

Readings

Jos 24:1-2a, 15-17, 18b

Ps 34:2-3, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21

Eph 5:21-32 or 5:2a, 25-32

Jn 6:60-69

Paul W. Galetto, O.S.A.
Church of St. Paul
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Just as a majestic oak tree starts from a tiny acorn so the change in Catholic worship from the Latin Tridentine Mass to the current form began with small seeds. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century there was much interest in the origins of the Mass. Within the Benedictine community of monks there were two separate movements that were started in order to elevate the experience of celebrating the Tridentine Mass. The first was an effort to develop a greater appreciation for Gregorian Chant. The monks at an abbey in France did research and discovered lost tunes and melodies that were beautiful and esthetically pleasing. These tunes were eventually published in a book called the *Liber Usualis* which became quite popular while at the same time renewing interest in the history of the Mass.

The second movement that was started at two Benedictine monasteries in Germany focused on liturgical art (especially icons from the Greek Church) and participation of the people in the celebration of the liturgy especially the Easter Vigil which is the most solemn of all Christian liturgies.

In 1909 at a conference in Belgium, a paper was presented that called for the active participation of the people in the celebration of the liturgy. This conference turned out to be a seminal (think acorn!) moment in the liturgical movement which would eventually lead to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X gave an unintended impetus to the liturgical movement by calling for a revitalization of church music and then encouraging people to receive communion with more regularity. Pope Pius also lowered the age for receiving First Communion to seven years old.

By the middle of the twentieth century another boost to liturgical reform came from Pope Pius XII encouraged Catholics to be actively involved in the liturgy and to use the Mass as a focus of one's spiritual life with emphasis on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Throughout Europe and the United States change had taken root and the sapling was well on its way to becoming a tree. This was the state of the Church when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

The first major document of the Council was *The Constitution on the Liturgy* and was propagated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963 after the Council fathers had approved the document 2147 to 4.

In the first paragraph of the document the Council seeks to invigorate the Christian life of the faithful and to adapt the liturgy “more suitably to the needs of our own times” and to “promote union among all who believe in Christ” (n.1).

The Council reiterated the concept that the liturgy and the participation of God's people in the liturgy is at the heart of the Church. “Pastors of souls must therefore realize that when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects” (n.11).

The Council sought “the full and active participation by all the people” (n.14). To accomplish this end the document called for all seminaries to teach the “theological, historical,

spiritual, pastoral and juridical aspects” (n.16) of the liturgy. In addition to those studying in seminaries, the faithful too must be educated in the history and meaning of the liturgy. (That what these talks are all about!)

The document noted that some parts of the Mass are immutable (i.e., not able to be changed) but there are parts that can be adapted to the needs of the people and therefore should be reviewed from time to time (n.21).

The role of Scripture in the Mass itself became primary since the actions and signs of the Mass derive from these sacred writings (n.24).

Liturgies were no longer to be private; rather, they are moments for the community of the Church to celebrate. There was a call for greater involvement of the laity as ministers of the word and the Eucharist. The people are also encouraged to sing and participate through their responses, gestures, and actions (nn.29-30). Married men were ordained as deacons and helped in the celebration of the liturgy.

The Roman (or Western) liturgy (vs. the Greek or Eastern liturgies) is distinguished by its “noble simplicity” (n.34). The people should be able to understand the meaning of what is happening and not be subjected to useless repetitions.

“The ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. The sermon moreover should draw its content mainly from scriptural and liturgical sources” (n.35.2). The document also called for more readings from the Scriptures so that the faithful would have a broader understanding of the message of the Bible.

One of the most notable changes in the Mass that resulted from this document was the use of the vernacular (i.e., the everyday language of the people) (n.36.3). The original intention seems to have been the inclusion of both Latin and the vernacular and so the initial reforms did

include both languages. Over the course of time, however, the local language tended to dominate.

The document also said that “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful... The homily, therefore, is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy... it should not be eliminated except for serious reason” (n.52). It took a few years for all the changes of the Sacred Constitution to be implemented. In the end, the Mass was simplified by eliminating repetitive prayers and actions that had crept into Catholic worship over the centuries. Many of the changes were not new things but rather restored forms of prayer and worship that had been lost over the ages.

The Prayer of the Faithful (i.e., the petitions) was added so that the needs of the Church and local congregation could be the focus of our prayers. Catholics were encouraged to receive communion more frequently and under both kinds (i.e. the Body and Blood of Christ). They were encouraged to stand rather than kneel and to receive the host in their hands rather than on their tongue.

Concelebration was permitted which replaced priests saying Mass by themselves. When the priest celebrated the Eucharist he would face the people rather than have his back toward them. This encouraged the participation of the laity through their responses; the prayers became a dialogue. In addition to more responses and singing on the part of the people, they were also to offer each other a sign of peace.

The changes were not relegated to the prayers alone. The vestments the priest wore reflected the ancient Roman style. The architecture of churches was expanded to include the culture of the people who celebrated at the church; the use of newer building materials and artistic styles were used to make the worship space inviting and inclusive. Gathering spaces at the

entrance of churches allowed the people to extend their time together both before and after Mass. With the development of better sound systems, the pulpit underwent renovations. Changes also occurred for the placement of both the baptismal font and the tabernacle.

Lastly, the reading of the Scriptures was greatly expanded. The liturgical year was divided into three cycles – A, B and C – for Sundays and Year I and Year II for daily Mass so that a wider selection of both Hebrew and Christian readings could be heard. Within the course of the three year cycle most of the Bible would be read and absorbed by the faithful.

Not all the changes were well received nor were they implemented well. However, the liturgy and the way we worship continues to evolve and to respond to both the essential nature of Catholic worship (those things that are immutable) and the needs of God's people.