

The Real Value Of Liturgy

Editorial from The FAITH Magazine July-August 2004

The recent instruction from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship (SCDW) *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, is most welcome. In addition to proposing concrete, forceful corrections to liturgical abuses, the document goes some way towards promoting an overall vision of the liturgy which will be widely welcomed as a more synthetic correction.

The document has been extensively reported and many summaries have been compiled. Since it covers a wide range of particular matters, we would simply advise readers to study the text for themselves. It is available either from the CTS or as a free download from the Vatican Website. In this article, we will draw attention to some of the broader themes that can be discerned from the emphases of the document.

First of all, as a general comment, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* is good news for the increasing numbers of young, deeply spiritual, orthodox Catholics who are revitalising the Church. A recent book on the phenomenon of young orthodox Catholics notes that they are in contrast with the older “baby boomer” generation.[1] Likewise, the Chair of the National Federation of Priest Councils of the United States noted at the 2003 National Conference of Priests of England and Wales that there is a clear trend showing a difference in theological outlook between priests ordained since 1985 and those ordained before then. The younger clergy and active laity often seek in the Church precisely the sacral, hieratic, authoritative and transcendent approach to liturgy which *Redemptionis Sacramentum* authoritatively promotes.

Rights of the Laity

One of the interesting and well-chosen emphases of *Redemptionis Sacramentum* is that upon the rights of the faithful to have the liturgy celebrated truly “as the Church wishes, according to her stipulations as prescribed in the liturgical books and in the other laws and norms” (*Redemptionis Sacramentum* (RS) n.12) It is noted that abuses obscure doctrine and hinder the faithful from re-living the experience of the disciples of Emmaus (RS 6). Priests who give free rein to their own inclinations when celebrating the liturgy do not serve authentic pastoral care or liturgical renewal but rather act in a way detrimental to the rights of the faithful (RS 11). These rights include the right to have Mass celebrated properly (RS 12) and the right to have the Bishop prevent abuses (RS 24).

The point is also made that the Liturgy is not anybody’s private property:

“Christ’s faithful have the right that ecclesiastical authority should fully and efficaciously regulate the Sacred Liturgy lest it should ever seem to be ‘anyone’s private property, whether of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated’” (RS 18). In this connection, Archbishop Amato,

Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made a telling point at the press conference to launch the document. In some places, the priest celebrant (or concelebrants) distribute Holy Communion to the faithful before communicating themselves. Regarding this abuse, the Archbishop commented,

“As justification of this practice (which is forbidden in n. 97 of the instruction), the explanation is offered that when one invites guests to one’s house, the guests must eat before the owner of the house! But is it really true that the Church is the house of the priest alone and that the faithful laity are only guests?”[2]

This most perceptive intervention is a powerful reminder of the manner in which apparently “pastoral” initiatives, lacking a genuine ecclesial understanding of the liturgy, actually downgrade the lay faithful and give the priest the wrong kind of prominence.

An example of the way in which “liberal authoritarianism” works in practice is seen in the cases where the faithful have been refused Holy Communion because they have chosen to kneel down (cf. RS 91). An example of how “liturgical correctness” works against popular devotion has been shown in the way that many liturgists have tried to prevent people from saying the Rosary during a time of Eucharistic adoration. The document specifically states that this is not to be excluded (RS 137). An example of how rigid adherence to parish programmes can work against the needs of children is shown in the lack of flexibility over young children who are ready to receive the sacrament earlier than others. The document reaffirms the more minimal requirements of canon law that the parish priest must admit children to the sacraments if they have reached the age of reason and are sufficiently prepared (RS 87).

The document underlines this theme at its conclusion by enjoining sacred ministers to ask themselves “even with severity” whether they have respected the rights of the lay faithful to the proper celebration of the sacred Liturgy (RS 186).

Correcting false views of lay advancement

This emphasis of *Redemptionis Sacramentum* on the rights of the laity gives the lie to the idea that the document “rolls back” lay initiatives. In fact, it promotes the genuine rights of the laity. At the same time, many of the prescriptions relate to a false understanding of lay advancement that is widely promoted. We have often commented in *Faith* on the mistaken notion that a shortage of priests is the Holy Spirit’s way of telling the Church to involve the laity more. Indeed our emphasis on prayer and work for vocations only echoes that made by the Holy Father on numerous occasions.[3] *Redemptionis Sacramentum* deals specifically with many liturgical abuses which reflect this false view of “lay advancement”.

In general terms, the parish priest is not to cede to the laity things that are proper to his office (RS 32). More particularly, the document deals in some detail with the role of the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. Once again,[4] the role

is clearly defined as extraordinary and supplementary, not “a fuller participation of the laity” (RS 151). One could point out that in fact the false understanding of extraordinary ministry of Holy Communion again reflects an unconscious authoritarianism. Whenever the laity help at such tasks in the liturgy, they are helping the priest in something that belongs to him by office. On the other hand, when the faithful pursue a genuinely lay apostolate as envisaged in Vatican II’s *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, they are not “helping the priest” but working to spread the gospel in places that the priest cannot have the same influence such as the family home, the workplace or the sports and social club. In these areas of action, they are genuinely acting with their own specific charism rather than simply helping the clergy.

In connection with lay-led celebrations in the absence of the priest, there are a couple of wise pastoral suggestions hidden in the text which have escaped the notice of many commentators. The document suggests that where it is necessary to have such a celebration on a Sunday because of a genuine unavailability of a priest, it is preferable

“...that the various parts be distributed among several faithful rather than having a single lay member of the faithful direct the whole celebration alone. Nor is it ever appropriate to refer to any member of the lay faithful as “presiding” over the celebration.” (RS 165)

Furthermore, the document recommends that the Bishop should not easily give permission for such celebrations on a weekday, especially if Holy Communion is distributed (RS 166). The rider is added:

“Priests are therefore earnestly requested to celebrate Mass daily for the people in one of the churches entrusted to their care.”

This is clearly directed at the practice of the priest taking a “Day Off” during the week, leaving the parish without a daily Mass and having a liturgy of the Word and Holy Communion in its place. The document here seems to echo the concerns of St Charles Borromeo, St Robert Bellarmine and others who saw the key to the reform of the Church in the reform of the life of the clergy, calling the priests gently back to the heart of their ministry: providing the Mass and the sacraments for the faithful.

Understanding *actuosa participatio*

One of the most important debates over the Vatican II reform of the liturgy is that concerning the proper meaning of the expression *actuosa participatio*.^[5] Commonly it has been understood to mean “active participation”. However, there is now a considerable debate over the precise meaning of the phrase and *Redemptionis Sacramentum* reflects this in the way in which it presents a nuanced understanding of such participation. The participation of the faithful is “a true exercise of faith and of the baptismal dignity” (RS 37). Crucially, it states

Nevertheless, from the fact that the liturgical celebration obviously entails activity, it does not follow that everyone must necessarily have something concrete to do beyond the actions and gestures, as if a certain specific liturgical ministry must necessarily be given to the individuals to be carried out by them. (RS 40)

Later, it is made clear that the people are involved actively in the liturgy when they “silently join themselves with the priest in faith” (RS 54) during the Eucharistic Prayer. It is also made clear that devotions such as the Rosary lead people to reception of the sacraments and are therefore “not without salutary effects for our participation in liturgical worship” (RS 41).

Importantly, the document makes it clear that

the power of the liturgical celebrations does not consist in frequently altering the rites, but in probing more deeply the word of God and the mystery being celebrated (RS 39)

and reprehends a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation which has led to abuses. Participation, it is clear, is not something to be achieved at the expense of the liturgy itself. The Liturgy is given and we participate in it because of our baptismal dignity, even when silent. We are present before the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* and participate “in reality”[6] by uniting ourselves spiritually to the mystery being celebrated. This does not mean that everybody has a job to do and in fact the proliferation of tasks and ministries may distract from the essential interior participation which is at the heart of the liturgical life.

This understanding of participation could help to reinstate a genuinely pastoral approach to the liturgy. Alcuin Reid, in his magisterial exposition of the organic development of the liturgy[7] examines two opposing tendencies within the liturgical movement. One is that liturgical piety should draw the faithful into the liturgy as it is given to us. The other is that active participation demands the alteration of the liturgy to suit the needs of the people of the present day. One might add that if the Liturgy is allowed to stand as a transcendent, “given” composite of rites, the devotions of the faithful will be allowed to flower and contribute to their genuine participation in the liturgy. In recent years, the devotions of the faithful have sometimes been constrained into a liturgical form that does not suit them. It sometimes seems as though nobody can make a devotional move without a penitential rite, a scripture reading, a responsorial psalm and bidding prayers.

Freedom for the priest

We have mentioned before in Faith that in the hands of some liturgists, the Liturgy since Vatican II has built up

“its own corpus of scruples, accretions and unwritten rubrics that have no formal basis in liturgical law but which are enforced, often rigorously, by liturgical commissions and other official bodies.”[8]

Many clergy will welcome the fact that *Redemptionis Sacramentum* has authoritatively swept away a number of these scruples. The priest is not bound to preach “on the readings” but should expound the mysteries of the Faith and the norms of the Christian life using the biblical readings or the texts of the ordinary, the proper or the other sacraments (RS 67). The clergy who have felt a little awkward about celebrating “private Masses” can rest easy with the earnest recommendation to the celebration of daily Mass “even if it should not be possible to have the faithful present” (RS 110). A further example is the clear ruling that priests are always and everywhere allowed to celebrate Mass in Latin (RS 112).

One might characterise the genuine freedom allowed by *Redemptionis Sacramentum* in terms of “let priests be priests” and conversely “let laity be laity”. Many lay people are understandably shy of taking a high profile public role in the liturgy. Men especially have been effectively excluded from much that passes for “creative liturgy” because of a natural embarrassment at “leading worship”. Men account for a small minority of participants in many parish activities that involve these models of participation. Yet it is clear that men are not naturally less “spiritual” than women. A father in my parish observed perceptively that there is no shortage of male participants in Muslim spiritual activities which have a formal character that does not involve a public exposition of “my feelings”.

An unexpected recommendation is that concerning the participation of priests at Mass. They are encouraged to concelebrate; but if there is a good reason not to (parish clergy will, after all, often have celebrated their own parish Mass), they should attend in choir dress (RS 128). This seemingly minor recommendation has an important effect in countering an erroneous understanding of the relationship between priests and people. By way of example, consider a gathering of Headteachers and senior clergy in a diocese. The clergy are recommended not to concelebrate but to be “in the congregation” so that their unity with the people is emphasised. There is also an underlying desire to prevent the clergy from “dominating” the proceedings and perhaps a worry about having the sanctuary filled with males. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, by insisting on the distinctive role of the priest certainly militates against this understanding of the liturgy. It will, of course, be seen by some as “clericalist”. Yet it will in fact help to foster a proper understanding of both the nature of the priesthood and the complementary role of the professional lay person. The priest is properly vested and visible in the sanctuary as the Headteacher properly exercises a true lay apostolate in the vital work of Catholic education.

Holy Communion

The sections of the document relating to Holy Communion will again be most welcome to the priest who is concerned to foster reverence for this most holy sacrament. Once again, scruples and liturgical correctness are authoritatively swept away. Small hosts to be used for the most part (RS 49), the fraction is not to be prolonged (RS 73), earthenware chalices are not to be used (RS 117).

There seems to be the beginning of a reconsideration regarding Holy Communion in the hand (n.92). All the faithful have the right to receive Holy Communion on the tongue. But there are various cautions regarding Holy Communion in the hand, particularly where there is a risk of profanation. Perhaps priests may now actually encourage the faithful to receive Holy Communion in the traditional manner. In another pleasant surprise, the communion plate is recommended (n.93). Yet again, a practice seen in many places as “conservative” or “old fashioned” is positively encouraged.

With regard to Holy Communion under both kinds, there is a welcome reserve and limitation. RS 102 recommends that Holy Communion should not be given under both kinds where the amount of wine necessary for consecration cannot be easily determined or where “a notable part of the people” chooses not to receive from the chalice. One must frankly plead here for a greater clarity in future legislation. If it is assumed that Holy Communion may be given under both kinds at a Sunday Mass, most parish Churches will only be able to do so with the use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Yet the same document makes it abundantly clear yet again that such ministers in the liturgy of the Mass are supplementary and extraordinary. Was there some failure of nerve here? Could it not simply be said that it is not appropriate to give Holy Communion under both kinds at a parish Sunday Mass?

We may note also the beginning of a renewed emphasis on the link between the reception of Holy Communion and the use of the sacrament of penance. Pastors are instructed to correct “prudently and firmly” the abuse whereby the faithful approach the altar as a group indiscriminately (RS 83). Significantly, it is also recommended that priests instruct those who go to communion “often or even daily” to go to confession at appropriate intervals (RS 86).

Development and tradition

At the Press conference to launch *Redemptionis Sacramentum* Cardinal Arinze, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, quoted Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter:

“Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* n.52)

This quiet but eloquent love for the Church has been exercised by some priests with very little official support for several decades now. Priests who remember being under pressure at the seminary in the 70s and early 80s for not receiving Holy Communion in the hand now see the freedom to receive Holy Communion on the tongue universally permitted. Priests who were not permitted to celebrate Mass privately or in Latin in their house of studies now see that they are universally allowed to do so. Conversely, priests who have not allowed extraordinary ministers to be used at Mass except in extraordinary circumstances now read that they are doing the right thing.

As we have noted, many priests will welcome *Redemptionis Sacramentum*. However, it may be with a little world-weariness – one hopes without bitterness. For years, liturgical abuses were legitimised by Rome . Holy Communion was given in the hand contrary to the norms of the Church – and it was legalised. Holy Communion was given under both kinds contrary to the norms of the Church – and it was legalised. The introduction of altar girls was contrary to the norms of the Church – and it was legalised. Let us be honest: *Redemptionis Sacramentum* represents a clear change of direction. We hope that the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship will continue with confidence to promote the transcendent and sacral understanding of the liturgy which underlies many of the juridical norms in this document.

Reading the various excellent studies of the liturgical reform by many scholarly authors including Cardinal Ratzinger, it is surely reasonable to say that the present order of Mass is not the epitome of liturgical perfection. Naturally, any further “reform of the reform” is fraught with difficulties in ecclesiastical politics. However, there may be a way forward which might have more practical effect than juridical norms – which we know may not be observed or enforced even with the clear juridical norms regarding grave abuses and *graviora delicta*.

One offers the following suggestion in the hope that it is not impertinent. In the 1952 film *The Sound Barrier*, test pilots are endangered and killed because they cannot pull out of a supersonic nose dive. The solution, one of them realises, is to push the stick forward – it seems a crazy idea but it solves the problem and the plane recovers. If one suggests allowing a greater liberty in the celebration of Mass, it may seem madness in the present climate. However, if the freedom is allowed to priests to incorporate traditional elements into the liturgy, it may be the stimulus needed to achieve a global “reform of the reform” gradually and organically with popular support. *Redemptionis Sacramentum* has already given priests and laity various freedoms that they have been restricted in hitherto. If the juridical approach does not produce a response from those who habitually undermine the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, why not allow a little more liberty to those who are its habitual supporters?

[1] Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful. Why Young Catholics are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002).

[2] *Bollettino Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, n.0197, 23 April 2004 (our translation).

[3] E.g. *Christifideles Laici* n.23; *Pastores Dabo Vobis* n.1; *Dies Domini* n.53; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* n.32.

[4] Cf. Inter-Dicasterial Instruction "On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests" (1997) Art.8, and Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship *Inaestimabile Donum* (1980) n.10.

[5] The second chapter of the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is titled "De liturgica institutione et de actuosa participatione prosequendis".

[6] Cf. Alcuin Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy* (Ohio : St Michael's Abbey Press, 2004) 53 footnote 195.

[7] *Op. cit.*

[8] Editorial, "Holiness is fitting to your house, O Lord," *Faith* 35 (Sept/Oct 2003): 2-5.