



Interpreting a medieval church through liturgy

DH Frost

Can a medieval church - which has fallen into ruin, been taken down stone by stone, and moved to another place – ever be brought to life again? Or, to put it another way, ‘Can these dry bones live?’¹

Of course, in some ways they can never be what they were. The bishop will not make his regular visitations, to confirm his flock; the priest will not sit down in Lent to absolve the sins of all who live nearby; the pilgrims will not cross the river here, rosaries in hand; the daily round of Mass and Office, the circle of the Church’s Year, will rarely be kept; the Blessed Sacrament will not return to the hanging pyx above the high altar from which it was removed almost five hundred years ago. The dove is in a cage, now; it is on show.

Yet every building in this museum faces a similar dilemma to some extent, and many resolve it with some degree of success. The farmers do not return every day from the fields to the farmhouses - but we do see stooks across the fence from time to time. Pigs appear only occasionally in their sty – but sometimes they are there. In the schoolhouse, there is no resident schoolmaster - but plenty of schoolchildren visit and learn things there. You can still buy bread from the Popty.

Similarly, St Teilo’s already speaks volumes. Even if we keep silence, ‘the very stones will cry out’.² It can have life as a place of awe and wonder - even of prayer and devotion - without any words of ours. Add to that the interpretative work of the whole St Teilo’s team, and it becomes possible to at least imagine the life that has vanished. It is also a particular privilege when members of the parish of Pontarddulais are with us. They can introduce us, by living memory, to aspects of the church’s life long after the Reformation. But despite all of that, some of us still feel that an attempt to bring the old liturgy of the church to life again would transport us best of all across the centuries to Tudor times. For churches are built primarily for liturgy – it is their staple diet. The very word λειτουργία in Greek means the

¹ Ezekiel 37: 3

² Luke 19:40

‘work of the people’. The liturgy is quite literally the Christian people’s daily job at the altar of the Lord, and we do not really understand a church building without it.

Of course, we can never fully recapture the experience of a medieval Mass in a Welsh country church – it was all ‘so long ago and far away’ and a great deal of evidence has been lost (or often, to put it more plainly, been destroyed). Yet enough remains for us to make a stab at carefully reconstructing the former ceremonial, liturgical texts and music. A number of missals, processions, graduals and books of instruction for priests have survived, as have manuscripts of typical bidding prayers and poetry and other literary references. It is therefore difficult but perfectly possible to put together something like a complete order of service for a great feast day in the church, and indeed I have done so, as I will explain in due course.

There are, however, a number of warning notes I would wish to sound about such an endeavour.

First of all, we must remember that it would not be entirely appropriate – for the purposes of interpretation - to re-enact in St Teilo’s Church the high culture and liturgy of somewhere like Salisbury Cathedral. Of course, to some degree, the parish churches were just adaptations of the more elaborate use, and were perhaps more similar to it than our modern experience might suggest. Nonetheless, proposals such as the reconstruction of the Bishop’s Reconciliation of Penitents, or offers of polyphonic settings by Byrd and Tallis, while beautiful and interesting in their own right, would not really help us to convey the ordinary liturgical life of St Teilo’s to a modern audience. Nor is the Sarum Missal a simple manual as to how things were done in a small Welsh parish church. For example, the Sarum books provide for the ‘Bidding of the Bedes’ – what we would now call ‘the Prayer of the Faithful’ – at the end of the initial procession, before Mass properly begins. This is indeed what would have been done in cathedrals. Yet an entirely different practice was usually followed in parish churches, with the bidding prayers (in Welsh) coming after the Creed, as in our modern liturgies.³ (Nothing I have said here precludes the use of the church for more elaborate liturgies on occasion, so long as we are clear that then we are interpreting an era more broadly, rather than the situation that once obtained in Llandeilo Talybont in particular.)

There are also pitfalls in recreating something of the musical atmosphere of a rural Welsh celebration. It might be a *reductio ad absurdum* to limit ourselves to make use of mediocre or even weak singers – the sort of people who might be found in the average remote parish choir today, rather than Cathedral lay-clerks or Cambridge-trained choirboys - to perform the chant. Nonetheless, it would be important to avoid too technically perfect an approach

³ Sandon, Nick, ed., *The Use of Salisbury: The Ordinary of the Mass*, Antico Church Music, Newton Abbot, 1984, p.3. See also Goulder, Laurance, *Church Life in Medieval England and Wales: 1: The Parishes*, London, Guild of Our Lady of Ransom, 1988, p.86.

(though perhaps this is an unnecessary warning in the light of mistakes we are bound to make, after so long!) We might also have to limit ourselves to the smallest of choirs – possibly only one or two strong, largely singing unadorned plainsong. In places there might be some occasional rudimentary harmony, but more characteristic might be unexpected pauses and a tendency to rhythm not at all to the taste of those modern masters of Gregorian chant at Solesmes Abbey.⁴

Another temptation would be to try and confine ourselves to liturgical books that have survived in Wales, choosing manuscript sources of local provenance over printed sources that were used across the British Isles by the early sixteenth century. Sometimes one hears the view advanced that Hereford or Bangor service books were used widely in the dioceses of South West Wales. There is no doubt that for some particular calendar feasts or types of celebration, local usages were followed. However, as a general rule – and more particularly in the poorer parishes – the cheapest printed editions were increasingly used. Furthermore, in both St David's and Llandaff dioceses, the Sarum use⁵ was largely followed, adapted for parish churches. The later we imagine any interpretative celebration to be, the more it is the case that printed Sarum books are likely to have been used. I would not be making the same case for 1300, or 1400. But in 1527, or 1547 and certainly in 1557, historical pressures were leading to liturgical standardisation.

My biggest fear, however, is that of a merely 'archaeological' reconstruction of the Mass. I do not believe it would be particularly helpful to attempt to re-enact what was once a very intimate and involving act of shared conviction in a cold or indifferent way. I would feel Gwenallt breathing over my shoulder: *Gwae inni wybod y geiriau, heb adnabod y Gair* – 'Woe to us who know the words, without knowing the Word'.⁶ Even in the most exacting Christian rituals there is a sense in which performance is forgotten, and an action takes place. It is an action primarily performed by God, in which human beings participate, slightly amazed at what they are being drawn into. 'It is time for the Lord to act' says the deacon at the beginning of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom. It is impossible to recreate such a mysterious event by merely going through the motions.

For this reason, it seems to me, there is a great advantage in making any reconstruction at the same time a living liturgy, celebrated by an experienced priest - and attended in part by worshippers – for whom the Mass, and adoration of the Host, is still a daily reality in their

⁴ Some experimentation has been done in this area in Ireland, at Glenstal Abbey. See Love, Cyprian, 'Glenstal Abbey, Music and the Liturgical Movement' in *Studies in World Christianity*, Volume 12, Number 2, 2006. pp. 126-41.

⁵ It is not strictly correct to refer to the 'Sarum Rite', as Mass celebrated according to the Salisbury books retains much in common with the Roman Rite throughout Europe at the period, and is rather a distinctive 'use' within a family of substantially similar forms.

⁶ Jones, David James (Gwenallt), *Ar Gyfeilorn*; originally published in the progressive literary journal *Heddiw* but currently in print in ap Gwilym, Gwynn & Llwyd, Alan, ed. *Blodeugerdd o Farddoniaeth Gymraeg yr Ugeinfed Ganrif*, Llandysul, Gwasg Gomer, 1987, p.95.

lives. We must not forget there is a continuity between Catholic worship 500 years ago and Catholic worship today. Some of us still even use the Latin language in our churches. But this is not to argue that the modern Mass is suitable, in its own right, for interpretative purposes. Even in Latin, it would give a false impression. Like the elderly Catholic who sometimes visits St Teilo's and asks a question like 'Where are the stations of the cross?' or 'Where is the tabernacle?' we could easily fall into the trap of anachronism. Just because one could serve and answer Mass in 1920 or 1955 does not mean one could have done so in 1520 or 1555. We need to acknowledge firmly that the way we do things now, and even the way we did them in our childhood, are somewhat different from the way they did them in the early sixteenth century.

We also need to realise that the parish Mass was usually situated at the heart of a wider group of liturgical events. Just as in an Orthodox church today, a visitor might be told that the Liturgy begins at a particular time, and ends at another, but that same visitor would notice that much went on before this point, and much after it – so it would be on a late medieval Sunday at St Teilo's. There would have been the blessing and sprinkling of holy water, the parish procession, prayers in the churchyard, possibly a sermon and even part of the Divine Office celebrated before the Mass proper began. After the end of Mass, prayers of thanksgiving would have been heard in the sacristy, blest bread would have been distributed and further offices or sacramental celebrations could have followed. The Mass on its own was more likely to be encountered on simple weekdays, but the festal and Sunday use was rich and complex. One of the major complaints at the Reformation, by country people, was the abolition of these additional rites and processions. It would be good, therefore, to include them in any interpretative celebration.

Of course, there have already been several attempts to recreate the Sarum liturgical use in recent times. On the Catholic side, Bishop Mario Conti celebrated the 500th anniversary of King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, with a Mass of the Sarum use, enhancing the sense of history of the occasion. Fr Sean Finnegan some ten years ago celebrated the Feast of the Purification in the Sarum use at Merton College, Oxford, with beautiful music and ceremonial. On the Anglican side, after the raising of the Mary Rose, an order for a Sarum Requiem Mass was compiled for the reburial of the remains of the lost sailors, with sumptuous Cathedral music and ceremonial, and clergy and musicians in Portsmouth undertaking the task of recreation. The parish of All Saints, York has also staged a close reconstruction of a medieval Requiem, photographed and described in detail in the book 'Mass and Parish in Late Medieval England'.⁷ At Salisbury itself there have been some

⁷ Barnwell, P.S., Cross, Claire and Rycraft, Ann, eds. *Mass and Parish in Late Medieval England: The Use of York*, Reading, Spire Books, 2005, Section 2, pp.127-72. The Danish liturgy website www.liturgy.dk also has a most fascinating series of reconstruction videos, and a selection may also be found on <http://uk.youtube.com/> with the search term 'Sarum mass' [accessed 11.12.08].

notable reconstructions, including a recent Easter Vespers. (Percy Dearmer's adaptive tradition at St Mary's Primrose Hill also still continues.)

At the end of the day, however, it has to be admitted that many of the full Sarum reconstructions mentioned above were one-off celebrations, aiming at a very high standard of liturgy and music, almost all largely unsuitable for our immediate purpose of interpreting St Teilo's as it was. In no case that I have been able to discover, has a full ordinary Sunday or festal liturgy of the Sarum use - such as would have been used in a rural parish church in South West Wales - been celebrated with the crucial element of its initial procession and ancillary rites which, as I have just noted, was so beloved of the people.⁸

All of these factors, taken together, have resulted in my conviction that an interpretative celebration in St Teilo's Church would have much to gain from being an actual liturgy in which the priest and some participants were worshippers themselves, sharing in substance the Eucharistic faith of their ancestors. At the same time, such a celebration should use as far as is reasonably possible a simple but comprehensive parish-level execution of the Sarum music, ceremonial and texts. The secret is to combine the two. To revive a significant tranche of the rural pre-Reformation liturgical diet, but to do so in a way that is not merely an act or a play, but reasonably accessible to the ecclesiastical descendants of the medieval worshippers. In this way the experience of those in the church is very close in both form and spirit to the original one.

Although, formally, the Sarum Missal is currently unauthorised for public use by Catholics, we nonetheless have available to us the remarkable flexibility of the current, third edition of the Roman Missal of 1970. This Missal would allow almost all the chants, hymns, readings and audible parts of the Sarum use, particularly on certain feasts. Indeed, in some instances, the 1970 use is uncannily close to the Sarum use. One sometimes asks oneself if the latter was not a specialist subject of some members of the liturgical Concilium that produced the new rites. For example, the pattern of reverences at the consecration in the Sarum use are much closer to those in 1970 than to those in the 1962 rite of Mass, sometimes called the 'Tridentine' rite. The same is true of the Sarum practice of the priest extending his arms wide, almost forming a cross with his body. The readings in Sarum often took place at a lectern visible and closer to the people as they do now, or even at a pulpit (where it had been introduced). Hymns (and particularly sequences) could occur at points traditionalists might consider unusual and the prayer of the faithful, coming after the Creed, was a strong feature, partly in the language of the people.

In country parishes, it is likely that some High Masses with deacon and subdeacon were offered, but there would also have been some simple Sung Masses, with a single priest,

⁸ Duffy, Eamon, *The Stripping of the Altars*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, (2nd Edition) 2005, pp. 124-6.

depending on the availability of clerical help. It is the second option, that of a Missa Cantata, that I would recommend for our purposes. To bring the ceremonial of deacon and subdeacon into play would really require us to use the 1962 rite, and this differs much more from the Sarum use and offers fewer possibilities for adaption.

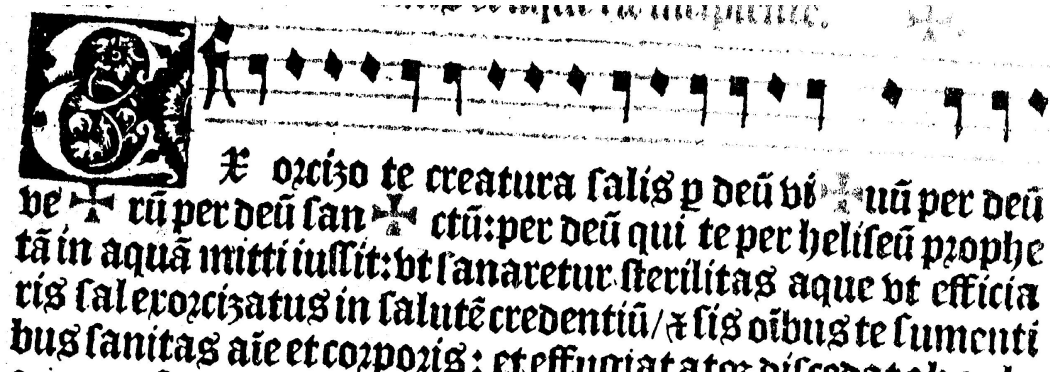
I propose now to highlight some of the distinctive features of the first part of such a proposed interpretative celebration. Let me first say something on pronunciation. Latin was pronounced slightly differently in different places and different times within the late medieval period, and there have been some studies of this.⁹ But for 'c' followed by 'i' or 'e' my inclination would be to tolerate the modern liturgical pronunciation, rather than the 'ts' claimed for some Tudor uses. This is partly because the variation across Europe and across Britain in such matters is hard to sort out now. Erasmus wrote a whole book on this problem.¹⁰ It is also partly because the differences in other sounds were comparatively slight. But it is mainly because there is a living tradition of using these languages in prayer; indeed because they live for many Christians in their devotional lives: perhaps not as vividly as Welsh or English live, but to a powerful degree nonetheless. My argument would be that we get more of a feel of a medieval Mass from someone reading Latin quickly in his usual manner, than from someone hesitantly attempting an unfamiliar pronunciation. The differences, as I have said, are very slight. If we are seeking to bring to life again the liturgy of a remote rural medieval church, we need to involve ordinary people, who at least at one time were used to hearing Mass in Latin, and ordinary priests and singers who are still used to singing it. Of course every effort should be made to make the music and ceremonial approximate to one of the early sixteenth century, but very slight variations of pronunciation and text, that allow ordinary worshippers to contribute more naturally to what is going on, are in my view more acceptable than an over-ambitious and all-consuming pedantry that fails to convey an atmosphere of true worship.

Let me finally put some flesh on these theoretical bones, by illustrating some of the characteristic features of one possible interpretative celebration that might take place in St Teilo's in the future. I have chosen the Feast of the Dedication of the Church for two reasons. Firstly it has suffered little change down the centuries, and secondly because we could choose when to celebrate it, since the actual date of the original consecration of the church is, so far as I am aware, unknown, and it is customary in such circumstances to designate an arbitrary date for the festival. I will just describe the very beginning of the celebration, though I have studied and prepared a detailed Ordo for the whole rite. If you want more, then you must help me bring its celebration to pass, in the Church of St Teilo, sometime in the near future.

⁹ For example McGee, Timothy et al., eds, *Singing Early Music: A Guide to Pronunciation, 1250-1650*, Bloomington, 1996; Copeman, Harold, *Singing in Latin*, Oxford, 1990.

¹⁰ Erasmus, Desiderius, *De recta Latini Graecique sermonis pronuntiatione dialogus*, Basel, Frobenius, 1528.

The morning would begin with the priest undertaking his preparation quietly in the sacristy. We would not hear him. In due course, however, the clergy and servers would move to the sanctuary, and without fuss get on with the blessing of salt and water in a monotone :`

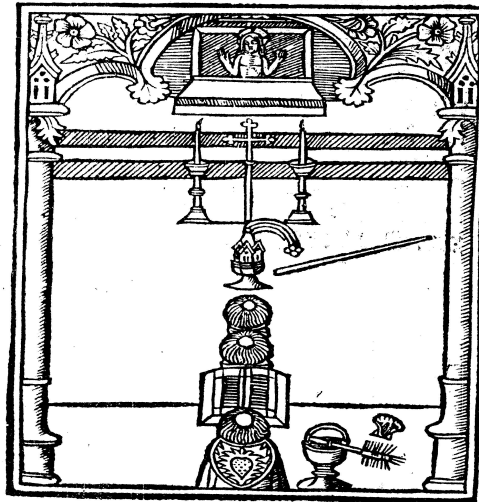


*Exorciso te creatura salis per Deum vivum, per Deum verum, per Deum sanctum, per Deum qui te per Heliseum prophetam in aquam mitti iussit...*¹¹

'I exorcise you, created element of salt, by the living God, by God the true and holy, by God who by the hand of Elisha the prophet mingled you with water...'

The celebrant, wearing an alb and cope, would stand before the high altar with assistants in surplices, holding the water and the book. Before them would be a cross and candles and incense, though arranged in a slightly different order to the modern one. In due course they would move around the church sprinkling the altars and those present:

¹¹ *Processionale ad usum insignis ac preclare ecclesie Sar[um]...* London 1519, [STC 16233595-01] fo.2r. Cf 2 Kings 2:13-15; 19-22. For the illustration, see fo.1v



**Et tunc dum benedicitur aqua
benedicta in omnibus dominicis.**

As the sprinkling itself took place, a fine chant would unfold which is not well known even to Catholics who remember the old rites, although the text is entirely familiar:

Asperges me domine yssopo et mun da bor

Lauabis me et super nivem dealbabor. ps. Miserere

mei deus: secundum magnam misericordiam tu am.

Asperges me. Versus.

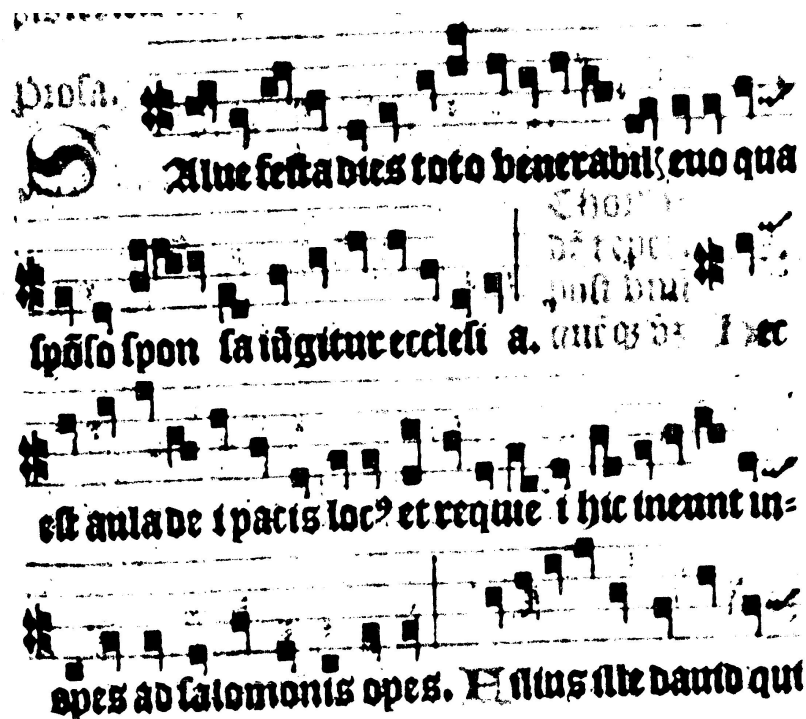
*Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo et mundabor; lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor. Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam...*¹²

¹² *Processionale*, 1519, [op.cit.], fo.3v

'You will sprinkle me with hyssop, O Lord, and I shall be cleansed; you will wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy...'

After the sprinkling, the full festal procession would begin. Led by the cross and candles, with the incense following on (a slight variation from modern use) the clergy and assistants would leave the sanctuary (possibly in our case through the parclose screen into the South Aisle). They would then process around the inside of the Church and out of the great West Door. As they passed down the central aisle the people would follow, and all the able-bodied would move to the Churchyard Cross (which we do not have at St Teilo's yet). As they processed hymns would be sung. Very frequently a version of the one we know as 'Hail thee, festival day' would be to the fore, and this would certainly be the case on this feast day.

Most of us who have ever met it will perhaps know it to the Vaughan Williams tune, but some older Anglicans may remember it sung in English to the Sarum tune. And it is this Sarum tune, to Latin words, that was so tremendously familiar to our ancestors, cropping up as it did so many times during the year, each time in a slightly different variation. It must have had a deep resonance of celebration for them:



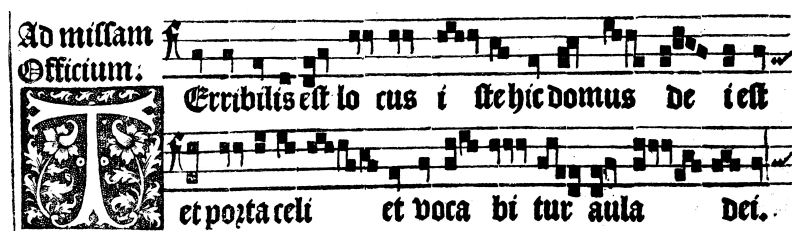
*Salve festa dies, tota venerabilis aevo: qua sponso sponsa iungitur Ecclesia. Haec est aula Dei, pacis locus et requiae: hic et eunt inopes ad Salomonis opes...*¹³

¹³ *Processionale ad usus [sic] insignis ecclesie Sar[um]...* London, 1544, [STC 16242482-03], f157r. See also *English Hymnal*, London, Mowbray, 1933, no. 634 (and 624).

‘Hail, O festival day, honoured by all ages: when the Church is joined as a bride to her bridegroom. This is the court of God, place of peace and rest, and here the poor find the riches of Solomon...’

The verses have wonderful spiritual and scriptural resonances, describing the consecrated church as a way of experiencing, in a certain way, the Tower of David, Noah’s Ark and Jacob’s Ladder. It is a type of the New Jerusalem, descending in a robe of light from heaven. As the procession re-entered the church we would hear for the first time some of the oft-repeated Latin refrains of this liturgy, especially Jacob’s words ‘Truly the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.’ After certain responsories, a sermon might be preached or read by the more learned or assiduous. Again it would be in the mother tongue, so would have had to have been translated into Welsh from the works of such as Mirk.¹⁴

After a canticle to the Blessed Virgin, the priest would go to vest for Mass, while perhaps a clerk sang one of the lesser hours of prayer. Eventually he would return to the altar, but would not say publically the ‘Prayers at the Foot of the Altar’ characteristic of the Counter Reformation liturgy and 1962. These remained an entirely private and quiet devotion in the Sarum use. The Introit, however, would be sung in almost exactly the same form as it would be in a modern Latin Mass – it has hardly changed at all:



*Terribilis est locus iste: hic domus Dei est, et porta caeli; et vocabitur aula Dei...*¹⁵

‘How awe-inspiring is this place: this is the house of God, and the gate of heaven; and it shall be called the court of God...’

When the Introit was finished, the *Kyrie Eleison* or ‘Lord Have Mercy’ would begin immediately in the Sarum use, as in 1962, but in our celebration we would have to follow 1970 and make *In nomine Patris* and *Dominus vobiscum* audible. On many feasts and Sundays,

¹⁴ I am grateful to Dr Madeleine Gray for drawing my attention to a possible contemporary translation of part of these in Lewis, Henry, ‘Darn o’rFfestival’, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1923-4: supplementary volume. London, Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1925.

¹⁵ *Graduale ad consuetudine[m] Sarum...* London, 1508, [STC 15862135-01], fo.172r

the Kyrie would be in a 'troped', expanded form (now reauthorised by the 1970 rite)¹⁶. It is noteworthy that in this case it is in an exotic and almost ecstatic blend of Greek and Latin:



*Deus, Creator omnium, tu Theos ymon, nostri pie: eleison. Tibi laudes coniubilantes, regum Rex Christe, oramus te: eleison. Laus, virtus, pax et imperium cui est semper sine fine: eleison. Christe Rex unice Patris almi natae coeternae: eleison...*¹⁷

'O God, creator of all, you are our God, upon us all, in your kindness: have mercy. To you we offer our praise in joyful unity, O Christ, King of kings, we pray you: have mercy. Praise, strength, peace and authority are yours always and without end: have mercy. O Christ the king, only Son of the gracious Father, and coeternal with him: have mercy...'

I will at this point cease to describe the rite in detail. There are constraints of length upon this paper and it is in any case impossible to convey liturgy fully in the way I am attempting. Let us hope we can celebrate it one day in its entirety, scholars helping worshippers, musicians helping liturgists, Protestants helping Catholics.

To make one final point, it would be my recommendation that only the priest (and perhaps a server or two) would receive Holy Communion at such an interpretative celebration. This would have been the norm in the early sixteenth century, except on great feasts such as Easter. It would help with the tensions that can arise from the post-Reformation situation of imperfect communion among different denominations of Christians. On this occasion all

¹⁶ 'When the Kyrie is sung as a part of the Penitential Act, a trope may precede each acclamation.' *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, London, Catholic Truth Society, 2005, p.18 (Section 52).

¹⁷ *Graduale*, 1508 [op.cit.] STC 15862135-01, f274v (numbered f46v in supplement of Commons at end)

those attending, including Catholics, would refrain from approaching the altar and believers would instead make a spiritual communion in their hearts.

I have perhaps said enough for most people to see why I believe a medieval church could usefully be interpreted, from time to time, through the medium of a living liturgy. It goes without saying that such a celebration would be open to all, those of different denominations could assist at it, and members of the public, interested non-believers or those of other faiths would be entirely welcome. After all, in one form or another, the Latin Mass has been in use among the Welsh for well over a thousand years, nurturing countless generations in the historic faith of the nation. Like St Teilo's Church itself, in that sense it belongs to all of us.

ABSTRACT

Medieval churches were at the heart of the liturgical and devotional life of their communities, and interpreting such a building involves understanding its liturgical use. A powerful aid to this can be the reviving of historical music and ceremonial in situ. The possibilities of doing so for an early sixteenth century church that has been rebuilt are discussed from a Catholic point of view, in the light of similar and ecumenical attempts in the past. Finally proposals are made for a celebration of the Feast of the Dedication that would promote understanding of a range of the Sarum liturgical rites, as they might have been celebrated in a rural Welsh parish with limited resources.

BIOGRAPHY

D.H. Frost is currently Principal of Holy Cross College, Bury, but while working earlier at St David's College, Cardiff, was a member of the advisory group on the restoration of St Teilo's Church. His principal research interest lies in Tudor ecclesiastical history and texts, particularly in Cornwall, on which he has published a number of articles. He is currently

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