

# The Amen Corner: Between Consultation and Faithfulness: Questions That Won't Go Away

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In the year 3615 AD, on the 1600th anniversary of the appearance of this article, perhaps English will be a dead language. Perhaps it will take specialized scholars to read these words in the original. Perhaps no print copy of this journal will have survived the moistures of time, and even electronic copies will have yielded to more durable forms of storage. Perhaps certain words in my vocabulary will be difficult to understand. Perhaps the religious and socio-political scene from which I write will be dimly grasped. It doesn't take much humility to admit that anything I write would provoke scant interest 1600 years later.

So I tip my cap to the early fifth-century bishop of the picturesque Umbrian see of Gubbio, a city that gave its name to the ancient Eugubine Tablets discovered there, and where Francis of Assisi legendarily tamed a menacing wolf. The bishop's letter has been lost, but his name still bestrides the reply composed by the reigning pontiff. This coming March 19, a rare confluence of the Feast of St. Joseph and the Saturday of Palm Sunday weekend, will mark the 1600th anniversary of the Letter of Pope Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio. To this day, the letter still influences liturgical practice and ecclesial authority.

Robert Cabié translated and commented upon the critical edition he prepared: *La Lettre du Pape Innocent I<sup>er</sup> a Décentius de Gubbio (19 Mars 416)*, Bibliothèque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique, Fascicule 58 (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1973).

Martin F. Connell translated the letter into English, wrote an introduction, and composed notes: *Church and Worship in Fifth-Century Rome: The Letter of Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2002). This volume developed Cabié's work, and the two books will reward those interested in a fuller study.

Decentius witnessed or heard of divergent liturgical practices, and, as a conscientious Church leader, he wanted to follow proper procedures. His information could have increased from passing pilgrims and his own peripatetic habits. He may have fielded opinions from his newly-ordained clergy and the aging cathedral sacristan. Regional liturgical variations found fertile soil in the unquiet ruminations of Decentius's loyal mind.

Because this bishop directed these matters to the judgment of the pope, the letter became not only a venue for liturgical theology, but also an occasion for the centralization of ecclesial authority. Time and again, Pope Innocent stresses that the Roman way should guide the liturgical practice elsewhere. Perhaps this was more than Decentius was asking, but by putting pen to parchment and sending the letter to the Vatican, what did he expect the pope to say? “Figure it out on your own”? No, Innocent, whose entire ministry flexed the muscle of the papal office, seized the opportunity to promote liturgical uniformity throughout a Church shaken by the recent incursions of Alaric the Goth.

Innocent methodically worked through eight of the topics that Decentius had proposed. The pope scuttled other questions because he preferred to discuss them in person. Nonetheless, the eight topics we have give a snapshot into the concerns of fifth-century Roman worship, and into those areas about which Innocent felt sufficiently comfortable to issue a public response. In order of appearance, and using some contemporary vocabulary for the sake of clarity, here are the liturgical pronouncements that Innocent returned to Decentius 1600 years ago:

- 1) The sign of peace should be exchanged after the eucharistic prayer. Some communities placed it before, but Innocent believed that the eucharistic prayer leads into the sign of peace, not the other way around.
- 2) The recitation of the names of those who contribute offerings comes after the gifts are prepared, and not before. Hence, the people first present their sacrifices, and then the donors’ names are mentioned in the eucharistic prayer.
- 3) Only bishops may confirm those who have been baptized. Presbyters may anoint the baptized with chrism consecrated by the bishop, but not on the forehead, as some Eugubine mavericks apparently did.
- 4) The faithful should observe a fast each week not only on Friday but also on Saturday. Some were choosing to fast only on Friday or only on Saturday. However, in imitation of the sadness that gripped the apostles between the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians should fast on these two days every week.
- 5) Because the practice of the *fermentum* would require traveling great distances, it need not be observed in Gubbio. In Rome, after the pope broke the bread of the eucharist, acolytes carried portions to other urban churches to seal the unity of their celebrations. This is impractical in other locales where places of worship spread far and wide.
- 6) Only the bishop may lay hands on those struggling with a demon of vice or sin, but he may delegate presbyters and clerics to handle the case of a person otherwise requiring an excessively long journey to and from the see city. Practical solutions may be applied to spiritual needs, as long as they do not compromise the bishop’s authority.
- 7) Priests normally forgive sinners only on the Thursday before Easter if repentance is sincere. However, a priest may forgive those near death and despair at other times of the year. This tolerance helps people return to communion before they die.

8) Priests and laity may anoint the sick. A bishop's work includes ministry to the sick, but he has a busy schedule. The oil he blesses may be used by others to extend mercy to the infirm.

This ancient letter strikes a modern balance between liturgical rules and pastoral practice, cultural diversity and seductive uniformity, hierarchical structure and minimal resources, theological theory and realistic obstacles. The scriptures already reign as an authoritative source, seconded by the power entrusted to the successors of the apostles. A fifth-century letter that arrayed these argumentative forces has itself become an authoritative source on debates such as the prudent placement of the sign of peace, and the proper ministers for confirmation and anointing of the sick. Sixteen hundred years later, the relevance of Innocent's letter comforts Christians that the arc of our liturgical traditions stands athwart the twin foundations of consultation and faithfulness, while the same letter disturbs Christians that some of our liturgical questions never seem to go away.

So, let us commemorate the anniversary of vibrant answers to a lost letter that a bishop sent to a pope. I am not a bishop, and you, dear reader, are probably not the pope. Instead of a pope sending answers to a bishop, a pastor sends questions to liturgical colleagues.

1) Why - after 1600 years - are we still hearing differences of opinion about the sign of peace? And why was it the number one question for Pope Innocent? This is not a rhetorical question. I'd really like to know why. People argue over when the peace should take place, whether it should take place, and, if it takes place, how it should be done. One extreme finds the sign of peace intrusive to an introspective participation in the eucharist. Another finds it an exuberant opportunity for physical embrace. In practice, many people treat it as an invitation to greet strangers and catch up with friends, which it is not. Does the debate pertain to liturgical piety and eucharistic theology? Or does it relate to a deeper hesitancy to offer signs of peace to those we do not know? Peace is costly in relationships both personal and international. Is this being played out in the liturgy? What is happening inside our communities - inside each of us - that makes people fight over the sign of peace?

2) How can the liturgy best acknowledge donors? The Catholic Church has a time-honored yet ecumenically controversial practice of accepting mass intentions. Many priests in third-world countries rely on them for their salary. When Catholics make an offering for a mass, they generally expect that the intention will be announced - even several times. The name of the donor appears in the printed bulletin, if not in the verbal announcement. Eucharistic Prayer I, the venerable Roman Canon, creates a space where the names of donors may be read aloud. A Catholic parish in first world countries needs more than mass intentions to pay its bills; it needs generous gifts in the weekly collection and a remembrance in members' wills. The interior walls and windows of many churches frame plaques acknowledging the gifts of some donors. People who contribute deserve thanks, but the faithful gather first to give thanks to God.

Should the names of donors attract the eyes and ears of the gathered faithful? There are fifth-century antecedents. What would suit the liturgy today?

3) Could the Eastern Rites take more aggressive action to help the Roman Rite reposition its sacrament of confirmation together with the baptism of infants? Maybe the leaders of the East are doing all they can, but liturgical theologians of the West, in spite of excellent research, volumes of publications, the restoration of the catechumenate, and a boost from an ecumenical council, have failed. Maybe ecumenism makes a better argument where Innocent's historical precedent perdures. Resistance to changing Western confirmation policies comes from fascination with the episcopacy and the panic driving youth ministry. Even the most unpopular bishop commands rock-star attention at confirmation ceremonies: He receives countless requests to pose for pictures, so great is the respect for the episcopal office. Many dioceses hitch their youth ministry to confirmation, in spite of theologically tenuous liturgical celebrations. The restoration of the Latin Rite catechumenate for adults should have drawn the age of confirmation closer to baptism in general, but it has not. In fact, many priests do not confirm children of catechetical age whom they baptize, even though the code of canon law requires it. The misguided thinking that confirmation is an adolescent rite of passage has stunted the impact of the adult catechumenate. Many other Christian denominations of the West also have a Spirit-based adolescent rite of passage, so Catholics following the Eastern star may cause further rifts among Christians in the West. But someone needs to bring more coherence to the Roman initiation rites. Could the East help?

4) Should liturgists take a stronger interest in Friday? In spite of the handwringing about poor attendance at Sunday mass, the Christian Sunday dominates the Western week much more than the Christian Friday does. The Sunday edition of the newspaper has the largest number of ads and the most thorough information concerning the week's upcoming events. American football plays on Sunday because many people rest. Businesses that open on Sundays often recruit low-earning employees to forsake the Lord's Supper in order to put supper on their own tables; those of a higher tax bracket more generally take Sundays off. Calendars default to a week that begins on Sunday. Traffic patterns flow differently - slower, though less congested. Sunday unquestionably retains an air of relaxation. Many people worship on Sundays, which remains the busiest day of the week in parishes. Fridays are another matter. Fridays are traditional days of fast, but they have become evenings of celebration. There is little liturgical support for the traditional practice, except for the Friday readings in Lent in the Roman Catholic Lectionary for Mass and the penitential psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Rule of Saint Benedict, which famously counterposes prayer and work, includes a weekly fast on Wednesday and Friday, though it merely delays the time for the midday meal. Some Catholics still abstain from meat every Friday; others receive communion on the First Friday of the month. Otherwise, ecclesially and culturally, the Friday fast is lost. Pope Innocent favored expanding the Friday fast into Saturday. All I can say is, "Good luck with that." Could it be that some of our struggle with Sunday worship is an inadequate

promotion of Fridays with liturgical worship, fasting, or something more charitable beyond picking up the tab for some buds?

5) What more can Christian churches do to affirm their unity on Sundays? Innocent writes about the *fermentum*, the practice of acolytes carrying communion bread from his altar to the others in Rome as an expression of solidarity. It is hard to know what inspired that practice. Perhaps a mother sent some of the bread she baked to the homes of her children too busy with their own families to eat at her common table. The Roman Rite *fermentum* has deteriorated to the priest dropping a piece of consecrated bread into his own chalice. The action now suggests the independence of the parish rather than the uniformity of a diocese. The Catholic liturgy includes many signs of diocesan unity - prayer for the local ordinary, collections for diocesan causes, the observance of a diocesan calendar. Signs of the broader Christian communion include similarities in the Sunday lectionary and the basic structure of the eucharistic service. The Roman Rite's change to the English translation of the Order of Mass has dissolved one symbol of Sunday's Christian unity. How can the liturgy broadcast better the unity that Christians share?

6) Does the liturgy help or hurt the pastoral ministry of bishops? Underneath Innocent's begrudging permission for priests and deacons to lay hands on the possessed who would be inconvenienced by lengthy travel to and from his see, there shines the urge for a bishop - even a pope - to administer pastoral care. He probably sensed his vocation out of a desire to serve others and to make a difference in their lives. However, a bishop needs to share pastoral care with others, as he cannot be physically present for all the ministry that happens in his name. When the bishop visits a parish, or when members of his flock go to the cathedral, the purpose, generally, is liturgical. The bishop's administrative responsibilities may interfere with offering personal pastoral care. Those who experience the most intense spiritual struggles need the most practiced spiritual leaders. These should be bishops. Many of them are indeed gifted at personal ministry and powerful prayer. But most people experience the bishop at large liturgical gatherings, and their best hope for a meaningful encounter is an instantly blogable selfie. Does the liturgy enhance the bishop's standing as a leader who gives pastoral care? Or does it distance him from that work?

7) How can the liturgy best support the ministry of forgiveness? Many Catholics no longer go to confession. Many other Christian denominations have nothing resembling our sacrament. Decentius lived when formal liturgical forgiveness happened once a year, and he apparently worried about the pastoral care of those battling the encroach of emotional despair or physical death. Innocent favored sharing mercy in these extreme circumstances, but he obviously preferred an annual pre-paschal opportunity for forgiveness. Ironically, although the liturgy sometimes prompts heated, even uncharitable rhetoric, the liturgy is the potent venue where many people seek to experience reconciliation. Some victims of sexual abuse, for example, have found comfort in liturgical acts of hierarchical reparation. In a culture that unreasonably expects people ever to

achieve success and never to admit fault, does liturgical forgiveness have something to offer? How can this better reach the needs of sinners all?

8) Does the failure of regional congregations impair ministry to the sick? In the past, local churches defined urban neighborhoods. Like barber shops, grocery stores, dry cleaners, and gas stations, churches served those who lived nearby. Rural congregations experienced the same because of the expanse of farmland compressing a city's limits. Today's congregations are more mobile. Individuals often choose a church not by its proximity, but by its liturgy. They choose the preaching that fits their politics, the music of their demographic, and the language they speak at home. The vernacular both unifies and splinters congregations. In my diocese, for example, we have about 100 parishes, of which eight offer mass in Spanish, and one in Vietnamese. Non-English speakers who live in other parishes may cross several boundaries to find the parish they want. Decentius could not anoint all the sick in a far-flung diocese. Innocent reassured him that even lay people could anoint. The Catholic Church's sacramental ministry to the sick falls to a diminished number of priests serving an increased number of Catholics. But the challenge is more than numbers. It's distance. A member may happily travel forty minutes to church once a week, but a priest will not so happily travel the same distance multiple times to tend the sick, bless a home, conduct a meeting, or eat a meal. If the Vatican ever extends the ministry of the sick to deacons, it will surely cite the tone that Innocent set. But the broader question remains. Has the failure of regional congregations impaired not only liturgical ministry to the sick, but pastoral ministry in general?

If someone does read this in the year 3615, I hope he or she will pass the baton.

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