



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 68th NATIONAL LITURGICAL WEEK IN ITALY

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Thursday, 24 August 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning.

I welcome all of you and I thank the President, His Excellency Bishop Claudio Maniago, for the words with which he introduced this National Liturgical Week, 70 years since the founding of the Liturgical Action Centre.

This time span has been a period in which, in Church history and, in particular, in the history of the liturgy, substantial and non-superficial developments have occurred. Just as the Second Vatican Council cannot be forgotten, so will the liturgical reform which flowed from it be remembered.

The Council and the reform are two directly linked events, which did not blossom suddenly but after long preparation. It is testified to by what was called the liturgical movement, and the responses given by the Supreme Pontiffs to the discomfiture perceived in ecclesial prayer; when a need is perceived, even if the solution is not immediate, there is a need that it be set in motion.

I think of Saint Pius x who issued a reordering of sacred music^[1] and the celebratory reinstatement of the Sabbath,^[2] and established a commission for the general reform of the liturgy, aware that this would “require considerable work and time” therefore, — as he said himself — “many years [would] have to pass before this type of liturgical *edifice* [... could] appear purified of the squalidness brought by time, newly resplendent with dignity and fitting order”.^[3]

The reformative project was resumed by Pius xii with the Encyclical Mediator Dei^[4] and the institution of a study commission;^[5] he too took concrete decisions about the version of the

Psalter,^[6] attenuation of the fast prior to the Eucharist, use of living language in the Ritual, the important reform of the Easter Vigil and of Holy Week.^[7] From this impulse, following the example of other Nations, the Liturgical Action Centre was set up in Italy, led by the Bishops, in their concern for the people entrusted to them and animated by scholars who loved the Church beyond the liturgical ministry.

The Second Vatican Council then brought to fruition, as the good fruit from the tree of the Church, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (sc), ensuring that its lines of general reform responded to real needs and to the concrete hope of renewal: it desired a vital liturgy for a Church wholly enlivened by the mysteries celebrated. It was a matter of expressing in a renewed way the perennial vitality of the Church in prayer, taking care “that Christ’s faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration” (sc, 48). Blessed Paul vi recalled this when explaining the first steps of the announced reform: “It is good that it be perceived as the very authority of the Church to wish, to promote, to ignite this new manner of prayer, thus greatly increasing her spiritual mission [...]; and we must not hesitate to first become disciples then supporters of the school of prayer, which is about to begin”.^[8]

The direction traced by the Council was in line with the principle of respect for healthy tradition and legitimate progress (cf. sc, 23),^[9] in the liturgical books promulgated by Blessed Paul vi, well received by the very Bishops who were present at the Council, and now in universal use for almost 50 years in the Roman Rite. The practical application, supervised by the Episcopal Conferences of the respective Countries, is still ongoing, because reforming the liturgical books does not suffice to renew mentality. The books reformed in accordance with the decrees of Vatican ii introduced a process that demands time, faithful reception, practical obedience, wise implementation in celebrations, firstly, on the part of the ordained ministers, but also of other ministers, of cantors and all those who take part in the liturgy. In truth, we know, that the liturgical education of Pastors and faithful is a challenge to be faced ever anew. Paul vi himself, a year before his death, said to the Cardinals gathered in the Consistory: “The time has now come to definitively leave aside divisive elements, which are equally pernicious in both senses, and to apply fully, in accordance with the correct criteria that inspired it, the reform approved by Us in the application of the wishes of the Council”.^[10]

And today, there is still work to be done in this direction, in particular by rediscovering the reasons for the decisions taken with regard to the liturgical reform, by overcoming unfounded and superficial readings, a partial reception, and practices that disfigure it. It is not a matter of rethinking the reform by reviewing the choices in its regard, but of knowing better the underlying reasons, through historical documentation, as well as of internalizing its inspirational principles and of observing the discipline that governs it. After this magisterium, after this long journey, We can affirm with certainty and with magisterial authority that the liturgical reform is irreversible.

The task of promoting and safeguarding the liturgy is entrusted by right to the Apostolic See and to the diocesan bishops on whose responsibility and authority I greatly rely at the present moment; national and diocesan liturgical pastoral bodies, educational Institutes and Seminaries are also involved.

In this educational sphere, the Liturgical Action Centre in Italy stands out for its initiatives, among which is the annual Liturgical Week.

After recalling the stages of this journey, I would now like to touch upon a few aspects in light of the theme on which you have reflected in these days, namely: “A Living Liturgy for a Living Church”.

— The liturgy is “living” by reason of the living presence of the One who “by dying he has destroyed our death, and by rising, restored our life” (Preface i of Easter). Without the Real Presence of Christ’s mystery, there is no liturgical vitality. Just as without the heartbeat there is no human life, without the beating heart of Christ there exists no liturgical action. What defines the liturgy is in fact the fulfillment, in the holy signs, of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, meaning the offering of his life to the point of spreading his arms on the Cross, a priesthood made present in a constant way through the rites and prayers, especially in his Body and Blood, but also in the person of the priest, in the proclamation of the Word of God, in the assembly gathered in prayer in his name (cf. sc, 7).

Among the visible signs of the invisible Mystery there is the altar, a sign of Christ, the living stone, rejected by men but which has become the cornerstone of the spiritual building where worship is offered to the living God in spirit and truth (cf. 1 Pt 2:4; Eph 2:20). Therefore, the altar, the centre toward which our churches focus attention,^[11] is dedicated, anointed with chrism, incensed, kissed, venerated: those praying, the priests and the faithful, direct their gaze towards the altar, called together by the holy assembly around it;^[12] upon the altar is placed the Church’s offering, which the Spirit consecrates to be a sacrament of Christ’s sacrifice; from the altar the bread of life and the cup of salvation are bestowed upon us “for we become one body and one spirit in Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer iii).

— The liturgy is life for the entire people of the Church.^[13] By its nature the liturgy is in fact “popular” and not clerical, being — as etymology teaches — an action for the people, but also of the people. As many liturgical prayers recall, it is the action that God himself fulfils in favour of his people, but also the action of the people who listen to God who speaks, and then react by praising him, invoking him, receiving the inexhaustible source of life and mercy which flows from the holy signs. The Church in prayer gathers all those whose hearts listen to the Gospel, without discarding anyone: she convokes the small and the great, the rich and the poor, children and elderly, healthy and sick, the just and the sinful. In the image of the “great multitude” that celebrates the liturgy in the heavenly shrine (cf. Rev 7:9), the liturgical assembly overcomes, in Christ, every boundary of

age, race, language and nation. The “popular” outreach of the liturgy reminds us that it is inclusive and not exclusive, a proponent of communion with everyone without, however, conforming so as to call each one, with his or her vocation and originality, to contribute to building up the Body of Christ: “The Eucharist is not a sacrament ‘for me’; it is the sacrament of the many, who form one body, God’s holy and faithful people”.^[14] We must not forget, therefore, that the liturgy is the first to express the pietas of the entire People of God, extended then by pious exercises and devotions that we know by the name of popular piety, to be enhanced and encouraged in harmony with the liturgy.^[15]

— The liturgy is life and not an idea to be understood. Indeed, it leads one to undergo an initiatory, transformative experience, that is, in the way of thinking and behaving, and not to enrich one’s own set of ideas about God. Liturgical worship “is not primarily a doctrine to be understood, or a rite to be performed; naturally it is also this, but in another way, it is essentially different: it is a font of life and of light for our pilgrimage of faith”.^[16] Spiritual reflections are something different from the liturgy, which is “precisely entering into the mystery of God; bringing ourselves to the mystery and being present in the mystery”.^[17] There is a great difference between saying that God exists and feeling that God loves us, as we are, here and now. In liturgical prayer we feel communion signified not by an abstract thought but by an action whose agents are God and us, Christ and the Church.^[18] The rites and prayers (cf. sc, 48), for what they are and not for the explanations we give for them, become for this reason a school of Christian life, open to those who have ears, eyes and hearts open to understand the vocation and the mission of Jesus’ disciples. This is in line with the mystagogic catechesis practiced by the Fathers, also recovered by the Catechism of the Catholic Church which draws from the liturgy, from the Eucharist and from the other Sacraments in light of the texts and rites of today’s liturgical books.

The Church is truly living if, forming a single living being with Christ; she is the bearer of life, she is maternal; she is missionary; she goes out to meet her neighbour, swift to serve without seeking worldly power that renders her barren. Therefore, celebrating the holy mysteries recalls Mary, the Virgin of the Magnificat, contemplating in her “as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be” (sc, 103).

Lastly, we cannot forget that the richness of the Church in prayer, since she is “catholic”, goes beyond the Roman Rite which, while being the most extensive, is not the only one. The harmony of the ritual Traditions of the East and of the West, by the blowing of the one Spirit gives voice to the one Church praying through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, to the glory of the Father and for the salvation of the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for coming and I encourage the leaders of the Liturgical Action Centre to continue to uphold the faith and the original inspiration, that of serving the prayer of the holy People of God. Indeed, the Liturgical Action Centre has always distinguished itself by the care given to liturgical ministry, in fidelity to the directions of the Apostolic See as well as of the

Bishops, and enjoying their support. The long experience of the Liturgical Weeks, held in numerous dioceses of Italy, together with the magazine “Liturgia”, has helped to introduce the liturgical renewal in the life of parishes, seminaries and religious communities. Fatigue has not been lacking, but neither has joy! This is still the commitment that I ask of you today: to help the ordained ministers, as well as other ministers, cantors, artists, musicians, to cooperate so that the liturgy may be the “font and the summit of the vitality of the Church” (cf. sc, 10). I ask you please to pray for me, and I impart to you a heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.

[1] Cf. Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini*, 22 November 1903: aas 36 (1904), 329-339.

[2] Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Divino Afflatu*, 1 November 1911: aas 3 (1911), 633-638.

[3] Motu Proprio *Abhinc Duos Annos*, 23 October 1913: aas 5 (1913), 449-450.

[4] 20 November 1947: aas 39 (1947), 521-600.

[5] Cf. Sacrae Congr. Rituum, Sectio historica, 71, “Memoria sulla riforma liturgica” (1946).

[6] Cf. Pius xii, Motu Proprio *In Cotidianis Precibus*, 24 March 1945: aas 37 (1945) 65-67.

[7] Cf. Sacrae Congr. Rituum, *Decretum Dominicae Resurrectionis*, 9 February 1951: aas 43 (1951), 128-129; Id., *Decretum Maxima Redemptionis*, 16 November 1955: aas 47 (1955), 838-841.

[8] General Audience of 13 January 1965.

[9] “The reform of the rites and the liturgical books was undertaken immediately after the promulgation of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and was brought to an effective conclusion in a few years thanks to the considerable and selfless work of a large number of experts and bishops from all parts of the world (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 25). This work was undertaken in accordance with the conciliar principles of fidelity to Tradition and openness to legitimate development (cf. *ibid.*, 23); and so it is possible to say that the reform of the Liturgy is strictly traditional and in accordance with ‘the ancient usage of the holy Fathers’” (cf. *ibid.*, 50; *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani, Prooemium*, 6; John Paul ii, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, 4).

[10] “The Pope’s attention is drawn today once more to a particular point of the Church’s life: the indisputably beneficial fruits of the liturgical reform. Since the promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* great progress has taken place, progress that responds to the premises laid down by the liturgical movement of the last part of the nineteenth century. It has

fulfilled that movement's deep aspirations for which so many churchmen and scholars have worked and prayed. The new Rite of the Mass, promulgated by Us after long and painstaking preparation by the competent bodies, and into which other Eucharistic Praises have been introduced alongside the Roman Canon, which remains substantially unchanged, has borne blessed fruits. These include a greater participation in the liturgical action, a more lively awareness of the sacred action, a greater and wider knowledge of the inexhaustible treasures of Sacred Scripture and an increasing sense of community in the Church. The results of these recent years show that we are on the right path. But unfortunately, in spite of the vast preponderance of the healthy and positive action of the clergy and the faithful, abuses have been committed and liberties have been taken in applying the liturgical reform. The time has now come to definitively leave aside divisive elements, which are equally pernicious in both senses, and to apply fully, in accordance with the correct criteria that inspired it, the reform approved by Us in the application of the wishes of the Council" (Allocution *Gratias Ex Animo*, 27 June 1977: Teachings of Paul vi, xv [1977], 655-656, in Italian 662-663).

[11] Cf. General Instruction of the Roman Missal, n. 299; *Rite of the Dedication of an Altar*, Preface, nn. 155, 159.

[12] "Around this altar, we are nourished by the body and blood of your Son to form your one and holy Church" (Rite of the Dedication of an Altar, n. 213, Preface).

[13] "Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the 'sacrament of unity,' namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops. Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it" (sc, 26).

[14] [Homily on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, 18 June 2017:](#) *L'Osservatore Romano* weekly edition in English, 23 June 2017, p. 6/7.

[15] Cf. sc, 13; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 122-126: 105 (2013), 1071-1073.

[16] [Homily on the Third Sunday of Lent, Roman Parish of "Ognissanti", 7 March 2015.](#)

[17] [Homily during Mass at Santa Marta, 10 February 2014.](#)

[18] "This is why the Eucharistic commemoration does us so much good: it is not an abstract, cold and superficial memory, but a living remembrance that comforts us with God's love.... The Eucharist is flavoured with Jesus' words and deeds, the taste of his Passion, the fragrance of his Spirit. When we receive it, our hearts are overcome with the certainty of Jesus' love" ([Homily on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, 18 June 2017:](#) *L'Osservatore Romano*

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