

CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY

Sacrosanctum Concilium

Liturgy was the first topic debated at Vatican II, and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*SC*) was the first document issued. The bishops decided to take up liturgy first because, of all the draft documents prepared in advance for the Council, the one on the liturgy was in the best shape. This was due to the fact that the ideas in this document had been circulating for decades prior to the Council. Despite all its newness, the Second Vatican Council did not fall out of the sky. Rather it was the result of a renewal already at work.

LITURGICAL RENEWAL PRIOR TO VATICAN II

The average Catholic's experience of the Mass prior to Vatican II was of a sacred ritual that was at the same time mysterious and mechanical. Prayers were in Latin. And for much of the Mass, the priest had his back to the congregation. This tended to separate the laity from what was going on at the altar. (Except for angelic-looking altar boys dressed like priests, the laity did not enter the sacred space beyond the communion rail.) Before the Council the faithful took part in an array of devotions outside of the liturgy—ranging from benedictions and holy hours to novenas and the rosary. But at Mass they were largely passive, watching a ritual done *for* them but not *by* them.

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Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

Introduction

Chapter One: General Principles for the Restoration and Promotion of the Sacred Liturgy

Chapter Two: The Most Sacred Mystery of the Eucharist

Chapter Three: The Other Sacraments and the Sacramentals

Chapter Four: The Divine Office

Chapter Five: The Liturgical Year

Chapter Six: Sacred Music

Chapter Seven: Sacred Art and Furnishings

Appendix: A Declaration of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on Revision of the Calendar
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And yet, during these years, a liturgical renewal was already at work. It began among European monks seeking ways to enrich their common prayer. And it gradually spread from monasteries to parishes. It even influenced papal teaching. Saint Pius X (1903–1914) sensed the separation many Catholics felt from the Eucharist and encouraged more frequent reception of Communion. To help, he lowered the age for First Communion. Thirty years later, Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) made the liturgy the topic of an entire encyclical letter called *Mediator Dei* (“Mediator of God”). In it, Pius XII confirmed the basic direction of the liturgical movement. He called all Catholics to full, active participation in the liturgy and said that all of the faithful constitute a holy priesthood. He recognized that Christ is present not only under the appearance of bread and wine, but also is present in the priest and the people. In terms of practice, the pope relaxed the

eucharistic fast to encourage people to take Communion. And, in the early 1950s, he reformed the liturgical rites for the Easter Vigil and Holy Week.

Alongside such official support, priests and bishops tentatively began to experiment with ways to encourage lay participation. Limited use of the vernacular emerged. Missals with English translations of the Mass were promoted in the United States. And “dialogue Masses,”

where the whole congregation responded to the prayers of the priest, became more common. These developments—a century in the making—reached their culmination in Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

THE DEBATE AT VATICAN II

After the dramatic opening days of the Second Vatican Council, debate on the liturgy began on Monday, October 22, 1962. The debate—which ran for fifteen meetings (days, or “General Congregations”)—would occupy nearly half of the Council’s first session. What stands out, particularly in comparison with other documents, is how little the text changed over the course of these debates. The final text of *SC* remained substantially the same as the initial draft presented to the council assembly.

This initial draft was put together by the Preparatory Liturgical Commission during the two years leading up to the Council. The commission secretary, Father Annibale Bugnini, was a strong proponent of the liturgical movement. He helped the commission produce a document that underscored the need for reform of the liturgy and that laid out principles to guide this reform.

During the fifteen days of debate on the liturgy, 328 speeches were given by the council participants (another 297 comments were submitted in writing). The speeches ranged from enthusiastic endorsement to firm resistance. The topics that generated the most intense debate were (1) the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, (2) whether priests should be allowed to concelebrate Mass, (3) if the laity should be allowed to receive consecrated wine along with the bread and (4) what the role of

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“ It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’ (1 Pet 2:9, 4-5) have a right and to which they are bound by reason of their Baptism ” (SC, 14).

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bishops' conferences should be in allowing for local adaptation. Discussion on these topics revealed a split among the bishops between a majority open to reform and a minority opposed to change.

At first it was unclear how large the minority was. But a dramatic moment occurred on the seventh day of debate (October 30). On that day Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani gave a speech strongly criticizing the document. Cardinal Ottaviani was the head of the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) and the unofficial leader of those at the Council opposed to reform. He attacked the document for proposing changes that would confuse and scandalize the faithful. He asked if the council fathers were planning to launch a revolution. He had so many complaints about the text that his speech ran over the allotted time. When he was asked to stop, he refused, and his microphone was shut off. The resounding applause that followed was a clear sign that most bishops did not agree with the tone of his remarks. Perhaps resistance to the document was not as widespread as some of the speeches indicated. Two weeks later, when the first vote was taken to determine if the text was generally acceptable as a basis for further revision, only forty-six participants voted against it (out of 2,215 votes cast).

THE PACE OF THE COUNCIL

Many bishops complained about the slow pace of the debate on the liturgy. Nearly a month had passed since the start of the Council and they hadn't finished discussing the first document. Part of the problem was that the council rules were ambiguous about how long debate on a particular topic should go on. As speeches became repetitive, the bishops became bored. They left their seats to smoke or get coffee. Finally, Pope John XXIII intervened. On November 6 he gave the council presidents authority to close debate if they felt a topic had been exhausted.

The pope's announcement was made at 10:00 AM, and the debate on chapter two of the liturgy draft was terminated immediately! From that point on the Council was able to move more quickly. But by then it had already become clear to everyone that the Second Vatican

Council would need to meet again. Plans were also being made to hold a second session the following fall. It was at this second session, on December 4, 1963, that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was formally approved and promulgated.

READING GUIDE

The first line of *SC* states the four goals of the “sacred council” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) Vatican II: (1) to energize Catholics, (2) to update church institutions, (3) to encourage the unity of all Christians and (4) to reach out to the whole world. These goals were spelled out by Paul VI, who became pope after John XXIII’s death, in his opening speech at the Council’s second session (September 29, 1963). They remain a wonderful summary of what Vatican II was all about.

According to *SC*, in order to achieve these goals the liturgy had to be reformed and promoted. Chapter one of *SC* lays out general principles for guiding this reform. Chapters two through seven take up the specific areas to be addressed.

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL PRINCIPLES (*SC*, 5–46)

The Nature of Liturgy (SC, 5–13)

Jesus Christ is the source of our lives, our salvation and our worship. This emphasis on Jesus Christ—so strong at the start of *SC*—runs throughout all the documents of Vatican II. *SC* states that Christ’s work of redemption was achieved through the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. This redemption touches us through liturgy, particularly baptism and Eucharist. Following the earlier encyclical of Pius XII, *SC* recognizes that Christ is present to us in many ways. Christ is present to us in a special way under the appearance of bread and wine, but he is also present in the priest who ministers the sacraments, in the word of God that is proclaimed and in the assembly of people who gather in Christ’s name. While preaching often precedes worship, and while private prayer and devotions are important, it is the liturgy that is the source and summit of all the church’s activity.

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Bar Jonah and Bar-abbas

Off a side aisle in St. Peter's Basilica were coffee shops set up to accommodate the almost three thousand men gathering each day for the council sessions. Nicknamed "Bar-Jonah" (Hebrew for "son of John," a scriptural reference to Saint Peter) and "Bar-abbas," they served as a place for bishops and their advisers to discuss (or escape!) the debates going on in the council hall. Credit for the idea goes to Pope John. He was rumored to have said that if the bishops didn't have a place to smoke their cigarettes, "they will be puffing under their miters."

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Active Participation (SC, 14–20)

The full, conscious and active participation of everyone at the liturgy is to be encouraged. In fact, this is the primary concern of liturgical renewal, the goal to be considered before everything else. This call for all people to actively participate runs throughout *SC* (it is repeated over a dozen times).

Principles for Reform (SC, 21–46)

SC calls for a general reform of the liturgy. The reform is to be truly comprehensive, affecting not just the Mass, but the church's entire liturgical system. To accomplish this, the liturgical books are to be revised "as soon as possible." *SC* lays out general principles to guide this reform, stating that the liturgy is a communal celebration and the rites should reflect this fact. All participate in this communal celebration according to their various roles. The permission granted later in *SC* (*SC*, 57) to allow

priests to concelebrate Mass (allowing more than one priest to preside over the same liturgy) reflects this move away from seeing the Eucharist as a private affair.

The overriding concern is to promote the active participation of everyone in the liturgy. For this to occur, the various prayers and rites must be easily understood by the participants. Thus the liturgy should be marked by a noble simplicity. Scripture is very important and should be used more, particularly in preaching. In a crucial passage, *SC* states that, while the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rite,

regional conferences of bishops can allow for the use of the vernacular in their churches. This article on the vernacular (*SC*, 36) is a classic example of the gentle way in which the council participants introduced change: They first acknowledged the value of the past, and then opened a door to the future. Subsequent church implementation would greatly expand *SC*'s initial opening to local languages.

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 “ Nevertheless, the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows ” (*SC*, 10).

Since the church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity, local adaptation of the liturgy is sometimes appropriate. One of the more important theological rediscoveries of *SC* is its vision of the local church united with its bishop around the Eucharist (see *SC*, 26, 41; also *LG*, 23, 26). The question of the relationship of the local bishop to the universal church (symbolized by the bishop of Rome, the pope) would come to dominate the debate on the Constitution on the Church. But this issue first came up in the debates on the liturgy: Just how much authority could local leaders exercise in adapting the liturgy? The minority position (voiced mainly by those bishops and cardinals who worked in the Vatican) wanted all authority to rest in Rome, with the pope and the various Vatican offices of the curia. The majority position (voiced mainly by those bishops and cardinals who led various dioceses) wanted more authority at the local level. In the end *SC* affirmed the authority of local bishops' conferences to make adaptations, provided that the “substantial unity” of the liturgy is preserved. Changes that involve a “more radical adaptation” are to be referred to Rome.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EUCHARIST (*SC*, 47–58)

Chapter two begins with a rapid review of eucharistic theology. Instituted at the Last Supper, the Eucharist is a sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood, a memorial of his death and resurrection, a sacrament of

love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity and a paschal banquet. The chapter then moves to recommendations for reform. The guiding concern is to promote the active participation of all of the faithful. Therefore, the rites are to be simplified, more Scripture is to be used, homilies are recommended, and the prayer of the faithful is to be restored. Three suggestions for reform that provoked major debates at the Council are included: (1) the vernacular is allowed, (2) Communion under both bread and wine is allowed (receiving the Lord's Body consecrated *at that Mass* is also encouraged), and (3) concelebration by multiple priests is allowed. Finally, the chapter underlines the link between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist.

CHAPTER THREE: OTHER SACRAMENTS AND SACRAMENTALS (SC, 59–82)

The concern for the intelligibility of the rites and the active participation of the people continues in SC's treatment of the other sacraments. Significant proposals made in chapter three include the restoration of the catechumenate for adults (a period of formation and instruction for those who choose to be baptized into the church), the revision of the rite of confirmation so that its connection with baptism is made clearer, the recognition that the sacrament called "Extreme Unction" is more accurately named "Anointing of the Sick" and that it is not intended only for those at the point of death, and the renewal of the funeral rites so that they express more clearly the hope of the resurrection. Certain elements from local cultures, where appropriate, can be incorporated into the church's sacramental life (for example, initiation and marriage rituals).

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DIVINE OFFICE (SC, 83–101)

The Divine Office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, is the church's public prayer, a recitation of psalms and other scriptural passages and prayers said throughout the day. At the time of Vatican II, these regular prayers were sung in many communities of vowed religious and were required of most clerics. Thus SC keeps these groups in mind. But the text also encourages the laity to take up this ancient tradition. The specific sug-

gestions made are meant to help everyone who prays the Divine Office better integrate this practice with the conditions of modern life.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LITURGICAL YEAR (*SC*, 102–111)

Over the course of a year, the church celebrates the whole story of Jesus—from his birth and life, to his death and resurrection, to his ascension into heaven and the promise of his return. The reform of the liturgical calendar is meant to bring out more clearly the profoundly Christ-centered nature of the church’s seasons. Thus, while celebrating the lives of Mary and the other saints is important, these should not distract from the church’s primary focus on Jesus. In response to movements outside the church, an appendix was added to *SC*, stating that the Council was not opposed to a perpetual calendar with a fixed date for Easter—provided that all Christians agreed on it.

CHAPTERS SIX AND SEVEN: MUSIC AND ART (*SC*, 112–130)

The final chapters on sacred music and sacred art generally praise the role of art and the work of artists in promoting prayer and piety. The document encourages forms of music that enable the active participation of the people. In art, it recommends noble beauty over sumptuous display. Church buildings should be designed with the liturgy in mind. The space should allow for the active participation of the faithful.

THE DOCUMENT TODAY

UNDERSTANDING AND MYSTERY

Perhaps the greatest gain to come from the reform of the liturgy inspired by *SC* is an increase in understanding. With prayers no longer in Latin, Catholics today can more easily understand what is going on at Mass. And with many of the rituals simplified, the major symbols in the sacraments stand out more clearly. If a sacrament is both *sign* and *cause* of God’s grace, it is the sign aspect that has been emphasized since Vatican II: “In this renewal, both texts and rites should be ordered so as to express more clearly the holy things which they signify” (*SC*, 21).

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The Language of the Council

The documents debated at Vatican II—and the debates themselves—were all in Latin. A simultaneous-translation system for the council hall was proposed before the first session, but it never materialized. Much of the behind-the-scenes work of the council commissions and the informal discussion among bishops took place in modern languages. But the official speeches in the council hall were in Latin. This posed a real barrier for those bishops who—outside of the liturgy—hadn't used Latin since their days in seminary. And during the debate on the liturgy, the irony of this arrangement was not lost on many of the participants. They heard speeches composed in elegant classical Latin that advocated more use of the vernacular at Mass. At the same time, they had to endure some speeches delivered in sloppy, elementary-level Latin that extolled the beauty and virtues of this ancient language!

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But some Catholics feel that what has been lost in all of this is a sense of mystery. For these Catholics, Sunday liturgy feels more like an informal gathering of people than the solemn worship of God. Many of these Catholics have no memories of the liturgy prior to Vatican II, but they still hunger for a greater sense of the sacred in worship. They want a feeling of awe and a recognition of God's transcendence. Other Catholics respond that God is encountered precisely in other people and in the basic activities of everyday life. This is the beauty and mystery of sacraments: God comes to us in bread and wine, God works through water, words and the touch of human hands. For these Catholics, the reform of the liturgy helps us to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary, the sacred in the assembly.

Sometimes, differences between these two viewpoints erupt in conversations about music (traditional hymns or contemporary songs?) or church architecture (Where is the tabernacle to be placed? How are the pews to be arranged?). It is far too simplistic to label these “pre-Vatican II” and “post-Vatican II” positions. For all involved are post-Vatican II people.