

The Holy Father
On Tradition and Progress

National Winner

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“Can the original form of Christian prayer still say something to us today, or should we try to find our own form, a form for our own times? Of course, we cannot simply replicate the past. Every age must discover and express the essence of the liturgy anew. The point is to discover this essence amid all the changing appearances” (*Spirit* 81). A consistent theme in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI is the relationship of “tradition” and “progress”—two concepts that many would consider contradictory. In his writings, however, the Holy Father makes it clear that there is a distinct and balanced relationship between tradition and progress that must be carefully preserved. The Holy Father has made the importance of this relationship quite clear in his quest to preserve the rich liturgical heritage of the Catholic Church. Many critics have been quick to classify Benedict as a “traditionalist” who simply wants to return to the way things were in ages past. However, anyone who has read his writings on the liturgy would realize that his views are much more complex.

While he was still a cardinal, Pope Benedict wrote a book entitled *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, which describes the history of the liturgical prayer of the Church and illustrates the relevance to the Church’s practices in modern times. The Holy Father writes about the numerous changes made to the liturgy in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, but he notes that there remains a strong sense of continuity between the ancient traditions of the Church and the modern reforms. Many modernists condemn the Holy Father’s desire for continuity as mere “romanticism and nostalgia for the past” (*Spirit* 80). But this is not the case; the Holy Father does not desire a return to the Church’s roots in form alone, but also in spirit. It is the Pope’s wish that the Church return to Her ancient traditions so that She may move forward in a genuine form of progress. According to Benedict, the only true progress is that which is firmly rooted in

tradition. This profound insight illustrates that the meaning of the liturgy “cannot be made but only received.” (*Introduction* 73).

From reading *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, it is evident that our Holy Father is not merely nostalgic, but rather he sees the true beauty of tradition and revelation embodied in the liturgical prayer of the Church. In the years that followed the close of Vatican II, there has been a great deal of misunderstanding with regard to the nature of the Mass itself. Viewed simply as a communal meal, the Mass is often reduced to the horizontal, focusing only on the assembled community and not on worshipping God. Pope Benedict makes it clear that the Mass is the pinnacle of all worship, the epitome of the “reality of man’s union with the living God” (*Spirit* 44). Benedict recognizes that the Mass is not simply a remembrance of events that happened long ago, but rather the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is just that—a sacrifice—in which the Son of God is made present to us and His offering of Himself for our salvation is perpetually renewed. Because he desires a return to tradition “in spirit and truth,” not just in action, Benedict engages in a detailed study of the spirituality that lies behind the routine actions that comprise the Mass (John 4:23). He speaks of the profound symbolism underlying the celebrant’s facing east—a sign of the priest and congregation together turning toward the Lord to offer worship. The Holy Father notes that the Mass is not simply a contemplative prayer, nor is it a series of actions devoid of spirituality; rather, Holy Mass is a form of prayer that unites the body and the spirit.

His writings demonstrate Pope Benedict’s love for the Church’s traditions, not for the sake of following rules, but rather for the sake of drawing the Church closer to Almighty God. This return to tradition is one that is progressive in nature, guiding the Church forward by rediscovering Her roots. This traditional progress is just what is necessary for the Catholic Church right now, as it seeks to guard its truth in the face of a constantly changing world. Pope

Benedict XVI is just the leader that the Church needs, for he understands that tradition and progress are not enemies, but rather the key ingredients for a faithful and vibrant Church.

Works Cited

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Paragraph of Welcome

Most Holy Father,

With hearts full of joy and gratitude to God, we welcome you to the United States of America. Your presence is a source of great hope for a part of the Church that seeks to renew itself in service to God and His people. Having you in our midst is a great privilege that we hope will inspire the Church in America to again return to her roots, embracing tradition and progress in a healthy balance. We pray that your visit will set our hearts ablaze with faith, that we may bear great fruit and grown closer to God. May your time with us bring abundant blessings to your pontificate, our nation and the Church.