THE CHURCH’S CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY:  
A review of Sacrosanctum concilium fifty years after 
the close of Vatican Council II

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Introduction: A Fifty-year Retrospective of Vatican II

The year 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962-8 December 1965). This ecumenical council, without doubt, ranks as the most important ecclesial event of the twentieth century. Its effects on the Catholic Church, and indeed upon the entire Christian movement, continue to be felt today around the globe. The principles, ideals, and goals presented in the documents themselves form at least one set of criteria by which an evaluation of the effectiveness of Vatican II can be made. Other criteria of course involve the degree to which such principles have withstood the test of time, the correspondence of the Council’s expressed ideals to the current state of the Church, and the actual achievement of the goals set by the Council fathers half a century ago.

The timeliness of reviewing the documents of the Second Vatican Council has been brought home by the decision of Pope Francis, announced on 13 March 2015, to declare an extraordinary Holy Year to extend from 8 December 2015 to 20 November 2016. The inspiration for the forthcoming extraordinary Holy Year, which will be dedicated to mercy, lies in the Pontiff’s desire to mark the golden jubilee of the adjournment of the Council, which took place on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December) 1965.

Even at a distance of fifty years, we are likely still too close in time to Vatican Council II to arrive at an adequate evaluation of its effectiveness. Scholars of the Council half a century from now will find themselves in a much better position to render an accurate assessment of the Council’s reception and its lasting contributions to the life of the Church. Nevertheless, on the golden jubilee of Vatican Council II, it is well worth re-reading, or, in many cases, reading for the first time the constitutions, decrees, and declarations of the largest gathering of spiritual leaders in the history of the Church. Such an investment of time and effort will enhance the fruitfulness of the coming extraordinary Holy Year marking the Council’s golden jubilee.

Many who have heard only of “the spirit” of Vatican II, whether as a justification of or as a challenge to current Church practice, lack even a nodding acquaintance or a superficial knowledge of what the documents of the Council actually state. Fifty years of bifurcated thinking have led others who actually did read the documents to conclude, erroneously, that despite what the Council formally taught, subsequent “pastoral” policies, decisions, and applications supersede any doctrinal positions framed by these magisterial texts.

Everyone, though, owes the Council, the Church, and themselves a fresh reading of the sixteen documents of Vatican II, especially now that we have reached the half-century milestone. For some, such a review will serve as a startling eye-opener; for others, an examination of conscience; for still others, a beacon continuing to guide the Bark of Peter toward her ultimate destiny: the full communion of all the saints in the very heart of the Triune God.

The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Four Constitutions, Nine Decrees, and Three Declarations

In keeping with the expressed wish of Pope St John XXIII (reigned 1958-1963), and in contrast with all previous
ecumenical councils, the Second Vatican Council issued no condemnations, no anathemata or excommunications. Its official teachings, though, took three distinct forms: constitutions, decrees, and declarations. The Council promulgated four constitutions: one on the sacred liturgy (Sacro Sanctum concilium, 4 December 1963); two “doctrinal” constitutions, the first on the Church (Lumen gentium, 21 November 1964), the other on divine revelation (Dei Verbum, 18 November 1965); and, on the day before the conclusion of the Council, a “pastoral” constitution on the Church in the modern world (Gaudium et spes, 7 December 1965). As may be expected, the “dogmatic” constitutions Lumen gentium and Dei Verbum are the most clearly and carefully phrased of the constitutions. Gaudium et spes, in keeping with its incipit, strikes a joyous and hopeful note as it inaugurates an optimistic dialogue with secular post-modernity.

In treating the sacred liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium uses terminology and nomenclature steeped in biblical, ecclesial, and theological imagery. Nevertheless the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, although composed by liturgical scholars and professional churchmen, is readily accessible to general readers. High schoolers and university students, therefore, should be encouraged to study this Constitution with attention. Their careful reading of this pivotal text will furnish them an authoritative lens through which to view the current state of the Church’s public worship.

In addition to the four constitutions, the Council issued nine decrees and three declarations. The decrees treated the following topics: 1) social communications (Inter mirifica, 4 December 1963), 2) Catholic Eastern churches (Orientalium ecclesiarum, 21 November 1964), 3) ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio, 21 November, 1964), 4) the pastoral office of bishops in the Church (Christus Dominus, 28 October 1965), 5) the updating and renewal of religious life (Perfectae caritatis, 1965), 6) the education and training of priests (Optatam totius, 28 October 1965), 7) the apostolate of the laity (Apostolicam actuositatem, 18 November), 8) the Church’s missionary activity (Ad gentes divinitus, 7 December 1965), and finally 9) the ministry and life of priests (Presbyterorum ordinis, 7 December 1965).

The three declarations of Vatican II dealt with Christian education (Gravissimum educationis, 28 October, 1965), the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (Nosstra aetate, 28 October 1965), and religious freedom (Dignitatis humanae, 7 December, 1965).

Over the course of this golden jubilee of Vatican II, and in preparation for the extraordinary Holy Year 2015-2016, The Rambler will consider the four constitutions of Vatican II, in chronological order. Since the Church had been offering liturgical worship since her birth, and because her official prayer had been well-established, the Council fathers considered

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**Key Documents on the Liturgy from Vatican II to Today**

**Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum concilium, 04 Dec 1964**

**FIVE INSTRUCTIONS ON THE CORRECT IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY:**

- *Inter oecumenici*, 26 Sept 1964
- *Tres abhinc annos*, 04 May 1967
- *Liturgicae instaurationes*, 05 Sept 1970
- *Varietates legitimae* (Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy), 29 Mar 1994
- *Liturgiam authenticam* (Vernacular and the Roman Liturgy), 28 Mar 2001

**On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests, 15 Aug 1997**

**Instruction Redemptionis sacramentum** (Matters to be implemented and avoided), 25 Mar 2004

**Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani** - Latin edition: Vatican website: www.vatican.va


USCCB Committee on Liturgy website: [www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy](http://www.nccbuscc.org/liturgy)
The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum concilium

Vatican II’s liturgical constitution, henceforth indicated by the initials SC (an abbreviated form of its Latin incipit Sacrosanctum concilium), over the course of seven chapters presents: the general principles for the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy (5-46), treats at length the holy Eucharist (47-57) and the other sacraments as well as the sacramentals (59-82), expounds on the liturgy of the hours or divine office (83-101), then addresses challenges relating to the revision of the liturgical calendar (102-111), gives directions for the renewal of sacred music (112-121), and offers guidance concerning sacred art and sacred furnishings (122-130). It is worth pointing out from the beginning of our study that the qualifying term “sacred” is used throughout the Constitution, even in the titles of its sections. At no point does the Constitution disparage the term “sacred” or urge a secularization of sacred persons, places, or things. This designation, quite to the contrary, serves to remind all that the liturgical prayer of the Church always retains its sacred character, in spite of the best efforts of those opposed to any “setting apart” of space, speech, song, and script for the exclusive use of divine worship. Nor does SC demand the destruction of beautiful church- es, altars, furnishings, and vestments in favor of a cult of ugliness, cacophony, or decadence.

A guiding principle at work in this essay is the use of what Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, called a hermeneutic (or interpretive key) of continuity rather than a hermeneutic of rupture or disjuncture. Like all councils, Vatican II stands in a long tradition of gatherings of the Church’s leadership in an exercise of magisterial authority aimed at clarifying, preserving, defending, and proclaiming what the Church has received through tradition and scripture from her Lord. The Magisterium of the Church, then, is the servant of the depositum fidei (deposit of the Faith), not its master.[1] As one authoritative expression of the Church’s faith entrusted to her by Jesus Christ, the sacred liturgy stands as a privileged point of reference (a locus classicus) for the authentic faith handed down from the Apostles to the present generation.

In accordance with the hermeneutic of continuity just cited, readers are encouraged to peruse SC in the light of two earlier papal documents on the sacred liturgy: the motu proprio of Pope St Pius X, Tra le sollecitudine (22 November 1903) and the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII Mediator Dei (1 November 1947). Sacrosanctum concilium builds organically on both works, broadening their scope, and applying their insights with discretion and wisdom.[2] Readers do well to recall that Vatican II issued SC in 1963, just one year after the 1962 edition of the Roman Missal appeared in print. This edition of the Missal constitutes the text approved by Pope St John Paul II.
The Sacred Liturgy

What is the Sacred Liturgy? How Important is It?

The liturgical constitution SC presents the sacred liturgy as divine worship that glorifies God and sanctifies mortals by means of Christ’s paschal mystery. In other words, by the sacred liturgy the Church’s members offer to God their prayers of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication in union with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. God the Father accepted the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, and indicated His approval of this sacrifice by raising Jesus from the dead and by according Him the rank of supreme favor at His right hand in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The source of the Church’s liturgy is the very heart of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, “For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth ‘the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’[4]” (SC 5). If the Church is the body of Christ in the world, then its soul or life-principle is the Holy Spirit, the uncreated Love breathed eternally between God and His infinitely perfect Self-Expression or Icon, the Word (Logos).

In Genesis God “formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.”[5] God then took a rib from the side of Adam and from it fashioned a woman,[6] Christ, the second Adam, in expiring on the cross, literally breathed forth on the Church, his bride, this divine Breath (the Holy Spirit). The Church for her part returns that divine breath in prayers and chants inspired by the very Love of God. In the divine office or liturgy of the hours, Christ’s mystical body the Church breathes her prayers and praises to the triune God.

From the pierced side of the second Adam, Christ, flowed water and blood,[7] the source of the Church’s sacramental life. This life wells up from the water of baptism and the tears of penance, culminating in the Blood of Christ made present in the Holy Eucharist. Between baptism and the Eucharist the whole range of the Church’s sacramental life is found. Hence the Church traces her very vitality to Christ’s emission of divine breath on the cross and to the tide of sacramental life flowing from his side. The Church’s liturgy, or public prayer, then, consists of the liturgy of the hours and the sacraments culminating in the Holy Eucharist. In this way the sacred liturgy arises from Christ’s own breath (divine office) and from his life-blood (sacraments), both of which Christ surrendered to the Father in his paschal mystery or his passing over from life to death to newness of glorified life.

Christ, who is “always present to his Church … always associates the Church with himself in this great work in which God is glorified and men are sanctified” (SC 7). Christ plays a pivotal role, as sole Mediator, between the Church and God the Father. The Church, as the bride and body of Christ, enjoys an intimate and integral connection to Christ her Bridegroom and Head. Consequently the Church offers, through Christ, worship to the eternal Father. Indeed Christ’s unique mediatorship is best understood as a distinctly priestly role whereby he presents the Church’s worship to God and bestows God’s blessing on the Church. “The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ” (SC 7). Precisely on this account, namely, that the liturgy is an action of Christ the Highpriest and of His mystical body the Church, “every liturgical celebration… is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree” (SC 7).

Excellence of the Sacred Liturgy

Such a daunting claim deserves clarification and further consideration. The divine office, as the breath of Christ’s mystical body, and the sacraments as that body’s lifeblood culminating in the Holy Eucharist, excel in nature and degree all other actions of the Church. Other prayers, devotions, spiritual exercises, however worthy of veneration and regard, do not enjoy the same status as the sacred liturgy. The sacred liturgy, as the Church’s official public prayer, even when prayed privately, outranks in stature every other form of non-liturgical prayer, even when such a devotion is exercised in common, as for example in a parish celebration of the Stations of the Cross on a Friday in Lent or the recitation of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin in a rally or a sodality meeting. The Mass offered by a missionary in a remote religious outpost or by a retired priest in a private chapel retains its authentic liturgical character, and hence its power or efficacy, regardless of the number of faithful in attendance. Conversely, even well-attended paraliturgical practices, such as Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, however solemnly celebrated, fail to exert...
the same efficacy as the Mass or the Hours. Sunday Vespers, therefore always constitutes the Church’s official evening prayer on the Lord’s Day, whether or not Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament follows that rite. More of paraliturgical devotions and pious practices below.

**The Earthly Liturgy: Mirror of the Heavenly Liturgy**

The excellent nature of the sacred liturgy logically demands careful attention in both its preparation and its practice. Indeed the Constitution sets a high standard for all responsible for the planning and celebration of each liturgical observance. For the liturgy is designed to mirror on earth the liturgy in heaven as offered by Jesus Christ, surrounded by the angels and saints: “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle (cf. Rev 21:2; Col 3:1; Heb 8:2)” (SC 8). This description constitutes a daunting examination of conscience to celebrants and ministers of the sacred liturgy. They may well ask themselves whether the congregations at their liturgical celebrations have tasted the heavenly liturgy in the earthly parallel offered by them.

The very fact that a heavenly or cosmic liturgy even exists may surprise Catholics today. Yet scripture refers to the liturgy of heaven. Isaiah, for instance, perceived his prophetic vocation in a vision that found him in the midst of the court of heaven, with the seraphim circling the throne of God and chanting, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Is 6:3). Catholics conversant with the eucharistic liturgy will recognize in this heavenly hymn the acclamation sung between the Preface and the Eucharistic Prayer or Canon missae. The Apocalypse of John likewise bears witness to an elaborate worship of God enthroned and surrounded by a variety of living beings ceaselessly singing the Tersanctus: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). Much of the Apocalypse, or Revelation, professes to be an unveiling of the liturgy endlessly being offered in heaven. Of all the books of canonical scripture, the Epistle to the Hebrews elaborates most emphatically on the high priesthood of Jesus Christ and the exercise of his ministry before the throne of God the Father. Christ’s heavenly ministry consists chiefly in presenting to the throne of God the Father before the court of heaven the five wounds impressed on his human body in the passion and visible still on his glorified body in heaven.

The liturgical constitution, then, presents the earthly liturgy as a participation here and now in the liturgy of heaven: “With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until he our life shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory.” (SC 8) Once priests, deacons, and other ministers of the altar grasp this fundamental concept, then the quality of the liturgy, in terms of its careful preparation, the accompaniment of appropriate music, and the cultivation of a clean, dignified, and distinctly sacred milieu, will improve. Without such a vision, the liturgy remains flat, horizontal, and centered on the immanent rather than on the transcendent. When the liturgy is reduced to a celebration of the community’s self-reflection or self-affirmation, or even when presented as a didactic exercise for the instruction of the lay faithful and visitors, it fails to achieve its raison d’être: the glory of God. The liturgy furthermore will lose none of its eschatological power as an expression of longing for the coming of Christ in that divine glory which is his as the Second Person of the Trinity.

**Summit and Source of the Church’s Life and Activity**

So essential is the sacred liturgy to the vitality of the Church that SC 10 describes it as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” [emphasis added]. The Eucharist forms, by way of analogy, the hub of the sacramental system, for it remains the first purpose and final aim of the other sacraments. Baptism admits believers to the worshipping community of the Church. Penance restores to Communion those who have sinned gravely. Confirmation raises the baptized to the status of witnesses to Christ and conforms the baptized more perfectly to Christ. Anointing of the sick strengthens the ill and infirm, preparing them for admission to the heavenly liturgy. The rites of ordination (holy orders) provide priests and other sacred ministers for the perpetuation of the Church’s sacramental life, especially the Eucharist. Matrimony seals, by means of an enduring covenant, the love of a man and a woman, thereby mirroring Christ’s own self-giving love for the Church and the Bride’s own self-surrender to her divine Spouse. For this reason, the crucifix, as the image of Christ’s sacramental sacrifice and sacrificial sacrament, hangs over the marriage bed. All the sacraments, then, derive their purpose from the Eucharist and admit the faithful to a worthy and more fruitful reception of eucharistic Communion.

The Constitution, recognizing the immense richness of the sacred liturgy, expressly discourages a minimalist approach to the rites and ceremonies of the Church. Laziness and the lack of zeal result in a mentality concerned only with providing the absolute minimum in terms of ensuring just the validity and liceity, or lawfulness of the liturgy; “Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that, when the liturgy is celebrat-
ed, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it” (SC 11). Since the emergence of the liturgical movements in the nineteenth century, hand-held missals and devotional manuals had provided liturgical texts juxtaposed with accurate vernacular translations. In many cases, as with the Schott missals in Germany and the Saint Andrew’s Daily Missal in anglophone countries, the liturgical texts of the Mass and their translations were augmented with insightful liturgical and pastoral notes.

The Role of Devotions and Popular Piety in Catholic Life

Finally, because participation in liturgical prayer scarcely exhausts the spiritual life of Christians, the Constitution praises other forms of communal prayer as well as private, individual prayer (SC 12). In respect of popular devotions, the Constitution recognizes the dignity of these expressions of piety. The Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Stations of the Cross readily come to mind. Novenas, litanies, various chaplets, and other spiritual exercises likewise fall into the category of such practices of piety. The Constitution instructs that “such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them” (SC 13).

The Marian Rosary fits this description to an excellent degree. The one-hundred-and-fifty Aves or Hail Marys correspond to the number of Psalms in the Bible. The division of each chaplet into five decades matches the number of psalms formerly prayed at Lauds and Vespers in the divine office. (The number of psalms and canticles was reduced to three in the reformed Breviary.) In some countries and religious settings the Rosary begins, like the Breviary, with the verse/response alternation, “Lord, open my lips / And my mouth shall announce thy praise / Incline unto my aid, O God/ O Lord, make haste to help me.” Since the days of St Louis de Montfort (1673-1716), the Gloria Patri (Glory be to the Father) has followed each decade of the Rosary in a manner similar to the same lesser doxology following each psalm in the Hours. Just as Vespers, when chanted in public on Sundays, ends with the seasonal Marian antiphon or anthem, most often the Salve Regina, so each five-decade chaplet of the Rosary concludes with the Salve Regina or Hail Holy Queen and a collect. Sometimes called the Marian Psalter or the Psalter of the Poor, the Rosary serves as a paraliturgical devotion clearly based on the liturgy of the hours. Its promotion by many popes and countless spiritual writers, including doctors of the Church, testify to the Church’s high regard for this popular prayer.

Key Criterion for Liturgical Renewal: Full, Conscious, and Active Participation of the Faithful

The term “liturgy” derives from the Greek word leitour gia, meaning “a public work” or “the people’s work.” Accordingly, once admitted to the Church as a community of faith and of worship, the baptized have a right and indeed a duty to be involved personally in the Church’s official public prayer. After all, in the words of St Peter, they constitute “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”[8] In order, then, to encourage “full, conscious, and active participation” in the sacred liturgy, the Constitution calls for a “restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy” (SC 14).

Obviously, such ongoing formation in liturgical practice can take root among the lay faithful, especially in families, only if the clergy themselves are deeply immersed in the liturgical life. After all, one cannot give what one does not have. Hence the Church must prepare priests, deacons, and religious eager to communicate effectively an appreciative understanding of the sacred liturgy and to make it a central thrust of their pastoral activity.

Liturgical Formation of the Clergy and Religious

To this end, priests and future priests (seminarians and novices in religious formation) are to become “fully imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy” (SC 14). The “liturgical training” of future clergy is to be carried out by faculty who themselves are qualified by properly accredited and recognized liturgical institutes (SC 15). Not only is the liturgical formation of the clergy to be given paramount importance, but “in theological faculties it is to rank among the principal courses” (SC 15). Theological faculties must ask themselves, fifty years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, whether central importance has been really accorded to the study of the sacred liturgy. In many theological faculties, liturgy still ranks merely as another of the “allied sciences” after scripture studies, systematic theology, moral theology, and even canon law. Certainly the Constitution insists that the liturgy “is to be taught under its theological, historical, pastoral, and juridical aspects” (SC 15); yet it likewise mandates that “those who teach other subjects, especially dogmatic theology, sacred scripture, spiritual and pastoral theology, should … expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation in a manner that will clearly set forth the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, and the unity which underlies all priestly training” (SC 16).

What clearly emerges here, once again, is the centrality of the sacred liturgy to all Catholic life, but especially to the priestly life. The Constitution exhorts those in charge of the education and spiritual formation of priests to ground their...
charges in a deep understanding of the nature and the importance of the liturgy for the life of the Church. Nevertheless, many priests and bishops today, even the most zealous, complain that their exposure to the study of the sacred liturgy in their seminary years was superficial, deficient, or even flawed. Readers ought to ask any priest of their acquaintance about the formation that he received in his seminary, and whether liturgical formation took the central place in the curriculum of studies as described in SC 14-18.

Given that the sacred liturgy of the Roman Rite had experience nearly two millennia of organic development by 1962, it is not surprising that a council dedicated to the renewal of the liturgy for the life of the Church should turn its attention to the renewal of the Church’s official prayer. The liturgical movement or movements that preceded Vatican II by over a century had called for a re-examination, renewal, and reform of the liturgy. Even popes, like Pius X and Pius XII, had recognized the need for liturgical reform. Pius X, for instance, had reformed the Roman Breviary, and Pius XII had restored the rites of Holy Week and the Paschal Triduum. The Council, therefore, set out general norms for the liturgical reform that would ensue after its conclusion.

Three basic principles were to guide liturgical renewal. First, the authority of the Apostolic See and, where permitted, the local bishop, was to supervise the regulation of the sacred liturgy. In other words, the reform of the sacred liturgy was not to be left to private or group interests independent of ecclesiastical authority. Second, limited liturgical regulation could be exercised by various episcopal conferences. Third, and this norm is worthy of direct quotation, “no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (SC 22).

It must be admitted that in some places liturgical experimentation after the Council went unchecked for several decades, leading to confusion among many of the lay faithful and to conflict between, on the one hand, clergy who favored the shedding of liturgical laws and, on the other, those committed to upholding the traditional principles of organic liturgical development. In fact, the Constitution warns against “innovations,” and cautions that “care must be taken that any development. In fact, the Constitution warns against synthetic addictions, having no part in the nature of the liturgy, cannot be recognized or admitted as “organic” developments. They must, therefore, be curbed or disallowed altogether. The Constitution consequently calls for a reform of the sacred liturgy in keeping with its nature and its organic development.

Reform of Liturgical Books

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent called for a reform of the liturgical books of the Roman rite. Similarly, Vatican II mandated four centuries later a reform of these liturgical books. Sources and resources not available to scholars of the liturgy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were to inform the twentieth-century reform. Competent scholars appointed by ecclesiastical authorities were to strive to ensure that “in liturgical celebrations each person, minister, or layman who has an office to perform, should carry out all and only those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy” (SC 28).

Moreover, the Council’s insistence that “servers, readers, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function” (SC 29) meant that liturgical books be made available so as to facilitate such participation in sacred ministry. This directive meant, in practical terms, that the various components of books like the Roman Missal ought to be published as separate but complementary books. Hence readers were to read from a lectionary, deacons to proclaim the Gospel from an Evangeliiar, cantors, scholae, and choirs to chant antiphons and acclamations from a Gradual (from the Latin word gradus or “step,” where such musical texts were sung), and priests to pray from Sacramentaries. Members of the lay faithful likewise were to have access to the texts of acclamations prepared for them and arranged in a convenient format in order to encourage and enhance congregational participation in liturgical rites. Such handbooks, called Missals, should indicate the actions, gestures, and postures to be assumed by congregants.

The Constitution mentions, significantly, that “at the proper time a reverent silence should be observed” (SC 30). Many centuries before 1963, periods of silent prayer had been...
built into the Mass. The Canon, or Eucharistic Prayer, for instance, had been prayed by the priest in silence. So too had the Offertory prayers, including the Secret (Prayer over the Offerings), been recited silently by the priest. The Fathers of the Council, then, were long since steeped in the mystical role of silence in the Mass. One of the most egregious casualties of the post-Vatican II liturgical reform has been silence, the mother of inspiration, of poetry, and of prayer. It is worth recalling here, then, that the Constitution’s call for the increased and enhanced participation of the lay faithful in no way demands the eradication of silence and the filling of every pause in the Mass with some noise, whether it take the form of music, recited text, or commentary.

**Norms arising from the Educative and Pastoral Nature of the Liturgy**

Although the primary aim of the sacred liturgy remains the worship of God, the rites nevertheless teach participants about the Christian faith. In this respect, sacred ceremonies express the *depositum fidei* entrusted to the Church by Christ. Accordingly the Constitution calls for clarity in the reform of the liturgy. Among the general norms to be observed in the reform of the rites, the Constitution cites, as a primary desideratum “a noble simplicity”: “They should be short, clear, and free from useless repetitions. They should be within the people’s powers of comprehension and normally should not require much explanation” (SC 34). Readers familiar with the *novus ordo Missae* will have noted a more austere or jejune format in the order of service when compared with the rite of Mass in the 1962 Roman Missal. The *Confiteor*, for instance, has been shorn of individual saints, and, when selected as an option for a given Mass, is recited by priest, ministers, and congregation all together, and only once. Although the *Agnus Dei* retains its triple formula, the last phrase ending with the plea *dona nobis pacem*, the *Dominum non sum dignus* (Lord I am not worthy) is recited only once, again all together by priest, ministers, and congregation.

At a distance of fifty years it is worth considering more recent objections concerning an excessive rationalism at work in the revised liturgy. After all, the liturgy itself operates, like sacred scripture, on various levels of sense or meaning beyond the literal, including the allegorical, the moral, and the eschatological. A meaning deeper than simply the literal or “obvious” may well be at work too in some of the Mass texts. Furthermore, scriptural echoes may penetrate the conscious or subconscious levels of participants when they are reinforced by repetition. Hence it behooves readers who have access to a celebration of the *usus antiquior* or Tridentine use of the Roman-rite Mass to experience for themselves the effects of this particular norm. Rationalism alone can scarcely be allowed to serve as the final criterion for judging the value of texts steeped in mystical and spiritual meaning.

The Constitution urges the restoration of “a more ample, more varied, and more suitable reading from sacred scripture” (SC 35, see also SC 51). Certainly this desideratum has been fulfilled by the introduction in 1970 of a three-year lectionary cycle for Sundays and a two-year lectionary cycle for weekdays. Moreover, the season of Advent now has a series of scriptural readings assigned for each day, thereby matching the season of Lent. Nevertheless it remains the case that the rite known as the “ordinary of the Mass” in the 1962 Roman Missal is replete with far more scriptural allusions and echoes than the order of Mass in the 1970 Roman Missal.

The ministry of preaching is to be exercised in such a way that a homily, rather than a sermon, is to provide instruction for the congregation, drawing its content mainly from the readings, the prayer formulae, and the character of the feast or season in which the rite takes place. The Constitution also encourages celebrants to provide short directives to congregants, though “only at suitable moments and in prescribed words or their equivalent” (SC 35, see also SC 52). The experience of some readers may suggest that whatever trimming the liturgy underwent according to paragraph 34, it recovered with double interest by the implementation of paragraph 35 in encouraging extempore explanations of rites and ceremonies on the part of celebrants, particularly when in the vicinity of a microphone.

**The Language of Worship**

The most obvious change in the liturgy associated with the Second Vatican Council has to do with the widespread adoption of the vernacular and the virtual disappearance of Latin in the celebration of Mass. The last two decades, it must be acknowledged, have seen the reemergence in many places of some Latin texts in parishes and chaplaincies. Rome and various international pilgrimage sites, like Lourdes and Fatima, have retained the use of Latin for the benefit of the wide range of pilgrims coming from around the world. The widespread loss of Latin in the Roman-rite Mass, however, cannot be blamed on *Sacrosanctum concilium*. Paragraph 36 clearly indicates that “the use of the Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites.” Non-Roman Latin rites include the Milanese (Ambrosian) and the Old Hispanic (so-called Mozarabic), both of which are confined to specific jurisdictions. Mass in these Latin rites, too, now may be offered in the vernacular, as well as in Latin.

The Constitution leaves it to competent territorial ecclesiastical authorities to determine whether and to what extent the vernacular language is to be used. Vernacular translations of the Latin-rite books are subject to the competent ecclesiasti-
cal authorities, with the Apostolic See exercising supreme jurisdiction in liturgical matters (SC 40). Limitations of space forbid further comment here except to point out that it took over forty years and considerable efforts on the part of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments before an accurate English translation of the Roman Missal was made available to Roman-rite Catholics.

Local Adaptations of the Sacred Liturgy

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy encourages the circumspect adaptation of liturgical rites when revising the liturgical books, thereby granting legitimate variations to specific groups, regions, and peoples, particularly in mission lands (SC 38). The Constitution likewise urges the establishment of local liturgical commissions under the competent ecclesiastical authorities and guided by “experts in liturgical science, sacred music, art, and pastoral practice” (SC 44). Adaptation of the sacred liturgy gave rise to a limited amount of experimentation to be monitored by the Holy See. Finally, the Constitution calls for the creation of diocesan commissions for sacred music and sacred art, which are to work “in the closest collaboration” with the Commission on the Sacred Liturgy (SC 46).

Decrees for the Holy Eucharist

The Constitution decrees that various elements of the rite of Mass be simplified, “due care being taken to preserve their substance” (SC 50). Such simplification involves, for example, the omission of duplications and accretions. On the other hand, “other parts which suffered loss through accidents of history are to be restored to the vigor they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary” (SC 50). One such element destined for restoration was the “bidding prayers,” better known as the “general intercessions” or “prayer of the faithful,” which would include intercessions for the Church, civil authorities, and specific needs for local churches (SC 53).

Here the Constitution shows a clear preference for patristic developments, whereas it holds medieval developments in decidedly less esteem. It should be pointed out, though, that the organic development of the liturgy scarcely ended with the fifth or sixth centuries, and that at least in the west developments in the sacred liturgy, such as the elevations of the Host and Chalice, as well as the institution of the feast and office of Corpus Christi, reflected the influence of authentic theological developments surrounding the real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the manner of that presence. Current trends in theological and liturgical circles, including academic faculties, likewise reflect a bias in favor of patristic over medieval studies. At some point this imbalance must be addressed if liturgiologists are to avoid charges of antiquarianism and a romantic attachment to a specific period of history. Authentic organic development implies continued growth over the ages up to and including the present. The vaunting of one historical period over all others risks inhibiting legitimate appreciation of eras less known, or poorly represented, in liturgical studies. Such an approach skews, or even impedes, the organic development itself of the sacred liturgy.

As mentioned earlier, the Constitution encouraged the use of vernacular languages in the Mass, particularly in the proclamation of the scripture readings in the Liturgy of the Word and in the Prayer of the Faithful. Nevertheless SC 54 insists that “care must be taken to ensure that the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.” Clearly, then, the Constitution in no sense abolished the use of Latin in the eucharistic liturgy. Indeed it presumes that congregations will have been so well exposed to Latin in the Mass that they will be able to sing their respective parts in responses and acclamations.

Without prejudice to the teachings of the Council of Trent on the reality and manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, including the principle of concomitance by which Christ remains really, truly, and substantially present, whole and entire, under each perceptible particle of the consecrated Host and each perceptible drop of the precious Blood in the Chalice, the Constitution permits local bishops to allow the distribution of Holy Communion, even to the laity, under both species (SC 55). Note that the Constitution does not mandate the distribution of Communion under both kinds as a general norm to be observed in each celebration of Mass, nor does it specify precisely how Communion is to be distributed under both species. Traditional practice has witnessed the emergence of three distinct ways of receiving Communion under both kinds: by intinction, by direct access to the Chalice, and by means of a fistula or metal straw.

The Constitution upholds the ancient practice of concelebration, which in the Latin West had become restricted to the ordination Mass of a priest or bishop in which the newly ordained concelebrated the Mass with the ordaining prelate and fellow priests or bishops. The Constitution extends its use particularly on Maundy Thursday, both for the Mass of Chrism and for the Mass of the Lord’s Supper; at Masses during cunclis, synods, and conferences of bishops, as well as gatherings of priests; at the conventual Mass in religious houses and at the principal Mass in churches (SC 57). The Constitution leaves local bishops to regulate the discipline of concelebration within their own dioceses. Since shortly after the rite for concelebration was drawn up at the bidding of the Constitution (SC
58), the practice of concelebration has become generally accepted throughout the Church. Nevertheless, the Constitution guarantees the right of each priest to celebrate Mass individually with the exception of the Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday: “Each priest shall always retain his right to celebrate Mass individually, though not at the same time in the same church as a concelebrated Mass nor on the Thursday of the Lord’s Supper” (SC 57).

Sacraments and Sacramentals

In addressing the sacraments other than the Holy Eucharist, the Constitution mandates the revival of the ancient catechumenate for adults (SC 64). The adult catechumenate had lapsed virtually throughout most of the Church except in mission countries. Instruction is to be accompanied by various prayers, blessings, exorcisms, and anointing administered at successive intervals of time, particularly over the course of Lent, the season specially dedicated to the preparation of adults for the sacraments of Christian initiation. Prospective converts of adult age had hitherto taken instructions individually or in a group setting, but their baptism or reception into the Church was a quiet, almost private affair. A revised catechumenate would restore the public and properly ecclesial character of the admission of adults to baptism, confirmation, and finally the Eucharist all within a single event. Since late antiquity and throughout the middle ages the western Church had witnessed a disintegration of the sacraments of initiation. The Council mandated their reintegration in a single ceremony. Such a restoration would strengthen both the neophytes and the rest of the Church who prayed for them and otherwise supported them on their spiritual pilgrimage to full initiation into the mystical Body of Christ.

The rite for the baptism of infants likewise was to undergo revision (SC 67-68). This rite, drawn from the medieval rite for baptizing a sick catechumen, was minimalist and brief, lasting usually twenty minutes or less. The new rite for the baptism of infants was to direct questions and elements of dialogue to the godparents or sponsors and parents of the baby, rather than directly to the infant, as was the case in the older rite in vigor in 1962. A choice of readings from Sacred Scripture, arranged as a liturgy of the Word, would expose adults involved in the rite to a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of baptism. The Constitution also decreed the revision of the rite for supplying what was omitted in the baptism of an infant (SC 69). This rite would then reflect the fact that the infant indeed had been baptized, and therefore it would omit the various exorcisms of a catechumen as well as references to an imminent baptism. A new rite was to be instituted for the admission of previously baptized converts into full communion with the Church (SC 69).

In order to manifest more clearly the nature and purpose of the post-baptismal Gift of the Holy Spirit, the Constitution commissioned a new rite of confirmation (SC 71). The renewal of baptismal promises before the actual conferral of the Holy Spirit was but one way that “the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of Christian initiation may more clearly appear” (SC 71). The new rite of confirmation emerged in 1973.

The sacraments of healing, that is penance and anointing of the sick, likewise were to undergo revision in respect of their rites and formulae, again so that they might “more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament” (SC 72). The Constitution clarifies that the anointing of the sick, then commonly known as “extreme unction” is not a sacrament only for those on the point of death, but for anyone of the faithful beginning to be in danger of death through sickness, old age, or infirmity (SC 73). Moreover, the Constitution mandates the preparation of a continuous rite in which the sick person “is anointed after he has made his confession and before he received Viaticum” (SC 74). Here the Constitution rectified a flawed situation that had transpired over the course of the Middle Ages whereby confession had been followed first by Viaticum and then by the final anointing. The number of anointings would be reduced to one on the forehead and on the hands (SC 75). With the restoration of the correct order of receiving “the last rites,” the Church was emphasizing the prime importance of the Holy Eucharist, and reflecting a real parallel between the order of these last rites with the rites of initiation. Hence, in both cases the forgiveness of sins leads, first, to an anointing for strengthening the soul, and, finally to the reception of the Bread of Life.

The Constitution prescribes little alteration for the rites admitting men to holy orders or couples to the sacrament of marriage. In reference to the rites of ordination, the Constitution urges the use of the vernacular in the addresses given by the bishop before each ordination or consecration (SC 76). All bishops present at the consecration of a bishop should join the three standard co-consecrators in imposing hands (SC 76). The relatively brief rite of the exchange of spousal consent in holy matrimony was to be enhanced by a repositioning after the liturgy of the Word, by greater use of the vernacular, and by the retention or admission of “other praiseworthy customs and ceremonies” drawn from local wedding customs (SC 77). Hitherto the exchange of marital vows had taken place just before the nuptial Mass. Its placement before the liturgy of the Eucharist within Mass underscored the newly married couple as an earthly icon of Christ’s union with the Church. To this end also, the profession of religious vows and the renewal of religious vows should henceforth take place within Mass, thereby highlighting the consecrated virgin as an icon of the Church wed to Christ (SC 80).
Finally the Constitution calls for a revision of the funeral rites in order to stress more effectively the paschal dimension of Christian death (SC 81). Similarly, a revision of the rite for the burial of infants, together with a Mass formulary for such an occasion, is to heighten the paschal character of these ceremonies (SC 82).

**Liturgy of the Hours**

In revising the divine office, the Constitution identifies Lauds and Vespers as “the hinges on which the daily office turns” (SC 89). Consequently, these chief hours are to be celebrated at the appropriate time of day, rather than on the day before in the case of Lauds, or in the morning of the same day in the case of Vespers, as had been the common practice in many places and by many clerics up to Vatican II. The nocturnal hour of Matins, renamed the Office of Readings, when prayed individually, could be offered at any hour of the day. The number of its psalms was to be reduced and its readings lengthened. The hour of Prime, really an echo of Lauds, was destined for suppression. Outside of choir, one of the minor hours of Terce, Sext, and None could be selected according to the most suitable time of the day. The liturgical day ends with the hour of Compline, even if prayed after midnight.

A further reduction in the *pensum* or weight of the divine office included the decision to distribute the total number of 150 psalms over the period of a month, rather than over the course of a single week. Such emendations to the Breviary were to make the praying of the liturgy of the hours less stressful and more prayerful for priests and religious engaged in active, rather than contemplative or strictly monastic, apostolates. The sanctification of time, then, through the praying of the hours was to be less monasticized than hitherto had been the case.

The Constitution directs pastors of souls to ensure “that the principal hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and on the more solemn feasts” (SC 100). The celebration of Vespers in parish churches on Sundays is one area where the Church was more observant before the Council than after it. Here is room for greater improvement in implementing one of the decrees of the liturgical constitution. On the other hand, it is clear that more of the lay faithful are praying the liturgy of the hours since Vatican II than before it. The Constitution strongly encourages the laity to join the voice of the Church in this form of liturgical prayer (SC 100).

**The Liturgical Year**

In treating the liturgical year, *Sacrosanctum concilium* prioritizes Sunday as the weekly observance of the Day of the Lord’s resurrection and Easter as its annual solemn celebration (SC 102). The custom of substituting the Sunday Mass formulary for that of the Virgin Mary was to yield to a decided preference in favor of the usual Sunday liturgy. Solemnities of Our Lady or particular saints that displaced the Sunday liturgy were to be reduced to a mere handful: “Other celebrations, unless they be truly of the greatest importance, shall not have precedence over Sunday, which is the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year” (SC 106). Accordingly, henceforth “the Proper of Time [i.e. of the Season] shall be given due precedence over the feasts of the saints so that the entire cycle of the mysteries of salvation may be suitably recalled” (SC 108).

The revised liturgical calendar would reduce the number of saints’ feasts, thereby clearing the various seasons of the year so that the minds of the faithful might become more closely attuned to the cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost. “Lest the feasts of the saints should take precedence over the feasts which commemorate the very mysteries of salvation, many of them should be left to be celebrated by a particular Church or nation, or family of religious. Only those should be extended to the universal Church which commemorate saints who are truly of universal importance” (SC 111). Every few hundred years, the liturgical calendar is culled of saints’ feasts. Yet with new saints being recognized through canonization, spaces on the calendar soon begin to fill up. With the pontificate of St John Paul II, a greater number of saints was canonized than in all of the preceding pontificates combined. The future will tell how strongly nature abhors a vacuum even in reference to the liturgical calendar.

**Sacred Music**

The Constitution recognizes the superiority of sacred music over every other art, since it forms “a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy (SC 112).” Consequently, the Constitution decrees that “great importance is to be attached to the teaching and practice of music in seminaries, in the novitiates and houses of religious of both sexes, and also in other Catholic institutions and schools” (SC 115). It likewise encourages the establishment of higher institutes of sacred music and the genuine liturgical training of composers and singers, especially boys. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002), approved by St John Paul II, actually favours “singing the Mass” over “singing at Mass.”

According to the Constitution, Gregorian chant still enjoys “pride of place” in liturgical services inasmuch as it is “specially suited to the Roman liturgy” (SC 116). Sacred polyphony along with other kinds of sacred music are to be admitted to liturgical services “so long as they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action” (SC 116). The Constitution
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called likewise for the completion of the “typical” (officially approved) edition of the books of Gregorian chant inaugurated under St Pius X, and the preparation of an edition of chants containing simpler melodies to be used in smaller churches. A *Graduale simplex* did see the light of day in the decades following the Council, although the average North American parish seems innocent of its existence and relevance.

The Council had scarcely drawn to a close when plainchant rapidly gave way in many parishes to popular and “folk” music performed with various degrees of competence on a wide spectrum of instruments. Despite the Constitution’s decree that the pipe organ be held “in high esteem” in the Latin Church (SC 120), it nevertheless permits the admission of other instruments for use in divine worship, but “only on condition that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use; that they accord with the dignity of the temple, and that they truly contribute to the edification of the faithful” (SC 120). This phrasing implies that some instruments are in fact unsuitable for sacred use, do not really accord with the dignity of God’s house, and actually fail to edify the faithful. Readers may consider these criteria, and ask themselves whether, over the past half a century, any such instruments come to mind.

Finally, the Constitution decrees that “the texts intended to be sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine. Indeed, they should be drawn chiefly from the sacred scripture and from liturgical sources” (SC 121). For anglophone worshipers, a close examination of conscience on this point is long overdue. Readers must honestly ask themselves how faithfully this decree has been implemented.

The decade following Vatican II witnessed the importation into the liturgy of such trite secular ditties as “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Five Hundred Miles Away from Home,” to be followed shortly by such catchy “Catholic” confections as Ray Repp’s “Here We Are!” and Sebastian Temple’s 1967 snappy, show-stopping two-step, “The Mass is Ended, All Go in Peace!” which actually made it into Canada’s very own post-Vatican II hymnal, *The Catholic Book of Worship* (Ottawa: Canadian Catholic Conference, 1972). How the Calvinist “Amazing Grace” and the anti-papal *The Church’s One Foundation* crept into Catholic hymn collections still escapes this author. How, for example, can a Catholic who espouses the Catholic interpretations of the lines just cited be directed to the author, care of The Rambler.

Some consider the current state of music in liturgical worship to be in “crisis.” To entertainers of such a view the question must be raised: How long can a “crisis” last? In a fever, the crisis may last only a few hours at most. Either the patient recovers, or else succumbs to the fever. There is no room for shilly-shallying. After fifty years of hearing the kind of music on offer in the average local Catholic parish, it is fairly safe to say that liturgical music in self-styled “developed” countries simply has collapsed. The relatively few pockets where authentic sacred music actually thrives will play an invaluable role when the time at last comes to revive Catholic liturgical music in North America.

Sacred Art and Sacred Furnishings

The Constitution notes rather unabashedly that “the Church has, with good reason, always claimed the right to pass judgment on the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and the laws religiously handed down, and are to be considered suitable for sacred use” (SC 122). Nevertheless, the Church has not confined herself to any particular style of art: “She has admitted styles from every period, in keeping with the natural characteristics and conditions of peoples and the needs of the various rites” (SC 123). The Constitution, therefore, permits free scope to be given to contemporary art from every race and country, “provided it bring to the task the reverence and honor due to the sacred buildings and rites” (SC 123). Those responsible for enhancing the Church’s artistic repertoire are to seek “noble beauty rather than sumptuous display” (SC 124). Moreover, bishops are to remove from houses of worship and other sacred places any works of art “repugnant to faith, morals, and Christian piety, and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or through lack of artistic merit or because of mediocrity or pretense” (SC 124). Here, as in music, the Constitution implies that some expressions of the plastic arts simply fail either to meet artistic standards or to respect religious sensibilities.

In contrast to the iconoclasm that despoiled many a North American church building of historically significant and artistically worthy sacred images, the Constitution actually upholds the practice of displaying sacred images for veneration by the faithful (SC 125). Indeed the Constitution explicitly warns local ecclesiastical authorities to “ensure that the sacred furnishings and works of value are not disposed of or destroyed, for they are ornaments in God’s house” (125). The decrease in iconography in churches since the mid-1960s has deprived several generations of Catholics of their liturgical and spiritual patrimony. This deracination has no foundation in Sacrosanctum concilium, and will be addressed only when concerned Catholics, whether clergy or lay, decide to reverse this decades-long trend toward minimalism.
Finally, the Constitution mandates that those in training for ministerial roles in the Church be given, during their philosophical and theological studies, instruction in “the history and development of sacred art, and … the basic principles which govern the production of its works” (SC 129). The recent increase in monumental Catholic architecture, featured for instance in Duncan Stroik’s *Journal of Sacred Architecture*, testifies to a hopeful reversal of the minimalist trend just deplored in the preceding paragraph.

**Conclusion**

The liturgical constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* remains the standard against which must be measured the effectiveness of the Church’s efforts to reform the liturgy for the new millennium. It must be admitted that, in the half-century since the close of the Council, the Apostolic See has had to release no fewer than five instructions regarding the correct implementation of this Constitution. The fifth such instruction, *Liturgiam authenticam*, issued in 2001, dealt with the authentic translation into the vernacular of the liturgical books of the Roman rite published after Vatican II.

Readers who appreciate the importance of consulting primary documents will want to peruse for themselves *Sacrosanctum concilium* in order to consider its fruits in the light of the past fifty years of liturgical renewal since Vatican II. They may also wish to consult the memoire/apologia of the figure most influential in shaping the revised liturgical rites: Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy (1948–1975)* (Liturgical Press, 1990). Also worth considering, from another perspective, is Peter Kwasniewski, *Resurgent in the Midst of Crisis. Sacred Liturgy, the Traditional Mass, and Renewal in the Church* (Angelico, 2015).

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