

**INAUGURAL MASS IN LATIN ACCORDING TO  
THE ORDINARY USAGE OF THE ROMAN RITE**

**St. Mary of Victories Church, Old St. Louis  
February 10, 2008, First Sunday of Lent**

*Homily preached by the celebrant, Fr. Brian Harrison, O.S.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The beginning of Lent can always rightly be seen as the opening of a new chapter in our earthly pilgrimage towards that union with God, through his Son Jesus Christ, which is the true purpose of our existence. The Church gives us this special yearly opportunity to turn back to God with all our hearts, recognizing our weakness, our sinfulness, and yet, trusting with childlike simplicity and poverty of spirit in that merciful Father who will always tenderly welcome us as prodigal children, back to his house. Here in St. Louis, right at the beginning of this season wherein we humbly recognize the shame and tragedy of human sin, the full force of its bitter and deadly reality has struck us directly here in the form of the dreadful massacre last Thursday that is still sending its shock waves round the entire nation.

In view of this need for each one of us personally to begin that new chapter in our spiritual lives, it seems fitting that in the spirit of quiet simplicity that marks the first Sunday in Lent, a new chapter is also quietly and modestly being opened today in the long history of St. Mary of Victories Church, by means of our inauguration of the only regular Sunday Mass of its kind being offered in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. As you all know, we are using the new rite for the Eucharistic liturgy, reformed after Vatican Council II, but celebrated in Latin, the Church's ancient common language which manifests so well both her bimillennial heritage and her catholicity – her universality among all peoples and nations. Indeed, the Mass we celebrate here every Sunday at 9: 30 a.m. will be bringing St. Mary of Victories back to her roots in more ways than one. Not only will the language of worship be once again that in which all Masses were celebrated here for the first one hundred and twenty-five years of her existence, but her magnificent high altar, sanctified by the relics of dozens of great saints and raised by Pope Leo XIII in 1879 to the dignity of being a Privileged Altar, will once again be used regularly at this Mass after lying in disuse for nearly forty years. We will also be offering you, at Communion time, the option of kneeling to receive the Lord's Body, thus once again using these beautiful wooden altar rails for their original purpose.

This beautiful and venerable church in the heart of old St. Louis – the second oldest in the city after the Old Cathedral – was raised by the devotion of the city's German immigrant community in 1843, under the guidance of the Most Rev. Peter Richard Kenrick, who in that same year began his more than half a century of distinguished service,

first as bishop, then as the first archbishop, of St. Louis. The year 1843 also represents yet another link with the history of this church, one especially worth remembering as we begin this season dedicated to conversion and reconciliation. For in that year a young Redemptorist priest arrived in the United States from Germany to begin the traditional mission apostolate of that Order: the apostolate of converting sinners – of reconciling them with God and their brethren. His name was Fr. Francis Xavier Seelos, and he quickly gained a reputation, not only for his powerful and zealous preaching, but also for his outstanding kindness, graciousness, and holiness. From October 1<sup>st</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> 1865, he preached a mission right here in this church. That was just a few months after the terrible devastation of the Civil War had come to an end, when tension and bitterness between North and South, blacks and whites, were still running very deep. Fr. Seelos revealed the true, healing spirit of Christ in that situation, ministering with the same ardent charity to all, regardless of race, ethnic background or political persuasion. In 2001 he was declared Blessed by Pope John Paul II. There, against the south wall of our church that was graced for two weeks by the ministry of this saintly priest now reigning with Jesus in Heaven, you can see the altar and statue dedicated to him.

Let us return to reflect for a few more minutes on today's Gospel – the Forty Days of our Lord's fasting and temptations in the desert. I believe we can see a providential symbolic resonance here to our new liturgical initiative here in St. Mary of Victories. In a few weeks' time we will be beginning the fortieth year since Pope Paul VI's historic Apostolic Constitution of April 3, 1969, promulgating the new post-Vatican-II rite of Mass – the rite we are using today (although slightly modified in the latest typical edition). Forty years, of course, is also a biblical period commemorated in the Church's liturgy and traditional spirituality during Lent – the forty austere years in which the newly liberated people of Israel struggled through the desert in their pilgrimage toward the Promised Land.

Now, it has been noted over the centuries by some of our spiritual masters that the Church, as the Mystical Body of Christ, sometimes seems destined to share, or to relive, as it were, some of the trials that her Divine Head had to endure during his own life on earth. And as Jesus exposed his human nature to the effects of its weakness and vulnerability to temptation during those forty days, I believe we can say that an honest gaze at the life of the Church over these last forty years also shows all too clearly the weaknesses of her human dimension, and her own vulnerability to severe temptations by the Enemy. Especially in the developed Western countries that had been the heartland of the Faith for many centuries, the renewal and revitalization of the Church, so confidently expected as fruits of the Council by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, has failed to come about. Although some positive results of Vatican II can indeed be noted, the general picture has been decidedly bleak. Mass attendance, conversions to Catholicism, and vocations to the priesthood and religious life have all sharply declined; doctrinal confusion and dissent has proliferated; and rebellion against the Pope and the church's holy disciplinary laws has become commonplace. Within a few years of the Council, Pope Paul, whose discourses before and during the Council were so full of optimism, found himself

obliged to lament publicly that a great crisis of faith had swept into the Church, along with what he famously described as “the smoke of Satan” infiltrating the temple of God.

This, in fact, was the situation that explains the existence of the community presenting this Mass here for you today, the Oblates of Wisdom. Most of you will not be too familiar with who we are, and so I will take this opportunity for a brief word of introduction. We are not a religious order of the classic kind; in fact our men are all juridically diocesan priests. By around the end of Paul VI’s pontificate, when the post-conciliar crisis was arguably reaching its most critical point, Msgr. John McCarthy had learnt by experience that many good priests, amid the waves of fashionable adaptation to worldly standards, were finding themselves isolated and marginalized in their respective dioceses simply because they were remaining faithful to the Holy Father and to the Church’s orthodox doctrine, sound discipline, and holy traditions.

Monsignor was given the discernment, however, to realize that the solution to this problem was not to react, as some did, into a radical and disobedient form of ‘traditionalism’ that further wounded the unity of the Church by setting up parallel structures and movements in defiance of her legitimate pastors from the Pope on down. Rather, he adopted the approach that Benedict XVI has now called a “hermeneutic of continuity” in understanding and applying the directives of the Second Vatican Council. That is, an effort to underline, in both theory and practice, the substantial organic unity of the post-conciliar Church with her own great bimillennial Tradition. Thus, in 1979, Monsignor McCarthy founded the Society of the Oblates of Wisdom as a fraternity of diocesan priests who, while remaining obediently in their existing pastoral assignments in different dioceses, could seek mutual strengthening and sanctification by networking with each other and adopting a common rule of life. This would be concretized by a new kind of private vow: a vow to pursue divine Wisdom, at a time when so many false prophets within and without the Church were wreaking havoc by the diffusion of a spurious wisdom masquerading as “progress” and “renewal”. Although this Mass today is our first really public activity in the archdiocese, it is now actually two-and-a-half years since Archbishop Raymond Burke, a valued patron of our community, graciously allowed us to establish what is now our central house and Study Center here in the rectory of St. Mary of Victories.

From the beginning, a special feature of the Oblates’ charism in the pursuit of true wisdom has been a response to an often-underestimated problem that was, however, emphasized by Paul VI in his 1970 Apostolic Exhortation *Quinque iam Anni*, commenting on the very mixed results of the first very troubled five years after the Council. Lamenting the outbreak of an ecclesial epidemic that he described as “a Christianity cut off from the unbroken Tradition which links it to the faith of the Apostles”, Pope Paul added by way of example, “Even the divine authority of Scripture is not left unquestioned by a radical demythologization”. As Oblates of Wisdom, we have as one of our main emphases what we call a ‘neo-patristic’ approach to Scripture studies which upholds the authentic and perennial doctrine of the Church on the inerrancy and historical value of both Old and New Testaments.

The Sacred Liturgy, too, has constantly been one of our main concerns as Oblates of Wisdom. Probably no aspect of the Church's 40-year 'temptation in the desert' that we contemplate at the beginning of Lent, 2008, has impacted more directly on ordinary members of the faithful than the temptation to subvert the holiness of our worship. In his letter to the Bishops that accompanied last year's *Motu Proprio* recognizing the Traditional Latin Mass as the "extraordinary" form of the Roman rite, Pope Benedict has frankly acknowledged this decades-long plague of false adaptation and so-called liturgical "creativity". It is interesting to note, as we consider today's Gospel, that although Satan repeatedly challenges our Lord to display prove his *divinity* in direct and spectacular ways, the temptations are really, at the same time, an effort to get our Lord to fall into excessively and inappropriately *human* ways of thinking that would mitigate the austere demands of his true mission and thus effectively nullify it. "It's only *human* to feel hungry! Come on, now, why make such a big deal of all this fasting? Change these stones into bread!" "It's only *human* to see the beauty and attractiveness of all that this modern world and its kingdoms have to offer. I can help you with that! Think of all the good you can do with that closer involvement with the world!" "Surely it's only *human* – it's only natural! – for you to want everyone to recognize you for who you really are. And here's an easy way you can do that: go and throw yourself off the top of the temple in Jerusalem with the angels appearing to grab you safely in mid-air in the sight of all the people! Wow! The media will lap it up! You'll have it made! Mission accomplished! Everyone will just *have* to believe you're the Son of God!"

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I would suggest that precisely these kinds of excessively "humanizing" innovations have also been the great temptation we have endured during forty years of liturgical change. Why, isn't it only *human* and natural to eliminate that dead language, Latin, completely from our worship, so as to have every single word readily comprehensible in our own language? Won't it be more humanly attractive to use more currently popular styles of music at Mass, and get rid once and for all of that weird old Gregorian chant from the Dark Ages that has no catchy melody and no clear beat to it? Isn't it humanly more attractive to be pluralistic in our worship, and offer a wide variety of optional ceremonies, prayers and rubrics at Mass? After all, our culture is now one of creativity and self-serve supermarkets! Won't our worship be more humanly attractive in this age of dialogue if we have the priest presider face to face with the people through the whole of Mass, so that even during the consecration he can be relating to them directly more as a real human person by his facial expressions, gestures and eye contact?

I could go on with many more examples, but I think you get the general picture. Indeed, I am sure you know it all too well. There are just two points I would emphasize. First, Vatican Council II's Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy did not call for the far-reaching innovations – both licit and illicit – that we have seen in our worship in these last forty years. And secondly, the changes in any case have not produced the effects that were hoped for. In our Western countries, above all, a far *lower* percentage of Catholics now attend Mass regularly than before the new liturgy came in. And even among those that do

attend, reliable and repeated surveys show that our ‘over-humanized’ liturgies have been accompanied, not surprisingly, by an over-humanization of our faith in the sublime Eucharistic mystery itself. An alarmingly large proportion of contemporary Catholics have practically no knowledge or belief in the essential sacrificial character of the Mass, and do not even believe in the great *mysterium fidei*, the Real Presence of the true Body and Blood of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. A humanized, Protestantized style of worship has led to a humanized, Protestantized belief that the Eucharistic bread and wine merely symbolize the Lord’s Body and Blood.

In doing what we can to help address this critical situation in accordance with our own charism as Oblates of Wisdom, we have preferred not to follow those groups who have opted, with the Church’s blessing, to use exclusively the Traditional Latin rites for Mass and the other sacraments, although it goes without saying that we admire and respect them. Some of us Oblates, including myself, also frequently use the Traditional or ‘extraordinary’ form of the rite, especially in private celebration. Our choice in accord with the idea of a ‘hermeneutic of continuity’, has been to emphasize, rather, that the new rite of Mass can be lawfully celebrated with traditional options, in a way that shows the kind of organic harmony with the great tradition of the Roman rite liturgy that the Fathers of Vatican Council II originally had in mind. That is why the red booklets in your hands today are very appropriately entitled “the Mass of Vatican II”. This form of worship maintains both the key elements of the Roman rite tradition, while at the same time incorporating the three principal legitimate developments called for by the Council: a moderate use of the vernacular (in our Mass, the opening greeting, Scripture readings and prayer of the faithful); a greater active participation of the faithful (we cordially invite you all to join in singing and reciting all the Latin parts of the ordinary as indicated in your red booklets); and finally, the much wider selection of Scripture readings that the Church has now made available with the new Lectionary.

We hope, naturally, that if you find that our style of Eucharistic celebration today helps you to come closer to God, some of you will become weekly worshippers with us. However, we realize that most of you will have regular commitments with your own parishes, and we don’t want to pull you away from that. However, I would like to conclude with this invitation: Please spread the word among your friends about our new *Novus Ordo* Latin Mass, and perhaps try to join us, say, once a month here at St. Mary of Victories at 9:30 a.m. This will be important for another vital reason. Repeatedly in recent years there has loomed the danger of having to close down this beautiful and historic church because of the burden of costs, now that almost nobody lives nearby and there is no longer a regular parish here. (The St. Louis Hungarian community, to whose patron, St. Stephen of Hungary, the church is also now dedicated, has the only other public Mass celebrated here in the course of each week.) Closing down this venerable house of God would be a heart-breaking decision, my dear friends; so please remember that your generosity with collection money from this new regular Sunday Mass will be important in helping to keep St. Mary of Victories open and active. And finally, remember that by supporting a Mass like this which combines, we believe, the best elements of the old and new ways of offering the Roman Rite liturgy, you are worshipping, as it were, at the heart

and center of the Church, manifesting her subsisting continuity and helping towards the recovery of her deeper unity, at a time when divergent factions within the Mystical Body remain in urgent need of reconciliation. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.