

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM
**Exploring the Underlying Theological
Principles of the Conciliar Constitution on
Sacred Liturgy**

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The Conciliar document on Sacred Liturgy is called simply Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. It is not termed as dogmatic constitution or decree. It is a permanent law and not a mere decree settling some momentary questions. The liturgical Constitution of the Second Vatican Council is disciplinary and not dogmatic. That is, it contains dispositions pertaining to the sphere of practical life rather than dogmatic teachings. However, these dispositions are firmly grounded in the teachings of the Church. The teachings are taught in the liturgical constitution but not defined. In other words, the liturgical constitution has the character statements of the *magisterium ordinarium*.

The document itself was the product of long and intense discussions that reflected many different perspectives. As the Benedictine liturgist, Anscar Chupungco records the council deliberations, the discussion of the proposed Constitution continued through fifteen general meetings in the first session alone from the

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22nd of October to the 13th of November 1962 with 297 written proposals and 328 oral interventions, and a series of amendments before it was finally approved.¹ Fundamentally, it represented a balance between “sound tradition” and “legitimate progress” (SC 23). Thus, it is accurate to say that the Constitution is a compromise document, attempting to appease both conservative and progressive camps.

Before we understand the content of the document it is important to understand the underlying theological principles of the Constitution. That is why, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* begins with building a beautiful theological edifice in order to understand better the liturgical actions of the Church. The Preface (art 1-4) and the first chapter with the title *General Principles for the Restoration and Promotion of the Sacred Liturgy* (art 5-46) sets the Constitution in the overall programme of the Council in its theological context. Significantly, it was the first document to be promulgated by the Council and it was the first time that a church council ever dealt with liturgy in a systematic way and in a separate document, with special attention to the liturgy’s theological dimensions. The first article of the constitution explains the purpose of the document. That is, through the reform and promotion of liturgy,

The sacred Council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church’s fold (SC 1).

In order “to impart an ever-increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful,” the Constitution builds on certain theological principles as mentioned in the introduction and the very first chapter of the document. I identify six such theological principles and attempt to explain them here below.

1. Biblical Foundation for Liturgy

The first theological principle is the intimate relation between the Sacred Scripture and Liturgy. The constitution re-discovers the intimate relation between Sacred Scripture and liturgy. The first chapter begins by emphasizing the importance of liturgy in the life of

¹A. Chupungco, ed., “Introduction to the Liturgy,” in *Handbook For Liturgical Studies*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997, 176.

the Church. Article 5 sets out to explain the biblical foundation for sacramental liturgy.

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ Our Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby "dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, restored our life." 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."

Furthermore, article 6 explains the mission that the Risen Lord entrusted to the apostles and how the mission was carried out after the Pentecost. From this biblical foundation the first chapter comes to the ecclesial understanding by drawing our attention to the fourfold presence of Jesus Christ in the Church's liturgical celebrations: "Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations... in the person of his minister, ...in the Eucharistic species... He is present in his word ...he is present when the Church prays and sings..." (SC 7).

Among number of points for which the constitution was praised, the one highlighting the importance of Holy Scripture in liturgy deserves our attention. Article 25 emphasizes that the liturgical texts and gestures are inspired by the word of God. It says,

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning (SC 25).

During Vatican II Sacred Scripture was restored as the source for all liturgical renewal with patristic theology and practice as its guide and inspiration.

1.2. The Christological Centre of All Christian Worship

Sacrosanctum Concilium recovered the importance of liturgical theology and spirituality with special emphasis on the Christological centre of all Christian worship. In its definition of liturgy it begins by saying, "The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ" and it goes on to say, "In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his Members" (SC 7). The praise and thanksgiving in the

liturgy is offered to the Father in and through Jesus Christ our Lord as the eternal high-priest. The Christian who prays through Christ to God the Father is not just calling upon Christ but, when he prays he enters Christ, he prays from within Christ, of whom he is a member by baptism. Prayer through Christ leads the Christian into the heart of the Holy Trinity. There the Father and the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, are united from all eternity in the fullness of life and love.² This Christological dimension of liturgy is acknowledged verbally in the phrase, *through Christ Our Lord (per Christum Dominum nostrum)*³ with which most of the presidential prayers are concluded during liturgy.

1.3. Liturgy As The Source And Summit

I would like to draw your attention to one strong and bold statement of the Council in its liturgical constitution which is widely quoted till today and which witnessed heated discussion at the Council itself finally receiving approval with 2004 positive and 4 negative votes for this statement alone. The article 10 says, "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows." This statement echoes the insights rediscovered by the twentieth century liturgical movement motivated by the profound study of Sacred Scripture and the writings of the fathers of the Church. The same article expands its reflection on this statement. First of all, the article compares grace to a fountain that is poured upon us for our own sanctification in Christ: "the liturgy therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain, and the sanctification of men in Christ." At eleven places the Constitution affirms what the Church teaches us, that is, Sacraments confer grace and sanctify men. That was why, the Fathers of the Church understood liturgy as the saving experience in as much it sanctified them. Today we have to be in touch with the source, that is liturgy, in order to have the same saving experience. Although this article reflected the trend of the liturgical movement in calling the liturgy as the *theologia prima*, that is source of theology it was misunderstood by

²T. Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy*, trans. J. Halliburton. 2nd ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1969, 32.

³S.J. Lionel, *Continuity in Liturgical Renewal: A Critical Analysis of the Prefaces for the Sundays of Lent in the Editions of Missale Romanum 1570 and 2002*, Palo Alto: Academica Press, 2012, 66.

some council fathers since the explanation was missing in the original draft. When the explanation was added and personally explained by the Preparatory Commission it received overwhelming approval with 2004 to 4. The topic of *theologia prima* itself needs further discussion and explanation for our readers in the light of various theologians who elaborated on this topic.⁴ But I would give a simple analogy which may assist us to grasp its meaningfulness. For example, several professionals can give detailed explanations about a waterfall. A geologists may describe the location of the mountain, etc., an expert in physics may tell the force of the water and what it can do, an expert in medicine may tell the medical value of taking bath in the water since it contains lots of minerals to rejuvenate the body, a photographer may present the beauty of the falls with various pictures. All these are explanations of the beautiful waterfalls. But all these explanations are not equal to a person taking bath in the falls experiencing the soothing touch of the medicinal water that flows from the mountain, the feel, the fragrance of nature, the sight around him, and the deeper rejuvenating experience of taking bath. Similarly, one can study about God, various theological dimensions, study his word but in Liturgy alone the divine-human interaction takes place. We come in touch with the sacred reality in as much as sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace. Sacraments are transforming encounters with the Risen Lord.⁵ They are not merely signs but they are efficacious since they bring to effect what they signify. When the priest prays the words of absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation it is not merely a sign but sins are actually forgiven. Here the sacrament of reconciliation is not a study about confession but actual experience of forgiveness. It is in this sense that the council Fathers approved that Liturgy is the source of Christian life from which the sanctifying grace flows. The sanctified man brings glory to God. All the activities of the Church are for the glorification of God, and the liturgy is the supreme expression of the glorification of God. During the Eucharist we beautifully acknowledge it through the great Doxology, "Through Him and with Him and in Him, O God almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all glory and honour

⁴For more details see D.W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, Mundelein, IL.: Hillenbrand Books, 2004; *What is Liturgical Theology?: A Study in Methodology*, Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

⁵S.J. Lionel, *Life of Grace: History and Theology of Sacraments*, vol 1, Bangalore, India: ATC, 2012, 95.

is yours forever and ever.” We not only glorify God with our own voice but join with angels and heavenly realities at least momentarily to sing glory to God when we sing the hymn *sanctus* at every Eucharistic celebration. Thus the introductory articles bring out profound explanation of the teachings of the Church in the very celebration of liturgy. When we accept the deeper theological insights treasured in the liturgy itself, that is, as the Church calls it the “source”, liturgy can no longer remain as merely learning some ritual and carefully observing them as it was understood prior to the Council. This is entirely a new trend set by Vatican II, that is, to restore liturgy to its original dignity the place it deserves in Christian life, namely the source and summit.

1.4. Liturgical Formation in Seminaries

From numbers 14 to 19 the constitution speaks about the liturgical formation of seminarians, priests, religious and laity. The Church is always concerned about formation of candidates to priesthood and religious life. For example, the Lateran council (1215) said,

To guide souls is a supreme art. We therefore strictly order bishops carefully to prepare those who are to be promoted to the priesthood and to instruct them, either by themselves or through other suitable persons, in the divine services and the sacraments of the church, so that they may be able to celebrate them correctly. But if they presume henceforth to ordain the ignorant and uninformed, which can easily be detected, we decree that both the ordainers and those ordained are to be subject to severe punishment. For it is preferable, especially in the ordination of priests, to have a few good ministers than many bad ones, for if a blind man leads another blind man, both will fall into the pit (Constitution 27).⁶

Similarly, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) dealt with several points concerning formation. For example, it spoke about religious practice from early age and orderly church life (Canon 18), promoting vocations among the rich and the poor, dividing the boys into number of classes according to age and capacity to learn in order to give proper training, assigning them to the service of the church when the time is ripe, educating them in Scripture, Sacraments, and writings of the Fathers of the Church, and appointing qualified teachers to instruct. Canon 18 of the council said:

⁶N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990, 248.

...they [candidates to priesthood] should study grammar, singing, keeping church accounts, and other useful skills; and they should be versed in holy scripture, church writers, homilies of the saints, and the practice of rites and ceremonies and of the administering the sacraments, particularly all that seems appropriate to hearing confessions. The bishop should ensure that they attend mass everyday, confess their sins at least every month ... They will punish the difficult and incorrigible and those who spread bad habits with severity, and expel them if need be... (Session 23; canon 18).⁷

Following the same trajectory Vatican II articulates well the importance of liturgical formation in seminaries and novitiates. It is one of the important decisions by Vatican II. The council deliberated on the topic of liturgical formation in the seminaries in the context of the goal set by the council to promote active and conscious participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Unless the priests and future priests receive proper liturgical formation the goal of active participation would never be achieved.

The study of sacred liturgy is to be ranked among the compulsory and major courses in seminaries and religious houses of studies; in theological faculties it is to rank among the principal courses. It is to be taught under its theological, historical, spiritual, pastoral, and juridical aspects... Moreover, other professors, while striving to expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation from the angle proper to each of their own subjects, must nevertheless do so in a way which will clearly bring out the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, as also the unity which underlies all priestly training. This consideration is especially important for professors of dogmatic, spiritual, and pastoral theology and for those of Holy Scripture (SC 16).

The council was also concerned about the liturgical formation of men and women religious already during their formation period.

In seminaries and houses of religious, clerics shall be given a liturgical formation in their spiritual life. For this they will need proper direction, so that they may be able to understand the sacred rites and take part in them wholeheartedly; and they will also need personally to celebrate the sacred mysteries, as well as popular devotions which are imbued with the spirit of the liturgy. In addition they must learn how to observe the liturgical laws, so that life in seminaries and houses of religious may be thoroughly influenced by the spirit of the liturgy (SC 17).

⁷N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, 750.

The article 21 mentions about the divinely instituted elements in the liturgy which are unchangeable and the elements which are subject to change. It says, “these latter not only may be changed but ought to be changed with the passage of time, if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become less suitable.” Although the council was open to changes it never intended random modifications. In the same trajectory, article 24 mentions that liturgical books are to be revised. However, no one should think that such changes are arbitrary. In articles 22 and 23 the constitution clearly states that the changes are subject to the Episcopal conferences and Holy See.

1.5. Making Room for Adaptations

One of the significant contributions of the council is making provisions for cultural adaptations in liturgy so that the Gospel may take firm roots in every nation. The council acknowledged that if the renewal had to be effective it was important to include cultural adaptations. Considering the goal to reform, although the Councils of Trent and Vatican II were separated by four centuries they had the same aim while promoting liturgical reform. That is, both the councils aimed to restore liturgy to the pristine beauty during the time of the Fathers of the Church. However, the scholars after Trent had many obstacles to fulfil the objectives. For example, there were no sufficient studies available on the writings of the Fathers of the Church or ancient liturgical documents. On the contrary, the context after Vatican II had the advantage of numerous discoveries, studies and critical editions of ancient sacramentaries published during the period between the two councils. These studies informed the methods followed by the Church during the early and patristic periods. Hence, the realization of this vision for liturgical renewal differed between these two councils. Let us briefly walk through history of Christianity to see evidences of adaptations.

The early church adapted herself to the Greco-Roman culture even in the structure of her public worship and the use of bilingualism was in practice. For example, when Egeria reports of the liturgy in Jerusalem at the turn of fourth to fifth century, she mentions that after the Greek text, the Syriac was given for those who did not understand the former. There were interpreters for Syriac and Latin. These general procedures were not uncommon in other regions and

in other centuries.⁸ Furthermore, we notice several signs of an organic development of liturgy. For example, during the period of patristic creativity, the Fathers of the Church allowed adaptations in liturgy to facilitate faith to take firm roots in every culture. The Fathers of the Church allowed adaptations in liturgical rites as long as the cultural elements were not based on superstition or contrary to the Christian faith.⁹ During the later period, there are evidences of translations of liturgical texts into local languages. It is attested by Friar John of Montecorvino, later Archbishop of Khanbalik or Beijing (+1328) that he celebrated Mass according to the Roman Rite among the Mongols of Southern Siberia in their language. Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605), authorized the preparation of a Chinese translation of the Bible, the Roman Missal, the canonical hours and the rites of sacraments. As a result, in 1670 the Chinese missal was printed in Beijing. However, in 1755 it was reprovved. In the subsequent years, requests for vernacular translations from missionaries in various parts of the world began to reach Propaganda and the Holy See found itself examining these petitions. Consequently, there were some permissions given for vernacular translations. For example, in 1910 the Propaganda published Roman Ritual in Ethiopian which was earlier translated by the Vincentian bishop St Justin de Jacobis (+1860) and on 9th March 1927, the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a decree approving the publication in Roman characters of the Roman Missal in Old Slavonic. On the basis of instructions and faculties granted in 1941 to Nuncios by Propaganda Fide, the Internuncio in India, citing the model of the Roman Ritual in German, approved on 8th July 1949 a Ritual which used in part the 'lingua indica' (Hindi). In 1953 and 1955 the rituals in Italian and English were approved for the use in Italy, United States of America, Australia and Canada. In 1962, bilingual ritual using Spanish for Latin America was approved.¹⁰ All these initiatives and approvals indicate the Church's intention that in every culture the Gospel has to take its roots. For the evangelization to be successful, cultural adaptations were not merely optional but necessary.

⁸Egeria, *Itinerarium*, cap 47, *Corpus christianorum series latina 175*, Brepols, Turnholt, 1965, 28-90.

⁹S.J. Lionel, "Liturgical Inculturation in India: Methods from the Tradition of the Church," *Journal of Indian Theology* (December 2011) 55-56.

¹⁰A. Ward, "The Western Experience of the Vernacular Before the Second Vatican Council," *Notitiae* (October 2011) 549-568.

The need for cultural adaptations was already highlighted by Pius XII in his encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* in 1939 in the context of proliferation of instances of liturgy being celebrated in the vernacular with the approval of the Holy See. It was this phenomenon that informed the decisions of Vatican II and the measures to implement them taken by the Roman Curia.¹¹ It is in the same spirit of the patristic age that Vatican II opened itself to allow adaptations in liturgy with caution. While clearly articulating the council's intention not to impose rigid uniformity the constitution emphasizes the substantial unity which is not modified by legitimate variations. Article 38 says, "Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved, provision shall be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in mission countries." These adaptations concern, "the administration of the sacraments, sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music and the arts, according, however, to the fundamental norms laid down in this Constitution" (SC 39). In article 40 the constitution opens the door for "radical adaptation of the liturgy" under the supervision of the Episcopal conferences which are subject to the approval of the Apostolic See. The same article offers utmost caution that it should be done with the help of experts under the strict supervision. Even when it speaks about experiments it clearly mentions that it should be only for a fixed period of time. Among the points mentioned in this section, "norms for adapting the liturgy to the genius and traditions of peoples" received much attention and was subject of prolonged debate with the final approval of 2083 votes in favour and only 21 votes against it. The consensus was possible because of the presence of bishops from mission countries especially from Africa and Asia. Although the spirit of the council in its openness to the pastoral motif is very clear in this article the practice or implementation of it sometimes offer uncomfortable results due to uncontrolled on-going experimentations in liturgy to this day. This is one of the issues that needs attention during this post-conciliar context.

1.6. The Pastoral Aim of the Constitution

The first chapter, while stating the theological principles, overflows with its pastoral aim in a number of articles. One of the dearest aims of the constitution is to promote active participation of the faithful in

¹¹A. Ward, "The Western Experience of the Vernacular," 548.

the liturgy. The constitution says, "all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (SC 14). In article 8, the constitution speaks about the eschatological dimension of liturgy: "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."

While emphasizing the hierarchical and communal nature of liturgy the constitution mentions that the various ministries such as servers, readers, and priests should be carried out with utmost care in the spirit of collaboration. It also reminds that liturgy is not a private function but it is community worship. When we consider Church as the "sacrament of unity" there is no room for sporadic innovations (SC 26-30). Similarly, while speaking about the educative and pastoral nature of liturgy, the constitution says, "it [liturgy] likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. ...[through liturgy] the faith of those taking part is nourished, and their minds are raised to God so that they may offer him their spiritual homage and receive his grace more abundantly" (SC 33). The pastoral aim of the constitution shines in the articles 34 and 35 wherein it says that the rites should have "noble simplicity" so that people understand the meaningfulness of the rite when performed. Article 35 mentions that "The sermon, moreover, should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources. ...Instruction which is more explicitly liturgical should also be given in a variety of ways" so that people understand the rites very well and actively and consciously participate in the liturgy. The same pastoral aim overflows when the constitution speaks about use of vernacular in liturgy. Although the article 36 notes the significance of Latin in the Roman Rite it leaves the option open to the episcopal conferences with the approval of the Holy See to use vernacular in worship.

The first chapter in article 41 describes Bishop as the chief liturgists in a diocese and celebration of liturgy is the first and the most holy office of the bishop. That is why, the throne of the bishop is located in the sanctuary of the Cathedral close to the altar. Furthermore, the general norms laid down in the first chapter promotes liturgical life in the parishes, collaboration of clergy and faithful in promoting active and conscious participation in the liturgy, and sacred music. From articles 41 to 46 it speaks about promotion of liturgical life in dioceses and parishes and pastoral liturgical action. It clearly

articulates the conciliar aim to promote liturgical renewal at the grass root level. In order to effectively do this the constitution encourages “every diocese is to have a commission on the sacred liturgy, under the direction of the bishop, for promoting the liturgical apostolate” (SC 46).

This brief survey of theological principles of the Constitution on Liturgy will help us to understand the pastoral zeal of the council to promote liturgical renewal. The Order of the Mass, Sacraments, the Liturgical Year, sacred music and architecture are all revised in the light of these theological principles. As we celebrate the golden jubilee year of the beginning of Vatican II it is very useful to keep in mind these theological principles to become agents of liturgical renewal today.