PROJECT MUSE®

*What's the Smoke For? And Other Burning Questions about
the Liturgy* by Johan Van Parys (review)

Kevin Magas

Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal, Volume 19, Number 1,
2015, pp. 100-101 (Review)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/atp.2015.0009>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/634045>

Johan Van Parys

What's the Smoke For? And Other Burning Questions about the Liturgy

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014

viii + 155 pages. Paperback. \$16.95.

In his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis underscored the need for a mystagogical catechesis which would lead to “a renewed appreciation of the liturgical signs.” Johan Van Parys’ *What’s the Smoke For?* answers that call, initiating readers into a liturgical world of sight and sound, movement and gesture. The book was inspired by a question-and-answer column on liturgical matters Van Parys has been writing for *Basilica*, the magazine of the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis, since 1998. Here Van Parys offers not only a compilation of those columns, but a variety of questions he solicited from Catholics new and old as well as additional questions he personally thinks should be asked. Van Parys seeks to give answers grounded in “a good theological foundation, accessible language, and the occasional twist” in a tone “reminiscent of both Miss Manners and Bishop Fulton Sheen” (viii).

Most of Van Parys’ ninety-one questions concern the externals surrounding the liturgical act. He includes sections on liturgical art and architecture, furniture and objects, as well as posture, gesture, and vesture. Other questions are framed more thematically, touching on issues concerning the relationship between liturgical prayer and private devotions, liturgical diversity and inclusivity, and the liturgical year. Van Parys includes a brief cluster of questions directly relating to liturgical theology, following upon a section devoted to questions of liturgical praxis (“I notice that in other churches the liturgy does not last more than fifty minutes. We take much longer. I’m not complaining; I am just curious. Why do we need more time to celebrate the same liturgy?” [89]). Both questions and answers are interspersed with humor and a lightness of being, and Van Parys helps remind us that the liturgy is also a form of play.

Throughout his work, Van Parys demonstrates his talent of distilling the complexities of liturgical history into manageable and easily understood explanations. He touches on many of the neuralgic and unfortunately divisive issues confronting contemporary Catholic liturgy, including questions of inclusive language, the new English translation of the *Roman Missal*, the role of the

Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, etc. In these instances, Van Parys' pastoral sensitivity shines through as he adopts a balanced and irenic tone that largely avoids ideological pigeonholing. Nevertheless, some readers will likely take issue with a few of Van Parys' expressions, such as his characterization of the "Mass of Paul VI" as "much less ritualistic" than the "Tridentine Mass", because the priest "no longer has his back to the people" who are now "expected to fully, actively, and consciously participate rather than simply attend" (125). The nature of the genre always runs the risk of oversimplification. Yet it would be a disservice to Van Parys and his book to try to lock him into a liturgical "camp" without taking account of, for example, his love for the treasury of liturgical traditions such as Eucharistic devotions or Gregorian chant. We would do well to heed his own call to a ceasefire in what has been regrettably termed the 'liturgy wars:' "So rather than set up theological barriers and delineate liturgical camps, let us build bridges we can cross together" (109).

What's the Smoke For? is a slim volume that offers much for the worshipper in the pew and the pastoral minister alike. It can serve as a helpful resource for the parishioner struck with liturgical curiosity and provide a model for the type of pastoral-liturgical catechesis those in ministry aim to cultivate. To this end, the work might have benefitted from some form of bibliographic notes or suggestions for further reading for those interested in learning more. This volume could be complemented nicely with Balthasar Fischer's *Signs, Words, and Gestures: Short Homilies on the Liturgy* or Romano Guardini's *Sacred Signs*. Van Parys' work joins these classics of the Liturgical Movement in deepening a distinctively liturgical spirituality. If liturgical reform is not to remain merely a manipulation of external forms but a progressive assimilation of the mystery of Christ, then more works in this mystagogical vein are called for. They help us re-experience the liturgy in a way which reminds us, in the words of Goethe, that "in every new situation we must start all over again like children, cultivate a passionate interest in things and events, and begin by taking delight in the externals, until we have the good fortune to grasp the substance."

KEVIN MAGAS
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
SOUTH BEND, INDIANA