

CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

December 4, 1963

This first document produced by the Council represents a whole new way of thinking about the sacred liturgy, one that is rooted more in the experience of the early Church, rather than the medieval Church. The Council Fathers describe the reforms as a “restoration” of the liturgy. (#21)

Key reforms:

- Emphasis on the full, active, conscious participation of the faithful
- Use of vernacular
- Adaptations permitted in the ritual
- More Scripture in the Mass
- Restoration of other sacramentals

Full, active, conscious participation of the faithful

Previously, the Church had taught that the efficacy of the Mass depended only on divine grace, not on the participation or the understanding of the assembly.

14. Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people... is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. 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.

21. In this restoration, both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community.

48. The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.

Use of the vernacular or mother tongue

In the early Church, Mass was always celebrated in the language of the people. When the Church adopted Latin as its official language, Latin was the common language spoken in Rome and throughout much of the Church. But, as Latin died out, the Church retained it as the language of the sacred liturgy, thus rendering the Mass and all other sacramental celebrations unintelligible for most people.

The Council Fathers choose not to mandate a complete and immediate return to the vernacular. Instead, they allow each bishop to decide how much vernacular to incorporate into the liturgy in his diocese, and how rapidly to make the transition.

These are the relevant paragraphs:

36. 1. [T]he use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.

2. But since the use of the mother tongue... frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants...

3. [I]t is for the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority... to decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular language is to be used...

54. In Masses which are celebrated with the people, a suitable place may be allotted to their mother tongue... Nevertheless steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.

Once the new Roman Missal was produced in multiple languages, the people's response demonstrated a clear preference for Mass entirely in the vernacular.

The Council Fathers mandated that all clergy continue to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in Latin. (#101) However, once the new Breviary was produced in multiple languages, clerics also chose to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in their own native language.

Variations and adaptations of the liturgy for particular groups

Previously, the sacred liturgy was thought to transcend all cultures. Hence, it was suitable for all peoples of all lands, without adaptation. Now, the Council Fathers allow the possibility of adapting not only the language, but even the rituals themselves, to various local customs, especially in the missions. (#38)

Sacred Scripture in the Mass

The pre-Vatican II Mass had become focused almost entirely on the Eucharist, to the exclusion of the Word of God. The Council Fathers want Scripture to be a central focus once again, as it was in the early Church. This will require the development of an entirely new, multi-year Lectionary of readings (#51) and a renewed emphasis on homiletics, or scriptural preaching. (#52)

Other Sacraments and Sacramentals

In addition to the Mass, the document also deals with other sacraments and rites.

- The adult catechumenate had disappeared after infant baptism became the norm. The Council Fathers want it to be restored. (#64)
- They want a new rite for those already baptized in other Christian churches who wish to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church. (#69)
- They also emphasize that the sacrament of the sick is for healing, not just for the final preparation for death (“last rites” or “extreme unction”). (#73)

Follow-up to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

All of the following were produced after the Council as a direct result of this document:

- A new Roman Missal, with the form of the Mass celebrated today, translated into all modern languages
- A new Lectionary of readings for Mass
- Revised rituals for all the other sacraments
- A new Breviary for the Liturgy of the Hours, translated into all modern languages