

# Brompton Oratory Has Lessons for Parishes

*The Brompton Oratory, where the Novus Ordo is done as it should be done, attracts vast crowds. The cause of restoration calls for greatness of vision.*

**By Joanna Bogle**

The London Oratory on Brompton Road -- often called the Brompton Oratory -- is one of London's Catholic landmarks. Nearest tube station: South Kensington. The Oratory is right next door to the Victoria and Albert Museum. You can't miss it, and on a Sunday you don't want to -- it has the most glorious liturgy in London and possibly in any city in Europe.

Its history is, or should be, known to all English-speaking Catholics. It is rich in links with John Henry Newman, whose statue, with a gentle smile, now faces the roaring traffic of the Brompton Road and reassures you that you have found the church you are looking for, and Father William Faber, author of "Faith of our Fathers", who is buried in Saint Wilfrid's chapel inside.

But what is currently important about the Oratory is that it offers today's Catholics a lesson in how the liturgy can and should be celebrated. The *Novus Ordo* Latin sung Mass every Sunday is packed with regular worshippers of all ages, visitors, inquiring Anglicans, and wistful we-come-when-we-can-and-wish-it-could-be-more-often refugees from parishes across London and the South of England.

The Mass is celebrated facing God. The clergy wear beautiful Roman vestments and birettas. The liturgy follows fully and exactly the rubrics of the Church complete with incense, genuflections, bowing, and the correct and exact wording of every prayer and Scripture reading. Nothing is altered into feminist language. No substitutes are made for the ritual and gestures prescribed by the Church. There is no "Good morning, everyone and wasn't that a wonderful result at the football last night?" There is no sudden decision to omit an important prayer or substitute something more chatty and informal. At the Consecration the reverence that sweeps the church is tangible. At the Elevation the bell of the church is tolled to tell London of the mystery enacted in its presence, while the bell at the altar sings out the simultaneous message to the congregation. At Communion, when priests bring the Hosts down to the second Communion rail (there are huge crowds) halfway down the Church, a cascade of genuflections precede them as everyone sinks to their knees in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Mass has an unhurried pace. There is a sense that it is worth spending time with God.

On Holy Days of Obligation, crowds pour in for evening Mass. At Christmas, a vast throng forms two hours before the church doors open for Midnight Mass. For the Holy Week ceremonies the church is crammed to capacity; it can take an hour for the congregation to venerate the Cross on Good Friday.

It's easy to say that all of this is merely the tasty fare of a rich and important city church, with no message for the ordinary parish. It is true that the London Oratory has certain advantages: a vast and impressive building in a fashionable part of London, a professional choir that produces recordings of Mozart and Palestrina, a committed team of priests, a good financial base. But things could have worked out differently. The western world has plenty of empty churches, many of them in smart parts of our cities. This Oratory church could be a vast white elephant, a giant baroque edifice redolent of faded glory just the sort of place that people say has no role in modern life. Yet it thrives in defiance of every modern cliché: that people want new concrete structures, that young people want 1970s pop songs sung to guitars and tambourines; that Latin went out with Vatican II; that the priest should seek to entertain rather than focus on the offering of the Sacrifice. If things had been done differently these past thirty years at the Oratory, I might be writing about a huge and decaying structure, an unnecessary and expensive hulk in a non-Catholic city already served by a good many other Catholic churches.

The Oratory's success is due to its liturgy. It is this that produces the crowds, the blend of old and young people, the blend of colors and classes and incomes that make this particular church something that belongs to a much wider London than that of Kensington.

Good liturgy is not a question of putting on a show. It is evidence of -- and linked to -- strong belief and a sense of evangelization. The London Oratory has the usual array of parish activities (charitable work, Scouts, fund-raising groups, regular talks on aspects of the Faith). Its linked boys' school is thriving, as is the parish primary school. Of course good schools are ventures that owe their success to those who run them and not directly to the Oratory Church but the bonds are there.

The High Mass is the one that people talk about, but this is a busy church, and there are Masses regularly throughout Sunday, beginning with the Vigil Mass on Saturday night. Here, the choir of the Junior House of the London Oratory School sings superbly. This Mass is in English. Those who attend include parents and friends of the boys (and I'll admit it in the case of this writer, the doting godmother of one of them). On the Sunday morning, another children's choir sings at 10 a.m.: this is the Oratory Church Junior Choir, made up of girls and boys who volunteer their services, committing themselves to a rigorous program of lessons, rehearsals, and Mass, week by week throughout the year. Like their counterparts in the 11 a.m. professional choir, they have also made successful tapes and records.

There is a Tridentine Rite Mass in the Little Oratory, adjoining the church, at 10 a.m. This is a low Mass, well attended, the congregation notably multi-racial and very devout.

The liturgy at the London Oratory shows what can be done in the modern Church -- and also reveals some of the tensions. The "Tridentine set" -- articulate regular attendees at the Little Oratory who are also members of the Latin Mass Society, etc. -- often drop in to the main church for the music but are for the most part uninterested in the *Novus Ordo* or in an Adoremus-style discussion of the "reform of the reform".

At a recent conference sponsored by the new international movement CIEL, which fosters interest in the Tridentine rite, a speaker who tried to show that a concern for the liturgy as a whole should embrace the possibilities of improving the current *Novus Ordo* met with a poor reception. This is a pity. Authentic renewal of the *Novus Ordo*, including restoration of "Tridentine" features (e.g. by celebrating it facing God, by making full and correct gestures, by observing decorum) can only help in fostering a general sense of what is good and noble and important in celebrating the liturgy. This in turn creates possibilities for creating a more generous attitude towards the use of the Tridentine Rite. It is notable that it is at the Brompton Oratory where the *Novus Ordo* is done as it should be done and attracts vast crowds that the Tridentine Rite is also, Sunday by Sunday, not merely tolerated but fostered and valued, advertised on the notice-board and treated as part of the parish life.

Those who love the Tridentine Rite have suffered much. They have been insulted and abused and are not disposed to accept anything less than simply being allowed to have this ancient Rite of Mass. They don't want a dialogue about improving the *Novus Ordo*; to them this is at best irrelevant and at worst downright dangerous. This is understandable, but the cause of restoration calls for greatness of vision: support for the Old Rite and a passionate urgency about ending the abuses, irreverence, banality and occasional near-blasphemy that so often occurs with the New. One great and thriving London church has shown what can be done.

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