

Fulfilling the Council: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the Traditionalist Movement

by Michael P. Foley



One of the many false representations that have been made against the Traditionalist movement," writes Monsignor Ignacio Barreiro, "is that it is frontally opposed to the Second Vatican Council."¹ However, whether intentionally or not, many parishes and communities are faithfully fulfilling both the letter and the *authentic* spirit of Vatican II (if we insist on using that much-abused phrase), perhaps even better than the bulk of their Novus Ordo counterparts.²

To flesh out this simple if disconcerting fact, the following essay merely compares what the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy preaches and what the traditionalist movement as a whole in America practices. I say "merely" because my goal is not to provide a critical analysis of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* or to offer my own conjectures about "what went wrong." (These will be provided in two successive articles scheduled to appear in upcoming issues of *The Latin Mass*.) For the moment I simply wish to compare *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the traditionalist movement in three specific areas: the faithful's understanding of the liturgy, their active participation in the mass, and their union with God through the Eucharist. These topics have not been randomly selected but go to the very heart of the Constitution, the Council urged a greater comprehension of the liturgy in order to facilitate more active participation in it, and it urged more active participation in

one to deepen participation in the entire mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Understanding the Liturgy

Making both the texts and rituals of the liturgy comprehensible to the people was a high priority of the reforms mandated by Vatican II. It was the desire of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that the "Christian people, as far as possible, should be able to understand the [the liturgy] with ease" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 21; cf. 48). Raising the mind to God, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states, enables the faithful "to offer Him the worship which reason requires and [to] more copiously receive His grace" (33). *Sacrosanctum Concilium* even makes provisions for liturgical instruction to be given within the liturgy itself (ibid.).

Even without in-service instruction or a single change to their rite (a point to which we shall return later), traditionalists as a whole receive high marks in this category. During a Latin mass celebrated today the faithful are typically engrossed in the beauty of the sacred liturgy, usually with the help of their well-annotated missals. As a general rule the pre-conciliar "horror stories" about Catholics "obliviously" praying the Rosary during Mass no longer apply; if these stories continue to circulate, it is usually by people who have never been to a celebration of the old rite in the past fifteen years.

The keen attentiveness of the average familiarity with an comprehension of the liturgy that enables him to know simply by the position of the priest or the servers at what point in the Mass they are, what is transpiring, and what it means. This same desire to understand lingers long afterwards as well. It is not unusual to find traditionalists loitering after mass and discussing the writings of Guéranger and Fortescue or hashing out the deeper Christological meanings of chasubles and maniples, incensations and aspersion – things the average Catholic would have difficulty picking out of a lineup, let alone explicating. The liturgical literacy of traditionalist amateurs is striking, all the more so because it is rooted in a genuine love of Christ and His Church rather than mere intellectual curiosity or aesthetic titillation.³

And it is a good thing, too. When he was still a cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI shrewdly observed that the faithful prior to Vatican II "who had never been in contact with the liturgy" – that is, who never understood it or truly participated in it – never mourned its loss, whereas

[i]n those places where the liturgical movement had created a certain love for the liturgy – in those places where this movement anticipated the essential ideas of the Council . . . there was greater suffering in the face of a liturgical reform undertaken in too much haste and limiting itself often to the exterior aspect.⁴

Loving comprehension and, as we shall also see, participation are therefore crucial to savoring and preserving the richness of liturgical tradition, while loyalty without illumination is doomed to be shallow and short-lived. One of the *Benedictus* antiphons in the old rite Breviary sums it up well: *Audite et intelligite traditiones quas Dominus dedit nobis* – “Hearken to and understand the traditions which the Lord hath given us.”

Ironically, an understanding of the traditions that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was hoping to awaken through liturgical reform seems to thrive less in those places where the reforms have been most radically implemented. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the more liturgically progressive the average American Roman Catholic is today, the less interested he is in actually learning either about or from the Mass. His goal is usually to “be creative” with the liturgy rather than understand it, and in general the zeal for the change which “creativity” demands – be it personal, political, or liturgical – is rarely matched in this postlapsarian world by an eagerness to grasp what is being changed.

This itch for innovation, incidentally, directly contradicts *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in at least two ways. First, the document expressly states that “absolutely no person, not even a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (22, §3). Second and more importantly, frivolous innovation implicitly undermines the Council’s teaching that the Eucharistic liturgy is a sacred “exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ,” for a policy of constant change consciously or unconsciously insinuates that the mass is a merely human fabrication, one subject to continual manipulation. When, however, the Mass is received as a Divine “given” (which is clearly the case among traditionalists), there follows the impulse not to treat it as a perpetually protean Mr. Potato Head but as an enthralling riddle from a caring and wise God, one that is to be delved into and delighted in.

In other words, because the sense of the given has been fostered better in the current celebration of the Tridentine rite than in the *Novus Ordo*, and because this sense heightens the believer’s desire to “figure out” rather than “fiddle with,” it is the former rather than the latter that has better accomplished thus far Vatican II’s goal of increasing the faithful’s understanding of the liturgy.⁵

Active Participation

In the 1867 preface to his monumental *The Liturgical Year*, Dom Guéranger bemoans the liturgical sensibility of the laity. “The first sad revolution in the Christian world,” he opines, occurred during the late Middle Ages, when “social prayer was made to give way to individual devotion.”⁶ Such devotion isolates rather than unites the believer to the prayer of the Church, with lamentable results.⁷ Liturgical prayer “can heal and save the world, but only on condition that it be understood” and only if the faithful “take a real share in it.”⁸ Guéranger thus called for a deeper understanding of and participation in the Church’s liturgy by the laity. His diagnosis and prescription were later taken up by Pope Saint Pius X, who coined the phrase *actuosa participatio* (somewhat misleadingly rendered into English as “active participation”⁹) and who famously enjoined the faithful not simply to pray at the Mass but to “pray the Mass.”

Almost a century after Guéranger, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* would make the concept of active participation the cornerstone of its reforms. Since the faithful should not attend mass “as strangers or silent spectators” (48) but should “participate knowingly, actively, and fruitfully” (10)¹⁰, the chief consideration when revising the liturgical books was to be the “full and active participation of all the people” (14).

Active participation is a touchy subject among traditionalists for two reasons. First, the principle was used in 1969 to justify numerous changes to the liturgy that exceeded the original parameters of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and that arguably stripped the mass of much of its mystery. Second, the principle is frequently used today as a means of turning the Mass from a Holy Sacrifice which is effected by Christ the High Priest into, as Pope Benedict XVI memorably puts it, a “pathetic homemade liturgy with . . . artificial theatrics” and “tiny self-affirmations.”¹¹ Active participation has become activist participation at many Masses today, to the point that genuine prayer becomes almost impossible. If there is any one principle of the Council’s liturgical theology that has been abused beyond measure, it is surely this.



Still, as the medieval schoolmen used to say, *abusus non tollit usum* – the abuse does not take away the use. If the “active participation” of Vatican II, Guéranger, Pius X and we should add, Pius XII, has been hijacked, then the solution is not to abandon it to the kidnapers but to take it back by doing it right.

Fortunately, this is what many traditionalist parishes and communities are already doing. As I intend to show in a

future article,¹² the Church has always meant by active participation “actively engaged contemplation,”¹³ not an activist participation that effectively undermines the conditions for any real prayer. Hence most Latin Mass attendees are engaged in authentic active participation simply by virtue of their being prayerfully, lovingly, and attentively present in the Mass. This is especially true when they recite or chant the parts of the Mass proper to them, but it is important to note that it can be equally true when they do not. Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (aka Edith Stein) was a strong proponent of the participatory “dialogue Mass” movement of her day, through she herself spent the entire Mass in rapt, silent adoration. It would be foolish to conclude from this “undemonstrative” form of love that this great saint was any less a participant of the Mass than her more vocal pew-mates.

Yet even if one accepts for the sake of argument the shallow conception of active participation as activism or mere external activity, Latin Mass congregations in general still participate *more* actively the Mass than Novus Ordo congregations in at least two ways.¹⁴ First, many traditionalists today do not just make the responses of the Mass (of which there are more in the *Tridentine* rite, incidentally) but its prescribed “actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes” as well, thus acting in accord with one of the professed goals of Vatican II (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 30). The frequent signs of the cross, striking of one’s breast, genuflections in honor of the Incarnation during the Creed and the Last Gospel or in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, and bowing at the Holy Name of Jesus in the rubrics of the old rite are often enacted meticulously by the faithful at a Latin mass, thus making for a holy and holistic worship that involves both body and soul.

By contrast, several of the relatively few rubrics of the Novus Ordo are either ignored by the average congregation (with experience as one’s sole guide, one would never know that bowing at the Holy name and striking one’s breast at the *Confiteor*;) are still in the General Instructions of the Roman Missal or they are supplanted by illicit gestures such as holding hands during the Our Father and aping actions reserved for the priest alone, innovations that are generically condemned by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (22, §3,23) and that have been explicitly condemned by the Magisterium several times since. Forty years after the Council, its most basic aspirations for prescribed bodily participation¹⁵ have still not been met – except at Tridentine masses.¹⁶

Second, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* requires 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” (54, emphasis added). Pope Paul VI vigorously tried to execute the Council’s will on this issue, insisting that a booklet be published with all the basic chants that an average Catholic should know. That booklet, *Jubilate Deo*, was finally published in 1974, after years of delay tactics (as rumor has it) perpetrated by the Pope’s subordinates.¹⁷ By the time the booklet came out, however, it was too late: an unauthorized war against liturgical Latin had already been successfully waged, leaving the traditional Latin Mass as one of the very few places today where the wishes of Paul VI – that’s right Paul VI – are being fulfilled.

The Eucharist

Appropriating the rites and prayers of the mass is important for participating “knowingly, devoutly, and actively” in it, says the Council, and participation in the Mass is important because it is through the Sacrifice of the altar that we receive salvific grace and come to union with God (48). Fully entering into the mystery of the “Eucharistic sacrifice of [Christ’s] Body and Blood” (47) would appear to be *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s most fundamental aim.

If so, then traditionalists, whose devotion to and love of the Eucharist are conspicuous and profound, are fully living out the desire of the Council. Following the example of the priest and his ministers, every one of whose actions reflects an intense adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the congregation at a Latin mass demonstrates – and more importantly, has – deep respect and love for their Eucharistic Lord. Traditionalists are therefore an important witness in an age when the love of the Eucharist is arguably at its lowest point in Church history. It is safe to say that we are in a crisis of faith concerning the Eucharist, as was made clear by the comments at the October 2005 Eucharistic Synod by several bishops concerned about the widespread lack of belief in the Real Presence.¹⁸ Given this dire backdrop, indult Latin Masses are all the more important for the example they give to all Roman Rite Catholics.

Respectful Disagreement

Of course, there are a number of passages in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* that devotees of the Latin Mass do not or cannot fulfill. In addition to articulating several general principles, the document authorizes several specific changes to the celebration of the sacraments and mandates the creation of a number of committees to make further modifications (within certain pre-ordained limits) later on. Most traditionalists have reservations about the breadth of these mandates and the extent of these changes, to say nothing of what those committees went on to do with them in 1969.

Nevertheless, even here an interesting point should be observed. By the logic of the Constitution, revision of the Roman liturgical books is not to be made capriciously but for the sake of actualizing and instantiating the documents’ essential principles. Specific revisions, in other words, were meant to be means to an end, the end being things

such as understanding, participation, and union with God through the Eucharist.

The question, then, is whether we should not rejoice equally if the same ends have been achieved but without the particular means envisioned. Should a Latin teacher resent his student for becoming a great Latinist because he used a textbook other than what he prescribed, or should he not rejoice in the young man's proficiency regardless? As we have seen in this essay, what many traditionalists have in effect done is reach the end of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* without recourse to its means, while conversely many practitioners of the new rites have employed its means without reaching its end.

Conclusion

Why does any of this matter? On the one hand, it is important for traditionalists to have a more precise understanding of where they stand vis-à-vis the Second Vatican Council. When, for example, Cardinal Ratzinger remarked several years ago that even the 1962 Missal should be celebrated according to "the essential criteria of the Constitution on the Liturgy,"¹⁹ he was not trying to inject modernism into the old rite but reminding traditionalists to remain faithful to the salutary strains of the liturgical movement developed in the "pray the Mass" campaigns of Pope Pius X and Pope Blessed Pius XII and reaffirmed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* – strains that, as this article has argued, are thriving in numerous Latin Masses throughout the country.

On the other hand, it is equally important for bishops, pastors, and liturgists who are inclined to view any attachment to "some previous liturgical . . . forms of the Latin tradition"²⁰ as a *de facto* rejection of Vatican II to consider a startling irony. Not only is the Latin Mass *not* a repudiation of the liturgical principles of the Second Vatican Council, it may be one of the few places in their dioceses where they are actually being practiced.

References and Notes

1. Monsignor Ignacio Barrerio, "John Paul II and Benedict XVI -- What Next for the Traditional Mass?" *Latin Mass Society Newsletter*, August 2005, <http://www.latin-mass-society.org/2005/barreirojpandben.html>. [\[back\]](#)
2. Here and throughout this essay I will be comparing the *average* traditionalist and non-traditionalist Catholic. Admittedly, there is considerable variety within both groups, and so these generalizations must be taken with a grain of salt. [\[back\]](#)
3. My argument is not that all traditionalists are liturgically literate but that enough of them are to make the phenomenon noteworthy. Further mention will be made of the unfortunate exceptions in my forthcoming article, "The Erosion of Comprehension in the Roman Rite." [\[back\]](#)
4. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "[Ten Years of the Motu Proprio 'Ecclesia Dei'](#)" (October 24, 1998, trans. by Fr. Ignatius Harrison). [\[back\]](#)
5. We will cover this topic in greater detail in the upcoming article, "The Erosion of Comprehension in the Roman Rite." [\[back\]](#)
6. *The Liturgical Year*, vol. 1, trans. Dom Laurence Shepherd, OSB (Great Falls, Montana: St. Bonaventure Publications, 2000), p. 3. [\[back\]](#)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 6. [\[back\]](#)
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 5. [\[back\]](#)
9. See *Tra le Sollecitudini*, 1903. "Active" is a somewhat misleading translation because in English it implies a contrast with "contemplative." *Actuosa*, however, does not connote tension with the contemplative life but merely means "full of vitality," fully "actuated." This topic will be treated more fully in my forthcoming article, "From Actual to Activist: The Kidnapping of Active Participation." [\[back\]](#)
10. q.v. SC 19, 27, 41. [\[back\]](#)
11. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), p.32. [\[back\]](#)
12. "From Actual to Activist: The Kidnapping of Active Participation," forthcoming. [\[back\]](#)
13. Aidan Nichols, O.P., *A Pope and a Council on the Sacred Liturgy* (Farnborough: Michael's Abbey press, 2002), p. 19. [\[back\]](#)
14. Here again it is important to distinguish the habits of the average contemporary traditionalist from those of the average American Catholic of the 1950s, who was doubtless "participatory" in the purely external sense of the term. [\[back\]](#)
15. Non-prescribed and idiotic bodily "participation" is another matter. [\[back\]](#)
16. A felicitous exception is London's Brompton Oratory, which celebrates the new Mass with great love, solemnity, and fidelity to the rubrics. [\[back\]](#)
17. An online copy of the 1974 Vatican typical edition is accessible at <http://www.ceciliaschola.org/notes/jubilatedeod.html>. [\[back\]](#)
18. XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. For a summary of its contents, see Kenneth Baker, S.J., "[Synod 2005: The Eucharist](#)," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, February 2006, <http://www.ignatius.com/magazines/hprweb/baker.htm>. [\[back\]](#)

19. ["Ten Years of the *Motu Proprio* 'Ecclesia Dei.'"](#) [\[back\]](#)
20. Pope John Paul II, *Motu Proprio Ecclesia Dei.*" [\[back\]](#)

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