



# STEWARDS OF THE TRADITION

## *Fifty Years After Sacrosanctum Concilium*

COMMITTEE ON DIVINE WORSHIP

### INTRODUCTION

As the Church marks the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) at the Second Vatican Council, we members of the bishops' Committee on Divine Worship of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wish to address particularly all who are involved in liturgical ministry and liturgical leadership in the United States. Without your continued cooperation and self-sacrificing ministry, the implementation of the reformed liturgical rites after Vatican II, which have proven to be such a grace for the Church, could never have been undertaken. We note in particular your ongoing work in the preparation and celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. We also recognize the expanded roles of professional and volunteer leadership to coordinate the process of adult initiation, sacramental preparation, and the day in, day out celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. We acknowledge all of your efforts with respect and deep gratitude.

In addition, we want to recognize all those who comprise the gathered liturgical assemblies in the variety of liturgical contexts that make up the local Churches in the United States. It is our hope and prayer that you continue to find in the reformed Liturgy what the Constitution called the very "summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed" and "the fount from which all the Church's power flows" (no. 10). Is it any wonder that the same Constitution asserts that "no other action of the Church can equal its effectiveness" (no. 7)?

The Sacred Liturgy is of utmost importance in the life of Catholics because in and through it we make present and participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, and in so doing we are incorporated into this "Mystery of Faith" for our redemption and the continued building up of the Church as "one body, one spirit in Christ" (Eucharistic Prayer III).

In two places in the First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul refers to the important words "hand on" and "receive." In the first instance, he refers to handing on what he received concerning the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26) beginning with the words: "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." In the second instance, he speaks of the Gospel and of the Death and Resurrection of Christ. He states that this is what he "handed on" to them and what they "received" (1 Cor. 15: 1–3), calling this of "first importance."

We use the words of St. Paul—to receive and to hand on—to characterize what we do as liturgical ministers, namely, to help the gathered assembly participate in Christ's Paschal Mystery in every liturgical celebration. We are privileged *stewards* (1 Cor. 4:1) insofar as our ministry is from the Lord "for our good and the good of all his holy Church" (Order of Mass, no. 29).

Grateful for the catechetical work the Church in the English-speaking world has successfully undertaken for the implementation of the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, we also wish to offer words of encouragement for the ongoing work of implementation and liturgical catechesis that lies ahead, especially as the Church calls for the reverent and proper celebration of the Sacred Liturgy as an intrinsic part of the New Evangelization.

There are any number of things that could be said at this anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Among them, as an expression of our gratitude and encouragement, we wish to offer reflections on the following:

- (1) *Liturgical Reform and the Renewal of the Church*
- (2) *Rereading Sacrosanctum Concilium in its Historical Context*
- (3) *Fundamental and Foundational Principles*
- (4) *Liturgy as an Art and a Craft*
- (5) *Living What We Celebrate*

### LITURGICAL REFORM AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* was the first text to be promulgated at the Second Vatican Council. In setting out a broad agenda, its opening paragraph stated:

This Sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions that are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy. (no. 1)

We want to underscore that the reforms in the Liturgy, which were the result of the Council's deliberations and decisions, are for nothing less than the increased spiritual vigor and ongoing renewal of the Church. It was judged that the visible rites of the Church had to undergo reform for the sake of interior renewal of the faithful.

At the Extraordinary Synod on the twentieth anniversary of Vatican II in 1985, and ever since, a key term surfaced for interpreting both the documents of Vatican II and the nature of the Church: *communio*. This is fittingly applied also to the Sacred Liturgy, which builds up and expresses the Church. Used in a variety of ways and contexts in subsequent Church documents, the term *communio* often refers to the relationship of the baptized as incorporated into the

Trinity of Persons who is the one true God. This is what constitutes the Church: that we are rooted in the very life of our Trinitarian God, experiencing most profoundly in the celebration of the Eucharist the reality of being “many parts, yet one body.” (1 Cor. 12:20).

Liturgy is always the public prayer of the Church, aptly called “the pilgrim Church on earth” (Eucharistic Prayer III). It has always been an ideal that the Church become who she is through the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. St. Augustine admonishes his listeners: “[I]t is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond ‘Amen’ (‘yes, it is true!’) and by responding to it you assent to it” (Sermon 272, *On Pentecost*, PL 38, 1247). Thus it is that the Church prays, “[G]rant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son, and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer III).

As we give thanks for the great work of reform of the Liturgy and renewal of the Church that has borne such abundant fruits, we must also continually strive to deepen this renewal that was begun under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. This ongoing renewal is the pilgrim journey of the Church toward the “holy city Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:10). Liturgy is the privileged time and place when our words and deeds cede to communion, ultimately leading to final (comm)union when we see God face to face. In other words, the Church’s Liturgy is always oriented toward the heavenly Liturgy. In the meantime, our communal engagement and incorporation into Christ’s Paschal Mystery must always lead to our witnessing to the world what we have celebrated and what we hope for. This Prayer after Communion in Easter Time expresses well our communion with “God-with-us” and our pilgrim journey to his heavenly Kingdom:

Graciously be present to your people, we pray, O Lord,  
and lead those you have imbued with heavenly mysteries  
to pass from former ways to newness of life.

## RREREADING SACROSANCTUM CONCILIIUM IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As we entered into the Year of Faith, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI invited the Church to attentive reflection on the documents of Vatican II. As we study anew the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, we cannot help but to appreciate it in light of what followed after it at the Council, namely the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). These four constitutions together form the backbone of Vatican II, and should always be seen in relation to each other.

In addition, it is important to recall that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was the fruit of the evolution of the Church’s teaching on the Liturgy, especially from the early years of the last century. The reformed Liturgy was the result of extensive historical scholarship and reflection on pastoral needs, and it was carried out by the specially-created *Consilium* under the direction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites (later to become the Congregation for Divine Worship) and Venerable Pope Paul VI. Among numerous examples, we cite two.

The first example is from the pontificate of Pope St. Pius X, who, in his 1903 landmark statement on music in the Liturgy, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, stated that the purpose of the Liturgy is “the glory of God” and “the sanctification and edification of the faithful” (no. 1). St. Pius X also made the concept of liturgical participation a matter of papal teaching: “[T]he faithful assemble for . . . acquiring this [true Christian] spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public

and solemn prayer of the Church” (Introduction). This 1903 *motu proprio* emphasized that music sung by the assembly (in addition to music sung by a choir) was an important means of participation in the Sacred Liturgy. *Tra le Sollecitudini* clearly set a standard for subsequent magisterial documents.

The second example is that of Venerable Pope Pius XII, who believed the liturgical movement was a sign of God’s providential work and a movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church, drawing the faithful closer to the mysteries of the faith and the riches of grace that flow from active participation in the Liturgy (cf. Discourse to the Participants in the First International Congress of Pastoral Liturgy at Assisi, September 22, 1956: AAS 48 (1956), 712). Pope Pius XII undertook some revision himself in a particular way with the restoration of the rites of Holy Week and the Easter Vigil (1951–56). Two of this pope’s many encyclicals—*Mediator Dei* (1947), on the Sacred Liturgy, and *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943), on the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ—were highly influential on the thinking that undergirded the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and, in fact, were valuable building blocks for its drafting.

We believe that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy should be understood as a “keystone,” with both a history leading to it and other developments flowing from it. For example, the *praenotandae* (introductions) to all the rites as revised after Vatican II are important sources for theological, liturgical, and pastoral teaching on the contents of the revised rites. In addition, other magisterial documents on the Liturgy since Vatican II continue to shed light on the Constitution’s vision of the Sacred Liturgy. For instance, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, Blessed John Paul II’s Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), the Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of Pope Benedict XVI—*Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), on the Eucharist in the Life and Mission of the Church, and *Verbum Domini* (2010), on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church—are examples of the ongoing authoritative teaching about the Sacred Liturgy and the celebration of the Eucharist, all in continuity with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

## FUNDAMENTAL AND FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Fully half of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy underscored important theological and liturgical principles “for the promotion and reform of the liturgy” (no. 3). In this light, we see the continued importance of the Constitution’s principles for promotion and reform (nos. 5–46) in connection with the revised translation of the *Roman Missal* in 2011 and the ongoing work of the translation of other liturgical books. It is important to reread the entire Constitution through the following four theological and liturgical principles; indeed, they should be kept in mind when studying and celebrating the Liturgy:

### 1. The Presence of Christ in the Liturgy (nos. 5–13)

First and foremost, these paragraphs present Christ as the unique mediator and instrument of our salvation (nos. 5–6). The classical adage from St. Leo the Great is relevant here: “[W]hat was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries” (Sermon 74, 2: PL 54, 398). The following paragraph (no. 7) on the manifold presence of Christ and his priestly action in the Liturgy lays a theological foundation for liturgical ministry, namely, that it is Christ himself who is present and active in the Liturgy: in the priest who acts *in persona Christi capitis*; in the proclaimed Word (the Scriptures); in

the song and prayer of the gathered assembly; and, above all, in the Eucharistic species itself, the Body and Blood of the risen Lord Jesus. This reality of Christ acting in and through us in the liturgical act is a consolation and a grace because it is Christ's work, not ours. It is also a challenge, reminding us that we need to celebrate the Liturgy with care and reverence, so that our ministry reflects Christ himself through the gifts and talents he has given to each of us. At the same time, however, the Church continues to await Christ's return in glory. Even as we encounter Christ present in the Liturgy, indeed because of that, we also look forward to the fulfillment of his Paschal Mystery in the world to come, as we cry out, "Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus."

## 2. Liturgical Participation (no. 14–20)

One of the Constitution's most influential propositions was its statement that "the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy" (no. 14). The Liturgy always has been and always will be about our taking part, our experiencing again and again, through rites and prayers, the central events of our redemption and sanctification in Jesus Christ. At various moments in the history of the Liturgy, this participation has taken on different forms, some more visible than others. From as far back as St. Justin Martyr (mid-second century), this interior level of participation has been enacted in the Liturgy through the contribution of a variety of ministries carried on by a variety of ministers. The liturgical reform had as its aim the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the faithful at an interior level that would be manifest in outward signs and tangible expressions. We commend the great strides that have been taken to invite such engagement over the past fifty years: catechesis on the Liturgy that has shaped the role of the liturgical assembly, the service of the faithful in a great variety of liturgical ministries, and the devotion of so many to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. These are but a few of the many signs expressive of our interior renewal and participation. The great care taken in the catechetical preparation for the implementation of the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, demonstrates that the faithful take their participation seriously as a means to draw closer to Jesus Christ. We encourage continued zeal in fostering such participation in the mysteries we celebrate. Just as Jesus invited the disciples to "put out into deep water" (Lk 5:4), so each of us is invited to be more "deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy" (no. 29).

In order to enable more readily the participation of the faithful, the Constitution also proposed the simplification of the rites when necessary. Part of the reason for this is to underscore the "noble simplicity" of the Roman rite, which had been encumbered by what were judged to be unnecessary duplications and accretions over the centuries. Because the various signs and symbols are able to speak more clearly, the faithful are able to participate more deeply.

## 3. Proclamation of the Word (no. 51)

One of the greatest graces of the conciliar reform has been the expansion of the biblical texts in the post-conciliar Liturgy. Because the Word of God is truly inspired and, like Christ, both human and divine (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 13), the Church rightly understands it as the soul of theology (cf. *Dei Verbum*, no. 24). When the Sacred Scripture is proclaimed within the Liturgy, it becomes an ecclesial event of the risen Christ addressing his people. Indeed, the Liturgy "brings about the most perfect actualization of the biblical texts, for the liturgy places the proclamation in the midst of the community of believers, gathered around Christ so as to draw near to God" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the*

*Church*, Section IV, C, 1). With the reform of the Liturgy, the rituals of the sacraments have been enriched by the Liturgy of the Word, which was not previously a regular part of the sacraments. This turn to the Word within the Liturgy has been a key factor in the growth of biblical literacy among Catholics in the past fifty years.

The foundational and essential character of Scripture drives us to continue "to promote that warm and living love for Scripture" called for by the Constitution (no. 24). The 2012 USCCB document *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily* is one recent effort for promoting this love, especially among the clergy. We are grateful for all the ways, great and small, that you have worked to encourage the Word, through bible studies, prayer groups, and personal *lectio divina*. To paraphrase St. Jerome, to know Scripture is to know Christ, and, therefore, to be well prepared for celebrating the Liturgy more fully and more deeply.

## 4. Inculturation and the Liturgy (nos. 37–40)

One of the many ways in which God's grace in the Liturgy has been made more accessible to the faithful is through various means of inculturation. The Constitution suggested adaptation of the Liturgy to various cultural circumstances in order to foster the participation of the people. Translation of liturgical texts into vernacular languages, for example, has been a monumental success, making the words of the Liturgy more understandable to those present. We should continue to consider ways in which the Liturgy can be legitimately adapted to the various cultures of our people. We also recognize that the Liturgy has a culture all its own, which can have a great influence for good upon society, and each of us must be open to the power of the Liturgy to shape and form our hearts and our lives to be more like Jesus Christ.

## LITURGY AS AN ART AND A CRAFT

In his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about "the art of proper celebration" of the Liturgy, or *ars celebrandi* (*SacCar*, no. 38). He stated:

In the course of the Synod, there was frequent insistence on the need to avoid any antithesis between the *ars celebrandi*, the art of proper celebration, and the full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful. The primary way to foster the participation of the People of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself. The *ars celebrandi* is the best way to ensure their *actuosa participatio*. The *ars celebrandi* is the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness; indeed, for two thousand years this way of celebrating has sustained the faith life of all believers, called to take part in the celebration as the People of God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (cf. 1 Pet 2:4–5, 9).

He then went on to treat three themes that we want to underscore.

### 1. Responsibility of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons (*SacCar*, no.40)

In this paragraph, Pope Benedict XVI clearly enunciated the collective "responsibility" of the ordained in the art of celebration. We take these words to heart and invite all the clergy to do so. At our ordination as deacons, we first received the *Book of the Gospels*, being told to "believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach." This is a challenge for all to serve with integrity as we proclaim and preach the Word. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) reminds us also that we must celebrate

the Liturgy with great care: “Therefore, when he celebrates the Eucharist, [the Priest] must serve God and his people with dignity and humility, and by his bearing and by the way he pronounces the divine words he must convey to the faithful the living presence of Christ” (GIRM, no. 93).

We do well to keep Pope Benedict XVI’s introductory comments in mind, namely that the whole People of God participates in the Liturgy. We are stewards of the Liturgy and servants of the People of God. The terms “minister” and “ministry” should always have special resonance for those who are ordained to serve the Body of Christ.

## 2. Art at the Service of the Liturgy (*SacCar*, no. 41)

The setting for the celebration of the Liturgy should be beautiful. While notions of what is “beautiful” can be subjective and culturally rooted, we wish to underscore that the objective quality of beauty is a reflection of the Divine. The 2000 USCCB guidelines, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (BLS), state: “The *place* where God gathers this people powerfully draws them more deeply into communion and expresses in beauty God’s profound holiness” (BLS, no. 140). Every object used in the Liturgy (vesture, books, vessels, candles, etc.), every focal point in the sanctuary (altar, ambo, chair, tabernacle, font, ambry, etc.), and every work of art in the church (statues, glass, sacred images, etc.) can lead us to the Divine, because Christian beauty manifests itself “as an echo of God’s own creative act” (BLS, no. 145), and therefore should reflect the best of our artistic heritage. The materials we use should be authentic and reflect human artistry as a gift from God which is offered back to him. Blessed John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists* reminds us of the importance of fostering creativity among artists whose imagination and ingenuity reflect the many ways in which God communicates with us, and we with God.

## 3. Liturgical Song (*SacCar*, no. 42)

Liturgical song has a preeminent place in the *ars celebrandi*, for not only is it a means of active participation, but it is another source of beauty that can lift hearts and inspire worship. We commend those who have dedicated themselves as composers and pastoral musicians who enrich our worship and enable our songs of praise. The development of a repertory of vernacular music for the Liturgy over the past fifty years is a gift for which we are grateful and which we continue to promote. We also seek to improve the quality of our celebrations in light of the 2007 USCCB guidelines *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*. To rely only on the music of a single genre or style for the celebration of the Liturgy is to diminish the breadth and depth of our liturgical heritage and to risk the exclusion of the legitimate contributions of particular cultures and composers. We wish to underscore the importance of the words set to music for the Liturgy, and that they must accurately reflect the theology of the Liturgy or be drawn from the liturgical texts themselves.

## LIVING WHAT WE CELEBRATE

Having been gathered in the Lord Jesus, the Church participates in the saving mysteries of our faith. The Sacred Liturgy enables us to live more committed to the Lord who sanctifies us in a privileged way through sacramental signs. The Constitution also reminds us that the Church’s mission moves from worship to charity and evangelization: “For all these works make it clear that Christ’s faithful, though not of this world, are to be the light of the world and to glorify the Father in the eyes of all” (no. 9). This perennial challenge to go forth from the Liturgy as witnesses of the Risen Lord was taken up

by Pope Benedict XVI when, in response to the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist, he added two texts for the dismissal to the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, linking the Liturgy with the living of the Christian life each day: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

There must be an intrinsic link between what we do in the Liturgy and what we do in the world. In the Eucharist, we partake of the Bread of life and share in the Chalice of salvation in order to strengthen our union and to become a leaven—a source of unity and healing—for a world wounded by sin and division and hungry for the holy. At the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, the Church does two things that illustrate the relationship between the Eucharist and the Christian life: washing of feet and collecting gifts for the poor. The ritual gesture of service leads to the work of charity. Christ is present in the liturgical act and in the charity that flows from it: “Where true charity is dwelling, God is present there” (antiphon for Offertory Chant, Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper). Christ’s command, “Do this in memory of me,” is therefore not only a call to partake of the Eucharist, but also a summons to charity and service.

## CONCLUSION

As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, we thank you for your ongoing, sustained, and ever-deepening contribution to liturgical ministry. We offer these reflections as an encouragement and an exhortation to continue the work you have undertaken so faithfully for the Church. It is our fervent hope and daily prayer that we might live in the Word proclaimed and the sacraments enacted. “What we have received we hand on to you” (see 1 Cor. 11:23). In the Liturgy, we celebrate the dying and rising of Christ, and through him our own dying and rising in the *communio* of the Church. The words of the Prayer over the Offerings for December 20 ring true; we pray together that:

by participating in this mystery,  
we may possess at last the gifts we have awaited  
and for which our faith bids us hope.

In the meantime we celebrate the Liturgy as both privileged and humble *stewards of the tradition*.

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The document *Stewards of the Tradition—Fifty Years After Sacrosanctum Concilium* was developed by the Committee on Divine Worship of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The Administrative Committee of the USCCB at its September 2013 meeting authorized the issuance of the document as a formal statement of the Committee on Divine Worship. It was subsequently authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Rev. Msgr. Ronny E. Jenkins  
General Secretary, USCCB

Committee on Divine Worship: Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond, *Chairman*; Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, *Chairman-Elect*; Cardinal Francis E. George; Cardinal Justin F. Rigali; Bishop Edward K. Braxton; Bishop Octavio Cisneros; Bishop Daniel E. Flores; Bishop Ronald P. Herzog; Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli; Bishop Daniel E. Thomas; Bishop David A. Zubik, *Consultant*.

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