CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY

(Sacrosanctum Concilium)

Introduction by

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VATICAN COUNCIL II

Front cover image: Ecumenical Council in St. Peter's © David Lees/CORBIS.
INTRODUCTION
by Francis Cardinal Arinze

The celebration of the mysteries of our redemption, especially of the paschal mystery of the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the Sacred Liturgy, is central in and to the life of the Church. Participation in liturgical celebrations is seen by the Second Vatican Council as the primary and indispensable source “from which the faithful may be expected to draw the true Christian spirit” (SC, no. 14).

It was, therefore, very fitting that the first of the sixteen documents to be issued by the Second Vatican Council was on the Sacred Liturgy. As Sacrosanctum Concilium was promulgated on December 4 1963, “the first fruit of the Council” (VQA, no. 1) was offered to the entire Church. Through the rich doctrine and wise directives offered by this Constitution, the road to liturgical renewal was marked out for the Church “in accordance with the conciliar principles of fidelity to tradition and openness to legitimate development” (VQA, no. 4; cf also SC, no. 23).

The crucial role of Sacrosanctum Concilium becomes clearer when we consider that a very close and organic bond does exist between sound liturgical renewal and the renewal of the whole life of the Church. After all, “the liturgy is the peak towards which the Church’s activity tends, just as it is also the fountain-head from which all its vitality flows” (SC, no. 10). “The Church not only acts but also expresses herself in the liturgy and draws from the liturgy the strength for her life” (DC, no. 13). In particular, “the Church draws her life from the Eucharist” (EE, no. 1), “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (LG, no. 11).

In the liturgical life of the Church, some very good developments have taken place since Sacrosanctum Concilium was promulgated. Pope John Paul II, in commemoration of twenty-five years of the document, lists five of these positive results (VQA no. 12).

The first is the place given to the Bible in the liturgy. Sacrosanctum Concilium insisted that the table of God’s word is to be made more abundantly available to the people of God in the
liturgy. If we reflect back over the past forty years, we see how the
renewed liturgical rites have been made much richer with biblical
texts. In the Mass, the lectionary is so arranged as to cover most of
the Bible in a three-year Sunday reading and a two-year weekday
lessons programme. The responsorial psalms help to elucidate the
readings. The sacramental rites and the celebrations of the
sacraments are suitably fitted with rich biblical texts. So is the
Liturgy of the Hours. In this way not only are the faithful exposed,
as it were, to a greater part of Holy Scripture so as to become more
familiar with it, but each community has the opportunity, in the
specific setting of the liturgical celebration, to enter ever more
deeply at all the levels of the human person into the great mystery
of God's transforming love which the Scripture proclaims. In
country after country, immense effort is undertaken to provide the
Christian people with translations of the Bible.

A second happy development is the sustained effort to translate
the various liturgical texts into the current language of the people,
and also to face the challenges of adapting liturgical celebration to
the culture of each people.

A third reason for gratitude is “the increased participation of the
faithful by prayer and song, gesture and silence, in the Eucharist
and the other sacraments”.

We are also encouraged because of “the ministries exercised by
lay people and the responsibilities that they have assumed in virtue
of the common priesthood into which they have been initiated
through Baptism and Confirmation”.

Lastly, and as a summary of the above four areas, we must thank
God “for the radiant vitality of so many Christian communities, a
vitality drawn from the wellspring of the liturgy”.

Each of these five positive results offers us reasons for joy and
encouragement. But each also assigns us a further task, poses us a
challenge and enjoins on us to see that the developments remain truly
positive, according to the desire and directives of the Council expressed
in Sacrosanctum Concilium, and of the Pope and the Bishops who
guide us today and tomorrow in the Church that Christ founded.

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Bible and Liturgy
In his commentary on Isaiah, St Jerome tells us that, “Ignorance of the
Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. Ignorance of the Bible is a great
handicap to an understanding of the liturgy and the hoped-for fruit of
participation in its celebration. A great part of the liturgy is based on
Holy Scripture, not only in the readings but also in the inspiration of
the prayers, in the symbols and in the images dear to the public worship
of the Church. Without a biblical understanding of exodus, covenant,
chosen people, Isaac, paschal lamb, Passover, manna and promised
land, how can the liturgy be understood? The Psalms, in particular, are
an indispensable source of liturgical language, signs and prayers.

“The Church is nourished on the word of God as written down in
the books of the Old and New Testaments. When the Church
proclaims the word in the liturgy, she welcomes it as a way in which
Christ is present” (VL, no. 23). It is Christ “himself who speaks
when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church” (SC, no. 7).

Everyone in the Church needs to make progress in contact with the
Bible: clerics, consecrated people and the lay faithful. The growing
desire of many lay people to receive better and deeper biblical
formation should be met with adequate programmes. The translation
of the Bible into the people’s language is the first and indispensable
step. People also need guidance individually and in groups in how to
read, understand and pray the Bible. This is essential for a Catholic
approach to the Bible, in which it is clearly understood that it is the
Church which presents the Bible to the faithful, explaining its
significance in the light of the Tradition that goes back to the Lord’s
Apostles. Liturgical experts and pastors should help people to see
how selected biblical texts fit into specific liturgical celebrations.
Homilies should also be rich in biblical foundations.

Translation - Adaptation - Inculturation
The Second Vatican Council introduced the vernacular into the
liturgy and also allowed for properly considered adaptations and
inculturation in the rites. This poses a considerable challenge and
requires careful consideration.
While retaining Latin as the language in the Latin rite, the Council appreciated the usefulness of the use of the mother tongue among the various peoples of the world (cf. SC, no. 36). However, Vatican II did not abolish Latin. It would be good that occasionally a parish sings the more popular parts of the Mass in Latin: think of what this means in terms of preserving and respecting our patrimony, showing the Church as a community that has a memory, and facilitating international Eucharistic celebrations.

Liturgical translations into the mother tongue pose the demanding challenge of producing translations which are faithful to the Latin original, which are excellent literary productions, which can be set to music, which will stand the test of time and which will nourish the piety and spiritual sensitivity of the people. Dangers and abuses arise from *ex tempore* translations, hurried works and illegitimate translations not approved by the Conference of Bishops and ratified by the Apostolic See.

When we go into the area of adaptation and inculcation of rites, we are faced with still more demanding challenges. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is very clear in its principles and directives (SC, no. 37). The carrying out of these directives will engage the Church for generations, especially in the countries of recent evangelization. Writing on the Holy Eucharist, Pope John Paul II says that "the 'treasure' is too important and precious to risk impoverishment or compromise through forms of experimentation or practices introduced without a careful review on the part of the competent ecclesiastical authorities ... 'because the Sacred Liturgy expresses and celebrates the faith professed by all, and being the heritage of the whole Church, cannot be determined by local Churches in isolation from the universal Church'" (EE, no. 51).

It is therefore reasonable and indeed obvious that there must be liturgical regulations and norms. With reference to the Holy Eucharist, for example, Pope John Paul II says that "These norms are a concrete expression of the authentically ecclesial nature of the Eucharist; this is their deepest meaning. Liturgy is never anyone's private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community" (EE, no. 52). That is why *Sacrosanctum Concilium* already declared that the regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the Bishops and the Bishops' Conference. "Wherefore, no one else at all, not even a priest, may, of his own authority, add to, take from, or modify anything in the Liturgy" (SC, no. 22).

The danger is that some people seem to think that inculcation in the liturgy encourages free and uncontrolled creativity. Pope John Paul writes that "it must be lamented that, especially in the years following the post-conciliar liturgical reform, as a result of a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation, there have been a number of abuses which have been a source of suffering for many" (EE, no. 52).

True and lasting inculcation demands long study, discussions among experts in interdisciplinary platforms, examination and decision by Bishops, recognition from the Apostolic See and prudent presentation to the people of God. Moreover, it should be noted that in religious matters, people's sensitivity and piety can easily be hurt by ill-considered and hasty novelties. In religious practices, most people are understandably conservative in the good sense, and unwilling to endure frequent changes.

**Active Participation**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stress the importance of the active participation of all the faithful in liturgical celebrations. "Mother Church greatly desires that all the faithful may be brought to take that full, intelligent, active part in liturgical celebrations which the nature of the Liturgy itself requires, and which, in virtue of their baptism, is the right and duty of the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (I Pt 2:9; cf. 2:4-5)" (SC, no. 14).

It is important to realize that the internal aspect of participation is indispensable as a basis, a requirement and the aim of all external participation. That is why personal prayer, Scriptural meditation
and moments of silence are necessary. "The sacred Liturgy is not
the whole of the Church's activity. Before men can come to the
Liturgy, they must be called to faith and to conversion" (SC, no. 9).
It is highly advisable to promote moments of silence for individual
reflection and prayer during the Eucharistic celebration, at such
times as after each reading, and after the homily and Holy
Communion. Choirs should resist the temptation to fill every
available quiet time with singing.

A sense of reverence and devotion is conducive to interiorized
active participation. Prominent among those who influence the
congregation in this matter is the priest celebrant. But the altar
servers, the readers, the choir and the extraordinary ministers of
Holy Communion where they are really needed, do also influence
the people by every move of theirs. Reverence is the exterior
manifestation of faith. It should show our sense of adoration of God
most holy and most high. And our belief in the Real Presence of
Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist should come across in how the
ministers handle the Blessed Sacrament, how they genuflect and
how they recite the prescribed prayers.

Liturgical music promotes worship. The Gregorian chant has an
honoured place in the history of the Latin rite. It is to be noted that
even young people today do appreciate it. Most liturgical singing
will understandably be in the mother tongue. The Diocesan or
National Music Commission should see that such texts are suitable
from the theological and musical points of view before they are
approved for Church use.

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal wisely notes the
importance of common gestures by the worshipping congregation
(nos. 42-44). Examples are times for the congregation to stand,
.kneel or sit. Bishops' Conferences can and do make some
specifications. Care should be taken not to regiment the
congregation, as if it were an army. Some flexibility should be
allowed, more so as it is easy to hurt people's eucharistic sensitivity
- with reference, for example, to kneeling or standing.

Church architecture also influences active participation. If a
church is built and the seats are arranged as in an amphitheatre or
as in a banquet, the undeclared emphasis may be horizontal
attention to one another, rather than vertical attention to God. In
this sense the celebration of Mass facing the people demands from
the priest and altar servers a high level of discipline, so that as from
the offertory of the Mass it be seen clearly that both priest and
people are turned towards God, not towards one another. We come
to Mass primarily to adore God, not to affirm one another,
although this is not excluded.

Some people think that liturgical renewal means the removal
of kneelers from Church pews, the knocking down of altar rails
or the positioning of the altar in the middle of the sitting area of
the people. The Church has never said any such thing. Nor does
liturgical restoration mean iconoclasm or the removal of all
statues and sacred images. These should be displayed, albeit with
good judgment. And the altar of the Blessed Sacrament should be
outstanding for its beauty and honored prominence, otherwise in
some so-called restored churches one could rightly lament:
"They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they
have put him" (Jn 20:13).

Lay Liturgical Roles
For proper celebration of the sacred liturgy and fruitful
participation in it by all Christ's faithful, it is important to
understand the roles proper to the ministerial or ordained priest and
those proper to the lay faithful. Christ is the priest, the high priest.
He gives all baptized people a share in this role of offering gifts to
God. The common priesthood of all the baptized gives people the
capacity to offer Christian worship, to offer Christ to the Eternal
Father through the hands of the ordained priest at the Eucharistic
celebration, to receive the sacraments and to live holy lives and by
self-denial and active charity make of their entire lives a sacrifice.

The ministerial priest, on the other hand, is a man chosen from
among the baptized and ordained by the Bishop to the Sacrament of
Holy Orders. He alone can consecrate bread into the Body of Christ
and wine into the Blood of Christ and offer to the Eternal Father in the name of Christ and the whole Christian people. It is clear that, though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are closely related (cf. LG, no. 10).

The major challenge is to help the lay faithful appreciate their dignity as baptized persons. From this follows their role at the Eucharistic sacrifice and other liturgical acts. They are the people of God. They are insiders. Their share as readers of lessons, as leaders of song and as the people offering with and through the priest is based on Baptism. The high point is when they communicate at the Eucharistic table. This crowns their participation at the Eucharistic sacrifice.

There should be no attempt to clericalize the laity. This could happen when, for example, lay people chosen as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion no longer see this role as being called on to help when the ordinary ministers (bishop, priest and deacon) are not available in sufficient numbers to cope with the high number of communicants.

We have also the opposite mistake of trying to laicize the clergy. When the priest no longer wishes to bless the people with the formula “May Almighty God bless you”, but prefers the seemingly democratic wording, “May Almighty God bless us”, then we have a confusion of roles. The same thing happens when some priests think that they should not concelebrate a Mass but should just participate as lay people in order to show more solidarity with the lay faithful. “In liturgical celebrations, each participant, whether minister or simple member of the faithful, in the performance of his office, is to do all that and only that which belongs to him from the nature of things and the rules of liturgy” (SC, no. 28).

**Conclusion: Revitalization of Church Life**

There is no doubt that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has continued to sustain the Church along the paths of holiness by fostering genuine liturgical life. It remains important to see that the Council’s genuine directives are actually followed.

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**Introduction**

It is a fact that as the Pope says, “some have received the new books with a certain indifference, or without trying to understand the reasons for the changes; others, unfortunately, have turned back in a one-sided and exclusive way to the previous liturgical forms which some of them consider to be the sole guarantee of certainty in the faith” (VQA, no. 11). Ongoing formation continues to be necessary.

Moreover we have to note that the liturgy of the Church goes beyond the liturgical reform. Many young priests, consecrated brothers and sisters and lay faithful are not conversant with the liturgical books of fifty years ago, either because they were born after Vatican II, or because they were infants when it was celebrated. What is above all needed is “an ever deeper grasp of the liturgy of the Church, celebrated according to the current books and lived above all as a reality in the spiritual order” (VQA, no. 14). There should be a widespread formation of the lay faithful in the theology and spirituality of the liturgy.

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**Abbreviations**

- DC - Dominicae Cenae
- EE - Ecclesiae de Eucharistia
- LG - Lumen Gentium
- SC - Sacrosanctum Concilium
- VQA - Vicesimus Quintus Annum
- VL - Varietas Legitimae