



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

**Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops**

## **Why Study the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Today?**

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) was the first document produced by the Second Vatican Council, and arguably the most influential. The everyday lives of millions of Catholics around the world have been influenced by what it had to say. It was approved by an overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers (2,147 to 4), and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963. It set in motion the most far-reaching liturgical reform in Catholic history.

In 1985, the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops would look back and reflect that "the liturgical renewal is the most visible fruit of the whole work of the Council." Pope John Paul II, on the document's twenty-fifth anniversary, would agree: "For many people the message of the Second Vatican Council has been experienced principally through the liturgical reform."

Another 20 years have passed since that time, and interest in the Constitution has not diminished but grown. On its fortieth anniversary, Pope John Paul II opined that "With the passing of time and in light of its

fruits, the importance of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has become increasingly clear" (*Spiritus et Sponsa*, 2). Pope Benedict XVI, as recently as June 2008, in a homily delivered via satellite to the 49th International Eucharistic Congress in Quebec, exhorted the faithful to study this document. "I would like everyone to make a commitment to study this great mystery [the Eucharist]," he said, "especially by revisiting and exploring, individually and in groups, the Council's text on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, so as to bear witness courageously to the mystery."

## **How Did This Document Come to Be?**

In the popular imagination, the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council are associated with the tumultuous 1960s, when "Times They Are A-Changin'" was on the radio, civil rights protesters were in the streets, the Vietnam war was on the news, and the sexual revolution was changing attitudes at a startling pace. This is a false perception. The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council were not a product of the sixties. They developed gradually and originated in a much earlier era.

A new concern with recovering the original meaning of the liturgy surfaced in the nineteenth century in French and German Benedictine monasteries. It developed into a worldwide movement during the first half of the twentieth century. As early as 1910, Pope Pius X called for active participation in the rites of the Church,

and solemnly identified the liturgy as "the indispensable source of the true Christian spirit" (*Tra le Solecitudini*, #220). His call for active participation was taken up by scholars and pastors in parishes, monasteries, schools, and religious houses around the world.

The Liturgical Movement, as it came to be called, began as an effort to study and understand the liturgy. Gradually, it became a movement of reform that sought to make the liturgy more accessible to everyone. Pope Pius XII endorsed the Liturgical Movement in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, written in 1947. He also sponsored several important liturgical reforms in the 1950s, restoring the Easter Vigil to its former glory on Holy Saturday night and reforming the other liturgies of Holy Week as well. The success of these efforts raised the expectations of many, and when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, liturgy was the first item on the agenda.

## **The Spirit of the Liturgical Renewal**

Two words that capture the spirit of the liturgical renewal of the Conciliar period are *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word that means bringing things up to the present day. Pope John XXIII called for the Church to update its presentation of its message. His call was motivated by pastoral concern. He did not want the Church to lose touch with the contemporary concerns and struggles of its people.

*Ressourcement*, a French word, means "back to the sources," that is, the study of liturgical history reaching back to the early centuries. Far from a sterile, archeological interest in the past, going back to the sources was a springboard for renewal, asking new questions of ancient texts.

At first glance, *ressourcement* may seem incompatible with *aggiornamento*, but actually they are complementary. "Sound tradition," protected by the Constitution (CSL, 23) is not simply a matter of preserving "old stuff." By going back to the sources, by studying and understanding the history of the liturgy, one can discern what is essential, what *must* be handed on in order to preserve the health of the Church in the present and sustain it in the future. A keen appreciation for how the Church's message is heard today, in turn, helps the Church pass on its living tradition effectively, so that it can be grasped and owned by a new generation.

## **The Theology of the Constitution**

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy has the standing of permanent law, and in many ways it reads like a book of statutes. At the same time, it is a theological statement. Many passages embody commitments and beliefs that are profoundly theological and inspiring, and well worth meditating on.

The theological heart of the Constitution is to be found in the concept of the Paschal Mystery. The death, Resurrection, and glorification of Jesus is the mystery par excellence that the liturgy celebrates.

The Paschal Mystery is presented as the principal way in which our Lord redeemed us (CSL, 5) and the mystical reality into which we are plunged by our Baptism (#6). It is the reason why believers have gathered for Eucharist since the time of the apostles (#6), and the wellspring of all the sacraments (#61).

Throughout the document, one also finds a vigorous theology of the Church. The liturgy is the "summit and source" of the life of the Church (CSL, 10). The whole mystical Body of Jesus Christ, head and members, performs the liturgy (#7). Liturgies are not private functions but expressions of the Church (#26), with diverse and complementary ministries and offices that work together for the good of the whole (#27-29). The document gives a picture of the bishop, the diocese, the parishes, pastors, and all the baptized forming an organic, ordered unity (#41-42). On the practical level, the Constitution encourages the establishment of diocesan commissions for liturgy, music, and art (CSL, 45-46), as well as territorial commissions and institutes for education in pastoral liturgy (#44). Thus, its theological vision is supported by structures to make the best use of the Spirit's diverse gifts.

## **How to Read the Constitution**

When reading the Constitution today, it is important—as it is in reading any historical document—to understand its context. For this purpose, commentaries can be helpful. The most venerable and detailed commentary on the Constitution can be found in Volume I of the *Commentaries on Vatican II* (Herder, 1967).

Written by Josef Jungmann, SJ, a peritus at the Council, the commentary analyzes the text article by article. More recent commentaries, such as Pamela Jackson's *An Abundance of Graces* (Hillenbrand, 2004) or my own *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Paulist, 2007) summarize the contents of the document more briefly and also show how it has been interpreted and implemented since the Council.

The structure of the document gives clear evidence that it was meant to serve as a blueprint for renewal. It begins with a short introduction that states the goals of the Council overall. Such a statement is found in no other document of the Second Vatican Council, and it is quite important for understanding the Council as a whole, as well as for understanding why the liturgical work of the Council was central to its agenda. The largest and most detailed chapter of the Constitution is the first, entitled "General Principles for the Restoration and Promotion of the Sacred Liturgy." It is followed by chapters devoted to the Eucharist, the other sacraments and sacramentals, the Divine Office, the liturgical year, sacred music, and finally, sacred art and furnishings. An appendix on the revision of the calendar appears at the end.

The text of the Constitution is full of references and allusions to the liturgical developments of the preceding hundred years. Some notes are provided (citations from scripture, the Church Fathers, liturgical texts, and the Council of Trent), but for the most part, it is simply assumed that the well-educated reader will know the background.

What are some of these allusions? We have already mentioned the call for participation found in the writings of Pius X. It appears often in the Constitution. Another example is the expression "noble simplicity" (CSL, 34). The expression comes from the influential essay "The Genius of the Roman Rite," published by Edmund Bishop near the turn of the twentieth century. Bishop argued that the Roman rite is characterized by a noble simplicity, soberness, and sense. The Council Fathers wanted to honor and preserve this fundamental quality of the Roman rite while reforming the liturgy. Noble simplicity wasn't merely an attractive idea on its own merits. It was a considered judgment, based on the study of liturgical history.

Following *Mediator Dei*, the Constitution enumerated ways in which Christ is present in the celebration (CSL, 7). It also spoke, however, of Christ's presence in his word—a form of "presence" not mentioned in *Mediator Dei*. This addition to a well-known list would have leapt to the eye of the document's first readers. Why was it added? It was included to foster ecumenism. One might press the question even further and ask: Why was the liturgy document concerned with ecumenism? Look at the introduction, where the aims of the Second Vatican Council as a whole are identified (#1), and you will find the answer.

Some of the provisions of the Constitution refer to liturgical practices so familiar today that we may take them completely for granted, such as Holy Communion under both forms (CSL, 55) or concelebration (#57). But these provisions were initially controversial and their acceptance hard won. Thus, when we see very cautious and limited permissions in these areas, we should remember that they were big steps at the time. Further development took place gradually over the years that followed the Council.

Some provisions of the Constitution, such as the call to inculturate the liturgy (CSL, 37-40), have generated a rich and nuanced discussion that is still going on vigorously around the globe. While the document states that the Church has always welcomed and sponsored the native genius of diverse peoples, this should not blind us to the fact that the call to adapt the liturgy to various cultures was a remarkable and noteworthy development. Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII both expressed interest in welcoming the genius of all peoples, but the inclusion of this provision in the Constitution raised the Church's commitment to inculturation to a higher level.

At times, the Constitution seems to represent both sides of a discussion. This is especially true with respect to Latin. Among the Council Fathers were strong views in favor of the vernacular and in favor of Latin, and both are represented (CSL, 36.1/36.2).

A "both-and" approach is also evident in the section on music. New musical compositions are welcomed (#121) and a variety of instruments may be used (#120), but Gregorian chant is warmly recommended (#116) and pipe organs are affirmed (#120).

## **What Happened after the Council?**

To carry out of the Council's directives in the Constitution, a host of practical decisions had to be made after the Council—by the Pope, the consultative bodies that advised the Pope, the conferences of bishops, and so on. It could not have been otherwise. The Constitution set a huge project in motion—one that is still going on today.

Since the Constitution's appearance in 1963, there have been five official instructions on its proper implementation. They give specific permissions and guidance in carrying out the reform. Three of these instructions appeared in quick succession: *Inter Oecumenici* (1964), *Tres Abhinc Annos* (1967), and *Liturgicae Instauraciones* (1970). The other two appeared much later: *Varietates Legitimae* (1994) and *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001). These are Vatican documents, written for the worldwide Church. There are also other documents—written by Popes, Episcopal Conferences, and individual bishops—that provide inspiration and guidance in carrying out the mandate of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

Many crucial conciliar reforms are not explicitly mentioned in the pages of the Constitution. A few examples would be the position of the priest at the altar (Mass facing the people is endorsed in *Oecumenici*), greater use of the vernacular (see *Tres Abhinc Annos*), and the inclusion of women in liturgical ministries (*Liturgicae Instauraciones* established this officially).

*Inter Oecumenici*), greater use of the vernacular (see *Tres Abhinc Annos*), and the inclusion of women in liturgical ministries (*Liturgicae Instauraciones* established this officially). It's also worth noting that the Constitution does not discuss eucharistic adoration; its primary focus was the celebration of the Eucharist. The document to consult concerning a renewed understanding of adoration would be *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, issued in 1973.

## **One Great Work**

The special virtue of studying the Constitution is that it is like the hub of a wheel. One can see, radiating outward from it, countless works of fidelity by the praying Church. Not only Popes and bishops, pastors and religious, but all faithful Catholics have a part to play in its vision and mission. Within all the baptized is the call and privilege to be caught up in the work of the liturgy: the eternal praise of the Father by the Son, through the Holy Spirit. If at times we fail to do our part as well as we should, it remains, nevertheless, a great work and a vibrant calling.

In the next issue of *Pastoral Liturgy*®, we will look at the spirituality of the Constitution.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What has been your experience of reading or studying primary texts, such as Church documents, historic statements, or books of the Bible? What challenges have you faced in making sense of such texts? What has helped you to gain a better understanding?

2. Everyone brings their own perceptions to the task of reading and interpreting Church documents. Sum up in a few words your general impression of worship in the period after the Second Vatican Council. What questions does your experience raise for you?
3. As you read the Constitution, what surprises you? What do you see, on the other hand, that seems self-evident or familiar? Are there particular words or phrases that "jump off the page" as you read them?
4. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy calls the liturgy the "summit and source" of our life of faith (CSL, 10). To what degree does this describe your experience? Does it correspond to the attitude of people in your parish? Why or why not?
5. Full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy is a value stressed by the Constitution (CSL, 14, 19, 27, 30, 48, 121). What are some factors that assist your participation in the liturgy? What impedes your participation in any given celebration?
6. Look up the passage which speaks of the various ways that Christ is present in the liturgy (CSL, 7). Which of these do you find easiest to experience in a heartfelt manner? Which is the most challenging for you?

