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The Mass Before and After Vatican II

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SECOND OF TWO PARTS

In this edition of Catholic Update, Fr. Matthew O'Toole continues to trace the development of the Mass from a few years before the promulgation of The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) to the Mass as we celebrate it today..

The first part of Fr. O'Toole's exploration of the liturgical reforms after the Second Vatican Council was published in the June-July 2024 edition of Catholic Update (C2406A). We encourage you to share both newsletters with those who want to better understand the Mass.



Promoting a Love of Scripture

Taking place concurrently with the liturgical reform movement of the twentieth century was the renewal of biblical studies in the Catholic Church. The growing appreciation for the role of sacred Scripture played an important part in Mass reforms at the Second Vatican Council. Just as theologians concerned with doctrine and liturgy were revisiting the writings of the early Church Fathers and ancient ritual texts, so too were Scripture scholars reaching deep into the past to recover biblical and patristic languages and modes of thought. The fruits of this new appreciation for Scripture compelled the council to make the word of God better known to the faithful.

The conciliar document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* declares: “[T]o achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony” (SC 24).

In the mid-twentieth century, ordinary Catholics, unlike their Protestant counterparts, had minimal interaction with the Bible. Beyond a general knowledge of stories, characters, and themes in Scripture, Catholics were given little encouragement or opportunity to contemplate seriously the word of God. Prior to Vatican II, biblical exposure came largely from listening to the readings at Mass, and in Latin! Back then, Catholics heard readings almost exclusively from the Gospel of Matthew; passages from the other Gospels were used less frequently.

The Vatican II bishops expressed a willingness to respond to the “needs of our age.”

“The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (SC 51).

The Council Fathers set in motion a revision of the *Lectionary*, the book containing the Scripture readings arranged according to the liturgical seasons. To give the faithful greater exposure to the word of God and the breadth of the Bible, a three-year cycle of Scripture was subsequently instituted for Sunday Masses, and a two-year cycle of readings was created for the weekday liturgies.

Before Vatican II, preaching by the ordained minister tended to be a sermon, that is, more topical and formal in nature on some matter of faith or current issue the priest may have wanted to address that particular day, but not necessarily derived from the Scripture readings of the Mass. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* encouraged the preaching of a less formal homily, rather than a sermon:

“[T]he ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources, and its character should be that of a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ, ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy” (SC 35.2).

While the homily continued to be delivered by the ordained clergy, the Constitution gave the laity a new, shared responsibility in the ministration of the Mass. Although a common experience today, originally the presence of a layperson inside the sanctuary assisting in the liturgy was a major change. “Servers, lectors, commentators, and members of the choir,” the Council Fathers declared, “also exercise a genuine liturgical function. They

ought, therefore, to discharge their office with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God’s people” (SC 29). Assisting at Mass became one way in which lay Catholics could exercise their “priestly office” imparted to them by baptism.

PRAYING THE MASS

Sr. Thomas, my third-grade teacher, taught me how to pray at Mass with a little jingle:

Adore ‘til the Gospel.
Give thanks ‘til the bell.
‘Til Communion ask pardon.
Then all your wants tell.

Sister did a pretty good job. Almost eighty years later, I can recite this little ditty as easily as the Hail Mary or the Pledge of Allegiance. The lesson’s apparent purpose was the four kinds of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, repentance, and intercession. What is striking, however, is that what we were taught had little to do with the actual content of the Mass. The pre-Vatican II Mass was a kind of holy background for our private prayer. Before Vatican II, we prayed at Mass. Now, we pray the Mass.

—ROBERT J. BYRNE

Responding to the Needs of Our Age

Pope St. John XXIII died in June 1963. When the bishops reconvened that fall for the second session of Vatican II, the Church had a new successor of St. Peter: Pope St. Paul VI. There was speculation whether he would continue the council’s reforming efforts. That uncertainty was put to rest when he pressed forward, and on December 4, 1963, approved and promulgated the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), with almost unanimous support of all the bishops. Church decrees, encyclicals, and the like derive their Latin titles from the opening words of the document. Thus, the title of this Constitution means “Most Sacred Council.”

From the start, the Council Fathers expressed a willingness to respond to the “needs of our age.” They intended to instill stronger and more life-giving energy to the faithful of



Pope St. Paul VI presiding over the introductory gathering of the council. LOTHAR WOLLEH / WIKIPEDIA

Christ. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states, the Church recognizes that in the celebration of the liturgy, Christ is made present to the people and the people in turn are made into “a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place for God in the Spirit” (SC 2).

Participation in the divine liturgy was no longer to be a passive duty for the faithful, nor a background for private prayer. Catholics were now called to be engaged with the ritual of the Eucharist: “In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (SC 14).

The agenda of liturgical reform at Vatican II had now been established by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Its implementation, as well as its interpretation, varied widely throughout the universal Church. The document called on pastors to make certain that Catholics were catechized about the changes to the Mass and that the faithful came to appreciate

what the sacred rituals were meant to accomplish.

As Msgr. Nicholas Schneider described in his biography of Joseph Cardinal Ritter of the Archdiocese of St. Louis: “One of the challenges facing dioceses after Vatican II was how to get its message to the faithful in ways that would be both instructive and engaging. St. Louis answered the challenge by developing ‘Operation Renewal,’ an archdiocesan-wide program consisting of 2,600 parish study groups that met to discuss the Council documents in a digested form, more easily presented with appropriate questions to stimulate discussion. People were eager to engage in this process and it was very popular at the parish level.”

During this time, it was not uncommon for some Catholics involved with liturgical reform to get overly enthusiastic about change. There are many stories of churches or religious houses that experimented with innovations. Most were modest accommodations, but some were extreme, like altering the ritual prayers into colloquial language, substituting a reading from Scripture with a

poem or an excerpt from a piece of literature, or baking Communion bread with unpermitted ingredients. While earnest in wanting to see the reforms implemented, many bishops, including Cardinal Ritter, kept presiders on a short leash. Hearing that some were celebrating Mass in ways not sanctioned, he wrote a letter to his priests threatening them with reassignment if they experimented with the liturgy without permission.

An Explosion of New Music

Catholic hymnody began to change swiftly as well. The contemporary trend in popular American folk music influenced many of the songs congregations started to sing at Mass. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young composers were producing music to be sung in English at the “new” Mass. Among them were Sebastian Temple (“Prayer of St. Francis”), Carey Landry (“Hail Mary, Gentle Woman”), and Ray Repp (“Peace, My Friends”). About the same time, a young group of Jesuit scholastics studying at Saint Louis University met and began composing music. “The St. Louis Jesuits,” as they became known, produced and published more than 150 liturgical songs and hymns, like “City of God,” “Earthen Vessels,” “Be Not Afraid,” “One Bread, One Body,” and “Here I Am, Lord.” Their recordings even garnered Grammy nominations. Songs originally used for student liturgies on university campuses were soon being sung across the world in the post-Vatican II Church.



The “St. Louis Jesuits” made a lasting mark on Catholic Liturgical music.

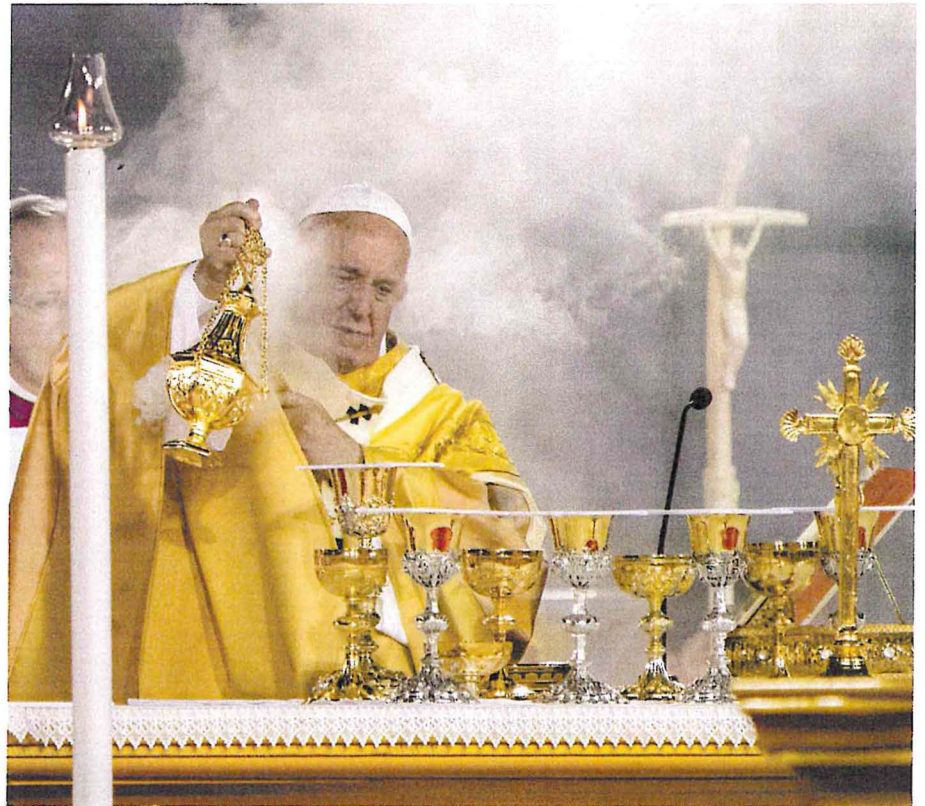
Sacrosanctum Concilium ushered in the liturgical reforms to the Mass as Catholics know it today. The teaching of this document emphasized the faithful’s “fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations”. (SC 14). It allowed the Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular language of the people; it restored lost components, like the Prayer of the Faithful and the offertory procession; it opened a variety of ministries to the lay faithful; and it encouraged incorporation of contemporary music and art.

Subsequent reforms followed in the years after the council. The calendar of liturgical observances was revised. The council called for a restoration of the permanent diaconate, and this was later instituted in 1967 with Pope St. Paul VI’s apostolic letter, *Sacramentum Ordinis* (*Sacramentum Diaconatus Ordinem*).

Accommodations for the Concerned

All these changes were not entirely received with enthusiasm by the faithful. Some Catholics dismayed by the departure of the Mass familiar to them, grumbled. To some, the new liturgy felt “too Protestant.” For others, there was a loss of sacred mystery and sense of otherworldliness that the old Mass provided with the use of Latin and the priest softly speaking prayers at the altar with his back to the people. The theological basis for the changes called for by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* were challenged in some corners of the Church. One group called the reforms heretical and went into schism with Rome, establishing their own church that denies the legitimacy of Vatican II.

Pope St. Paul VI and Pope St. John Paul II made accommodations for priests and other recognized groups of the faithful to celebrate the preconciliar Mass, mostly to assuage their emotional distress, and only for special circumstances. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI made the momentous decision to issue *On the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform*



Pope Francis presides over Mass in Bangkok (2019). BRICKINFO MEDIA / SHUTTERSTOCK

of 1970 (*Summorum Pontificum*). This decree lifted most of the restrictions on the use of the old Mass. Now there were two forms of the single Roman rite: the Ordinary Form (*Novus Ordo*), used almost universally and in the vernacular; and the Extraordinary Form, which is commonly referred to as the Traditional Latin Mass.

Use of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass became particularly popular in the United States. In July 2021, Pope Francis reigned in what his predecessor allowed. In the accompanying letter to his papal rescript *Guardians of the Tradition* (*Traditionis Custodes*), Pope Francis charged that the Extraordinary Form had been “exploited” by traditionalists in the Church, and its proliferation had encouraged disagreements and caused divisions among Catholics. Henceforward, a bishop must have a dispensation from the Holy See if he wishes to allow the preconciliar Mass to be celebrated in his diocese or to erect personal parishes dedicated to this same

form. Pope Francis called the path of liturgical reform begun by the council “irreversible.”

Decades since the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the implementation of change to worship continues to cause concern among some of the faithful. But this is not necessarily bad, because it reminds us how important the sacrament of the Eucharist is for God’s people. The manner in which this sacrament is celebrated is, for some, an issue of taste and style. For others, it is more importantly a theological expression of the Church’s beliefs.

What never changes and remains always true is that Jesus Christ comes to us in the Eucharist, by the proclamation of his word and in the sharing of his Body and Blood. Amen!

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Imprimi Potest: Fr. Kevin Zubel, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists

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