

Deepening Our Appreciation For The Liturgy: The Revised Roman Missal

Part One: Preamble to Vatican Two: Setting the Stage for Liturgical Renewal It is common knowledge that in the next liturgical year we will be using a revised Roman Missal for the Mass. There has been strong reaction to this revision. One may ask, what is the big deal? Well, the short answer is that we are talking about the liturgy. Anything that has an impact on liturgy goes to the heart of who we are (by "liturgy" we are referring to the Mass, the 7 sacraments, the liturgical year, and the liturgy of the Hours). For us Catholics, the liturgy is the absolute foundation of all we are and all we do. The liturgy is the most important thing in Christian life, the most important work of the Christian community (source and summit of our spiritual life). It is the liturgy that gathers us together as a faith family and that constitutes our distinct identity as Catholics. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy #2 asserts, "The Liturgy is the outstanding means by which the faithful express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church." The Mass specifically, is the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the paschal mystery. This mystery is the most significant event of human history. Nothing can take the place of liturgical prayer, especially the Mass, which is the model and source of all authentic Christian prayer. Vatican II stressed that the Sunday Mass more than anything else is the primary expression of what it means to be Catholic (see Charles Miller, Foundations of Vatican II Liturgy, 93, 120).

In addition, The Liturgical Reform of Vatican II has reached middle age (fast approaching fifty years). Middle age is the right time to take stock. It is about time to look back at where we have been, what we have done well and badly, and how we can do better in the future. We are at a point of renewal, a point of midcourse correction, attempting to deepen the fruits and successes of the liturgical reform.

Even though the Second Vatican Council was opened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, the ground work for it was laid at the dawn of the 20th century when Pope Leo XIII in 1898 lifted the ban which prohibited the translation of the missal into vernacular languages. Till then most Catholics did not understand the Mass prayers. Pope Pius X went further by declaring that full active participation in the sacred liturgy is indispensable source of the true Christian spirit. He lowered the age for first Holy Communion from 14 to 7 and encouraged Catholics to receive communion regularly, both quite revolutionary at the time. Pius XI on the other hand encouraged the use of hand missals in vernacular so that people could follow the Latin prayers in translation. Even as these changes were taking place, Catholics were being taught that the Mass never changes and that it has always been celebrated in Latin in exactly the same way around the world. This of course was far from the truth.

Pope Pius XII made even greater liturgical innovations with two significant encyclicals he published in 1943. He called the first *Mystici Corporis* or "The Mystical Body of Christ." In it he explained that the Church was not merely an institution (of the pope, bishops, and priests) but that more than anything else it is the body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit, composed of a diversity of members, and that it was changing and growing even as it has always been immutable and mature. This encyclical had great influence on Vatican II's documents on the church and on the church's pastoral constitution in the world and it is said to have necessitated the changes in the liturgy during the Second Vatican Council. The Second encyclical was on Sacred Scripture – *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. In it Pius XII encouraged Catholic scholars to use all available tools to study and uncover the profound meaning of the Scriptures in their original languages. Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation expanded on Pius XII's work in articulating the importance of the whole of Sacred Scripture to the liturgy. In 1947 Pius XII published another significant document, *Mediator Dei*, in which he called Catholics to full, active participation in the sacred liturgy. He emphasized that "all Catholics ought to be aware that to participate in the sacred liturgy is their chief duty and their supreme dignity." (Quoted in Charles Miller, Foundations of Vatican II Liturgy, 47) The pope emphasized the priesthood of the laity by which he implied that they do not play a passive role at the Mass but offer Mass in union with the ordained priest.

These significant papal teachings were unfortunately never communicated to the people in the pews who continued to believe that the Mass would never change and had not changed in centuries. Little wonder then that the reforms of Vatican II came as a shock to many Catholics. Pius XII continued his reforms by reducing the Eucharistic fast to enable Catholics to receive communion at every mass. By 1955 he had restored the entire Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil) as it had been celebrated in the early Church and as we celebrate it today.

With this abridged survey of some of the reforms of the liturgy, it should be clear that the reforms of Vatican II carried out under the courageous Pope John XXIII and his successor Paul VI were not as unprecedented as we have come to believe and would not have been as shocking for many Catholics if the work of catechesis on the innovations introduced by the popes of the 20th century had been ongoing. Next week we will look at the

