

# **A Reaction to Sandro Magister's conjectures on the liturgy as celebrated in the Neocatechumenal communities**

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A story of the Desert Fathers tells of how some monks came to Abba Agathon and accused him of being a fornicator, of being an arrogant man and of always talking nonsense. The elderly monk agreed to all charges, however, when his visitors accused him of being a heretic, he vehemently denied this. When the visitors asked for an explanation of why he refused this last insult and was willing to bear the other calumnies he explained, "The first accusations I take to myself for that is good for my soul. But heresy is separation from God. Now I have no wish to be separated from God" (see Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975], 21). Over the years I have read many ridiculous suggestions and criticisms about how the liturgy is celebrated in the Neocatechumenal communities and up until now have not felt compelled to write any rebuttal. However with the furor raised by Sandro Magister in his chiesa blog (hosted by a generally anti-clerical Italian daily newspaper) and seeing how his theories are being picked up by the main-stream Catholic media, I felt compelled to write this short reaction in the spirit of Abba Agathon.

I have been in the Neocatechumenal Way for more than 25 years and it was through this charism that I discovered my love for the Church and a special love for Catholic liturgy (not to mention my vocation to the ministerial priesthood). This love of the liturgy has inspired me to pursue graduate studies in liturgy and I now hold three post-graduate degrees in academic liturgy. I am a priest in good standing, hold a *mandatum* from my archbishop and teach liturgy in a Pontifical faculty. I have personally attended thousands of Eucharistic celebrations in Neocatechumenal communities in the United States, Canada, Ireland, England, Scotland, France, Germany, Poland, Italy, Spain, Estonia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Australia, Guam, Saipan, Taiwan and Israel. All of these Eucharists have been in conformity with the relevant rubrics and used the approved liturgical books of the Roman Rite.

I find it hard to put up with the constant criticisms from Magister and the like who blend some plain untruth with half-truths taken out of context. The Neocatechumenal Way has from its very beginnings been in full communion with the Pope and the various Vatican dicasteries. In 1974 there was the first written approval of the liturgy of the Neocatechumenal communities as being "an excellent example" of the renewal of the liturgy (see *Notitiae* 95/96 (1974): 229). Many very positive meetings and audiences with the different popes have followed this initial document. Pope John Paul II celebrated the Eucharist with two thousand people from the Neocatechumenal communities on the Feast of the Holy Family 1988 in Porto san Giorgio (the international center of the

Neocatechumenal Way). This was preceded by a more detailed note by the CDW (see *l'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, January 9, 1989). This note granted specific permission to celebrate the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy in small communities, the reception of Communion under both Species and the transferring of “the Rite of Peace to after the Prayer of the Faithful” (an indult not granted to the USCCB when they asked for it).

The 2008 definitive Statute of the Neocatechumenal Way, approved by the Congregation for the Laity, confirms the earlier permissions, stating that the Saturday evening Eucharists of the small communities “are part of the Sunday pastoral work of the parish” (art. 13 #2). It also allows for brief monitions to the Sunday Mass readings prepared by lay members of the communities and states that “the neocatechumens receive [Communion] standing, remaining at their place” (art. 13 #3). The only other aspect of the celebrations that are somewhat outside of the experience of the regular parish Mass is the possibility, before the priest’s homily, of the sharing of a few brief personal experiences or “echoes” by some members of the small community. If anyone has actually regularly attended the Eucharist in a Neocatechumenal Community they can easily see that these are not at all confused with the homily that follows them (and that they are in conformity with the Article 3 #2 of the 1997 *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest*).

Regarding the specifics of Magister’s points. Yes, there could well be more than one Eucharist being celebrated for a community on any given Saturday night in a parish (this is the whole point of the Neocatechumenal Way which is basically a liturgical charism lived in small communities). If the celebration of the Eucharist is in a church or a chapel, then the altar is usually used, and if the Eucharist takes place in some other room of the parish, then a very dignified altar is prepared. They do not “sit round the altar in a circle,” but, as in many churches, the assembly sits on three sides in an orderly fashion and the priest sits at the head of the assembly. The communities take great care of the liturgical signs and it is not at all unusual for the individual community to invest thousands of dollars in liturgical vessels, cloths and other signs and to always make sure that the assembly is set up in a beautiful manner.

He makes reference to the celebration of the Eucharist being “convivial.” This is presented as if it was a bad thing, however my *Oxford American Dictionary* gives a primary definition of “convivial” as “(of an atmosphere or event) friendly, lively, and enjoyable.” I am not sure how this is a problem, although if it is bandied about enough in a negative sense, people will tend to assume that it is somehow bad. I would hope that even the members of the SSPX would hope that their Masses were “friendly, lively and enjoyable.” Even though I am Irish, I am afraid that I don’t see misery and drudgery as being absolute virtues in liturgy! Just because the celebratory element of the Paschal Mystery of the Eucharist is emphasized in the liturgy of the Neocatechumenal Way, this in no way denies the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist. No particular metaphor can hold all the graces

contained in the Eucharist and it is ridiculous to try to penalize people for actually enjoying and taking life from the saving mysteries.

As I said above the monitions and echoes/resonances are short, and permitted by liturgical law, and are clearly distinguished from the priest's homily that is given after the echoes. For Communion, the community uses unleavened bread, prepared not according to some arcane instruction of Dr. Kiko Argüello, but in accordance with 320-321 of the current *GIRM*. The community also receives from the chalice in the normal way. Both Species of Communion are administered to the individual members by the priest who (in accordance with the Statute of the Neocatechumenal Way), brings it to them in their places as they stand to receive.

Regarding the January 20<sup>th</sup> meeting with Pope Benedict. A further approval was granted by the Congregation for the Laity for the various "celebrations" contained in the Catechetical Directory for the Neocatechumenal Way. As the Neocatechumenal Way is a Post-Baptismal Catechumenate, the neocatechumenal communities gradually re-live the various steps of Christian Initiation as sacramentals. These celebrations are not considered as official liturgies of the Church in the strict canonical sense, as they are not in some formally promulgated liturgical book. But, in any case, with this additional Decree, they are now fully approved. Last week's Decree did not deal with the celebration of the Eucharist, as there has never been any significant problem with the manner in which the Eucharist is celebrated in the Neocatechumenal communities. In an op-ed piece entitled "A breath of Fresh Air" in the current edition of Madrid's *La Razón* Cardinal Cañizares (the Prefect of the CDW) did mention the Eucharist as celebrated in the Neocatechumenal communities: "The celebration of the Eucharist, in the interior of the itinerary proper to these communities, is carried out in a very dignified and beautiful manner, with a great sense of faith, with an ecclesial spirit that is both festive and liturgical, with a deep 'sense of mystery and the sacred'" (my own translation from the Spanish original found at <http://www.larazon.es/noticia/2533-un-aire-fresco-por-cardenal-antonio-canizares>).

This echoes perfectly the thought of Pope Benedict XVI who, on the meeting of January 20<sup>th</sup>, affirmed the integral aspect of the Eucharist celebrated on Saturday evening in the small community, as being an important part of this charism: "Precisely in order to promote the reconciliation to the wealth of the sacramental life by people who have strayed from the Church, or have not received adequate formation, the Neocatechumens may celebrate the Sunday Eucharist in small communities, after the first Vespers of Sunday, according to the provisions of the diocesan bishop (cf. Statutes, art. 13 §2)."

With these reflections, I do not want to say that the Neocatechumenal Way is the only plank of salvation, thank God the Catholic Church is much bigger than the Neocatechumenal Way. We have a Church that today has many liturgical rites, we have a special form of the liturgy for use in the former Zaire, for use by former Anglicans and those who use the Extraordinary Form are allowed to maintain their particular liturgical

spirituality and practices. What binds the Catholic Church together is not uniformity in liturgical practice, but unity in belief and faith in communion with the Successor of Peter. This past summer I personally attended Mass in at the Opus Dei shrine in Torreciudad (Spain), at London's Brompton Oratory and a Pontifical Mass in the Extraordinary Form celebrated by Cardinal Burke at the Fota Liturgical Conference in my native city of Cork (Ireland). While not everything in these celebrations would be my own cup of tea, I have no difficulty in accepting that these are valuable parts of the Church's liturgical treasury and I appreciate how they can help in the salvation of many souls. In a similar way, the minor liturgical adaptations that have been granted to the Neocatechumenal communities are precisely to help them answer to the needs of the New Evangelization and bring people back to the Church and to a fuller encounter with the Risen Lord.

In conclusion, I do not even suggest that there are never problems with various Neocatechumenal communities and particular parishes. Where there is life there is always problems. But, as in any family, the various members of the Church should work out any problems that arise together. Many years ago, while speaking of the growing pains of the institutional Church in welcoming the Neocatechumenal Way, Cardinal Ratzinger suggested that "our task – the task of the office-holders in the Church and of theologians – is to keep the door open to them, to prepare room for them." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 44.