

## LITURGY AND HYMNS

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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Over the course of the last forty years, the liturgy has sometimes seemed like a battlefield of competing interpretations, tastes and agendas, rather than a source of unity within the Church. Catholics under 40 have known only the “New Mass” their entire lives and many probably don’t even know there was such a thing as the Traditional Latin Mass. On the other hand, Catholics over 40 remember something called the Second Vatican Council but if asked what it accomplished, would probably tell you that all it did was turn the altars around to face the people and get rid of Latin and chant to supposedly make it more relevant for the modern world. The so-called “Spirit of Vatican II” was used to justify everything and anything but no one can really quite define what it’s supposed to mean. If these things were supposed to make the Church more relevant, why have our churches emptied out?

So, what did Vatican II really decree about the liturgy? Most people have never read its documents and the average Catholic would be surprised to see what the council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy actually says. For instance, it states that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites” and that “steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them.”<sup>1</sup> It states that “the treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care”<sup>2</sup> and that “the Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is the official music of the Roman Church. And as for the altar? Nothing whatsoever was mentioned about moving it anywhere.

No matter how much the popes since Vatican II “insisted upon the need for a true spirit of reform, faithful to the essential nature of the Church, ... what happened outside the Council ... began to influence it negatively ... Society’s fascination with an exaggerated sense of individual freedom and its penchant for the rejection of anything permanent, absolute or other worldly had its influence on the Church and often was justified in the name of the Council. This view also ... tended to idolize anything new.”<sup>4</sup>

But the liturgy has been a laboratory for experimentation for far too long. We have to get it through people’s heads that it is no one’s property. Neither is it a playground for anyone’s creativity or personal agenda. The liturgy is a sacred ritual handed down to us as a precious treasure by the Church, who has always jealously guarded it and introduced change into it only with great caution. As ritual it is a stylized choreography made up of texts clothed in stylized movements. As ritual it is something passed down, not made up. It is not spontaneous and a product of the moment. And this particular ritual is sacred because it is divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, who has carefully directed its development through the centuries. Pope Benedict is continually reminding us in word and by example, that “the question of liturgy is not peripheral: the Council itself reminded us that we are dealing here with the very core of Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup>

He is telling us that we need to return to the basics because the reform of the liturgy, which the Council called for, has still not been implemented.

That is why I feel that it is vitally important to occasionally catechize on the liturgy. Two weeks ago, I spoke about how the liturgy is not created by our own individual creativity but rather is a priceless gem, which we are given and which we tamper with at our own risk. It is not a vehicle for our own self-expression. It is not a meeting for the purpose of feeling good. It is the revelation of the One True God, who became Incarnate and who becomes present on our altar. That is why, above all, we must return to the dimension of the sacred in the liturgy.

There are many misunderstandings about what should be happening in the Mass, but probably one of the most misunderstood is the role of music. Music has always been integral to the liturgy but what we usually see today is often radically different from the role that it played prior to Vatican II. The model to which most Catholics have become accustomed is what we could call the “four hymn Mass”—an opening hymn, an offertory hymn, a communion hymn and a recessional hymn. The only problem is that this isn’t really Catholic. It’s actually a very Protestant form of worship. All they have are sermons and congregational singing, so they place a lot of emphasis on them. For instance, that’s why they sing all the verses. But when we do that at the Mass, the liturgy then becomes a slave to the song. Protestants have just hymns but we have the Mass and it is the liturgy itself that we should be singing. When we sing hymns at Mass we merely sing **at the liturgy**. It is not singing **the liturgy** itself. And it’s even worse when hymns replace parts of the Mass, which are supposed to be there. This is something clearly contrary to the mind of the Church.

The group of bishops appointed by Pope Paul VI to implement the reform of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council was very clear on this point. They stated: “What must be sung is the Mass, its Ordinary and Proper, not ‘something’, no matter how consistent, that is imposed on the Mass. Because the liturgical service is one, it has only one countenance, one motif, one voice, the voice of the Church. ... Liturgical song involves not mere melody, but words, text, thoughts and the sentiments that the poetry and music contain. Thus texts must be those of the Mass, not others, and singing means singing **the Mass** not just singing **during** Mass.”<sup>6</sup>

To understand this better, let’s look at the structure of the Mass. Its core is a series of unchanging texts, mostly taken from Sacred Scripture, called the *Ordo Missae*, the “Order of the Mass”. This includes all of the various prayers and acclamations that the priest says, as well as the various responses of the people. But there are two other integral parts of the Mass, which are meant to be sung: the Ordinaries and the Propers. The Ordinaries are certain important texts, which are always a part of every Mass. They are the ordinary parts of the Mass. That’s why they are called the “Ordinaries.” They are the *Kyrie*, the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei*. On Sundays and special feast days, they also include the *Gloria* and the *Creed*. They aren’t just any old songs that the music director happened to chose. They **are** the liturgy. The other sung texts, which are integral to the Mass are called the Propers: the Introit (or Entrance Antiphon), the Collect (or Opening Prayer), etc. These are texts, mostly based upon Scripture, which are specific, that is “proper” to the day on which we offer a given Mass—either a feast day, the commemoration of a saint or a seasonal day. That’s why they are called the “Propers.”

Many of these texts have been in use in the liturgy since the early centuries of the Church. Yet, most Catholics are not even aware of their existence or their importance.

And that brings us to those Latin chants at the 9:30 Sunday Mass that people have wondered about, and some have even complained about. They aren't high-brow Latin hymns. They are the texts of the Mass of the day, which are supposed to be sung at those specific moments of the Mass. They are sung in chant because those are the official melodies, which the Church has given to them. We no longer sing a so-called "entrance hymn" because we now chant what is supposed to be sung at the beginning of the Mass—a text from Scripture called the Introit. What most churches have done is replace this text with a hymn that has nothing to do with the liturgy of that day's Mass and which is treated more like a "let's get into the mood for Mass" piece. The Introit, in contrast, is the Church's text to set the tone for the entire Mass specifically intended to accompany the priest as he processes to the altar

And not only are hymns not part of the liturgy itself but the manner in which they are executed often disrupts the continuity of the liturgy—imposing something on it. Perhaps, you have noticed how hymns are often dissonant to the flow of the Mass. The liturgy progresses smoothly and then all of a sudden everything stops so that we can do a little congregational singing and when it's done, we resume where we left off. One can feel a break in the flow of the liturgy. The entire structure of the liturgy has been inspired by the Holy Spirit and we stop it, so that we can do something of our own, something which is really very Protestant in nature. If a hymn or motet is seamlessly woven into the liturgical action, it can complement a part of the Mass as an aid to meditation when nothing else is meant to be sung but it should never replace the texts of the liturgy itself. It is not about whether one enjoys singing hymns or one's personal preferences in music. It's about singing the liturgy itself, not something else.

Cardinal Ratzinger once stated: "I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the Liturgy .... when the community of faith, the worldwide unity of the Church and her history and the mystery of the living Christ are no longer visible in the Liturgy, where else, then is the Church to become visible in her spiritual essence? Then the community is celebrating only itself, an activity that is utterly fruitless."<sup>7</sup>

All of this is, in part, why your experience of Mass with us from the Canons Regular is now a bit different in contrast to some of the other places that you've been. Benedict has been trying to pull us back to what the Council intended and an important part of our mission is to embody that to the best of our ability.

In a 1984 address to a Congress of Liturgical Commissions in Rome, John Paul II said: "Liturgy on earth will fuse with that of heaven. Where ... it will form one choir ... to praise with one voice the Father through Jesus Christ"<sup>8</sup> If we are faithful to the texts and melodies of the earthly liturgy, which the Holy Spirit has so carefully inspired, then our voices will form one choir with the liturgy of heaven, which He has also inspired. But if we do something else, anything else, to satisfy our whims, then we will not form one choir with the liturgy of heaven. We will only be doing our own thing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 36, no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Ranjith Malcolm, foreword to the book *True Development of the Liturgy: Cardinal Ferdinando Antonelli and the Liturgical Reform from 1948 to 1970*, by Msgr. Nicola Giampietro (<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2009/03/archbishop-ranjiths-foreword-to-true.html>).

<sup>5</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, *Milestones*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1998), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Tucker, Jeffrey, "The Proper Place of Propers," New Liturgical Movement, 26 April 2009 (<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2009/04/proper-place-of-propers.html>).

<sup>7</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph, *Milestones*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1998), 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, "Address to the Congress of Presidents and Secretaries of National Liturgical Commissions," 1984, taken from Hitchcock, Helen Hull, "Pope Benedict XVI and the Liturgical Reform". *Adoremus Online Edition*, September 2006 Vol. XII, No. 6 (<http://www.adoremus.org/0906BenedictXVI.html>).