

***Sacrosanctum concilium* at Fifty: Reports from Five English- Speaking Countries**

5. The United States

Paul Turner

“The liturgy...is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”¹ When the Second Vatican Council promulgated the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in 1963, it hoisted lofty goals up the mast of Peter’s barque. It hoped for a renewal of words and rites, hearts and hands. It promoted a renewal of the Church inside, and an invitation to the world outside. The liturgy became the touchstone for this renewal, and through it the Council designed manifold blessings to the Church and the world.

If the bishops who approved the Constitution could see the Catholic Church in the United States fifty years later, they would be proud. People here understand and participate in the liturgy better. They sing, make responses, and receive communion. They are more biblically literate, more ecumenically sensitive. They care about the mass. Implementation is not complete, but the successful reform of the liturgy in the United States cannot be overstated. The Council wanted the mass “to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as also the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested.”² The “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else.”³ People should “take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.”⁴ All this happened, more successfully than the bishops could have imagined.

Mass

The three-year lectionary wins wide praise. The council wanted “more reading from holy scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable.”⁵ The breadth of readings now proclaimed Sunday after Sunday - and day after day -

¹ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) 2.

² CSL 50.

³ SC 14.

⁴ CSL 30.

⁵ CSL 35/1.

testifies to renewal. People hear these passages proclaimed by well-prepared lectors and deacons. Although many of the faithful read along from participation aids, disrupting the sacramental hearing of the proclaimed Word, they demonstrate a detailed interest in the Liturgy of the Word.

The homily, too, has been renewed. People may complain that homilies are long, inarticulate, or meaningless. Yet everyone expects the homily to bridge the scripture with everyday life. The Prayer of the Faithful, restored at the will of the Constitution,⁶ has become integral to the celebration. Not all examples are beautiful, but people expect petitions even at weddings and funerals, whereby the faithful exercise their priestly ministry.

At least one paragraph remains unfulfilled: “That more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice, is strongly commended. The dogmatic principles which were laid down by the Council of Trent remaining intact, communion under both kinds may be granted when the bishops think fit, not only to clerics and religious, but also to the laity.”⁷

Rarely do the faithful in the United States receive the Lord's body from the same sacrifice, even though the practice is “strongly recommended.” Priests retrieve communion wafers from the tabernacle during mass, rather than prepare a sufficient quantity before mass. Even if enough bread comes forward in the procession of the gifts, a minister often goes to the tabernacle to distribute its contents to some of the faithful. This has confused many about the purpose of the tabernacle and the nature of their sacrifice. Debates over tabernacle placement are probably intense because people still receive communion from it, not from the altar. Catholics should offer themselves in sacrifice and receive communion from what they offer. Without the link, many cannot distinguish the sacrifice of the mass from a communion service.

Communion under both kinds is warmly practiced more successfully in the United States than in other countries. If the Blood of Christ is not offered, people notice. Still, even though Catholics expect to see the communion cup, not all of them drink. The Council wanted participation in the sacrifice under the fullest of signs, yet some are missing from the lives of even the most faithful participants at the Catholic mass.

Sacraments

The enrichment of baptismal rites has taken root. The restoration of the catechumenate in “several distinct steps”⁸ was intended to help mission lands. However, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults filled an unexpected need in the United States. Parishes form and welcome new members. Catholics invite their friends to join the faith. Catechumenate rites have been celebrated during Sunday

⁶ CSL 53.

⁷ SC 55.

⁸ SC 64.

Paul Turner, “*Sacrosanctum concilium* at Fifty: Reports from Five English-Speaking Countries, 5. The United States,” *Worship* 87/6 (November 2013):510-516.

masses, and the Easter Vigil is populated by those to be baptized, their godparents, families and friends.

The Rite of Baptism for Children has also enjoyed rebirth. The role of parents and godparents,⁹ developed in the revised rite, feels completely natural. Pastoral questions remain. For example, what happens after baptism with families who do not participate in the weekly mass? But the ritual has been enhanced.

The reception of baptized Christians into the full communion of the Catholic Church is a dormant difficulty. The Constitution says, “a new rite is to be drawn up for converts who have already been validly baptized; it should indicate that they are now admitted to communion with the Church.”¹⁰ The new rite is a simple ceremony for a Sunday mass whenever an individual candidate is ready to be received. However, it is most commonly celebrated at the Easter Vigil, the most elaborate liturgy of the year, combining the baptized with the unbaptized. The problem is more acute in the United States because the RCIA includes adapted rites preliminary to reception. The Constitution never envisioned stages for reception paralleling stages for the catechumenate.

“The rite of confirmation is to be revised and the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth; for this reason it is fitting for candidates to renew their baptismal promises just before they are confirmed.”¹¹ The renewed rite of confirmation surpasses its predecessor. Most confirmations now take place at mass, and they all include readings from scripture, an element missing from the preconciliar rite. However, the Constitution left unaddressed the age of confirmation for those baptized as infants, as well as its sequence with first communion. The absence of direction, combined with the popular full initiation at the Easter Vigil, raised unresolved tensions. A priest is required to confirm unbaptized children of catechetical age right after he baptizes them, even if the children are younger than the diocesan age of confirmation. The problem is especially noteworthy in the United States where the diverse age for confirmation is “between the age of discretion and about 16 years of age.”¹² Perhaps resolving this dilemma was more than the council could do.

“The rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament.”¹³ This revision happened, but largely without implementation. The revised rite of penance includes a greeting by the priest, an optional reading from scripture, a

⁹ SC 67.

¹⁰ SC 69.

¹¹ SC 71.

¹² USCCB, “Canon 891 - Age for Confirmation, Complementary Norms,” 2002.

¹³ SC 72.

closing dialogue, and a dismissal that are all broadly ignored. The second form of the rite of penance, the communal penance service, has enjoyed a good measure of success, but it takes so much time that people leave early or work their cellular devices while waiting their turn. The third form, general absolution, offers a tantalizing possibility for future reform, but it was not envisioned in the Constitution, and the Vatican has successfully pared its usage.

The anointing of the sick “is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.”¹⁴ This idea has simultaneously succeeded and failed. It has succeeded in that a priest now anoints people during their illnesses or on account of their age. People understand that the anointing is for healing, that the appearance of a priest at their bedside is not the family’s passive way of telling them the end is near. However, countless people have missed the change. Priests still receive calls from frantic Catholics who never spoke up throughout the long illness of a loved one, and now, at an inconvenient hour, or on a holiday, they panic because they cannot find a priest to administer “last rites.” The words “last rites” do not appear in the Rite of Anointing and Pastoral Care of the Sick, but nearly everyone assumes that they do, and that good Catholics locate a priest during the final hours of a loved one’s life. Priests are few; they cannot respond to all such requests. They don’t need to. If any sacrament should be given to the dying, it is communion - viaticum. Any lay minister can offer that. But people still think they need last rites. They think they need a priest.

“The marriage rite now found in the Roman Ritual is to be revised and enriched in such a way that the grace of the sacrament is more clearly signified and the duties of the spouses are taught.”¹⁵ The revised marriage rite does include a brief catechesis on the duties of the spouses. Weddings can be beautiful. But the entire ceremony is increasingly engulfed by the shifting norms of society and the competitive drive of the market. The procession, the participation of the assembly, the choice of music, the decorations, and the sexual habits of the engaged have all diminished the hope that the postconciliar Catholic ceremony has been “enriched”. Celebrating a recognizably Catholic liturgy at a wedding is a tall mountain to climb.

Other Concerns

The funeral rite’s improvements have been comforting. “The rite for the burial of the dead should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This holds good also for the liturgical color to be used.”¹⁶ In the United States, white vestments have replaced black, the paschal

¹⁴ SC 73.

¹⁵ SC 77.

¹⁶ SC 82.

candle burns brightly, people sing hope-filled music, a variety of ministers assists. The Constitution offered much-needed comfort to those grieving the death of an infant: “The rite for the burial of infants is to be revised, and a special Mass for the occasion should be provided.”¹⁷

However, some practices have raised questions. People leave the cemetery before the body is interred. The popularity of cremation was unforeseen in the Constitution, nor could the bishops have imagined the burgeoning business of videoed biographies and multiple oral remembrances. The local church is one place where people still gather to remember the deceased, but the building morphs into a kind of hall for after-dinner speeches. In the United States we are seeing the decrease of the funeral rite’s three stages. Fewer people want a prayer service at the funeral home in the evening, a mass the following morning, and a visit to the cemetery after mass. Many prefer to come for only one event. If cremation is involved, the family may choose a day of the week - in a month of the year - that seems more convenient. The proximity between death and burial is losing ground.

The Constitution devoted an entire chapter to the Divine Office,¹⁸ or the Liturgy of the Hours. Significantly, “the traditional sequence of the hours is to be restored so that once again they may be genuinely related to the time of the day when they are prayed, as far as this may be possible.”¹⁹ Other changes affected the structure and content of the office. The result was a form of prayer that worked - not perfectly, but worked - both in private and in public. Fifty years later, a bonus the Constitution could never have foreseen, the number of people praying the office is spiking due to its accessibility on electronic devices. People repulsed by purchasing the expensive four-volume set, figuring out the week of the year, struggling with ribbons, and inserting and losing cards, have enjoyed the simplicity of praying from a handheld phone or tablet. The English-language apps are pirated - the International Commission on English in the Liturgy has never issued electronic rights. But the texts are available on line, in the cloud, and in one’s pocket day and night. Cell phones are increasing the popularity of a prayer conceived for monasteries.

The revision of the liturgical calendar²⁰ has succeeded. The seasons of the year follow a more logical pattern, as does the sanctoral cycle. Moving some saints’ dates to alternate ones has caused some confusion, but it produced a calendar much more predictable and respectful of liturgical times. The United States has exercised restraint in adjusting the calendar to local needs, and its additions have been sensible and enriching.

¹⁷ SC 82.

¹⁸ SC Chapter IV.

¹⁹ SC 88.

²⁰ SC Chapter V.

The chapter on Sacred Music²¹ opened the door to various musical styles and new compositions. The Church lost some treasured chant and polyphony. Music shifted from the choir loft to the nave. Newly composed music became liberally available. In the United States, the failed dream of a national hymnal has produced a friendly competition among publishers of liturgical music. Sadly, some music that people want to sing may not be available in the book they have at church. But publishers keep striving to provide what will be most helpful to worshipers.

Regarding sacred art, the Constitution took a liberal view: “The Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples, and the needs of the various rites.”²² The Constitution was silent about architecture, but its rethinking of the Catholic liturgy caused major changes to church buildings. In the past, a basilica successfully managed sound and light in the pre-electronic age. Now, more flexible shapes can meet the same needs. Spotlighting the active participation of the people, the Council effectively criticized churches built in the long, narrow basilican style, pews flanking a central aisle. Post-conciliar architecture favored fan-shaped churches that gathered the assembly around the altar, where they could better exercise their priestly function.

The liturgical movement came hand in hand with the ecumenical movement. Many of the changes to the Roman Rite attempted to diminish offense to other Christians, such as the reduction of saints’ names in the eucharistic prayers. However, recent rules for translation have shown a disinterest in ecumenical cooperation in developing texts shared by Christians. The council’s ecumenical decree offered a glowing vision of future cooperation, and it can still bear fruit.

The Constitution’s chapters on adaptation²³ boldly invited nations unfamiliar with Roman customs to find a home in an adapted Roman Rite. The Council did not foresee individual parishes populated by people of many different nationalities. Blending these cultures is something that the liturgical renewal still tries to assist.

Overall, the report on *Sacrosanctum concilium* is excellent. More work needs to be done. But Catholics in the United States are celebrating a revised liturgy that the Constitution bravely hoped would happen. The faithful are expressing the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church.

²¹ SC Chapter VI.

²² SC 123.

²³ SC 37-40.