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**Pope Francis and the Liturgy**

“We can affirm with certainty and with magisterial authority that the liturgical reform is irrevocable.” Pope Francis made this extremely significant declaration in the context of his August 24, 2017, address to the participants in the 68th National Liturgical Week in Italy. For him, the reform of the liturgy set in motion by the Second Vatican council must be allowed to proceed, undeterred by “divisive elements.” Francis insists that now is not the time to rethink the Council’s liturgical reforms or review the choices made in the 1963 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. It is time for deepening our understanding of the reform and for “internalizing” the “inspirational principles” behind it.

The great significance of the pope’s solemn declaration on the irreversibility of the Vatican II liturgical reform comes to light when we recall the history of modern liturgical developments. In response to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent initiated many liturgical reforms that issued in the 1570 Missal of Pius V. This liturgy, known as the Tridentine Mass, was the common form of worship for Catholics all the way up to Vatican II and is still celebrated today. Some older Catholics can recall the role of the priest: with his back to the congregation he led the prayers in Latin, often quietly; at the beginning he said prayers at the foot of the altar in dialogue with the boy servers who memorized the Latin responses; periodically he turned and greeted the people; he read the Epistle from the right side of the altar and, after the server moved the book, he read the Gospel from the left side; on Sundays he preached a sermon in English; after saying the words of consecration, he elevated the host and chalice while the server rang the bells; he placed consecrated bread on the tongues of the people kneeling at the communion rail while rapidly repeating a prayer in Latin; he concluded the Mass by saying the last Gospel, taken from the Prologue to John’s Gospel.

The Vatican II liturgy includes elements not found in the Tridentine Mass: the priest facing the people: the congregation saying and singing responses; the three-year cycle of scripture readings; the prayers of the faithful; the greeting of peace; the option of receiving communion in the hand; or the cup for the assembly.

Starting in the 19th century, liturgical leaders in Europe began pushing for more active participation in the liturgy, convinced that the passivity of people at Mass was contributing to the diminishment of Christian piety and witness in the world. In France, for example, Prosper Gueranger (1805-1875), who refounded the Benedictine abbey of Solesmes, published a multivolume work, *The Liturgical Year,* that sparked interest in liturgical reform and eventually led to scholarly studies of the history and nature of liturgical worship.

Drawing on these developments, Pope Pius X, who served as Bishop of Rome from 1903-1914, described the liturgy as “the indispensable source of the Christian spirit” and encouraged reforms including active participation and frequent communion beginning at an early age.

In the United States, Virgil Michel (1888-1938), a Benedictine monk of St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, played a major role in the liturgical movement that spread around the country. After traveling in Europe and immersing himself in liturgical developments there, Michel returned in 1925 to Collegeville and made it a center for liturgical renewal that sponsored conferences, including The National Liturgical Week starting in 1940, and published the periodical now known as *Worship*. Thanks to Michel and his numerous lectures and articles, the American version of the liturgical movement not only promoted active participation in the Eucharist but also placed a great deal of emphasis on the integral connection between liturgy and social justice.

In 1947, Pope Pius XII made an important contribution to the liturgical movement by publishing the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, which established a sound theological basis for reforming the liturgy and promoting active participation in the Eucharist. He also made a practical contribution to the movement by restoring the Easter Vigil.

In his 2017 Liturgical Week Address, Pope Francis referred to the liturgical movement as an initial response to “the discomfiture perceived in ecclesial prayer.” It bore fruit in the Second Vatican Council and its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum* *Concilium),* which responded to “real needs and to the concrete hope of renewal.” The Constitution, the first of the 16 documents produced by the Council, passed with only three dissenting votes and was promulgated on December 4, 1963. Francis, who did not participate in Vatican II, views the document as expressing “in a renewed way the perennial vitality of the Church in prayer” while maintaining “the principle of respect for healthy tradition and legitimate progress.”

The first chapter of the Constitution presents general principles to guide the reform of the liturgy. Christ is present at Mass in various ways: in the consecrated bread and wine; in the scriptural word; in the person of the presider; and in the assembly of the faithful (7). Liturgy is the “exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ,” the full public worship “performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ,” and a “sacred action surpassing all others” (7). It is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the fount from which all her power flows” (10). The faithful are called to “full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations” (14).

The reform of the liturgy should be guided by certain norms. The rites should be characterized by “a noble simplicity.” They should be “short, clear, and free from useless repetitions” so that the people can comprehend them without much explanation (34). Since “scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy,” it is essential to cultivate a “warm and lively appreciation” of the biblical word (24) and to restore a “more ample, more varied and more suitable reading from sacred scripture” for liturgical celebrations (35). The Council allowed the use of vernacular languages in the liturgy and gave “the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority,” for example, bishops’ conferences (22), the power to make decisions, subject to confirmation by the Apostolic See, about the use of the vernacular and proper translations from the Latin (36). The precise wording and intended meaning of this directive has become a major source of friction between Francis and his curial critics.

The second chapter of the Constitution contains a number of decrees promoting full and conscious participation in the liturgy so the faithful are not at Mass “as strangers or silent spectators” (48). The rites are to be simplified, with duplications and unnecessary additions omitted and useful elements from the early church restored (50). “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly” so that over a number of years the faithful attending Mass will hear a “more representative part of the sacred scriptures” (51). The Council put greater emphasis on the homily, which is an integral part of the Eucharistic liturgy and should be based on the scripture readings (52). It also opened up the practice of the laity receiving the consecrated wine at Mass (55) and expanded the opportunities for concelebration, which manifests the “unity of the priesthood” (57).

In chapter three on the other sacraments, the bishops introduced some changes worth noting: revising the rite of Confirmation so that it appears more clearly as part of Christian initiation; changing the name of “Extreme Unction” to “Anointing of the Sick” to indicate it is for anyone in danger of death from sickness or old age; and restoring the adult catechumenate.

When Pope Francis declared the liturgical reform is irreversible, he was referring to the renewal officially set in motion by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, passed overwhelmingly by the Second Vatican Council, and gradually implemented over the next decades. Of special note were the first Masses in English in the United States on the First Sunday of Advent November 29, 1964 and the publication of the new Missal in 1970.

Francis felt the need to make his authoritative declaration because some Catholics, clerical and lay, have continued to resist various elements of the reform. Early opposition was led by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991), who participated in Vatican II but refused to support some of the documents. His vigorous opposition to the Council, including the liturgical changes, led to his suspension in 1976 and his excommunication in 1988. Some of his followers returned to communion with Rome, but others, the Society of Saint Pius X, have continued their opposition. At a popular level, the Catholic traditionalist group *Rorate Coeli* continues to recruit priests to offer the Tridentine Mass for the poor souls in purgatory, claiming that as many as 76 American priests do so regularly.

Out of concern for elderly priests, Pope Paul VI allowed the celebration of the Tridentine Mass in certain circumstances. In 2007, Pope Benedict issued *Summorum Pontificum,* expanding permission for all priests to celebrate in private the 1962 Tridentine Mass, called the “extraordinary form“of the one Roman Rite. This opened up the possibility of priests using this form with a congregation and even doing so at a regular parish liturgy. Traditionalists have used this option to multiply opportunities to attend Latin Masses.

In his 1997 memoir, *Milestones*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called for a “new liturgical movement,” which came to be called a “reform of the reform,” to correct the harmful liturgical errors and distortions caused by emphasizing the discontinuity between the Vatican II and the living tradition of the Church. Cardinal Ratzinger insisted the Church urgently needed “a liturgical reconciliation” that recognizes the unity of the history of the liturgy and understands Vatican II not as a break from the past but as a stage of development. After his election as pope, Benedict delivered an address to the Roman Curia that blamed the “hermeneutic of discontinuity” (interpretations of Vatican II that emphasize the differences between the Tridentine and Vatican II liturgies) for creating more subjective approaches to the liturgy that neglect its divine origin and goal. The “reform the reform” movement and the great availability of the 1962 Latin Mass, authorized by Pope Benedict, helped energize opposition to the Vatican II liturgical reform that prompted the strong defense of the Council by Pope Francis.

The important task of producing English translations of the original Latin liturgical texts has generated a great deal of controversy. Sensing a need for an improved translation, the International Committee for English in the Liturgy (ICEL), composed of representatives of 11 English speaking countries, gathered a group of experts in the early 1980s, who worked some 17 years to produce a new translation. In 1998, ICEL presented to the Vatican what many considered a fine version of the Sacramentary only to have it totally rejected, despite the fact that Vatican II had given regional conferences of bishops authority to produce translations. Furthermore, in 2001, Rome promulgated *Liturgiam* *authenticum*, which demanded more literal translations of the Latin texts with nothing added and nothing omitted. The Vatican then produced its own English translation, which was implemented in 2011.

Since then, polls indicate most Catholics, clergy and laity, do not like the translation, finding it wooden, stilted, ungrammatical and even at times unintelligible. Theologically, it places more emphasis on God’s transcendence than divine imminence, more on merit than mercy. Many of the prayers are one sentence long with multiple clauses, making it difficult to understand for presiders reading them, let alone parishioners just hearing them. Those who long for a more intelligible and aesthetic prayer experience at Mass can find some hope in two recent decisions of Pope Francis. He is supporting a commission to do a critical study of *Liturgiam* *authenticum,* which provided the theoretical basis for the current literal translation. He also issued the statement *Magnum* *Principium,* which re-endorsed the Vatican II directive that national hierarchies are in charge of translating liturgical texts. Thus, we see that disputes over translations also contributed to the pope’s strong affirmation of the reform fostered by the Council.

Cardinal Robert Sarah, former archbishop of Conakry, Guinea, and current influential Prefect of the Congregation of Divine Worship (CDW), has emerged as an unofficial leader of the reform the reform movement, at times putting him at odds with Pope Francis, who appointed him to his current positon. Sarah made his criticisms of the Vatican II liturgy public in his book, *The Power of Silence: The* *Dictatorship of Noise*, which includes an Afterward by former pope Benedict, who wrote that the “liturgy was in good hands” with the man he had named a cardinal and recommended as the Prefect of CDW. Sarah has encouraged priests presiding at Mass to face east with their back to the assembly, which drew a public rebuke from Francis. He has also disparaged the ancient tradition and current practice of receiving communion in the hand while standing, suggesting it is the work of Satan and shows a lack of submission to God. In response to the pope’s *Magnum* *Principium*, which reaffirmed the authority of national conferences of bishops over liturgical translations, Sarah published an article claiming his Congregation still had control over translations as a parent over a child or a professor over a student. In this article, which was widely distributed throughout Europe and the United States, the cardinal also insisted that the literal translation rules were still in place. Francis responded with a letter clarifying the intent of *Magnum* *Principium,* insisting that liturgical translations no longer must conform in all points to the norms of *Liturgiam* *authenticum,* as was previously the case. The responsibility to translate faithfully now belongs to episcopal conferences and not to the Congregation for Divine Worship, whose confirmation responsibility “no longer supposes a detailed word-by-word examination.” The Congregation should not impose on episcopal conferences a translation it produced, as “this would undermine the right of the bishops sanctioned ….by *Sacrosanctum* *Concilium*.” Finally, Francis asked Sarah to share his clarifying letter with the bishops, the members of his Congregation, and the media outlets.

In his address to the Italian liturgists, Francis devoted a paragraph to the altar as a sign of Christ, “the cornerstone of the spiritual building,” where worship is offered to the living God in spirit and truth. The altar, which we venerate, is “the center toward which our churches focus attention” and the place from which we are nourished by “the bread of life and the cup of salvation.” Thus, the pope provides a solid theological reason for maintaining the present postures at Mass that undercuts the arguments for facing east.

It is possible to read the rest of the pope’s address to Italian liturgists as a reflection on the Vatican II Constitution on the Liturgy. Francis insists that the liturgy is “popular” and not clerical. It is an action of God himself for our benefit, but also the action of the people who listen to God and respond in prayer. The liturgical assembly is inclusive, overcoming “in Christ every boundary of age, race, language and nation.” Liturgical worship “is not primarily a doctrine to be understood, or a rite to be performed.” Rather, “it is a fount of life and of light for our pilgrimage of faith.”

By his authoritative declaration that the Vatican II renewal is irreversible, Pope Francis has rejected the reform the reform movement, a phrase he dislikes and calls “an error.” This means there is no reason for a dialogue between those who accept the directives of the Council and those who favor the Tridentine Mass, which is itself “an exception” to the ordinary liturgical life of the Church. National hierarchies know best how to judge vernacular translations. Presiders should face the altar and not the east. The Vatican II liturgy, properly understood, is not inherently too subjective since it is the work of God and of the people. There is no room for clericalism in the liturgy, which must be popular and inclusive.

Pope Francis has spoken with decisive authority and great pastoral care. Those of us who support him can hope that his initiative will prove to be a significant moment in the ongoing effort to revitalize the liturgy as the fount of Christian life. 2687 words