

“A LETTER ON THE LITURGY”

BY HIS EMINENCE
ROBERT
CARDINAL
SARAH

IT IS MY PLEASURE to greet all of you,¹ gathered in New York City, for the inaugural conference of SACRA LITURGIA in the United States of America. In particular, I greet His Eminence, Timothy Cardinal Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, and thank him for his interest in and support of this event underlining the essential role of liturgical formation and celebration in the life and mission of the Church.

I was very pleased to be present at the launch of the Italian and English editions of the proceedings of SACRA LITURGIA 2013 in Rome last November, and congratulate Bishop Dominique Rey and all who work with him on making this happy initiative a reality, now also in the United States of America.

I greet His Eminence, Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, who will present the keynote address. And I greet all the bishops, priests, religious, and learned lay men and women who will make presentations as well as those who will celebrate the Sacred Liturgy and preach in the coming days. Your apostolate in promoting the Sacred Liturgy is a most important one in our time: I thank you for all that you do.

¹ Message of His Eminence, ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH—Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments—to the conference “SACRA LITURGIA USA” (June 2015).

II. THE NATURE OF THE SACRED LITURGY

BECAUSE THE SACRED LITURGY is truly the font from which all the Church's power flows, as the Second Vatican Council insists (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §10), we must do everything we can to put the Sacred Liturgy back at the very heart of the relationship between God and man, recognizing the primacy of Almighty God in this privileged and unique forum in which we—individually and ecclesially—encounter God at work in our world. One cannot encounter God, my brothers and sisters, without trembling, without awe, without profound respect and holy fear. This is why we must rank what Cardinal Ratzinger called “the right way of celebrating the Liturgy, inwardly and outwardly” first amongst our concerns (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2000, p. 9).

III. MY DUTY AS PREFECT OF THE CONGREGATION

WHEN THE HOLY FATHER, Pope Francis, asked me to accept the ministry of Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, I asked: “Your Holiness, how do you want me to exercise this ministry? What do you want me to do as Prefect of this Congregation?” The Holy Father's reply was clear. “I want you to continue to implement the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council,” he said, “and I want you to continue the good work in the liturgy begun by Pope Benedict XVI.”

My friends, I want you to help me in this task. I ask you to continue to work towards achieving the liturgical aims of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §1) and to work to continue the liturgical renewal promoted by Pope Benedict XVI, especially through the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* of 22 February 2007 and the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum* of 7 July 2007. I ask you to be wise, like the householder in St. Matthew's Gospel, who knows when to bring out of his treasure things both new and old (cf. Mt 13:52), so that the Sacred Liturgy as it is celebrated and lived today may lose nothing of the inestimable riches of the Church's liturgical tradition, whilst always being open to legitimate development (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §23).

IV. GOD MUST COME FIRST

YOU HAVE MANY DAYS in which to consider these questions in depth. I would like to suggest two critical areas in which authentic liturgical renewal in the twenty-first century can be furthered. The first is by being utterly clear what Catholic liturgy is: it is the worship of Almighty God, the place where mankind encounters God alive and at work in His Church today. Please—never underestimate the importance of this. The liturgy is not some social occasion or meeting where we come first, where what is important is that we express our identity. No: God comes first. As Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in 2004:

If the Liturgy appears first of all as the workshop for our activity, then what is essential is being forgotten: God. For the Liturgy is not about us, but about God. Forgetting about God is the most imminent danger of our age. As against this, the Liturgy should be setting up a sign of God's presence. (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Collected Works: The Theology of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2014, p. 593).

The Church's liturgy is given to us in tradition—it is not for us to make up the rites we celebrate or to change them to suit ourselves or our own ideas beyond the legitimate options permitted by the liturgical books. That is why we must celebrate the Sacred Liturgy faithfully, with that reverence and awe of which I spoke earlier.

V. AN URGENT & CRUCIAL NEED: LITURGICAL FORMATION

THE SECOND AREA in which I ask you to give of your time and expertise is in the promotion of sound liturgical formation. The Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy went so far as to say that "it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing" the liturgical renewal it desired "unless the pastors themselves, in the first place, become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and undertake to give instruction about it" (§14). We cannot truly participate in the Sacred Liturgy—we cannot drink deeply from the source of Christian life—if we have not been formed in the spirit and power of the liturgy. As our Holy Father, Pope Francis, said last year:

Much remains to be done for a correct and complete assimilation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy on the part of the baptized and by ecclesial communities. I refer in particular to the commitment to a strong and organic initiation and liturgical formation of the lay faithful as well as the clergy and consecrated persons. (Message to the participants of the Roman Symposium on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 18 February 2014)

I hope and I pray that the different initiatives of SACRA LITURGIA can do much to meet this urgent and crucial need.

VI. CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

DEAR BROTHERS in the episcopate, dear priests, deacons and religious, dear lay men and women, your participation in this conference is a sign that you are already aware of the importance of the Sacred Liturgy in the life of the Church. I thank you for your willingness to give of your time to study and consider this reality further. I pray that these days may increase your wisdom and knowledge, that they will help you to grow in holiness, and that they will make you ever more zealous in promoting authentic liturgical renewal in the Church.

I hope I will be able to join you for the next SACRA LITURGIA Meeting of July 2016 in London. Please pray for me that I may faithfully exercise the service to which I have been called. May God bless you always!

+ ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH

Prefect

CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP

AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS