



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
(WASHINGTON, OREGON, IDAHO, MONTANA AND ALASKA)**

*9 October 1998*

*Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. With fraternal love in the Lord I welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in the Northwestern United States, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. This series of visits by the Bishops of your country to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and to the Successor of Peter and his collaborators in the service of the universal Church, is taking place while the whole People of God is preparing to celebrate the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and enter a new Christian Millennium. The two thousandth anniversary of the Birth of the Savior is a call to all Christ's followers to seek a genuine conversion to God and a great advance in holiness. Since the liturgy is such a central part of the Christian life, I wish today to consider some aspects of the liturgical renewal so vigorously promoted by the Second Vatican Council as the prime agent of the wider renewal of Catholic life.

To look back over what has been done in the field of liturgical renewal in the years since the Council is, first, to see many reasons for giving heartfelt thanks and praise to the Most Holy Trinity for the marvelous awareness which has developed among the faithful of their role and responsibility in this priestly work of Christ and his Church. It is also to realize that not all changes have always and everywhere been accompanied by the necessary explanation and catechesis; as a result, in some cases there has been a misunderstanding of the very nature of the liturgy, leading to abuses, polarization, and sometimes even grave scandal. After the experience of more than thirty years of liturgical renewal, we are well placed to assess both the strengths and weaknesses of what has been done, in order more confidently to plot our course into the future which God has in mind for his cherished People.

2. The challenge now is to move beyond whatever misunderstandings there have been and to

reach the proper point of balance, especially by entering more deeply into the contemplative dimension of worship, which includes the sense of awe, reverence and adoration which are fundamental attitudes in our relationship with God. This will happen only if we recognize that the liturgy has dimensions *both local and universal, time-bound and eternal, horizontal and vertical, subjective and objective*. It is precisely these tensions which give to Catholic worship its distinctive character. The universal Church is united in the one great act of praise; but it is always the worship of a particular community in a particular culture. It is the eternal worship of Heaven, but it is also steeped in time. It gathers and builds a human community, but it is also “the worship of the divine majesty” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33). It is subjective in that it depends radically upon what the worshippers bring to it; but it is objective in that it transcends them as the priestly act of Christ himself, to which he associates us but which ultimately does not depend upon us (*ibid.*, 7). This is why it is so important that liturgical law be respected. The priest, who is the servant of the liturgy, not its inventor or producer, has a particular responsibility in this regard, lest he empty liturgy of its true meaning or obscure its sacred character. The core of the mystery of Christian worship is the sacrifice of Christ offered to the Father and the work of the Risen Christ who sanctifies his People through the liturgical signs. It is therefore essential that in seeking to enter more deeply into the contemplative depths of worship the inexhaustible mystery of the priesthood of Jesus Christ be fully acknowledged and respected. While all the baptized share in that one priesthood of Christ, not all share in it in the same manner. The ministerial priesthood, rooted in Apostolic Succession, confers on the ordained priest faculties and responsibilities which are different from those of the laity but which are at the service of the common priesthood and are directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1547*). The priest therefore is not just one who presides, but one who acts in the person of Christ.

3. Only by being radically faithful to this doctrinal foundation can we avoid one-dimensional and unilateral interpretations of the Council’s teaching. The sharing of all the baptized in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the Council’s call for “full, conscious and active participation” in the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). Full participation certainly means that every member of the community has a part to play in the liturgy; and in this respect a great deal has been achieved in parishes and communities across your land. But full participation does not mean that everyone does everything, since this would lead to a *clericalizing* of the laity and a *laicizing* of the priesthood; and this was not what the Council had in mind. The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical and polyphonic, respecting the different roles assigned by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise.

Active participation certainly means that, in gesture, word, song and service, all the members of the community take part in an act of worship, which is anything but inert or passive. Yet active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These

are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active. In a culture which neither favors nor fosters meditative quiet, the art of interior listening is learned only with difficulty. Here we see how the liturgy, though it must always be properly inculturated, must also be counter-cultural.

Conscious participation calls for the entire community to be properly instructed in the mysteries of the liturgy, lest the experience of worship degenerate into a form of ritualism. But it does not mean a constant attempt within the liturgy itself to make the implicit explicit, since this often leads to a verbosity and informality which are alien to the Roman Rite and end by trivializing the act of worship. Nor does it mean the suppression of all subconscious experience, which is vital in a liturgy which thrives on symbols that speak to the subconscious just as they speak to the conscious. The use of the vernacular has certainly opened up the treasures of the liturgy to all who take part, but this does not mean that the Latin language, and especially the chants which are so superbly adapted to the genius of the Roman Rite, should be wholly abandoned. If subconscious experience is ignored in worship, an affective and devotional vacuum is created and the liturgy can become not only too verbal but also too cerebral. Yet the Roman Rite is again distinctive in the balance it strikes between a spareness and a richness of emotion: it feeds the heart *and* the mind, the body *and* the soul. It has been written with good reason that in the history of the Church all true renewal has been linked to a re-reading of the Church Fathers. And what is true in general is true of the liturgy in particular. The Fathers were pastors with a burning zeal for the task of spreading the Gospel; and therefore they were profoundly interested in all the dimensions of worship, leaving us some of the most significant and enduring texts of the Christian tradition, which are anything but the result of a barren aestheticism. The Fathers were ardent preachers, and it is hard to imagine that there can be an effective renewal of Catholic preaching, as the Council wished, without sufficient familiarity with the Patristic tradition. The Council promoted a move to a homiletic mode of preaching which would, like the Fathers, expound the biblical text in a way which opens its inexhaustible riches to the faithful. The importance that preaching has assumed in Catholic worship since the Council means that priests and deacons should be trained to make good use of the Bible. But this also involves familiarity with the whole Patristic, theological and moral tradition, as well as a penetrating knowledge of their communities and of society in general. Otherwise the impression is given of a teaching without roots and without the universal application inherent in the Gospel message. The excellent synthesis of the Church's doctrinal wealth contained in the [\*Catechism of the Catholic Church\*](#) has yet to be more widely felt as an influence on Catholic preaching.

4. It is essential to keep clearly in mind that the liturgy is intimately linked to the Church's mission to evangelize. If the two do not go hand in hand, both will falter. Insofar as developments in liturgical renewal are superficial or unbalanced, our energies for a new evangelization will be compromised; and insofar as our vision falls short of the new evangelization our liturgical renewal will be reduced to external and possibly unsound adaptation. The Roman Rite has always been a form of worship that looks to mission. This is why it is comparatively brief: there was much to be

done outside the church; and this is why we have the dismissal "*Ite, missa est*", which gives us the term "Mass": the community is sent forth to evangelize the world in obedience to Christ's command (cf. Mt 28:19-20).

As Pastors, you are fully aware of the great thirst for God and the desire for prayer which people feel today. The World Youth Day in Denver stands out as evidence that the younger generation of Americans too yearns for a deep and demanding faith in Jesus Christ. They want to have an active role in the Church, and to be sent out in the name of Christ to evangelize and transform the world around them. Young people are ready to commit themselves to the Gospel message if it is presented in all its nobility and liberating force. They will continue to take an active part in the liturgy if they experience it as capable of leading them to a deep personal relationship with God; and it is from this experience that there will come priestly and religious vocations marked by true evangelical and missionary energy. In this sense the young are summoning the whole Church to take the next step in implementing the vision of worship which the Council has bequeathed to us. Unburdened by the ideological agenda of an earlier time, they are able to speak simply and directly of their desire to experience God, especially in prayer both public and private. In listening to them, dear Brothers, we may well hear "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:11).

5. In our preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the year 1999 will be devoted to the Person of the Father and to the celebration of his merciful love. Initiatives for next year should draw particular attention to the nature of the Christian life as "a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the 'prodigal son', we discover anew each day" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 49). At the core of this experience of pilgrimage is our journey as sinners into the unfathomable depths of the Church's liturgy, the liturgy of Creation, the liturgy of Heaven – all of which are in the end the worship of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Priest, in whom the Church and all creation are drawn into the life of the Most Holy Trinity, our true home. That is the purpose of all our worship and all our evangelizing.

At the very heart of the worshipping community, we find the Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, who, from the depths of her contemplative faith, brings forth the Good News, which is Jesus Christ himself. Together with you I pray that American Catholics when they celebrate the liturgy will have in their hearts the same song that she sang: "My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit finds joy in God my Savior. . . God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name" (Lk 1:46-50). In entrusting the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses to the Blessed Mother's loving protection, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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