

REVERENCE FOR THE EUCHARIST

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Twenty-five years ago today, on December 4, 1963, the more than 2,400 bishops of Vatican Council II, in union with Pope Paul VI, issued their first major document—the council’s first fruits—the historic constitution on the sacred liturgy. While many of the issues discussed in the council (1962-1965) had only an indirect bearing on the everyday life of the faithful, the liturgy touches virtually everyone immediately and personally. Nothing is more clearly at the core of Catholic life and practice than our public worship—which, in fact, is precisely what “liturgy” means. The constitution on the sacred liturgy made a powerful impact in our parishes, there for all to see and judge.

Hundreds of documents on the liturgy have since been published by the Holy See in the wake of the constitution. Thousands of liturgists eagerly plunged into the effort to implement and further the reforms. Millions of Catholics, though sometimes bewildered by it all, bravely accommodated themselves and their lifelong habits to new ways of worshipping God together.

There have been those who, for the sake of conserving ancient traditions, were unwilling to accept these reforms. There have been others who, concerned with urgent pastoral needs, felt they could not wait for the definite reform to be promulgated. As a result some individuals, acting on private initiative, arrived at hasty and sometimes unwise solutions, and made changes, additions or simplifications which at times went against the basic principles of the liturgy. This only troubled the faithful and impeded or made more difficult the progress of genuine renewal.¹

The dust has settled sufficiently now that I think it might be useful to look back across these twenty-five years to see if the considerable hopes of Vatican Council II have been achieved, to ask if by and large, the renewed liturgy has helped us worship better, pray better, become better persons of faith.

In these few pages I would like to share with you some personal reflections on *the*

great mystery which, although I do not understand it, I hold as absolute fact, an irrefutable truth. It is something at the heart of my daily consciousness which, by God's gift, I believe with every fiber of my soul. I mean, of course, the Holy Eucharist, both as the unbloody sacrifice of Jesus in the Mass, and as the living Christ, God and man, whom we receive in Holy Communion.

How can an educated person in the twentieth century, you ask, actually believe in the Eucharist, really believe that bread and wine in fact become the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Me? I believe it because, thanks to the grace of God, someone whom I thoroughly respect and love has taught me it's a fact, an awesome fact. That *someone* is the Church, the teaching and believing Church of the apostles and martyrs, the People of God of twenty centuries. . . my father and mother. . . the thousands of people in the Diocese of Arlington for whom I celebrate the sacred mysteries and with whom I receive the body and blood of Christ Jesus.

When you deal with a constitution you are dealing with fundamentals. It is a trait of human nature, I guess, to get away from pondering fundamentals—they're too ponderous—in order to get to what is more fascinating, the externals. It is far easier to apply oneself to what touches the senses, much harder to weigh the abstract and the sublime. The ultimate purpose of the constitution on the sacred liturgy was not so much to effect changes in the liturgy, as to effect a change in the hearts and souls of Catholic worshippers. It seems to me that a basic principle of the constitution was this: Liturgy is "good" to the degree that it pierces the senses, goes beyond the externals, to reach the heart and resurrect the sense of reverence for God in the individual person. People need to see through the externals of liturgical forms, see through even the central external of the priest celebrant himself, to arrive at the inner reality of what is happening, of Who is present among us.

The true center of the sacred liturgy, and indeed of the whole of Christian life, is the Eucharist.² The Eucharistic action is the "source and summit,"³ "the soul"⁴ of all Christian life, "the very heartbeat of the congregation of the faithful."⁵

For the most blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ Himself, our Passover and living bread. Through His very flesh, made vital and vitalizing by the Holy Spirit, He offers life to men. They are thereby invited and led to offer themselves, their labors, and all created things together with Him.⁶

The word "Eucharist" does not appear in the New Testament. It was first used in the Didache (late first century) and then by Ignatius of Antioch and Justin. In the New Testament the Eucharist is called "the Lord's supper,"⁷ the *agape*,⁸ and the "breaking of bread."⁹ The rite and the reality have existed from the beginning, and the constant goal of the Church has been continually to try to understand and to live the Eucharist more fully.

Like the Church herself, the Eucharistic liturgy is both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities. As the constitution puts it, in the liturgy "the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest."¹⁰

And so I thought it best if we consider each of the two elements of Eucharistic worship separately, the external ritual and the internal reality, and then speak about the reverence due to each.

I. THE EXTERNAL RITUAL

The Eucharistic liturgy is based on signs, of both human and divine origin, that aim at our sanctification. It is the Church's own ritual that uniquely promotes our spiritual life through signs and symbols perceptible to the senses—words and music,

gesture and vesture, art and architecture, sounds and silence. Yes, even silence is an important external of the liturgy. "At the proper time a reverent silence should be observed," admonished the constitution, for by a reverent silence the faithful "are associated more intimately in the mystery that is being celebrated."¹¹ Silence is "part of the celebration" itself.¹²

Another important external is language. Much has been said about the use of Latin to enhance public worship. No doubt about it; Vatican Council II not only did *not* outlaw the use of Latin in the Mass, but called for its preservation. The council placed on episcopal conferences the responsibility of regulating the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. Restrictions on the use of the vernacular were progressively lifted in the face of representations by hierarchies from all over the world, until by 1971 the use of the vernacular in public Masses was left entirely to the judgment of episcopal conferences, and to the judgment of individual priests for private Masses.

My preparation for the priesthood was entirely pre-Vatican Council II and was veritably steeped in Latin. Five years of Latin grammar classes were followed by ten years of classroom and liturgical usage of Latin. I confess that I was pretty proud of my Latin skills—an Italian pronunciation and a vocabulary that could not be stumped (that is, if you kept the conversation to things theological and canonical).

At first it was a disappointing thought for me to have to begin saying Mass in English. But what I discovered surprised me. Now people were listening to the meaning of the words I was saying and they could now tell quite easily if there was sincerity and devotion in my words, my inflections, my pace of delivery—things that were largely hidden from their ears when we had said Mass in Latin. This in turn forced me to a greater reverence at the altar, and I often thanked the Holy Spirit for Vatican Council II. It puzzled me later that what I found to be of such value for reverence—vernacular in the liturgy—some perceived as a slippery road to irreverence.

Reverence, however, is not an inherent trait of one language over another. Rather it is the trait of a person who is aware of God's presence and action, no matter what language he uses to express that awareness.

No bodily posture so clearly expresses the soul's interior reverence before God as the act of kneeling. Reciprocally, the posture of kneeling reinforces and deepens the soul's attitude of reverence.

Jesus knelt to pray in the Garden of Olives on the eve of His death (Luke 22:41). Stephen knelt down to pray for his persecutors as they prepared to kill him (Acts 7:60). At Joppa Peter knelt down next to the corpse of Tabitha to pray before calling her back to life (Acts 9:40). Paul, after giving his final farewell to the elders of the church of Ephesus, ". . . knelt down with them all and prayed. . . Then they escorted him to the ship" (Acts 20:36, 38).

In his letter to the Phillipians (2:8-11), Paul speaks of the Lord Jesus in magnificent poetic strokes:

He was known to be of human estate and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross!
Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name,
So that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord!

The general norm of the universal Church is that the congregation kneel at the consecration of the Mass.¹³ Further, the long and venerable custom of United States Catholics of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer was reaffirmed by our episcopal conference in 1969 for the post-Vatican Council era. And, of course, the practice

of genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament is a norm for Catholics around the world:

Genuflection on one knee is prescribed before the Blessed Sacrament whether it be reserved in the tabernacle or exposed for public adoration.¹⁴

Before the Vatican Council even ended, there were new words and phrases inserting themselves into our liturgical vocabulary, while some venerable old phrases, without any warning, became archaic. The new jargon, it must be pointed out, was not created by the constitution on the sacred liturgy.

Suddenly the traditional "sacrifice of the Mass" was to be referred to simply as the "liturgy," the "Eucharist," or the "Eucharistic liturgy." Yet the constitution prefers the traditional phrase "sacrifice of the Mass"¹⁵ and indicates that "liturgy" and "Eucharist" have wider meanings than the Mass, while "Eucharistic liturgy" has a narrower meaning than the Mass, being but one of the two parts (with the liturgy of the word) that comprise the Mass.¹⁶

I had been giving "sermons" at Mass for many years until I found out that henceforth I would be giving "homilies" after Vatican II. The constitution, however, points out that a "sermon" is part of the liturgical action¹⁷ but is called a homily (as a species of a genus) when the mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian living are expounded from the sacred scriptures according to the course of the liturgical year.¹⁸

At times, while waiting for the procession to start down the center aisle for Mass, I have heard my name announced to the congregation as "Our presider today is. . ." To be perfectly frank, "Our priest today. . ." is so much more meaningful, even when it refers to a bishop!

What I had known only as the sacrament of penance was now known as the sacrament of "reconciliation." The word "penance" went antediluvian. When "extreme unction" was renamed the "anointing of the sick," the sacrament became more widely used since people understood by the change in title that you need not be at the brink of death in order to ask for the sacrament. I have always wondered if the new title of "reconciliation" did not have the same effect, in reverse, so that fewer and fewer people would ask for the sacrament, thinking the sacrament was now intended only for those in mortal sin and therefore in need of reconciliation with God.

At any rate, the constitution never refers to the sacrament of reconciliation but only to the sacrament of penance,¹⁹ which is indeed its official title to this day.²⁰

A lot of those old phrases, tried and true through centuries of venerable use, still say it best.

The temptation is fierce, and I have rarely seen anyone successfully overcome it. When a very special event is to be celebrated with a Mass, e.g., the installation of the bishop, or his funeral, those in charge of planning the liturgy will invariably feel it appropriate to make the liturgy longer, more complex, more elaborate. If there are twelve verses of a hymn printed in the hymnal, all twelve will be sung. After all, this is a special occasion. The longest Eucharistic prayer is selected *de rigueur*. Musical interludes sometimes become mini-concerts. Holy Communion, of course, must be administered under both species, in spite of any logistical problems with the size of the congregation. The principle seems to be: Whatever *can* be added, *should* be added to the liturgy of a special occasion.

Extraordinary length of liturgy, I had always thought to myself, was not an extraordinary sign of reverence, either for God or man. That nagging thought, surfacing during a marathon liturgy, has always caused me some degree of guilt, feeling that I simply was not generous enough to sense the uniqueness of the event and the appropriateness of an elaborate liturgy. My guilt is relieved, however, whenever I read the constitution on the sacred liturgy. Apparently the council fathers had felt

the same way I have, for they directed that the renewed rites thereafter should be “simple, short and clear”—without granting exemptions for special events.²¹

“In your prayer,” said the Lord, “do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words. Do not imitate them” (Mt. 6:7).

While the constitution aimed to launch a whole new era of liturgical reform and renewal, it explicitly called for the preservation of three traditional externals that for centuries had served the Church’s liturgy, especially the Mass, with dignity and decorum. They had to do with sound and the sense of hearing, the three sounds of language, song, and musical instrument:

- 1) Gregorian chant “. . . should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”²²
- 2) “The pipe organ is to be held in high esteem in the Latin Church, for it is the traditional musical instrument, the sound of which can add a wonderful splendor to the Church’s ceremonies and powerfully lifts up men’s minds to God and high things.”²³
- 3) “The use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites.”²⁴

Whatever happened to these venerable old sounds? Well, I can understand why, at the beginning of the renewal, they were left behind in the excitement of embracing such a variety of new forms and substitutes. Are the three traditional sounds gone forever? Hardly. The era of renewal is still underway, and another sign of progress is the already visible return of these three jewels of sound. They will be back, not to dominate, but to take their rightful and honorable place in the rich mosaic of Catholic ritual.

The liturgy is such a sacred possession of the Church that no one, “not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority.”²⁵ Many subsequent documents have reiterated this basic norm of the constitution on the sacred liturgy:

Only the supreme authority of the Church, and, according to the provisions of the law, the bishop and episcopal conferences, may do this. Priests should, therefore, ensure that they so preside over the celebration of the Eucharist that the faithful know that they are attending not a rite established on private initiative, but the Church’s public worship, the regulation of which was entrusted to the apostles and their successors.²⁶

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote this memorable phrase: “. . . liturgy can only be liturgy to the extent that it is beyond the manipulation of those who celebrate it” (*Feast of Faith*, p. 85). The liturgy, by its very nature, is the public patrimony of the whole Church; it cannot be the possession or hallmark of an individual priest or a particular parish community.

The priest must realize that by imposing his own personal restoration of sacred rites he is offending the rights of the faithful and is introducing individualism and idiosyncrasy into celebrations which belong to the whole Church.²⁷

In the liturgy the priest acts *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, not in his own name or by his own authority. How the priest conducts himself at the altar has to be based not on a sense of personal ownership of the ritual, but on the deference and reverence owed to the Lord Himself, who entrusted the Mass to His Church. It is the ultimate, most prized and jealously guarded possession of the Church. It is no surprise that the Church insists on the use of officially authorized rituals and missals, rubrics and directives for the externals of its liturgy.²⁸

There is heard at times the complaint that liturgical norms tend to stifle the freedom and spontaneity that should mark private and public worship. “We are a

church of charity, not law," they say. "Let the spirit blow where it will. Don't shackle it; don't restrain its power by placing it under law and order."

By happy coincidence, I happened to be in Rome on January 25, 1983. That was the long awaited day for the promulgation of the new code of canon law that had been in preparation for more than a decade. As an old canonist myself, I was especially delighted to see and hear the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, personally promulgate the code in the Hall of Benedictions above the front vestibule of St. Peter's Basilica.

In his talk the Holy Father spoke of the same complaint about the "intrusion" of law into matters of the spirit. He said that church law does not substitute for faith or grace or charisms or charity. No, it creates the best conditions whereby those primary values have a chance to flourish unimpeded in the vast society of the Church and the world. Law creates the conditions for the development of the important things. By the same token, the rubrics of the liturgy are not established to substitute for true worship, but to create the external conditions so that the interior values of the liturgy have a better chance to achieve their purpose.

As we Catholics are one in faith and sacrament, so must we be one in worship. Unity in the Church extends not only to doctrine, faith, and morals, but also to worship and liturgy. And when you speak of the Eucharist, how ironic that the Mass should sometimes become a cause of disunity, division, or resentment, as it can when its ritual is tampered with. Pope John Paul II writes:

Above all I wish to emphasize that the problems of the liturgy, and in particular of the Eucharistic liturgy, must not be an occasion for dividing Catholics and for threatening the unity of the Church. This is demanded by an elementary understanding of that sacrament which Christ has left us as the source of spiritual unity. And how could the Eucharist. . . form between us at this time a point of division and a source of distortion of thought and of behaviour, instead of being the focal point and constitutive center, which it truly is in its essence, of the unity of the Church herself?²⁹

I sometimes visualize the Mass as three-dimensional in its unifying power. Like the altar on which it takes place, I see the Mass with a certain length, width and height. The dimension of length reaches back as a memorial across twenty centuries to the Last Supper and Calvary. Its width is all-encompassing, as wide as the earth, embracing the entire body of the faithful around the world. Its dimension of height makes it reach up to the one true God in heaven in adoration, thanksgiving, satisfaction and petition.

The long memory of the Church through the centuries leads to one conclusion: simple and straightforward observance of the norms for celebrating Mass creates the best conditions for the inner reality of the liturgy to be grasped by the greatest number of people. As a rule, when Mass is celebrated in total accord with the Church's norms, the liturgy has its widest and deepest effectiveness among people.

II. THE INTERNAL REALITY

To the degree that the externals of the liturgy can pass beyond our senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, and reach the heart and soul, to that degree will the externals achieve their purpose in the liturgy. As carefully planned and beautifully executed as a particular liturgy might be, if it does not enter the heart, the psyche, the intellect, the memory, the will, the spirit, it fails in its purpose. It must reach the human soul in its depths. It is there, in the inner sanctum of one's soul that a sixth sense can be nourished, enlivened, focused—the sense of reverence before the presence and action of God Himself.

I sometimes got the impression in the years right after Vatican Council II that there

was so much emphasis put on style and sensual élan that the ultimate purpose of the liturgy was hardly adverted to. Those in charge of planning and executing the liturgy must realize that much more is required than correct rubrics. "It is the duty of pastors," directs the constitution, "to ensure that the faithful take part, fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it."³⁰

The heart is where it's at. Jesus once quoted a passage of Isaias to people whose religion stopped at the externals: "This people honors me with its lips, but its heart is far away from me (Mk. 7:6). The constitution puts it another way: People's minds must be attuned to their voices.³¹ A basic liturgical principle has to be this: "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Lk. 6:45).

People really have to "see through" the externals of the liturgy to grasp the inner reality. And one of the most obvious externals is the priest himself. Pope John Paul II gives a powerful instance of this, where the faithful at Mass must pass beyond the externals of the priest from the first moment he appears in procession and approaches the altar:

It is Christ Himself who, represented by the celebrant, makes His entry into the sanctuary and proclaims His gospel. It is He who is the "offerer and the offered, the consecrator and the consecrated."³²

If I think that I have given a fairly good homily, I have always had the custom, even from the time of my ordination to the priesthood thirty years ago, to type it out afterward and save it. I have a few "keepers" from my first months as a young priest in 1959, a few years before the council began. When I look at those early sermons now, in light of Vatican II, I can hardly believe that I once had the audacity to consider them good and decent sermons worth saving. Frankly, they are awful sermons, too long and involved, academic and abstract, as engaging as a filibuster. They did not have a minimal chance of moving anyone, of touching the hearts of anyone, or helping people arrive at the inner mystery of the Eucharist. I really was, if I say so myself, a *maladroit* young preacher.

In a couple of my pre-Vatican "keepers" I explained quite correctly to people that by the consecration performed by the priest the substance of the body and blood of Christ becomes present under the appearance of bread and wine, in place of the natural substances corresponding to these appearances. I explained further that the substance of Christ's body and blood remains actually, truly, and essentially present as long as the appearances endure, yet in such a manner that it is present whole and indivisible under each species, as well as under any part thereof. Sound theology, all right, but I never appealed through the senses to the heart, as the liturgy is meant to do. And the homily, or sermon, is part and parcel of the liturgy itself.³³

The body of Christ is beyond all sensible perception. Can it happen at Mass that we stop at the sensual perceptions and never reach the mystery beyond? Sometimes going to Mass can be like listening to a foreign language, not a word of which you comprehend. The foreign words touch your sense of hearing, but do not penetrate the understanding of your mind. The liturgy can sometimes touch the senses of sight and sound. . .yet the heart and soul do not comprehend.

The visible signs of the liturgy are necessarily limited in conducting us to the inner mystery. In the final analysis, the mystery will always remain a mystery. "Senses cannot grasp this marvel; faith must serve to compensate" is the line from the wonderful old hymn *Tantum ergo* sung at benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, a Eucharistic liturgy that truly belongs in the Church of Vatican Council II.

Before the Eucharist, the senses fail us, it is true. And when we become truly conscious of that fact, we are already at the threshold of the inner mystery.

Lord and God, devoutly you I now adore,
hidden under symbols, bread and wine no more.
Sight and touch and taste, Lord, are in you deceiv'd;
by your Word alone, Lord, can you be believ'd.
All that you have taught me, I do firmly hold,
truer words than yours, Lord, never have been told.
As I contemplate you, senses fail to see,
but my heart and soul, Lord, with my faith agree.

A key phrase of the constitution states the goal of liturgy, to move people to “full, conscious, and active participation.”³⁴ Of the three adjectives used—full, conscious, and active—the word “active” seemed to be the one favored by most liturgists and pastors when first implementing the new liturgy. “Active participation” became the motto of those times.

Yet, of the three adjectives I really think that the most important one is “full” as in *full* participation. The word “active” can be taken to mean merely *external* participation without much attention to interior worship; “conscious” can mean merely *internal* participation without joining the worshipping community. But “full” means both together, internal and external participation. People are to take part in the Mass “conscious of what they are doing, with devotional (internal) and full collaboration (external).”³⁵

When a person is fully participating, internally with reverence and devotion, and externally in collaboration with his fellow worshippers, he is doing five things, five basic actions described by the constitution:³⁶

- 1) He is instructed (Scriptures, homily)
- 2) He is nourished (Holy Communion)
- 3) He gives thanks to God (the meaning of “Eucharist”)
- 4) He offers Christ and himself in sacrifice to the Father
- 5) He unites with God and his brothers and sisters at worship.

If the words “full, conscious, and active” are the key words for all participants in the liturgy, what is the key word for the priest? I think a key goal for the priest is “effective” participation; the Mass is to be celebrated “effectively,” that is, so people can receive the “very many fruits” the Lord intends by it.³⁷ True, there are some people of extraordinarily developed faith and reverence for whom the demeanor of the priest at the altar does not mean that much, one way or the other. But for most of us, the manner in which the priest celebrates Mass has a lot to do with people’s ability to worship well and to receive what the Lord intends to give through the Mass to each soul.

In the matter of personal participation in the Mass, the constitution states that, as faithful dispensers of the mysteries of God, priests “must lead their flock not only in word but also by example.”³⁸ The priest’s demeanor, his sense of reverence, his sense of the sacred, his ability to enhance, not intrude on, people’s awareness of the inner mystery, mean so much.

. . . it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing this goal (viz. of achieving active and full participation among the faithful) unless the pastors themselves, to begin with, become thoroughly penetrated with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and become masters of it.³⁹

But it is not only the demeanor of the priest that means so much to full, conscious and active participation; it is also the demeanor of fellow participants that counts. I have always thought that there are two basic ways to draw a soul to God through the liturgy: 1) the power of the liturgy itself; and 2) the good example of others’ rever-

ence in the liturgy. One can grow through the liturgy in two ways basically: 1) by achieving an awareness of God's presence and action; and 2) by associating with others who are achieving it. The liturgy will draw people to that awareness if it remains true to its purpose, affirming the deposit of faith entrusted to the Church, and helping people profess that faith in union with the whole Church.

"The Eucharist is above all else a sacrifice," wrote Pope John Paul II.⁴⁰ The Mass, you can say, has three basic aspects—sacrifice, meal, and community. But of the three aspects, the sacrificial is the primary one, even though it is the one most hidden behind the externals of the ritual.

The celebration of the Eucharist which takes place at Mass is the action not only of Christ, but also of the Church. For in it Christ perpetuates in an unbloody manner the sacrifice offered on the cross, offering Himself to the Father for the world's salvation through the ministry of priests. The Church, the spouse and minister of Christ, performs together with him the role of priest and victim, offers Him to the Father and at the same time makes a total offering of herself together with Him.⁴¹

The Eucharistic ritual makes it quite obvious that it involves a meal, the taking of nourishment. The ritual likewise makes it easy to understand that those who participate are one community, who thereby express their unity by affirming one faith, one Father, singing one chorus of adoration and thanksgiving, and partaking of the one bread:

Because the bread is one, we, the many who all partake of that one bread, form one body (I Cor. 10:17).

The signs and symbols of the Eucharistic rites, however, conceal rather well the inner sacrificial action. Nothing on the altar looks like a sacrifice; no particular action of the priest or people resembles the performing of a sacrifice. It is *the* great mystery. "The mystery of this water and wine. . .the mystery of faith" are phrases that the priest repeats in every Mass.

The priest might well be joined by the unordained in celebrating the other two aspects of the Mass, by those who assist him in the distribution of Holy Communion and those who affirm with him their unity of faith and worship as a single community of God's people. But in the performance of the sacrifice, he stands alone. No one pronounces with him the words of consecration. In this he is exercising the ultimate role of priest; in this he is affirming the uniqueness of the ministerial priesthood of the New Testament; in this he acts most perfectly in the person of Christ.

Perhaps that is why, in order to penetrate the sacrificial reality taking place on the altar, people depend so much on the leadership of their priest. There he stands alone as the steward, the administrator, the dispenser of the mysteries of God (I Cor. 4:1). The spirit and power of the liturgy usually will not engage the participants in the sacrificial aspects of the rite unless that spirit and power are evident in the priest who is leading the liturgy.

Canon 836 says it so simply: Sacred ministers are to arouse and enlighten people's faith. To arouse is to motivate the will of people; to enlighten is to further their understanding. It's no wonder that the constitution pointed up the supreme importance of liturgical training for clergy⁴² who "are to be given a liturgical formation in their spiritual life."⁴³

During the ceremony when the bishop ordains a man to the priesthood, there is a dramatic, riveting moment when the man kneels before the bishop, who hands him a chalice filled with wine and a paten carrying bread. Looking the new priest straight in the eye, the bishop charges him for the rest of his life: "Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate." Commenting on this, Pope John Paul II writes:

It is from this admonition that the priest's attitude in handling the Bread and Wine which have become the Body and Blood of the Redeemer should draw its inspiration. Thus it is necessary for all of us who are ministers of the Eucharist to examine carefully our actions at the altar, in particular the way in which we handle that Food and Drink which are the Body and Blood of the Lord our God in our hands. . .⁴⁴

"Arouse and enlighten"—this the priest must constantly strive to achieve, to arouse faith in the sacrifice by his reverence, and to enlighten that faith by his instruction on the mystery of the sacrifice.

"It is evident," concluded the extraordinary synod of bishops in 1985, "that the liturgy must favor the sense of the sacred and make it shine forth. It must be permeated by the spirit of reverence, adoration and the glory of God."

In the early years of the reform, *active* participation was so emphasized that quality and achievement were gauged solely on the level of external performance—singing, responding, exclaiming, proclaiming, celebrating, etc.—that few checked to see if the sense of the sacred pervaded. Banners and balloons, prose and poetry, orchestration and choreography were so highlighted that people often had no good chance to adore. When gestures, vestments, movements, words, postures, singing, sights and sounds of the ritual do not express the interior awareness of the sacred, they are only clanging cymbals, not effective symbols.

The Holy Father often speaks of "a new spiritual awareness and maturity" demanded of celebrant and faithful alike:

Eucharistic worship matures and grows. . . when it brings about in us such recollection and devotion that the participants become aware of the greatness of the mystery being accomplished and show it by their attitude.⁴⁵

That awareness, says the Holy Father, is truly mature when it is genuinely interpersonal, conscious of God and, at the same time, conscious of His awareness of you. . . like the awareness of Mary when her sister Martha told her: "The Master is here and is asking for you" (John 11:28).

Saint Paul was speaking not of the sin of disbelief but of irreverence when he wrote: "A person should examine his conscience and after so doing he may eat of the bread and drink of the chalice, because he who eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks to his own condemnation" (I Cor. 11:20).

There is an interesting insight, I think, in the new code of canon law, in canon 913 which speaks of the preparation and basic comprehension which children should regularly have before making their first Holy Communion. Should the child be in danger of death, however, the canon indicates that the preliminaries may be dispensed with and the child given Holy Communion provided that he can do two things: 1) distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary bread; and 2) receive Communion *reverently*. Reverence for the Eucharist is never dispensable, even in a child, even in danger of death.

A sense of the sacred, a sense of reverence, is due not only to the Eucharist, but to other persons too, and to places and things. I am always struck by a renewed sense of the sacred during the rite of dedicating a new church by which it becomes sacred, a sacred place, set aside exclusively and perpetually for the worship of God. It makes me conscious again of "the reverence due to the house of God"⁴⁶ and the reverential silence we keep in church in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

Vatican Council II, despite all myths to the contrary, reaffirmed our clear obligation as Catholics to participate in Sunday Mass. The constitution on the sacred liturgy states that the centuries' old obligation is both communal and personal to each of us: "The faithful are bound to come together into one place: to listen to the word of God and to take part in the Eucharist."⁴⁷

Going to Mass is basic to a Catholic's self identity as a Catholic. After all, "The celebration of the Eucharist is the center of the whole Christian life both for the universal Church and for the local congregations of that Church."⁴⁸ ". . .in the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church."⁴⁹ The person who places going to Mass on Sunday higher than anything else that day is rightly referred to as a "good Catholic" or a "practicing Catholic." If going to Mass is not the heart of Catholicism, a lay friend of mine recently asked, "then what is?"

Last June during our *ad limina* visit in Rome, twenty-four of us American bishops met with the Holy Father, who gave us a marvelous talk on prayer. In the course of his allocution, he touched on the subject of Sunday Mass:

Five years ago, in speaking at some length about this matter, I mentioned that "throughout the United States there has been a superb history of Eucharistic participation by the people, and for this we must all thank God" (*Ad limina* address of July 9, 1983). The time is ripe to renew gratitude to God for this great gift and to reinforce this splendid tradition of American Catholics.

Through baptism and membership in the Church, a believer undertakes a whole new network of rights and obligations. Sure, there is the obligation of Sunday Mass, but by the same token Catholics have a clear right to good liturgy. If the aim of the liturgy is to draw out and vivify people's highest and noblest religious aspirations and affirmations, then the job of parish liturgy is a very lofty one, and success comes not that easily. Nevertheless, the people have a right to good liturgy.

I think it can be said that if reverence does not pervade a liturgy, it will fail in its purpose even if all the liturgical roles within it are correctly carried out. Conversely, a liturgy that is not competently executed can sometimes achieve success if it is pervaded by reverence for the presence and action of God among us.

No one can deny that, in the wake of the Vatican Council, some attempts to implement the liturgical reforms were themselves in need of reform. Some appealed to the "spirit of Vatican II" to justify some fanciful and distorted interpretations of conciliar doctrine. Given the magnitude and pace of such remarkable changes taking place, a certain amount of misdirection, confusion, and consequent upset was inevitable. Part of that was the fault of us who plunged into the work of implementation without sensing people's need of adequate explanation. The rush to change externals sometimes outpaced the interior need to understand and digest. Perhaps there was just too much early excitement about the changes to pay any attention to a basic ground rule given us back in 1964 in the *Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*:

. . .the general reform of the liturgy will be better received by the faithful if it is accomplished gradually, and if it is proposed and explained to them properly by their pastors.⁵⁰

Pope John Paul II wrote some remarkable thoughts to us bishops in 1980:

As I bring these considerations to an end, I would like to ask forgiveness—in my own name and in the name of all of you, venerable and dear brothers in the episcopate—for everything which, for whatever reason, through whatever human weakness, impatience or negligence, and also through the sometimes partial, one-sided and erroneous application of the directives of the Second Vatican Council, may have caused scandal and disturbance concerning the interpretation of the doctrine and the veneration due to this great sacrament. And I pray to the Lord Jesus that in the future we may avoid in our manner of dealing with this sacred mystery anything which could weaken or disorient in any way the sense of reverence and love that exists in our faithful people.⁵¹

In officially bringing to a close Vatican Council II in 1965, Pope Paul VI called the council “a wondrous event.” Twenty years later, Pope John Paul II called it “a new Pentecost.” Again in 1987 he referred to the council as “a new Pentecost for our century” as he announced the start of the Marian Year. Indeed the council has been an indescribable blessing, an event that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, signaled a process of renewal that is steadily moving ahead. The doctrine and the ideals of the council, as the Holy Father has said, need to be still further deepened and grafted into the Church’s life.

The liturgical renewal is the most visible fruit of the whole conciliar effort. And one of the most crucial insights we have gained in the wake of the council is that the liturgy’s effect cannot be achieved in a purely external manner. We have learned, writes Cardinal Ratzinger, that “. . .we are in such urgent need of an education toward inwardness. We need to be taught to enter into the heart of things. As far as liturgy is concerned, this is a matter of life or death.”⁵²

Liturgy addresses the human being in all his depth, which goes far beyond our everyday awareness; there are things we only understand with the heart; the mind can gradually grow in understanding the more we allow our heart to illuminate it. . .No external participation and creativity is of any use unless it is a participation in this inner reality, in the way of the Lord, in God Himself.⁵³

Twenty-five years ago today the constitution on the sacred liturgy gave birth to a remarkable worldwide renewal in the way we worship God together and receive His gift of sanctification. The transformation is well underway and, thanks to the Holy Spirit, there are palpable impulses everywhere, prompting us to an ever greater reverence for the Eucharist.

Indeed we are privileged witnesses to “a new Pentecost.”

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Bishop of Arlington

NOTES

1. *Liturgiae Instaurationes—Third Instruction on the Correct Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, September 5, 1970. 1.
2. *Eucharisticum Mysterium—Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, May 25, 1967. 1.
3. *Lumen Gentium—Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, November 2, 1964. 11; *Code of Canon Law*, 1983. 897.
4. *Dominicae Cenaе—On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist*, February 24, 1980. 5.
5. *Presbyterorum Ordinis—Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, December 7, 1965. 5.
6. *Ibid.* 5.
7. I Cor. 11:20.
8. Jude 12.
9. Acts 2:42.
10. *Sacrosanctum Concilium—The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, December 4, 1964. 2.
11. *Musicam Sacram—Instruction on Music in the Liturgy*, March 5, 1967. 17.
12. *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, March 26, 1970. 23.
13. *Ibid.* 21.

14. *Eucharistiae Sacramentum—On Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside of Mass*, June 21, 1973. 84.
15. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 7, 49.
16. *Ibid.* 56.
17. *Ibid.* 35.2.
18. *Ibid.* 52.
19. *Ibid.* 72.
20. *Code of Canon Law*. 959.
21. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 34.
22. *Ibid.* 116.
23. *Ibid.* 120.
24. *Ibid.* 36.1.
25. *Ibid.* 22.
26. *Eucharisticum Mysterium*. II IV D.
27. *Liturgiae Instaurationes*. 1.
28. *Code of Canon Law*. 846.1.
29. *Dominicae Cenaes*. 13.
30. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 11.
31. *Ibid.* 11.
32. *Dominicae Cenaes*. 8.
33. *Code of Canon Law*. 767.1.
34. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 14.
35. *Ibid.* 48.
36. *Ibid.* 48.
37. *Code of Canon Law*. 899.3.
38. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 19.
39. *Ibid.* 14.
40. *Dominicae Cenaes*. 9.
41. *Eucharisticum Mysterium*. 3.
42. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 16.
43. *Ibid.* 17.
44. *Dominicae Cenaes*. 11.
45. *Ibid.* 9.
46. *Code of Canon Law*. 562.
47. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. 106.
48. *Eucharistiae Sacramentum*. 1.
49. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. 5.
50. *Inter Oecumenici—Instruction on the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. 4.
51. *Dominicae Cenaes*. 12.
52. *Feast of Faith*, p. 73.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 151.



Lateran Basilica

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