

“HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION: ON THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM”

Keith F. Pecklers, SJ[♦]
Gregorian University, Rome

1. Introduction

On December 4th the universal Church will celebrate the 45th anniversary of the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's Liturgy Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, which the Council bishops approved with an astounding majority: 2,147 in favour and 4 opposed. Thus the Constitution was solemnly approved by Pope Paul VI—the first decree to be promulgated by the Ecumenical Council.

Vatican II was well aware of change in the world—more than any of the twenty ecumenical councils that preceded it. It had emerged within the complex social context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a rise in Communism, and military dictatorships in various corners of the globe. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated only twelve days prior to the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum concilium*.¹ Despite those global crises, however, the Council generally viewed the world positively and with a certain degree of optimism. The credibility of the Church's message would necessarily depend on its capacity to reach far beyond the confines of the Catholic ghetto into the marketplace—into non-Christian and indeed, non-religious spheres.²

[♦]Keith F. Pecklers, SJ is Professor of Liturgy at the Pontifical Gregorian University and Professor of Liturgical History at the Pontifical Liturgical Institute, Rome. His most recent book is *Liturgy: The Illustrated History*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana and New York: Paulist Press, 2012.

¹Nathan Mitchell, “The Council's Call: On the 40th Anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” *America* (January 19-26, 2004) 9.

²John O'Malley, “Reform, Historical Consciousness and Vatican II's Aggiornamento,” *Theological Studies* 32 (1971) 573.

It is important that the liturgical reforms be examined within such a framework.

2. Lessons from the Liturgical Movement

The extraordinary unanimity in the final vote on the Liturgy Constitution reflected the fruit of the fifty-year liturgical movement that had preceded the Council. The movement was successful because it grew not in isolation, but rather in tandem with church renewal promoted by the biblical, patristic, and ecumenical movements in that same historical period. The Pauline doctrine of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ recovered at Tübingen in the nineteenth century offered the theological grounding for the movement's agenda. Speaking of the Church as one body implied and indeed, demanded an intimate link between worship and social concern. It was fitting, then, that the liturgical movement was founded in 1909 at a Catholic labour congress in Belgium, drawing on both the *Motu Proprio* of Pius X *Tra le sollecitudini* in which the Pope spoke of the liturgy "as the true and indispensable source for the Christian life," but also on Leo XIII's social encyclical *Rerum novarum*. Equally significant is the fact that the movement was founded by a former labour chaplain turned Benedictine monk Lambert Beauduin, who would later serve as a sort of mentor for the founder of the U.S. Liturgical Movement, Virgil Michel. The two met when Beauduin taught on the faculty of the Collegio Sant'Anselmo in Rome in the early 1920s and the young German-American Benedictine was a student of Philosophy.

Like its Belgian forebear, the U.S. Liturgical Movement exhibited the same sorts of social concerns and bridge-building efforts. In the years of the great economic depression of the 1930s, the movement in this country found a natural affinity with the Catholic Worker Movement. Subsequently, it forged relationships with Friendship House, Catholic Action, and the Grail Movement. Those Catholic social activists became promoters of liturgical renewal while the liturgical journal *Orate Fratres* regularly defended the Catholic Worker Movement in its editorials. Columnists like H.A. Reinhold challenged racism and a preferential option for the rich in favour of social transformation both within the Church and beyond that found its origins in the liturgy.

3. *Sacrosanctum concilium* and the Liturgical Reforms of Vatican II

The major theological, historical, and pastoral themes that marked the pre-conciliar liturgical movement came to play a significant role in the shaping of the Liturgy Constitution, and then in the implementation of the reforms under the leadership of the international *Consilium*. Thus, Vatican II was as much the ratification of the efforts of the liturgical movement as it was a point of departure for the liturgical renewal that has led us to the present day. The Liturgy Constitution strikes a careful balance between historical and theological foundations, between “sound tradition and legitimate progress.” In many respects, it was a *via media*—a compromise document that attempted to appease both conservative and progressive camps.

But *Sacrosanctum concilium* was also much more than a *via media*. In some cases it called for a complete revision of liturgical books and not a mere superficial editing of what was present in the Tridentine liturgy.³ And while the Constitution did not use the term inculturation,⁴ it does acknowledge the need to allow for “legitimate variations and adaptation to different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission lands.”⁴ Several paragraphs later, the text is even more forthright: “In some places and circumstances, however, an even more radical adaptation of the liturgy is needed.”⁵ In other words, it may not be enough to simply adapt the Roman Rite to particular cultures and circumstances.

With the desire to recover “full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy,” the Council took up once again discussion on the vernacular question that had first been introduced at the Council of Trent four centuries prior, arguing in favour of the employment of local languages on the grounds of intelligibility;⁶ not surprisingly, it proved to be one of the most hotly debated topics at Vatican II. There were some bishops present at the Council who contended that Latin, even if it was not understood by most, gave Catholics a special

³Anscar J. Chupungco, “*Sacrosanctum concilium*: Its Vision and Achievements,” *Ecclesia Orans XIII* (1996/3) 500. See Art. 50 on the revision of the Order of Mass.

⁴Art. 37

⁵Art. 40

⁶Art. 36. On the vernacular debate at the Council see Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence: The Living Language of Christian Worship*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003, 170-225.

identity. Shifting to local languages, they argued, would be tantamount to abandoning Catholic orthodoxy. Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York was one such bishop. Speaking on the matter during one Council session, he cautioned against “an exaggerated historicism and a zeal for novelties.” He suggested that “confusion, astonishment, and injury” could ensue when the faithful “see the unchangeable Church changing her rites.” That said, however, the Cardinal was not exactly the best Latinist himself. During Council sessions, it became so painful when Spellman stood up to address his colleagues in Latin that Vatican staff members were assigned to another microphone with the task of translating the Cardinal’s Latin into correct Latin so that he could be understood. So the Cardinal proposed a vernacular compromise: he would accept the vernacular for praying the Breviary (Divine Office) since he himself had difficulty in grasping what he was praying; but the celebration of Mass should remain in Latin.⁷

Everyone breathed a great sigh of relief when the 84 year old Patriarch of Antioch Maximos IV addressed the bishops in French, arguing that he was Catholic but not Roman Catholic, and Latin was not the language of his liturgical tradition. Undoubtedly, the shift toward vernacular worship represented one of the most profound developments that came out of the Council. And, in fact, it received an extraordinary amount of attention in the secular press—everything from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to *Sports Illustrated* and *Time*. Catholic journalists voted the topic of “English in the Liturgy” the “top religious story of 1964.”

The principle of collegiality among bishops was clearly operative in the Constitution: liturgical matters pertaining to the local church were best dealt with by episcopal conferences or even by diocesan bishops themselves.⁸ Such liturgical de-centralization was justified by the fact that the diocesan bishop is empowered to shepherd that local church and not merely serve as a sort of district representative or middle-manager. Thus the diocesan bishop or episcopal conference should have the authority to make appropriate liturgical decisions that pertain to the particular local church in question.⁹ Nonetheless, an underlying tension around the issue of collegiality held sway

⁷Pecklers, *Dynamic Equivalence*, 170-215.

⁸Art. 22.

⁹Art. 41; Chupungco, 507-508.

during Council sessions, largely between bishops and cardinals of the Roman Curia who were suspicious of extending authority to episcopal conferences, as opposed to diocesan bishops whose pastoral experience made them less threatened by such decentralization.

That division between the Roman Curia and diocesan bishops is well demonstrated in the 2007 publication by Archbishop Piero Marini, the former Papal Master of Ceremonies. In that text entitled *A Challenging Reform: Realizing the Vision of the Liturgical Renewal*¹⁰ Marini argues that resistance to the liturgical changes was largely centred in the Congregation for Divine Worship which sought to maintain a monopoly on the liturgical reform and approval of liturgical texts, both out of a bureaucratic desire for control and based on a conservative theology that distrusted the reforms of the Council. This tension was made most explicit in a 1964 letter signed by all the Bishop members of the French Liturgical Commission on the 7th of February and sent to several dicasteries of the Roman Curia. The letter addressed the subject of liturgical translation as an issue of collegiality:

The Council did not decide that the Assemblies would propose this or that concession for the vernacular to be approved by the Holy See... Neither did the Council state that the bishops' conferences would submit translations for approval by the Apostolic See; it agreed that the translations would be approved by the bishops' conferences, that is all... People are saying that just two months after its promulgation, that the Constitution is beaten in the breach, that the decisions made by episcopal assemblies may be effectively neutralized by the Roman Curia, that the role of the bishops' assemblies is being undermined at the very moment of its establishment by the Council, and that the decisions of the Council are being contested even before the Council has finished.¹¹

4. The Current Liturgical Climate Fifty Years After *Sacrosanctum concilium*

There has been much “water under the bridge” since the French Bishops wrote their 1964 Memorandum. How then, are we to

¹⁰Edited by Mark R. Francis, CSV, John R. Page, and Keith F. Pecklers, SJ, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2007.

¹¹“Memorandum by the Liturgical Commission of the French Episcopate,” 7th February 1964 in Piero Marini, *A Challenging Reform*, 168-170.

interpret our post-Conciliar liturgical history as it has unfolded these past fifty years. It has been argued that in the period immediately after the Council too much happened too quickly. Bishops returned home from the Council enthusiastic to put into practice the new liturgical norms and principles, but few were sufficiently prepared to lead their dioceses in implementing the reforms. Complex Latin liturgical texts were translated into English and other vernacular languages expeditiously, producing an English edition of the Roman Missal in only four years.

Much of the criticism against the liturgical experimentation of the 1960s and 70s was not without justification and mistakes were made. Indeed, few liturgical scholars would argue that the 1973 *Sacramentary* was an adequate rendering in English of the Latin *editio typica* of the Roman Missal. And even today, fifty years after the promulgation of the Council's Liturgy Constitution, most of us could tell stories about places where all sorts of "liturgical experiments" continue to be conducted under the guise of "creativity"—normally registering little success. But as Cardinal John Henry Newman remarked after Vatican I, every Church council has been followed by a period of turmoil and unrest. It would be enough to think of the aftermath of Nicea and Chalcedon, but even the Council of Trent did not succeed in gaining unanimous adherence to its decrees. The Church in France waited well into the seventeenth century to publish the Tridentine decrees and largely ignored that Council's efforts at liturgical uniformity and centralization until well into the nineteenth century. In fact, when Prosper Guéranger arrived on the scene in 1832 to re-found the Benedictine monastery of Solesmes, most French dioceses were still using their own diverse liturgical books and celebrating liturgies with elements that differed from diocese to diocese. In neighbouring Germany, the Tridentine Missal of Pius V was implemented in Münster only in 1890—more than 320 years after the promulgation of the Roman Missal of 1570.

As we reflect upon the liturgical renewal in the years since Vatican II we have much for which to be grateful. The Council's desire for full, active, and conscious participation has been realized in much of the North American Church, especially evident in the growth within lay ecclesial ministry and liturgical leadership. A concomitant growth has also been registered in liturgical formation—both for laity as well as clergy. Today, the Church in the 21st century recognizes more clearly that the handing on of the Church's tradition through its

worship necessarily involves more than the clergy. It is a partnership shared between women and men, involving a complementary rather than competing exercise of ministry within the liturgical assembly as within the Church itself. Baptism not ordination appropriately becomes the common denominator in this equation and thus, at least ideally, the implications for ecumenical liturgical cooperation are obvious.

Like other Christian churches, the Roman Catholic Church has made great strides in recovering the intrinsic relationship between liturgy and life—worship that flows into social outreach of the poor and disenfranchised. Questions raised by the social sciences—new insights drawn from cultural and gender studies have called our attention to the diverse dynamics at play when we gather for Christian worship, and the importance of worship that is contextualized according to the needs and parameters of the given celebrating community. Back in the 1970s some Roman Catholic liturgists in the United States called for an “American Liturgy” that would reflect the genius of the North American cultural experience. But today, we would need to ask ourselves “which America?” since we are much more conscious than we were thirty or forty years ago of our multiracial, multicultural, diverse identity, and the effects of globalization on our worship. This, of course, is all the more a reality in a country as large and diverse as India. As we look toward the next fifty years, there is much more to be done in all these areas but it must be said that the pluses far outweigh the minuses if we were to compare and contrast between 1958 and 2013. Nonetheless, if one employs the solid principles of Vatican II as a barometer and the clear Conciliar preference for collegial structures of leadership within local churches, then there appear to be more shadows than light in recent years.

5. Divergent Ecclesiologies: Which Starting Point?

As we reflect upon the current liturgical climate, I submit that the tensions of these post-Conciliar years point to a much deeper reality than whether or not we pray in Latin or English, or in a more traditional or contemporary manner. What the liturgical debates represent are competing ecclesiologies—how we view the Church, in other words—the relationship between Church and Eucharist, for example—between the local and universal Church. Vatican II’s vision of the Church was radically different than what had preceded it,

recovering the nature of the Church's global dimension—its own self-realization as a world-church linked together as a communion of local churches under the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Publications by the retired Archbishop of San Francisco, John Quinn,¹² and by the Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley¹³ have called for a return to the more ancient view of papal primacy with its emphasis on collegial and synodal structures of church leadership, as continues to be the case today in the Churches of the East. Such a re-thinking of our ecclesiological premises would, of course, have obvious implications for the Church's liturgical life, as well.

6. Worship and the Mission of the Church

The Church is in a very different place than it was back in 1963 when *Sacrosanctum concilium* was promulgated and this must be stated squarely. In the West, a decline in church attendance continues to be registered along with a concomitant decline in the number of ordained priests, resulting in ever greater numbers of "priestless parishes"—even in Catholic Italy. In the concrete, this means that as we look toward the future, we will increasingly become a non-Eucharistic Church: the Mass will no longer be the standard fare for significant groups of Catholics but rather a Word service led by a layperson at which Communion is distributed from the tabernacle.

Sociological surveys and studies continue to be carried out, attempting to better understand the sharp decline in religious practice in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania. Here in Australia and throughout much of the Western world, increasing numbers of Catholics find themselves in what the Roman Catholic Church calls "irregular situations" and many are in our assemblies on Sunday morning. Here we are faced with a host of new pastoral challenges begging our attention: how do we reach them—the divorced and remarried, for example? How do they recognize themselves in our words? In Latin America, over 100,000 people leave the Catholic Church each year in search of more intimate communities of faith that they find in fundamentalist communities; they lament the anonymity and disinterest they experience in large urban Catholic parishes. These pastoral problems do not appear to be

¹²John R. Quinn, *The Reform of the Papacy: The Costly Call to Christian Unity*, New York: Crossroad, 1999.

¹³Michael J. Buckley, SJ, *Papal Primacy and the Episcopate: Towards a Relational Understanding*, New York: Crossroad, 1998.

abating and will become an ever-greater reality in the Roman Catholic Church as it moves forward in the twenty-first century.

Globalization, of course, is having its own influence on twenty-first century life. Several years ago, I attended a Christmas concert of the Vienna Boys Choir. As they came onto the stage, it was immediately clear that the group was anything but classically Austrian. Much to my surprise, the Vienna Boys Choir now reflects the multicultural reality that is increasingly constitutive of the North American Church. The Conductor is Peruvian from Lima and the choristers hail from Australia, Canada, Poland, Nigeria, Slovakia, Soviet Georgia, and even the United States! As globalization is changing the way we live, it is also changing the way we worship: we have indeed become a global village and this multicultural gift continues to present fresh challenges for worship in all our churches.

The Church's face is also radically different from fifty years ago in terms of where it is growing exponentially and this also has serious implications for our liturgical future. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 80 percent of all Christians throughout the world were white and lived in the northern hemisphere. By the year 2020 we are told that 80 percent of all Christians will be people of colour who live in the southern hemisphere. In his book *The New Faces of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins writes:

The average Christian in the world today is a poor person, very poor indeed by the standards of the white worlds of North America and Western Europe. Also different is the social and political status of African and Asian Christians, who are often minorities in countries dominated by other religions and secular ideologies.¹⁴

Christian worship is always intended to lead to mission, and thus the liturgical polarization discussed earlier can easily distort our vision and impede our progress in linking what we do in church with what happens beyond its borders. We must constantly resist the temptation to think that our liturgical celebrations are only about us and our concerns, lest we celebrate nothing more than ourselves. By their very nature, our liturgical rites are celebrations of the world Church—the whole body of Christ. If our Catholic tradition realized and celebrated in worship is to be credible, capable of reading the

¹⁴Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 68.

signs of the times in this postmodern age, then along with our counterparts in other churches, Roman Catholics will need to be courageous in asking those difficult questions about where their worship is leading them and what it is demanding of them.

Fifty years after the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum concilium*, we are more aware than ever that Christian worship—the Eucharist in particular—is by its very nature linked to love of neighbour. In the concrete, this means that our worship necessarily unites us in solidarity with those who suffer in Syria or in Pakistan or in Mali. Whether Anglican or Methodist, Roman Catholic or Lutheran, authentic Christian worship means that we are not only inextricably linked to one another, but also intimately united with the people of Afghanistan and Gaza, Iraq and Egypt—because authentic liturgy transcends human barriers of culture and social status, gender and race. The alternative would be a sort of “liturgical isolationism” or self-sufficiency that runs counter to the Gospel of Christ.

7. Conclusion

We have all come a long way on our liturgical pilgrimage of fifty years and we have done so together ecumenically. At a time when that Conciliar tradition is being challenged in various sectors of the Church it is more important than ever that we remain faithful to the vision of the Second Vatican Council, for there is much that remains to be done. The newly-canonized Jesuit saint from Chile, Alberto Hurtado, often spoke of the “prolongation of the Mass in daily life—similar to what the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner referred to as the “liturgy of the world”—the liturgy lives on the streets, far beyond the confines of the church building. It is not a coincidence that the word “Mass” comes from *missio*. *Ite Missa Est* literally means “Go you are sent.” But this sending forth must necessarily mean a being sent forth together as one Church—one, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic—united in a common profession of faith and a common baptism. Getting lost in our liturgical debates while ignoring that fundamental vision of the Ecumenical Council will only perpetuate and indeed, augment the divisions within the already wounded body of Christ as it cries out for healing in so many parts of the world.

Fifty years after the Vatican II’s Liturgy Constitution as we give thanks for the progress that has been made we need to reawaken that intrinsic relationship between worship and mission which by its very nature, underscores ecumenical liturgical cooperation as a non-

negotiable. Put differently, how we understand worship will determine how we understand mission. The goal, then, is that the language of the Eucharist become the language and pattern of our own lives as we participate within God’s mission within human society.¹⁵ As we consider our liturgical future, failure to do so ecumenically will be to our detriment. Indeed, if our worship is to be one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic as the Council desired and as the Gospel demands, then it must open wide to embrace the whole of God’s world in all its need as Christ would have us do.

¹⁵Francis J. Maloney, SDB, *A Body Broken for a Broken People: Eucharist in the New Testament*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990, 1997, 155-159.