

Corpus Christi 2006 at St. Mary's

In 2003 George Weigel attended the Solemn Mass of Corpus Christi at this Catholic church in Greenville (SC) and soon thereafter wrote in his *Letters to a Young Catholic* that

St. Mary's Church in Greenville, South Carolina is as good a place as there is in North America to experience what Catholic worship is and ought to be In 1963 the bishops of the Second Vatican Council taught that the liturgy we celebrate here and now is a participation in "the heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle." The people of St. Mary's, Greenville, might not be able to tell you exactly what that high theological language means. But in a sense they don't have to; they know what it means, in their hearts and minds and souls, from their experience **in the liturgy restored and renewed as Vatican II intended.**"

To see for ourselves, we retraced Weigel's footsteps to St. Mary's for the 11 am Solemn Mass of Corpus Christi this year. Overestimating our driving time, we arrived over a half hour early at 10:20 am, but a number of people were already seated in the richly refurbished 19th century church, an exquisite central city jewel. A veiled chalice was already set up on the altar, topped with matching burse (always a good sign). The pews were stocked with pamphlets detailing the choral and congregational music for the Mass.

No one entered a pew without genuflecting, and neither before or during Mass did anyone (lay or clerical) pass in front of the Tabernacle (directly behind the altar) without genuflecting. By 10:30, when the altar boys began to filter out of the sacristy in their cassocks and surplices to kneel before the altar for their individual prayers of preparation for Mass, the church was beginning to fill rapidly.

At 10:50 am the 6 candles flanking the tabernacle and the usual 6 (for a high Mass) on the altar itself were lit, and an organ prelude soared in palpable anticipation. Otherwise, the silence in the church was unbroken by any sound of human voice — other than an occasional baby that was shushed quickly — during the 40 minutes preceding the start of Mass, which was signaled by the ring of a sanctuary bell alerting everyone to stand for the processional, *At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing*. Mercifully, there had been no trite welcome for visitors, no redundant announcement of the hymn number, and (best of all) there was no cantor up front with a microphone to override the congregation's singing. The people simply stood at the bell as one and immediately joined with the organ and choir (accompanied by organ, strings, woodwinds, and trumpets) to sing as one with a beauty and power that could have made one wonder whether he'd inadvertently strayed into an Anglican Church.

The 12 altar boys including thurifer, crucifer, and torch bearers — preceding the deacon (vested in a dalmatic matching the celebrant's chasuble) and finally the priest — processed down the aisle with such a stately pace that several verses were required for them to reach the altar. No phalanx of so-called "ministers" was included. Indeed, no lay person of any sort — other than altar boys and two readers — intruded within the sanctuary at any time before, during, or after Mass.

After the processional, the organ alone continued through an additional verse or two while the altar was thoroughly incensed. With such thick clouds of incense — repeated later at the usual

points (gospel, offertory, and consecration) in the Mass — as to suggest that in a parish where the Real Presence of Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Sacrifice of the Mass is preached vigorously — as Fr. Jay Scott Newman (pastor of St. Mary's) did this Sunday in his homily — perhaps fewer of the common respiratory complaints are heard.

The whole Mass (apart from readings and homily) was sung or chanted in the vernacular — except for the *Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei* of the *Missa de Angelis* sung in Latin not only by the choir but (seemingly) by the entire congregation of about six hundred. The *Gloria* was sung by all present in a beautiful and moving English setting with soaring voices and trumpets, and the *Credo* was proclaimed by all in English with a slow measured cadence and deliberate emphases that made it actually sound like a conscious statement of shared faith; seemingly, not a person present failed to bow at the mention of the incarnation. Fr. Newman chanted in English the propers and dialogue parts of the Mass as well as the Preface and much of the Roman Canon, with an especially solemn chant for the Consecration. The choir chanted antiphonally the full 24 verses of the *Lauda, Sion* sequence before the Gospel in a stately Elizabethan English setting (Thee/Thou, shalt, learneth, etc).

There was no visible hand-holding (nor *orans* posturing) during the Our Father, no noise or roaming about at the Sign of Peace. The priests and deacon distributed the sacred hosts, which most (if not all) communicants received on the tongue, so few (if any) hosts were touched by lay hands. This being the solemnity of the Body *and* Blood of Christ, the chalice was made available, but the chalice-bearers (whose stations were inconspicuous at the far corners of the church) themselves first received communion on the tongue, kneeling in their front-row pew without entering the sanctuary.

With only two priests up front in the center aisle and numerous communicants kneeling or genuflecting, communion lasted long enough for the choir to sing most of the great Eucharistic hymns that St. Thomas Aquinas composed in Latin for the Corpus Christi office, including *O Sacrum Convivium*, *Adoro te Devote*, and *Panis Angelicus*. The people remained kneeling until the Tabernacle door was closed. Only then did the congregational communion hymn *God With Hidden Majesty* begin. In lieu of a recessional hymn, the Mass ended with a towering Bach organ postlude as the people left with as little within-church conversation after Mass as before it. Though there was plenty of convivial conversation outside; we talked at some length with a young assistant who had just recently returned from seminary in Rome and celebrated his first solemn Mass (Latin Novus Ordo) there at St. Mary's Church.

So this was George Weigel's true "Mass of Vatican II". And well might the Fathers of the Council have been happy to see it turn out like this. Indeed, why would not every Catholic parish aspire to a Sunday Mass celebrated with comparable beauty and dignity and reverence? So that no one need leave his own diocese for such glorious liturgy. Such an accomplished choir and orchestra as St. Mary's likely are less necessary than the determination of priest and people to give their best effort and glory to God. (Indeed, some of us may remember when the *Missa de Angelis* could be heard even in modest Catholic churches in East Tennessee. Why not again?)

CHE

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