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Silent Action of the Heart

June 15, 2015

By Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments

CWR Staff



Left: Cardinal Robert Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, in 2011 photo (CNS photo/Paul Haring); right: Photo from Sacra Liturgia 2015, New York City.

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Fifty years after its promulgation by Pope Paul VI, will the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy finally be read? *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is actually not just a catalogue of "recipes" for reform, but a veritable Magna Carta of all liturgical action.

In it the Ecumenical Council gives us a magisterial lesson in methodology. Indeed, far from being content with a disciplinary, external approach to the liturgy, the Council wishes to have us contemplate what it is in its essence. The Church's practice always results from what she receives and contemplates in revelation. Pastoral ministry cannot be detached from doctrine.

In the Church "action is directed to contemplation" (cf. no. 2). The conciliar Constitution invites us to rediscover the Trinitarian origin of the liturgical work. Indeed, the Council determines that there is a continuity between the mission of Christ the Redeemer and the liturgical mission of the Church. "Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so also He sent the apostles," so that "by means of sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves" they might "accomplish the work of salvation" (no. 6).

Carrying out the liturgy therefore is the same as accomplishing the work of Christ. The liturgy is essentially "*actio Christi*": "the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God" (no. 5). He is the great high priest, the true subject, the true protagonist of the liturgy (cf. no. 7). If this vitally important principle is not accepted in faith, we run the risk of making the liturgy a human work, the community's celebration of itself.

On the contrary, the Church's real work is to enter into Christ's action, to join in the work for which He has been commissioned by the Father. Therefore "the fullness of divine worship was given to us," because "His humanity, united with the person of the Word, was the instrument of our salvation" (no. 5). The Church, the Body of Christ, must

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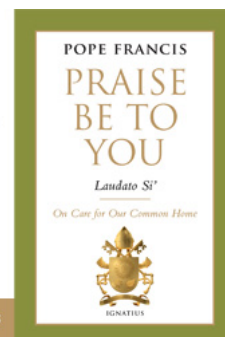
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therefore become in turn an instrument in the hands of the word.

This is the ultimate meaning of the key concept of the conciliar Constitution: "*participatio actiosa*". For the Church, this participation consists of becoming the instrument of Christ the Priest, for the purpose of participating in His Trinitarian mission. The Church actively participates in Christ's liturgical work insofar as she is the instrument thereof. In this sense, language about the "celebrating community" has its ambiguities and requires true caution (cf. the Instruction *Redemptoris sacramentum*, no. 42). Therefore this "*participatio actiosa*" should not be understood as the need to do something. On this point the Council's teaching has often been distorted. Instead it is a matter of letting Christ take us and associate us with His sacrifice.

Liturgical "*participatio*" must therefore be understood as a grace from Christ who "always associates the Church with Himself" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7). He is the one who has the initiative and the primacy. The Church "calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father" (no. 7).

The priest must therefore become this instrument that allows Christ to shine through. As our Holy Father Pope Francis recalled recently, the celebrant is not the host of a show, he must not look for sympathy from the assembly by setting himself in front of it as its main speaker. To enter into the spirit of the Council means, on the contrary, to be self-effacing, to refuse to be the center of attention.

Contrary to what has sometimes been maintained, and quite in keeping with the conciliar Constitution, it is altogether appropriate, during the penitential rite, the singing of the Gloria, the orations and the Eucharistic prayer, that everyone, priest and faithful, turn together toward the East, so as to express their intention to participate in the work of worship and redemption accomplished by Christ. This way of celebrating could possibly be implemented in cathedrals, where the liturgical life must be exemplary (cf. no. 41).

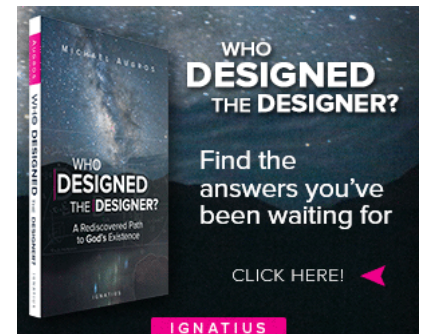
Of course, there are other parts of the Mass in which the priest, acting "*in persona Christi Capitis*" ["in the person of Christ the Head"] enters into a nuptial dialogue with the assembly. But the only purpose of this face-to-face is to lead to a *tête-à-tête* with God which, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, will become a heart-to-heart conversation. The Council thus proposes other means of promoting participation: "acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes" (no. 30).

An over-hasty and all-too-human interpretation has led some to conclude that it was necessary to make sure that the faithful were constantly busy. The contemporary Western mentality, shaped by technology and fascinated by the media, tried to make the liturgy a work of effective, rewarding instruction. In this spirit, many have tried to make liturgical celebrations convivial. Liturgical ministers, prompted by pastoral motives, sometimes try to instruct by introducing profane, show-business elements into liturgical celebrations. Don't we sometimes see a proliferation of testimonies, scenery and applause? They think that this will foster the participation of the faithful, whereas in fact it reduces the liturgy to a human game.

"Silence is not a virtue, noise is not a sin, it is true," says Thomas Merton, "but the turmoil and confusion and constant noise of modern society," or of some African Eucharistic liturgies, "are the expression of the ambiance of its greatest sins—its godlessness, its despair. A world of propaganda, of endless argument, vituperation, criticism, or simply of chatter, is a world without anything to live for.... Mass becomes racket and confusion; prayers—an exterior or interior noise" (Thomas Merton *The Sign of Jonas* [San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1953, 1981], *passim*).

We run the real risk of leaving no room for God in our celebrations. We fall into the temptation of the Hebrews in the desert. They sought to create for themselves a form of worship on their own scale and of their own stature, and let us not forget that they ended up prostrate before an idol, the golden calf.

It is time to start listening to the Council. The liturgy is "above all things the worship of the divine majesty" (no. 33). It has instructional value to the extent to which it is completely ordered to the glorification of God and to divine worship. Liturgy really places us in the presence of divine transcendence. True participation means renewing in ourselves that "amazement" that Saint John Paul II held in high regard (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 6). This sacred wonder, this joyful fear, requires our silence before the divine majesty. We often forget that sacred silence is one of the means noted by the Council for promoting participation.



If the liturgy is Christ's work, is it necessary for the celebrant to interject his own comments? We should remember that, when the missal authorizes an intervention, this must not become a profane, human speech, a more or less subtle commentary on current events, or a worldly greeting to the persons present, but rather a very brief exhortation to enter into the mystery (cf. *General Introduction of the Roman Missal*, no. 50). As for the homily, in itself it is always a liturgical act that has its own rules. "*Participatio actuosa*" in Christ's work presupposes that we leave the profane world so as to enter into the "sacred action surpassing all others" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7). In fact, "we claim somewhat arrogantly to remain in the human sphere so as to enter into the divine" (Robert Sarah, *God or Nothing* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015], chapter IV).

In this regard it is deplorable that the sanctuary in our churches is not a place strictly reserved for divine worship, that people enter it in worldly garb, and that the sacred space is not clearly delimited by the architecture. Since, as the Council teaches, Christ is present in His word when it is proclaimed, it is likewise harmful that lectors do not have proper attire that shows that they are not pronouncing human words but a divine word.

The liturgy is a fundamentally mystical, contemplative reality, and consequently beyond the reach of our human action; even our "*participatio*" is a grace from God. Therefore it presupposes on our part openness to the mystery being celebrated. Thus, the Constitution recommends the full understanding of the rites (cf. no. 34), and at the same time prescribes that "the faithful... be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them" (no. 54).

Indeed, understanding the rite is not the work of unaided human reason, which would have to grasp everything, understand everything, master everything. The understanding of the sacred rites is that of the "*sensus fidei*", which practices a living faith through the symbol and knows by being attuned more than through concepts. This understanding presupposes that one approaches the mystery with humility.

But will people have the courage to follow the Council this far? Such an interpretation, illuminated by the faith, is fundamental however for evangelization. Indeed, "the liturgy... shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations, under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together" (no. 2). It must stop being a place of disobedience to the Church's prescriptions.

More specifically, it cannot be an occasion for divisions among Christians. Dialectical interpretations of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the hermeneutics of rupture in one direction or the other, are not the fruit of a spirit of faith. The Council did not intend to break with the liturgical forms inherited from Tradition, but rather intended to appreciate them in greater depth. The Constitution declares that "any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing" (no. 23).

In this regard, it is necessary that some should celebrate according to the "*usus antiquior*" [older usage] and should do so without any spirit of opposition, and therefore in the spirit of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Similarly, it would be a mistake to consider the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite as coming from some other theology which is not that of the reformed liturgy. It would also be desirable in a future edition of the Missal to insert the penitential rite and the offertory of the "*usus antiquior*" for the purpose of emphasizing that the two liturgical forms illuminate each other, in continuity and without opposition.

If we live in this spirit, then the liturgy will stop being a place of rivalries and critiques, so as finally to make us participate actively in that liturgy "which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle" (no. 8).

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