

Ongoing Formation 2023

**MYSTERIUM FIDEI;
On the Liturgy
- Fourth Lenten Sermon 2023
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After reflecting on evangelization and theology, today I would like to propose some considerations on the liturgy and the worship of the Church, always with the intention of making a contribution, however modest and indirect, to the work of the synod. The liturgy is the point of arrival, what evangelization tends toward. In the Gospel parable, the servants are sent to the streets and crossroads to invite everyone to the banquet. The Church is the banquet hall and the Eucharist is “the Lord’s meal” (1 Cor 11:20) prepared therein.

In our reflections, let us start with a word from the Letter to the Hebrews. It says that, in order to approach God, one must, first of all, “believe that he exists” (Heb 11:6). Even before believing that he exists (which is already part of the approach), however, it is necessary to have at least the “hint” of his existence. This is what we call the sense of the holy and which a famous author calls “the numinous,” qualifying it as a “tremendous and fascinating mystery.”

St. Augustine surprisingly anticipated this discovery of modern phenomenology of religion. Turning to God, in his Confessions, he says, “When I met you for the first time..., I trembled with love and horror.” And again, “I shiver and I burn; I shiver because of the distance, I burn because of the resemblance.”

If the sense of the sacred were to be completely lost, the soil, or the climate, in which the act of faith blossoms would be missing. This is the worst effect of secularization. Charles Péguy wrote that “the frightening scarcity and indigence of the sacred is the profound mark of the modern world.” If the sense of the holy has disappeared, however, nostalgia for it has remained which someone has defined, in secular terms as “the longing for the totally Other.”

Young people feel the need to get away from the banality of everyday life and they have invented their own ways of satisfying this need. It has been observed by mass psychologists that young people who once attended famous rock concerts, such as those of the Beatles, of Elvis Presley or the 1969 Woodstock Festival, were transported out of their everyday world and projected into a dimension that gave them the impression of something transcendent and sacred.

The same happens for those who take part today in the mega-gatherings of singers and bands. The fact of being many, of vibrating in unison with a mass, infinitely amplifies one’s own emotion. One has the feeling of being part of a different, superior reality. The term “fan” (an abbreviation of fanatic) is the secularized equivalent of “devotee.” The qualification of “idols” given to their favorites has a profound correspondence with reality.

These mass gatherings can have their artistic value and sometimes convey noble and positive messages, such as peace and love. They are “liturgies” in the original and profane sense of the term, that is, shows offered to the public out of duty or to obtain their favor. However, they have nothing to do with the authentic experience of the sacred. In the title “Divine liturgy,” the adjective divine was added precisely to distinguish it from human liturgies. There is a qualitative difference between the two.

Let us try to see through which means the Church can be, for people today, the privileged place of a true experience of God and of the transcendent. The first instances that come to mind – due to the external similarity – are the large gatherings promoted by the various Christian Churches. Let us think

of the “World Youth Days” and of the countless events – congresses, conventions, and gatherings – in which tens- (and sometimes even hundreds-) of thousands of people all over the world take part. There is no accounting for the number of persons for whom these events were the occasion for a powerful experience of God and the beginning of a new and personal relationship with Christ.

What makes the difference between this type of mass encounter and those described above is that here the protagonist is not a human personality, but God. The sense of the sacred that one experiences in them is the only truly genuine one, and not a substitute because it is raised by the Holy of Holies and not by an “idol.”

However, these are extraordinary events, in which not everyone can participate, and not always. The occasion par excellence and most common, for an experience of the sacred in the Church, is the liturgy. The Catholic liturgy underwent a transformation from an action with a strong sacred and priestly imprint to a more communal and participatory action, where all the people of God have their part, each with their own ministry.

I would like to say how I see and explain this change to myself. This is absolutely not to set myself up as a judge of the past, but to better understand the present. The “present” in the Church is never a denial of the “past,” but its enrichment, or, as in the present case, going back from a relatively recent past to a more ancient and original one.

In the evolution of the Church as community, something happens that is similar to what happens with the church building. Let’s think of some famous basilicas and cathedrals: how many architectural transformations over the centuries took place to respond to the needs and tastes of every era! But it is always the same church, dedicated to the same saint. If there is a general trend going on in the modern era, to restore these buildings – whenever this is possible and worthwhile – to their original structure and style. The same trend is taking place in the Church as a community, and in particular in its liturgy. The Second Vatican Council was a decisive moment in this process, but not the absolute beginning. It gathered the fruit of much previous work.

There is certainly no need to delve into the secular history of the liturgy here – others have done that – and precisely from the point of view that interests us. I would just try to highlight the evolution concerning the sense of the sacred.

At the beginning of the Church and for the first three centuries, the liturgy was truly a “liturgy,” that is, the action of the people (*laos* – people – is among the etymological components of the word *leitourgia*). From St. Justin, from the *Traditio Apostolica* of St. Hippolytus, and other sources of the time, we obtain a vision of the Mass that is certainly closer to the reformed one of today than to that of the centuries behind us. What happened? The answer is an awkward word which, however, we cannot avoid: clericalization! In no other sphere was it more conspicuous than in the liturgy.

Christian worship, and especially the Eucharistic sacrifice, underwent a rapid transformation, both in East and West, from being an action of the people into being an action of the clergy. For centuries, the central part of the Mass, known as the Canon or Anaphora, was pronounced by the priest in a low voice, in Latin, behind a curtain or a wall (a temple within a temple!), out of the sight and hearing of the people. The celebrant only raised his voice at the final words of the Canon: “Per omnia saecula saeculorum,” and the people replied, “Amen!” to what they hadn’t heard, let alone understood. The only contact with the Eucharist, announced by the sound of the bells, was the moment of the elevation of the Host.

There is an evident return to what was going on in the worship of the First Covenant. The High Priest entered the *Sancta sanctorum*, with incense and the blood of the victims, and the people stood outside trembling, overwhelmed by the sense of God’s tremendous holiness and majesty. The sense of the sacred is at its highest here, but, after Christ, is it the right and genuine one? This is our crucial question.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read: “You have not approached...a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them...No, you have approached... Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel” (Heb 12:18-24). “Through the blood of Jesus, we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh” (Heb 10: 19-20). Christ has penetrated beyond the veil and has not closed the passage behind him (Heb 10:20).

The holy has changed the way of manifesting itself: no longer as a mystery of majesty and power, but as an infinite capacity of hiding and suffering. After the consecration, the celebrant says or sings, “The mystery of faith!” Those of my age will remember that once this exclamation was inserted in the middle of the formula for the consecration of wine: “*Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei, novi et aeterni testamenti – Mysterium fidei! – qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum.*” As if the Church stopped, halfway through the story, amazed at what she was saying!

The reform was right, of course, to move this exclamation to the end of the consecration, but we should not lose the sense of amazement contained in it. More important than this, however, is to understand what the real reason for our amazement should be. It must be of the same kind as what we read in the poems of the suffering Servant of Jahvè: “So shall he startle many nations, kings shall stand speechless. For those who have not been told shall see, those who have not heard shall ponder it” (Is 52:15).

Tremor and trembling still have a place in the New Covenant, but before the humility and the love of God, more than his majesty. One who had this sentiment very acutely was Francis of Assisi: “Let humanity tremble,” he wrote in one of his letters to the whole Order, “let the whole universe tremble and heaven exult when on the altar, in the hands of the priest, is Christ, son of the living God.”

Again, trembling for what? “O sublime humility!”, continues the saint. “O humble sublimity, that the Lord of the universe, God and Son of God, so humbled himself as to hide himself, for our salvation, under the smallest amount of bread! Look, brothers, at the humility of God!”

It is only a question of not wasting this new possibility offered by the reformed liturgy with arbitrary and bizarre improvisations, and of maintaining the necessary sobriety and composure even when the Mass is celebrated in particular situations and environments.

In all the Eucharistic Prayers, ancient and new, the invitation that immediately follows the consecration is always to remember: “Unde et memores...” – “Remembering, therefore...” It is the answer to Jesus’ command, “Do this in memory of me!” But what, above all, must we remember about him? “Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:26). For once, we should once try to go beyond words, or rather, to give words an existential content and not just a ritual one.

Let us go back to the moment when Jesus pronounced those words and try to understand in what interior conditions the command “Do this in memory of me!” came from the Redeemer’s mouth. He clearly saw what he was getting into. He repeatedly spoke about it, but as if from a distance. Now the time has come; there is no longer even an interval of time to mitigate the anguish. The words “This is the cup of my blood” leave no doubt. Here is someone who knew that in a few hours, he would be going to die a horrible death. “Qui pridie quam pateretur” – the day before suffering passion...

And what was going on around him? The apostles found a way to argue once again about who is the greatest (Lk 22: 24-27), like brothers, gathered around their father’s deathbed, quarreling over the inheritance. One of them, in a few hours, would sell him for 30 denarii – “In qua nocte tradebatur” – on the night he was betrayed!

Under these conditions, he instituted the sacrament with which he will remain with his family until the end of the world. Where could one find a more “tremendous and fascinating” mystery than this? What could be more sacred in the world? On the day the Holy Spirit should allow us, for just a moment, to cast a glance into the depths of this love and pain abyss, I believe that we would no longer be able to live as before. This explains why St. Pio of Pietrelcina seemed to struggle during the Mass and be unable to complete the consecration.

But we have to complete our review of the Mass. It does not consist only of the Canon and the consecration; there are also the Liturgy of the Word and Communion. We have at our disposal some means that were not available in the past to enhance the Liturgy of the Word and also make it an occasion for an experience of the sacred. Thanks to the progress that the Church has made in many fields in the meantime, we have a more direct access to the Word of God. It can resound with greater richness and power than in the past.

The current liturgy is very rich in the Word of God, wisely arranged, according to the order of the history of salvation, in a framework of rites often brought back to the linearity and simplicity of the origins. We must value these means. Nothing can penetrate the human heart and make it feel the transcendent reality of God better than a living word of God proclaimed during the liturgy with faith and adherence to life. Faith, says Saint Paul, is born out of listening to the word of Christ – *Fides ex auditu* (Rom 10:17).

Many words of Jesus, perhaps heard a little earlier in the Gospel of the day, at the moment of the consecration resound in the heart, as spoken anew by their very author, alive and truly present on the altar. I will always remember the day when, after having commented on the words of Jesus in the Gospel: “Behold, now there is more here than Jonah; now there is more here than Solomon” (Mt 12:41-42), getting up from the genuflection after the consecration, I felt like exclaiming within me, full of amazement: “Look, now there is more than Solomon here!”

Even the reading from the Old Testament, chosen in view of the Gospel passage, releases new and illuminating meanings. In the transition from figure to reality, the mind, said St. Augustine, lights up like “a torch in motion.” As with the two disciples of Emmaus, Jesus continues to explain to us “what in all the Scriptures refers to him” (Lk 24:27).

And then we have Holy Communion. How can the liturgy make this moment an occasion for an experience of the sacred, not only on an individual level but also on a community level? I would say, through silence! There are two kinds of silence: a silence that we can call ascetic, and a mystical silence. A silence with which the creature seeks to rise up to God, and a silence provoked by God who draws close to the creature. The silence that follows Communion is a mystical silence, like that which we see in the theophanies of the First Covenant. After communion, one should hear the admonition of the prophet Zephaniah resound in the air (1:7), “Silence in the presence of the Lord God!” There should be a few moments, even if short ones, of absolute silence after Communion.

The Catholic tradition has felt the need to prolong and give more time to this moment of personal contact with the Eucharistic Christ and has developed over the centuries, especially starting from the XIII century, the cult of the Eucharist outside Mass. It is not a separate cult, detached and independent from the sacrament; it is a continuation of “the remembrance” of Christ, of his mysteries and words – a way to interiorize the mystery we have received. Eucharistic adoration is the clearest sign that Christ’s humility and hiding do not make us forget that we are in the presence of the “Most Holy”, of the one who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, created heaven and earth.

Where it is practiced – by parishes, individuals, and communities – its fruits are visible, even as far as evangelization is concerned. A church full of faithful in perfect silence, during an hour of adoration in front of the exposed Blessed Sacrament, would make anyone who enters by chance say, “God is here!” I remember the comment of a non-Catholic, at the end of an hour of silent Eucharistic

adoration, in a large parish church in the United States, packed with faithful, “Now I understand,” he said to a friend, “what you Catholics mean when you talk about ‘a real presence’!”

If there is one reason why I regret the loss of Latin, it is that, with its abandonment, some songs which have served generations of believers of all languages to express their warm devotion in front of the Eucharist are disappearing from use: the *Adoro te devote*, the *Ave verum*, the *Panis angelicus*. They now survive almost exclusively because of the music that famous artists wrote for them.

We “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1) and, in different ways, every faithful engaged in the worship of the Church, could feel crushed and powerless before such a sublime task. How can we help people to have an experience of the sacred and the supernatural in the liturgy, we who experience in ourselves all the heaviness of the flesh? The answer is always the same, “You will receive strength from the Holy Spirit!” He who is defined as “the soul of the Church” is also the soul of her liturgy, the light and inner strength of the rites.

It is a gift that the liturgical reform of Vatican II placed the epiclesis, that is, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, at the heart of the Mass: first over the bread and wine and then over the entire mystical body of the Church. I have great respect for the venerable Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Canon, and I love to use it occasionally, being the one with which I was ordained a priest. I cannot, however, fail to note with regret the total absence of the Holy Spirit in it. Instead of the present consecratory epiclesis over the bread and wine, we find in it the generic formula, “Sanctify, O God, this offering with the power of your blessing...”

This too was a sad consequence of the polemic between East and West. In the past, it prompted us Latins to put the role of the Holy Spirit in brackets in order to attribute all the efficacy to the words of the institution, and it prompted the Greeks to put the words of the institution in brackets in order to attribute all efficacy to the action of the Holy Spirit. As if the mystery were accomplished by a kind of chemical reaction whose exact moment can be determined.

There is, nevertheless, a pearl that the Roman Canon handed down from generation to generation and that the liturgical reform has rightly preserved and inserted in all the new Eucharistic Prayers; and it is precisely the final doxology: “Through him [Christ], and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever.”

This formula expresses a fundamental truth that St. Basil formulated in the first treatise on the Holy Spirit. On the level of the going out of creatures from God, he writes, everything starts from the Father, passes through the Son, and reaches us in the Spirit; in the order of the coming back of creatures to God, everything, inversely, begins with the Holy Spirit, passes through the Son, and returns to the Father. Since the liturgy is the moment par excellence for the return of creatures to God, everything in it must start and take its momentum from Holy Spirit.

The ancient missal contained a whole series of prayers that the priest had to recite in preparation for Mass. Today we could not prepare ourselves for the celebration better than with a short but intense prayer to the Holy Spirit to renew his priestly anointing in us and put in our hearts the same impulse that he placed in the heart of Christ to offer us to the Father as a living sacrifice. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that Jesus, “moved by the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God” (Heb 9:14). Let us pray so that what happened in the Head may also happen in us, members of his Body.

1. Augustine, Confessions, VII, 10: “contremui amore et orrore”.
2. Ib. XI, 9: “et inhorresco et inardesco”.
3. Max Horkheimer