

THE YEAR OF FAITH: VATICAN II AND THE LITURGY

One of the most visible changes to come out of Vatican II was the reform of the liturgy – most notably a shift to prayer in the vernacular. But the Council called us to something much deeper than just external changes.

Over this Year of Faith, which will begin on the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II (Oct. 11, 2012), I will review the Council's first document: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), [*Sacrosanctum concilium*](#) – and ask: What does this have to do with us today? How are we living this out? What else must we do to live out the intention of the Council?

The CSL was the first document to be passed by the Council – on December 4, 1963 – by a vote of 2147 to 4.

As the first document of Vatican II, SC (§1) begins by stating the four-fold aims of the Council:

1. To invigorate – enliven, energize – the Christian life of the faithful;
2. To adapt those aspects of Church life that are changeable (and not all are) to contemporary needs;
3. To foster unity among Christians; and
4. To strengthen whatever can help evangelize, and call all persons into the Church.

To accomplish these ends, the Council set before itself the task of reforming and promoting the liturgical life of the Church. Why? Because it is through the liturgy that “the work of our salvation is accomplished” and that we express and manifest the truth of who Christ is, and what is the real nature of the Church (§2). That is, to celebrate the liturgy is to grow in relationship with Christ – which, rather than turning us only inward, also moves us outward into the world as evangelists.

These aims are echoed in Pope Benedict's call to observe the Year of Faith. In *Porta Fidei*, he reminds us that “it is the love of Christ that fills our hearts and impels us to evangelize” (§7). The liturgy is that privileged place of encounter with Christ, where Christ fills our hearts, and from where we are called to “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” (Order of Mass #144).

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM – CHAPTER I

In the first chapter of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), the Council Fathers laid out the general principles for the restoration and promotion of the liturgy. We can summarize the overarching principles as follows:

First, the liturgy is the work of Christ, who is present in minister and assembly, in word and sacrament. The whole Church acts in the person of Christ, the priest specifically in the person of Christ the Head (§§6-7). Rather than Christ's real presence being confined to the Eucharist, the Council made it clear that the liturgy is about encounter with the Savior as we join with Him in offering praise, thanksgiving, and the sacrifice of our lives to the Father.

Second, while liturgy is not all that the Church does, all that the Church does flows from and leads back to the liturgy. Evangelization, catechesis, social action, administration, personal prayer and devotion – these never stand alone, apart from the liturgy (§§9-13). In fact, if the ministries of the Church are isolated from the liturgy, they wither and die—like a branch separated from its vine.

Third, while the following of liturgical laws and rubrics is necessary, that alone is not enough. “All the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is

demanded by the very nature of the liturgy,” and is their right and obligation (§14; see also §11). This aim is to be considered before all else, and requires the formation of the clergy (§§14-20).

This section does not give presiders permission to do whatever they want, but demands from them more than robotic actions and speech. Presiders ought to *pray the liturgy* and lead the assembly in that prayer in such a way that invites their understanding and their full – body, mind, spirit – participation. By their liturgical style and skills, presiders either help us encounter Christ, or hinder us from doing so (see <http://www.davenportdiocese.org/lit/liturgylibrary/Resources/litFromPerformerToPrayer-English.pdf>).

It is also important to keep in mind that “participation” does not mean that everyone needs to be doing everything, or even some particular liturgical ministry. Participation is first of all internal—a matter of the heart—before it is ever external if it is to be authentic.

Finally, the Council recognized that there are certain elements of the liturgy that are divinely instituted, and therefore unchangeable, while there are other elements that do change over time and are therefore able to be adjusted if they do not help the Church express her faith and worship God in a way that is understandable and invites participation (§21).

At the end of Chapter 1, the norms that would guide the reform of the liturgy are laid out.

Only the Holy See (and to some extent, Bishops and their national conferences) have the authority to regulate the liturgy. No one “may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (§22.3). This norm is a good reminder that the liturgy does not belong to any one of us – or any one community. Part of entering into the liturgy is dying to ourselves—and our particular preferences or desires—and, in a sense, giving ourselves over to the liturgy of the Church to be changed, molded, and transformed by it (rather than remaking it in our image).

The next paragraph reminds us that the liturgy is part of tradition; while open to “legitimate progress” such growth must occur “organically” – that is, be rooted in what has come before. It is certainly the case that a great deal of ink is currently being spilled arguing over what in the wake of Vatican II has been in continuity and what, at least in the eyes of some, has not (and must therefore be repaired). We shouldn’t be surprised. History tells us that the time after every major Council has been characterized by differences regarding interpretation and implementation. We just happen to live in such interesting times!

In keeping with the trajectory set by the renewals in liturgical and scriptural studies (see the article on *Verbum Domini* below), the Constitution emphasizes that “[s]acred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy” (§24) and so to reform the liturgy is also to promote a love for the scriptures.

Only then does the Constitution call for the reform of the liturgical books as soon as possible (§25).

The liturgy is the joint action of the Body of Christ (§§26-32). While we each have different roles, or offices, in the liturgy, none of us is to be a passive spectator. We are all to be fully active, doing all (but only) that which is ours to do—like a body, the parts all working together, each part making its unique contribution to the well-being (or not) of the whole. For the first time, the reformed liturgical books are to give attention to the rubrics governing the people’s parts. It is preferable that all liturgies (including all the sacraments) be celebrated communally, rather than privately or quasi-privately. All liturgical

ministers are to be well-prepared for their service. Baptism is the great equalizer; in the liturgy, no special honors are to be paid to any person or group.

It is easy to pass this last section over without realizing what a radical change this was for the Church. “Radical” means “to the root” – and that’s exactly what the Council was about: getting back to our roots. And here we see one of the key principles of the whole Council: the primacy of baptism. We are short-sighted if we see the Constitution on the Liturgy to be just about “tweaking” the Mass; no, there is much more here. The Constitution – and the documents that followed – are about who we are as Church. They get at the core of our identity. No wonder that they generated such debate then – and continue to do so now!

Interested in reading more? Check out Massimo Faggioli’s new book, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium*, available from The Liturgical Press:
<http://www.litpress.org/Detail.aspx?ISBN=9780814662380>.

Liturgy is, above all, the worship of God. But it is also formative (§33). Therefore, in reforming the liturgy, the Council Fathers stressed that the “rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity” – short, clear, avoiding useless repetition, understandable (§34). Greater use of the scriptures and the importance of preaching is stressed (§35). While the importance of Latin was maintained, the Council also opened the door to greater use of the vernacular—a permission that Bishops’ conferences around the world requested and were granted (§36) in the following years.

Next, the Council laid down norms for what has come to be called inculturation—the adaptation of the liturgy to various cultures. While liturgy ought to be unifying, that does not require a “rigid uniformity” (§37), but adaptations can be made only by the proper authorities (§§38-40).

Finally, the Council provided instructions for promoting the liturgy in dioceses and parishes (§§41-46). Most notable, it is only here that the Council called for specific structures: liturgical commissions at the national and diocesan levels (§§44-45).

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIIUM – CHAPTER II

Chapter II focuses on the Eucharistic Liturgy. On the one hand, here we see laid out the major external changes called for in the reform of the liturgy: a simplification of the parts of the Mass to help make them more understandable (§50), an increase in the number and variety of readings from Scripture (§51), a renewed emphasis on the homily, rooted in the Scriptures, as an integral part of the liturgy (§52), a return of the “prayer of the faithful,” by which all the baptized exercise the priestly ministry that is theirs by baptism (§53), use of the vernacular (§54), communion with bread consecrated at the particular Mass and not from the tabernacle as well as communion under both kinds (§55), a reminder that the Mass, while having 2 parts—Word and Eucharist—is a single act of worship (§56), and a broadening of the practice of concelebration (§§57-58).

By and large, these changes have been largely implemented—at least in this country. Yet, our preaching is more often than not anemic and uninspiring, and too many priests and parishes still resort to the tabernacle for communion as a routine—in clear violation of the Church’s law and intent, thereby short-circuiting the symbolic exchange so crucial to the liturgy.

More importantly, it is our *internal* participation that needs attention (§48); it is the greatest part of the reform called for by the Council that remains unfinished. How well have we fostered the dispositions of gratitude and self-offering, of receptivity to encounter and transformation, that are crucial to the liturgy? How well have we learned to offer ourselves with and through Christ to the Father, and so be changed more and more into Christ's Body?

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIIUM – CHAPTER III

Chapter III of the Constitution covers the Sacraments other than Eucharist as well as the sacramentals of the Church. The chapter begins with the observation that sacraments not only presuppose faith, but “nourish, strengthen, and express it” (§59). Sacraments (and sacramentals) engage us through the senses: “There is hardly any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed toward the sanctification of men and the praise of God” (§61).

This is not an insignificant statement; it is a reminder that for us as Catholics the world is not an evil place to be escaped – but space and time are where we encounter God.

This chapter calls for the revision of all the rites, but does not give detailed specifics; that work would be left to special commissions.

Of particular note in this section is the call to renew the ancient catechumenate (§§64-66) – what we now call the RCIA, one of the greatest accomplishments of the Council and, unfortunately, one aspect of the Church's vision for the renewed liturgy that has yet to be fully implemented in every parish.

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIIUM – CHAPTER IV

Chapter IV covers the Liturgy of the Hours, and begins by reminding us that the Divine Office—prayer offered by the Church throughout the day—is a tradition dating back to our earliest history as a community of faith. In such prayer, we—Christ's Body—join with Christ Himself in unending praise and worship of the Father. Even when prayed alone, it is still prayed in union with and for the Church, and so is true liturgy.

After calling for various changes, made necessary by the changing circumstances of modern life, the Constitution spells out for whom the Office is an obligation and to what degree. However, there is in this final section an often-forgotten paragraph:

100. Pastors of souls should see to it that the chief hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts. And the laity, too, are encouraged to recite the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually.

This is one of the unrealized visions of the Council—first, that the Liturgy of the Hours be communal prayer and, second, that it be part of regular parish life. We are reminded that all Christians—not just clerics and religious—are to punctuate the day with prayer, and especially with this way of praying as Church. And we are reminded that as important and central to our identity as the Eucharist is, that is not the only way that we pray when we gather as a community. The Liturgy of the Hours, with its emphasis on the Scriptures (especially the Psalms), is dialogical prayer at its finest: God speaks and we respond. It corresponds well with that encounter with the living Word which Pope Benedict has been encouraging.

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Perhaps during this Year of Faith, parishes might want to consider celebrating the Hours at least on occasion. Vespers (Evening Prayer) on the Sundays of Advent may be a good way to start.

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM – CHAPTER V

Chapter V is about the Liturgical Year. Prior to the Council, in some ways, the feasts of Mary and the Saints had come to overwhelm the calendar. Now, the Bishops of Vatican II called for a return to the primacy of Sunday as *the* Christian feast day—“the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year” (§106).

The Council Fathers called for the temporal cycle (feasts of the Lord and the liturgical seasons) to “be given the preference which it is due over the feasts of the saints, so that the entire cycle of the mysteries of salvation may be suitably recalled” (§109). But the Liturgical Year is not just about recalling events from the past, but about a living encounter with Christ; in other words, time itself becomes sacramental.

Finally, the Constitution calls for the proper veneration of Mary and the Saints as images of the work of Christ and as exemplars for the faithful. However, the number of universal feasts was to be reduced, while still allowing the observance of certain feasts by particular nations or religious orders. In other words, the calendar itself was to proclaim the centrality of Christ and his Paschal Mystery.

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM – CHAPTER VI

It seems that one of the most contentious questions that arises in parish life has to do with liturgical music. Clearly, much has changed since 1963. But the Constitution gives us sound principles to guide our decision-making, principles that have been expanded and supplemented by later documents (such as the US Bishops’ *Sing to the Lord*). But, let us begin with what lies at the heart of what the Church has to say about Sacred Music.

First, the Constitution (like subsequent documents) stresses that music is an “integral part of the solemn liturgy” (§112). It is not an “add on” or decoration; it is necessary. Liturgy ought to be sung. Second, song belongs to the “whole body of the faithful” (§114). As important as well-prepared musicians and choirs might be, they do not replace the assembly.

We do have a rich history of sacred music, a tradition in which chant and organ have been held in particular esteem; they should not be easily set aside, all things being equal (§§116, 120). This last phrase is key: *all things being equal*. The use of chant and organ, especially if exclusive, should not be promoted *if it excludes the participation of the faithful*. Of course, that does not mean that we should not be stretched, and that these forms of music have no place at all in our worship. But it does mean that we should always strive to foster the “aim that is to be considered before all else” (§14) – the full and active participation of all in the liturgy. That means we should primarily look to musical styles and instruments that reflect *this* time and place (§§119-121).

Of course, this participation is not just external. Liturgical music should also lift our hearts towards God and rightly reflect the faith of the Church. There are times when active listening rather than singing along is best; there are times when chant and organ help our prayer—even by stretching us beyond that which is familiar. But in all decisions, paragraph 14 of the constitution sets the bar.

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM – CHAPTER VII

Just like music, the visual arts have long had a crucial role in the devotional and liturgical life of the Church: beauty is the truth made visible (§122). Yet, and this is key, “the Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own...” (§123). The art, the furnishings, and even the architecture of the church will reflect its place and time; there is more than one way to build and appoint a church.

Bishops (§§124, 126-129) are charged with the oversight of this part of the church’s life. In particular, they are called to make sure that churches are suitable for the liturgy—which means not only in terms of the art or style used, but also in terms of visibility, audibility, and the ability to move easily and gracefully in procession. That is, the church must be able to house the various liturgies that will take place there: not just Sunday Mass, but weddings and baptisms and funerals; and so much more.

Paragraph §125 gives important directions for those charged with building and appointing our churches: while the practice of placing sacred images in churches for veneration is to be maintained, they should be moderate in number and not take the focus away from where it should be: the central liturgical action. This is where the Church’s call to “noble simplicity” comes in. We are not to multiply images, but what we do have should be of excellent quality. The sanctuary—with its three foci of altar, ambo, and chair—is at the center; everything else should lead us there.

And so we come to the end of our review of *Sacrosanctum concilium*. In December of this year, we will celebrate this Constitution’s 50th anniversary. After the Year of Faith, the USCCB will be asking us to observe a year focused on the liturgy. What will we do to renew our liturgical life, to make it really what the Council intended: “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed... the font from which all her power flows” (§10)?