

How Firm a Foundation

Basic Principles of the Liturgy

In calling for “the reform and promotion of the sacred liturgy,” in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) more than forty years ago, the Second Vatican Council identified some basic principles that should guide that reform. The bishops drew on the whole history of the liturgy as well as teachings of recent popes—particularly Pope St. Pius X and Pope Pius XII—and research undertaken during the twentieth century liturgical renewal. Here are five of those principles that provide a firm foundation for our rites and our pastoral liturgical practice today.

The Liturgy Is the Action of Christ. Liturgy does not belong to any one individual or to a local community or even just to the present members of the Church. The liturgy belongs to Christ as an exercise of his priestly office (SC, 7), that is, as an expression of Jesus Christ’s total self-offering to the Father in love and fidelity. This priestly act is carried out today by Christ present in the Church. Christ acts through the Church in three ways: in the baptized members of the Church who gather for worship (and in a particular way through ordained ministers), in the proclamation of the Word (and in a particular way in the Gospel), and in the sacramental elements (uniquely in the bread and wine of the Eucharist).

The Liturgy Leads Us to Authentic Gospel Living. As our hearts and minds are transformed through the grace of God, we are called to respond to that grace and move beyond the walls of our churches into a world greatly in need of love, care, and concern. We are called to be living signs of the reign of God for the salvation of the whole world. The late Pope John Paul II made such authentic living of the Gospel a measure of the effectiveness of our liturgy. In his apostolic letter *Mane Nobiscum, Domine* (2004), he wrote: “By our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ . . . This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged” (*Mane*, 27).

Full Participation in the Divine Plan Stems from and Leads to Full Participation in the Liturgy. The Church was established to spread the Gospel through word and action (Matthew 28:19–20). The liturgy is the “primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (SC, 14) which will lead to participation in the Church’s mission. Therefore “full, conscious, and active participation” in the liturgy (SC, 14)

is essential in order to shape people to serve as ambassadors of Christ, bring salvation to the world, and live as redeemed people. “Full” participation is both internal and external, for we are embodied spirits. If we are to be conformed to Christ, we need to “embody” the attitudes of worship, prayer, devotion, petition, celebration, sorrow, and rejoicing. We need to hear the Word and to proclaim it in spoken and sung prayer, acclamation, psalmody, and hymnody. We need to savor the Eucharistic elements and the cleansing power of water, the smooth anointing of oil, and the touch of hands invoking the Spirit, if the Spirit and the Word and the sacramental presence of Christ are to transform our spirits.

The Church Is One Body with Many Ministries. The primary liturgical role, of course, is that of the whole Body—the liturgical assembly of believers brought together by the Holy Spirit. But, like a human body, the Body of Christ needs specialized “members” who perform various ministries so that the whole Body may function properly. These special ministers include ordained members (bishops, priests, deacons) and baptized members who are appointed to a ministry. The goal of each ministry is the action of the whole Body in sharing in Christ’s worship of the Father, and each ministry has both responsibilities and limits. Each individual should perform the whole of what is required by the role, but only that which is required (SC, 28), acting “with the sincere devotion and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected . . . by God’s people” (SC, 29).

Music Is an Integral Part of the Solemn Liturgy. Of all the arts, music is the one most useful to and expressive of liturgy’s goals because it unites to the texts we proclaim in such a way that it adds delight to prayer, fosters oneness of spirit, and invests the rites with greater solemnity (SC, 112). Music is ubiquitous in authentic Roman (Latin) Rite liturgy, not only in the specific musical selections that the rite includes but also in every element of ritual celebration: tempo, rhythm, pitch, silence, timbre, tension and release, harmony and dissonance. Music contributes to the complex set of symbols that constitute the liturgy in a unique and irreplaceable way that enlivens the other symbolic elements. Its purpose as an integral part of the liturgy, in other words, is the same as the purpose of liturgy itself: “the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (SC, 112).