additionally explains what is meant by the term "Catholic" which is also important to recall anew: "[T]he Church is called Catholic, that is universal, because it hath been set up in, or spread over, all the world, because the whole multitude of the faithful ought to be in one congregation, or because in the Church is laid up the doctrine necessary for the instruction of all." (p. 3)

Of all of the sacraments within the Catholic Church, the most essential is that of the baptism: "The sacrament of necessity only is baptism, which when administered by anyone, so it be in the form of the Church, in greatest extremity profiteth unto salvation. And it is said to be 'of necessity,' because without it no one can be saved, if it be neglected through contempt." (p. 119) A corresponding passage is as follows: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (*Ephesians 4:5*).

The sacred function of the Mass is paramount within the Catholic Church: "Of all the mysteries (*sacramenta*) of the Church, all are in agreement that the most important is the Mass celebrated on the most holy altar." (p. 233) The sacred origins and symbolism of the Mass reveal themselves as a mystery because they are supra-human in origin and cannot be changed by man: "the Mass is called a mystery because it is beyond us, and a sacrifice because it is offered before everyone and for everyone." (p. 252) With the Vatican II, the Tridentine Mass has

been replaced with a “New Mass” or *Novus Ordo Missae* (“New Order of the Mass”) introduced by Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) in 1969, which reformed the Catholic liturgy making it invalid as a sacred rite as it is not Catholic in its truest sense. This dire situation was not unforeseen by the last traditional Pope, Pius XII (1876-1958), who is reported to have said, “[T]he day was coming soon when the faithful would only be able to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the mass on the secret altar of the heart.”⁶ Whatever spiritual possibilities are available at a given time are not dependent on what man wills but the Divine will: “[H]e that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth” (*Revelation* 3:7).

We are grateful to the publishers, Fons Vitae for having made this treatise available in these troubled times. It is our hope that in the near future all eight books of *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* will be translated in their entirety as it is an indispensable guide for anyone interested in the mediaeval roots out of which the Christian tradition has arisen. It works like this that will increase spiritual literacy, which is precisely what is needed to challenge the attacks on religion such as those made by the post-Conciliar Church of Vatican II. We live in a time when not only is the Western Church in crisis, but many religions of the world are facing similar challenges given the rise of secularism, extremism and New Age parodies. In an inverted world where all of the social structures are fast disintegrating before our eyes, the insightful and timeless words of the Gospel bring transparency to the errors of modernism and post-modernism, demonstrating the truth of the scripture, “if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” (*Mark* 3:25) Faithful or traditional Catholics can take heed that they are never without divine Mercy no matter how bleak their circumstances may appear: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (*Matthew* 28:20) Additionally, there is the Catholic saying from the traditional Mass: *Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum* (“May the peace of the Lord always be with you.”)

⁶ William Stoddart paraphrasing Pope Pius XII, William Stoddart, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism*, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 30.