



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER
SPIRITUS ET SPONSA
OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF
JOHN PAUL II
ON THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY
"SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM"

1. "The Spirit and the Bride say 'Come'. And let him who hears say, 'Come'. And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Apoc 22: 17). These words from the Apocalypse echo in my heart as I remember that 40 years ago today, exactly on 4 December 1963, my venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, promulgated the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the Sacred Liturgy. What, indeed, is the Liturgy other than the voice of the Holy Spirit and of the Bride, holy Church, crying in unison to the Lord Jesus: "Come"? What is the Liturgy other than that pure, inexhaustible source of "living water" from which all who thirst can freely draw the gift of God (cf. Jn 4: 10)? Indeed, in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first fruit of the Second Vatican Council, that "great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century"¹, the Holy Spirit spoke to the Church, ceaselessly guiding the disciples of the Lord "into all the truth" (Jn 16: 13). The commemoration of the 40th anniversary of this event is a good opportunity to rediscover the basic themes of the liturgical renewal that the Council Fathers desired, to seek to evaluate their reception, as it were, and to cast a glance at the future.² With the passing of time and in the light of its fruits, the importance of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has become increasingly clear. The Council brilliantly outlined in it the principles on which are based the liturgical practices of the Church and which inspire its healthy renewal in the course of time². The Council Fathers set the Liturgy within the horizon of the history of salvation, whose purpose is the redemption of humanity and the perfect glorification of God. The wonders wrought by God in the Old Testament were but a prelude to the redemption brought to completion by Christ the Lord, especially through the Paschal Mystery of his blessed Passion, his Resurrection from the dead and his glorious Ascension³. However, it needs not only to be proclaimed but also to be accomplished; this "is set in train through the sacrifice and sacraments, around which the entire liturgical life revolves"⁴. Christ makes himself present in a special way in the liturgical gestures associating the Church with himself. Every liturgical celebration, therefore, is the work of Christ the Priest and of his Mystical Body, "full public worship"⁵ in which the faithful take part, with a foretaste in it of the Liturgy of the heavenly Jerusalem⁶. This is why the "Liturgy is the summit toward which the

activity of the Church is directed" and at the same time, "the fount from which all her power flows"^{7.3}. The liturgical outlook of the Council did not keep to interchurch relations, but was open to the horizons of all humanity. Indeed, in his praise to the Father, Christ attaches to himself the whole community of men and women. He does so specifically through the mission of a praying Church which, "by celebrating the Eucharist and by other means, especially the celebration of the Divine Office, is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the entire world"⁸. In the perspective of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the liturgical life of the Church acquires a cosmic and universal scope that makes a deep mark on human time and space. It is also possible to understand in this perspective the renewed attention that the Constitution pays to the liturgical year through which the Church journeys, commemorating and reliving the Paschal Mystery of Christ⁹. If the Liturgy consists in all of this, the Council rightly affirms that every liturgical action "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"¹⁰. At the same time, the Council recognizes that "the Sacred Liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church"¹¹. Indeed, on the one hand the Liturgy presupposes the proclamation of the Gospel, and on the other, it demands a Christian witness in history. The mystery proposed in preaching and catechesis, listened to with faith and celebrated in the Liturgy, must shape the entire life of believers who are called to be its heralds in the world^{12.4}. Then with regard to the different elements involved in liturgical celebration, the Constitution pays special attention to the importance of *sacred music*. The Council praises it, pointing out as its objective: "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful"¹³. In fact, sacred music is a privileged means to facilitate the active participation of the faithful in sacred celebration, as my venerable Predecessor St Pius X desired to highlight in his Motu Proprio On the Restoration of Sacred Music *Tra le Sollecitudini*, whose centenary occurs this year. It was this very anniversary that recently gave me an opportunity to reassert the need to preserve and to emphasize the role of music at liturgical celebrations, in accordance with the directives of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*¹⁴ and mindful of the Liturgy's real character as well as the sensibility of our time and the musical traditions of the world's different regions.⁵ *Sacred art* was another fruitful topic addressed by the conciliar Constitution. It gave rise to many developments. The Council gives clear instructions to continue to leave considerable room for it in our day too, so that the splendour of worship will shine out through the fittingness and beauty of liturgical art. To this end it will be appropriate to make provision for projects to train the various craftsmen and artists who are commissioned to build and decorate places destined for liturgical use¹⁵. At the root of these guidelines is a vision of art, and sacred art in particular, that relates it to "the infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands"¹⁶. *From renewal to deepening*⁶. Forty years later, it is appropriate to review the ground covered. I have already suggested on former occasions a sort of examination of conscience concerning the reception given to the Second Vatican Council¹⁷. Such an examination must also concern the liturgical and sacramental life. "Is the Liturgy lived as the 'origin and summit' of ecclesial life, in accordance with the teaching of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*?"¹⁸. Has the rediscovery of the value of the Word of God brought about by liturgical reform met with a positive confirmation in our celebrations? To what extent does the Liturgy affect the practice of the faithful and does it mark the rhythm of the individual communities? Is it seen as a path of holiness, an inner force of apostolic dynamism and of the Church's missionary outreach?⁷. The Council's renewal of the Liturgy is expressed most clearly in the publication of *liturgical books*. After a preliminary period in which the renewed texts were little by little incorporated into the liturgical celebrations, a deeper knowledge of their riches and potential has become essential. The mainspring of this deepening must be a principle of *total fidelity* to the Sacred Scriptures and to Tradition, authoritatively interpreted in particular by the Second Vatican Council, whose teachings have been reasserted and developed in the ensuing Magisterium. This fidelity engages in the first place the Bishop "to whom is committed the office of offering the worship of Christian religion to the divine Majesty and of administering it in accordance with the Lord's commandments and with the Church's laws"¹⁹; at the same time, it

involves the entire ecclesial community "in different ways, depending on their orders, their role in the liturgical services and their actual participation in them"²⁰. In this perspective, it is more necessary than ever to intensify liturgical life within our communities by means of an *appropriate formation* of the pastors and of all the faithful with a view to the active, conscious and full participation in liturgical celebrations desired by the Council^{21.8}. Consequently, what is needed is a *pastoral care of the Liturgy* that is totally faithful to the new *ordines*. Through these, renewed interest in the *Word of God* has gradually developed as the Council desired, hoping for a return to a "more ample, more varied and more suitable reading from Sacred Scripture"²². The new lectionaries, for example, offer a broad choice of passages from Scripture which constitute an inexhaustible source from which the People of God can and must draw. Indeed, we cannot forget that "in listening to the Word of God the Church grows and is built, and the wonderful works God once wrought in many different ways in the history of salvation are represented in their mystical truth through the signs of the liturgical celebration"²³. In this celebration, the Word of God expresses the fullness of their meaning, inciting Christian life to continuous renewal, so that "what is heard at the liturgical celebration may also be put into practice in life"^{24.9}. *Sunday*, the Lord's Day, on which the Resurrection of Christ is especially commemorated, is at the heart of liturgical life as the "foundation and nucleus of the whole liturgical year"²⁵. There is no doubt that considerable pastoral effort has been expended to bring people to rediscover the value of Sunday. Yet it is essential to make a point of this, for "the spiritual and pastoral riches of Sunday, as it has been handed on to us by tradition, are truly great. When its significance and implications are understood in their entirety, Sunday in a way becomes a synthesis of the Christian life and a condition for living it well"^{26.10}. Liturgical celebration nourishes the spiritual life of the faithful. The principle I formulated in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "calling for a Christian life distinguished above all *in the art of prayer*"²⁷, stems from the Liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* interprets this urgency prophetically, spurring the Christian community to intensify its prayer life, not only through the Liturgy but also in "popular devotions", for as long as these are in harmony with the Liturgy, they are in some way derived from it and lead to it²⁸. The pastoral experience in recent decades has reinforced this insight. In this regard, the *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments* has made a valuable contribution with its *Directory on Popular Piety, Liturgy, Principles, Guidelines*²⁹. Then, with the Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*³⁰ and the announcement of the *Year of the Rosary*, I myself wanted to make explicit the contemplative treasure of this traditional prayer that has spread far and wide among the People of God. I therefore recommended its rediscovery as a privileged path to contemplation of the Face of Christ at the school of Mary. *Future prospects*¹¹. Looking to the future we see various challenges that the Liturgy is called to confront. During the past 40 years, in fact, society has undergone profound changes, some of which have put ecclesial commitment severely to the test. We have before us a world in which the signs of the Gospel are dying out, even in regions with an ancient Christian tradition. Now is the time for *new evangelization*. This challenge calls the Liturgy directly into question. At first sight, spirituality seems to have been put aside by a broadly secularized society; but it is certain that despite secularization, a renewed need for it is re-emerging in different ways in our day. How can we not see this as proof that the thirst for God cannot be uprooted from the human heart? Some questions find an answer only in personal contact with Christ. Only in intimacy with him does every existence acquire meaning and succeed in experiencing the joy that prompted Peter to exclaim on the mountain of the Transfiguration: "Master, it is well that we are here" (Lk 9: 33).¹². The Liturgy offers the deepest and most effective answer to this yearning for the encounter with God. It does so especially in the Eucharist, in which we are given to share in the sacrifice of Christ and to nourish ourselves with his Body and his Blood. However, Pastors must ensure that the sense of mystery penetrates consciences, making them rediscover the *art of "mystagogic catechesis"*, so dear to the Fathers of the Church³¹. It is their duty, in particular, to promote dignified celebrations, paying the proper attention to the different categories of persons: children, young people,

adults, the elderly, the disabled. They must all feel welcome at our gatherings, so that they may breathe the atmosphere of the first community of believers who "devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2: 42).¹³ One aspect that we must foster in our communities with greater commitment is *the experience of silence*. We need silence "if we are to accept in our hearts the full resonance of the voice of the Holy Spirit and to unite our personal prayer more closely to the Word of God and the public voice of the Church"³². In a society that lives at an increasingly frenetic pace, often deafened by noise and confused by the ephemeral, it is vital to rediscover the value of silence. The spread, also outside Christian worship, of practices of meditation that give priority to recollection is not accidental. Why not start with pedagogical daring a specific education in silence within the coordinates of personal Christian experience? Let us keep before our eyes the example of Jesus, who "rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mk 1: 35). The Liturgy, with its different moments and symbols, cannot ignore silence.¹⁴ Pastoral attention to the Liturgy through the introduction to the various celebrations must instil a *taste for prayer*. To do so, it will of course take into account the ability of individual believers and their different conditions of age and culture; but in doing so it will not be content with the "minimum". The Church's teaching must be able to "dare". It is important to introduce the faithful to the celebration of the *Liturgy of the Hours* "which, as the public prayer of the Church, is a source of piety and nourishment for personal prayer"³³. It is an action that is neither individual nor "private, but is proper to the entire Body of the Church.... Thus, if the faithful are summoned for the Liturgy of the Hours and gather together, joining heart and voice, they make manifest the Church, which celebrates the mystery of Christ"³⁴. Priority attention to liturgical prayer does not vie with personal prayer but indeed implies and demands it³⁵, and harmonizes well with other forms of community prayer, especially when it is recognized and recommended by the ecclesiastic Authority³⁶.¹⁵ *Pastors* have *the indispensable task* of educating in prayer and more especially of promoting liturgical life, entailing a duty of discernment and guidance. This should not be seen as an uncompromising attitude that is incompatible with the need of Christian souls to abandon themselves to the action of God's Spirit who intercedes in us and "for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8: 26). Rather, the guidance of Pastors constitutes a principle of "guarantee", inherent in God's plan for his Church that is governed by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The liturgical renewal that has taken place in recent decades has shown that it is possible to combine a body of norms that assure the identity and decorum of the Liturgy and leave room for the creativity and adaptation that enable it to correspond closely with the need to give expression to their respective situation and culture of the various regions. Lack of respect for the liturgical norms can sometimes even lead to *grave forms of abuse* that obscure the truth of the mystery and give rise to dismay and stress in the People of God³⁷. This abuse has nothing to do with the authentic spirit of the Council and should be prudently and firmly corrected by Pastors. *Conclusion*¹⁶. The promulgation of the Constitution on the Liturgy marked a stage of fundamental importance in the life of the Church for the promotion and development of the Liturgy. It is in the Liturgy that the Church, enlivened by the breath of the Spirit, lives her mission as "sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men"³⁸, and finds the most exalted expression of her mystical reality. In the Lord Jesus and in his Spirit the whole of Christian existence becomes "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God", genuine "spiritual worship" (Rom 12: 1). The mystery brought about in the Liturgy is truly great. It opens a glimpse of Heaven on earth, and the perennial hymn of praise rises from the community of believers in unison with the hymn of heavenly Jerusalem: "*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis!*". At the beginning of this millennium, may a "*liturgical spirituality*" be developed that makes people conscious that Christ is the first "liturgist" who never ceases to act in the Church and in the world through the Paschal Mystery continuously celebrated, and who associates the Church with himself, in praise of the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Together with this wish, I impart my Blessing to everyone from the depths of my heart. *From the Vatican, 4 December 2003, 26th Year of the Pontificate of*

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- Notes**1) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 57: AAS 93 (2001), 308; cf. Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), n. 1 [ORE, 22 May 1989, p. 7]; AAS 81 (1989), 897.
- 2) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 3.
- 3) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 5.
- 4) Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium [SC]*, n. 6.
- 5) *Ibid.*, n. 7.
- 6) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 8.
- 7) *Ibid.*, n. 10.
- 8) *Ibid.*, n. 83.
- 9) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 5.
- 10) *Ibid.*, n. 7.
- 11) *Ibid.*, n. 9.
- 12) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 10.
- 13) *Ibid.*, n. 112.
- 14) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 6.
- 15) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 127.
- 16) *Ibid.*, n. 122.
- 17) Cf. Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (10 November 1994), n. 36; AAS 87 (1995), 28.
- 18) *Ibid.*
- 19) Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, n. 26.
- 20) Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 26.
- 21) Cf. n. 14; John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), n. 15; AAS 81 (1989), 911-912.
- 22) SC, n. 35 (1).
- 23) *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, n. 7.
- 24) *Ibid.*, n. 6.
- 25) Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 106; cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), n. 22: AAS 81 (1989), 917.
- 26) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), n. 81: AAS 90 (1998), 763.
- 27) *Ibid.*, n. 32; AAS 93 (2001), 288.
- 28) Cf. SC, n. 13.
- 29) Vatican City, 2002.
- 30) Cf. AAS 95 (2003), 5-36.
- 31) John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus* (4 December 1988), 21: AAS (1989), 917.
- 32) *Institutio Generalis Liturgiae Horarum*, 202.
- 33) Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 90.
- 34) *Institutio Generalis Liturgiae Horarum*, 20, 22.
- 35) Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 12.
- 36) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 13.

37) John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003), n. 52: AAS 95 (2003), 468; Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, n. 16 (4 December 1988), AAS 81 (1989), 910-911.

38) Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1. Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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