

# Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

## Study Guide, Part 3

### A RETURN TO NOBLE SIMPLICITY

#### Tradition and Reform

Concerning the liturgy, the Church has never subscribed to the adage, “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.” Rather, one guiding principle for understanding the liturgy is *semper reformanda*—“always to be reformed.” It’s not that we welcome change for its own sake. But the Church recognizes that, if Christian worship is to remain vital and vibrant, it must adapt to the many cultures in which people seek to encounter Christ in the Eucharist from one generation to the next. You may recall that we discussed this in the first session when we talked about *aggiornamento* (bringing things up to the present day) as one aspect of the spirit of liturgical renewal. Consulting the *Constitution*, you will see that the reforms of the Second Vatican Council brought things up to the present day in many ways, such as by allowing use of the vernacular, permitting cultural adaptations, and encouraging the ongoing creation of new sacred music and art.

As you will recall from that first session though, *aggiornamento* was coupled with *ressourcement*, or “going back to the sources.” The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* looks back to the origins of our faith and tradition. The word *tradition* comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning a “handing on” of teachings, beliefs, and customs. What was handed on by the Apostles to the first Christians continues today through the Church’s teaching, life, and worship. And this tradition, received from the Apostles, develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit as we grow in understanding of what has been handed down (*Dei Verbum*, 8).

How simple it would be if the Lord had handed his disciples a script with stage directions for celebrating Eucharist! Instead, he gave them a model based on a Jewish family meal with the command, “Do this in memory of me.” For two millennia, the Church has kept faithful to this command as the sacramental celebration moved from a family meal at home in Palestine, to a celebration spread throughout the world.

With such growth, change is inevitable. The challenge for the Church is to remain faithful to the message of Jesus Christ as handed down by the Apostles. The process of tradition has been described as taking one step backward before taking two steps forward. A theologian will take one step backward, delving into the doctrine and experience of the

Church to prepare to take two steps forward to advance the tradition so that Christ’s presence is revealed here and now. If we look backward only, the Church will be mired in the past. If we look forward only, the Church will lose its moorings and drift away. So, tradition employs a tension connecting the past and future through the present.

In this way, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* is a traditional document. It was born out of the liturgical reform movement of the twentieth century that studied the development of the liturgy over two thousand years and attempted to adapt it for the needs of Roman Catholics in the twentieth century and further. Mindful of the principle of *semper reformanda*, the Council did not intend to write the definitive word on the liturgy, but to continue the discussion. For 400 years, since the Council of Trent and the Missal of Pope Pius V (1570), the Mass went virtually unchanged. In 1970, the Missal of Pope Paul VI brought radical change to Roman Catholic worship.

#### For Discussion

- ▶ Reflect on changes to the liturgy that you have experienced in your lifetime, such as the changes of the Second Vatican Council, or if you were not present for those changes, the more recent changes in the words of the Mass upon the implementation of the third edition of the Roman Missal. How did you feel about those changes? What changes in the liturgy are most challenging to you personally? What changes are most challenging to your worship community as a whole?
- ▶ Refer to paragraph 1 of the *Constitution*: “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 humanity into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly



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cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.” How would you summarize in your own words the purpose for change?

### NOBLE SIMPLICITY

Refer to paragraph 34 of the *Constitution*: “The rites should be marked by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension and as a rule not require much explanation.”

The beauty of the Roman Catholic liturgy lies in its simplicity. Here, simplicity refers to intelligibility and clarity, in the ability to understand the meaning and movement of the liturgy for the sake of greater participation. This sentiment was expressed well by Edmund Bishop, a renowned liturgist of the early twentieth century, in the essay, “The Genius of the Roman Rite.” He wrote, “[T]he genius of the native Roman rite is marked by simplicity, practicality, a great sobriety and self-control, gravity and dignity . . . . It is precisely in this simplicity . . . that lies the importance of the native Roman rite for the history of public worship.”

However, along the way of history, the liturgy expanded and grew complex. Pope John XXIII called attention to this problem in his apostolic letter *Rubricarum Instructum* (1960). He explained that the constant duty of the papacy, especially since the Council of Trent, has been “to define more accurately and arrange more suitably the body of rubrics by which the Church’s public worship is ordered and governed. Thus many things have been emended, changed and added in the course of time. The consequent growth of the system of rubrics has sometimes been unsystematic and detrimental to the original clarity and simplicity of the whole system.”

The rites should be simple yet noble. The nobility of our worship challenges any attempt to interpret simplicity as casual or even careless. It warns against practicing a worship of convenience and settling for what is cheap. So, we should be generous with our symbols, such as the bread and wine, water, and oil; these symbols should “speak.” The vessels and vestments, along with the furnishings, need not be lavish but should be dignified, suggesting the significance of the celebration. In a word, “nobility” reminds us of the reverence with which we approach the Eucharistic celebration. We should enter the liturgy with a proper disposition of respect and dignity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1186, explains that we cross a threshold when we enter the church, passing from the world burdened by sin to a new life in which the Lord wipes away every tear and feeds us with eternal life.

### For Discussion

- ▶ Consider the artwork, liturgical furnishings, vestments, vessels, and symbols present in your parish church. Are there any that embody the idea of “noble simplicity” for you? How so?
- ▶ Are there other ways by which we may foster a sense of “noble simplicity” in our worship?

### THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF WORSHIP

One reason for the revision of the liturgy was concern for the biblical nature of Roman Catholic worship. Our liturgy today is imbued with Scripture. We find it not only in the readings for the day, but throughout the prayers as well. The revision of the prayers expresses a more literal translation of Scripture. This is an instance of *ressourcement*: Our prayers go back to Scripture, one of the oldest elements of our tradition.

For example, at the Invitation to Communion, the priest celebrant holds up the host saying, “Behold the Lamb of God . . . .” This translation recalls John the Baptist’s statement upon seeing Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The revised translation opens the meaning of the proclamation. The change from the previous translation, “This is the Lamb of God,” also mirrors the change in the proclamation after the readings. Some time ago, the phrase ending the Scripture readings changed from “This is the word [or Gospel] of the Lord” to simply “The word [Gospel] of the Lord,” suggesting that the risen Lord is present to us in the hearing of the Word. The response to “Behold the Lamb of God . . . .” generated discussion prior to the implementation of the third edition of the Roman Missal. However, the words, “Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” echo Luke 1:1–10 more clearly. Our meditation on those words can extend beyond Communion.

Along with the liturgical prayers, certain practices were revised for the sake of noble simplicity. The liturgical reform movement restored some practices of early Christian worship, for example, the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful) and the reverence for the *Book of the Gospels*. The Universal Prayer provides an exercise of the office of the baptismal priesthood of the laity (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 69). Here, responding to the proclaimed Word of God, the people offer prayers to God for the salvation of all. Also, the restored prominence of the *Book of the Gospels*, with procession and incense, recalls an ancient custom of reverence for this symbol of Christ’s presence.

The goal of these revisions in the liturgy, both at the time of the Second Vatican Council and more recently with the changed words of the Mass with the implementation of

the third edition of the Roman Missal, is to develop the sense of noble simplicity in our prayer. The prayers, readings, and Homily that we hear at Church should enable us to clearly hear the Word of the Lord speaking to us.

### For Discussion

- ▶ Are you aware of any other instances of Scripture in our liturgical prayers? What are they?
- ▶ How do you hear the Word of the Lord speaking to you at Mass?

### ACCRETIONS

The period of renewal following the Second Vatican Council was necessary in part because, over the course of hundreds of years, Catholic worship had become encumbered by different rituals and elements that had crept into regular practice and eventually been made an official part of what happened at Mass. We call elements that creep into our worship and become regular practice *accretions*. The Second Vatican Council worked to rid the Mass of these accretions in order to go back to the sources of Catholic worship.

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, there have been new accretions. For example, during the praying of the Lord's Prayer at Mass it is common to see people holding hands. This practice is not called for by any ritual book, it is something that people started doing that has "stuck" and spread. Another example of a modern accretion is when people who are too young to receive Communion or who are not in full communion with the Church come forward in the Communion line with their hands folded across their chests in order to receive a blessing from the priest. These gestures are fairly commonplace, but they are not called for in any of our ritual books. We also sometimes see accretions in the form of cultural adaptations, such as the use of a unity candle or prayer before Mary during wedding liturgies.

We do not necessarily need to do away with all accretions (remember, another element of the Constitution is an increased respect for cultural practices), but it is important that our leaders—our bishops and our local parish leaders—are aware of these practices and work to evaluate them according to the principle of noble simplicity. The practice of

noble simplicity in our liturgy should lead the faithful to clearly hear the call of the Lord in Word and sacrament, and to respond as one people joined in the Body of Christ. Noble simplicity fosters a greater sense of full, conscious, and active participation, which we will discuss in more detail in our fifth session.

### For Discussion

- ▶ Have you ever participated in a liturgy that seemed to do a good job of incorporating cultural practices without sacrificing the principle of noble simplicity? How was this done?
- ▶ Sometimes parishes face challenges when planning liturgies such as for weddings or funerals because they have to say no when parishioners want to do things like play secular music or cover the altar with decorations. Have you ever had an experience like this? Do you understand these challenges in a new light now that you have learned about the value of noble simplicity?

### PRIOR TO THE NEXT SESSION:

- ▶ Read the parts of the *Constitution* that have to do with Scripture, especially paragraphs 24, 35.1–35.4, and 51–52.
- ▶ Reflect on the following questions:
  - What words does the *Constitution* use to describe the role of Scripture in Catholic worship?
  - Name and consider the different ways in which you encounter Scripture in your life, such as reading the Bible on your own, participating in a Bible study group, hearing Scripture proclaimed at Mass, listening to scriptural texts in sacred music, displaying art based on scriptural passages in your home or workplace, and so on. How do these encounters with Scripture influence your life?

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