

SACROSANCTUM CONCILLIUM

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

with Fr. Tim Menezes



Sacrosanctum Concilium is the Vatican II document on the liturgy, the public prayer of the Church. It was the first major document to be written at Vatican II in November 1963. In the first 20 paragraphs of this document, you will see that the liturgy is always infused with hope. It is a prayer of the Trinity. It is the priestly prayer of Jesus Christ. And we are called to fully conscious and active participation whenever we gather for the liturgy.

As Fr. Tim reminds us in his opening remarks of the video, anyone under the age of 65 is unlikely to be aware of how the liturgy was celebrated before Vatican II because they will not have experienced it and so making comparisons is neither easy nor particularly necessary. However, it is good to reflect on what we do experience on a weekly basis. In what ways does the celebration of our Mass inspire us? How does it continue to transform us as we participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ?

Reflecting on Sacrosanctum Concilium will deepen our understanding of the Liturgy and, as Fr. Tim tells us, help us come to appreciate fully the truth of the Liturgy as an act of glorifying God.

As a beginning consider this question:

Q. In what ways does the Liturgy you celebrate each Sunday enable you to Glorify God? What are the positives of your Sunday celebration? What could be better?

The liturgical celebration as envisaged by Vatican II calls each one of us to 'Full Conscious Active Participation'. In the liturgy there are no spectators, only participants. Article 10 teaches us that it is the Eucharist which defines us as Christians and that the liturgy we celebrate is the source of our Christian life and the summit toward which we journey. As Fr. Tim reminds us, when we gather for Sunday worship we are nourished by the Word of the Eucharist, to return again to our own week of personal prayer, united with the angels and the saints. Our personal prayer and our public prayer feed one another.

In Article 11 the document tells us that when we come to liturgy we must be 'well disposed', ready to participate and actively engaged in the rites.' Article 14 reiterates this by saying that it is the 'right and duty' of the Christian people to be able to participate fully, as 'the chosen race, the royal priesthood, and the holy nation'. To this end the document states that the general restoration of the liturgy must take place with great care.

Q1. Do you remember the liturgy prior to Vatican II? If so, what do you remember in particular?

Q2. Listening to Fr. Tim, what strikes you about the activity of the Liturgy as celebrated since Vatican II? What part do we play? What part does Scripture play?

Article 51 onwards has a focus on the specific reforms that the Constitution called for. These include the place of Scripture as a central component of the liturgy, the importance of receiving the sacraments, especially Holy Communion regularly, and the use of the Vernacular language.

Q. Why do you think these aspects of the Liturgy are important? How do aspects such as using the local language serve our participating better?

Later in Chapter 3 the Constitution reflects on the Sacraments and the formation of people in order to be able to receive the sacraments.

Q. When the Constitution speaks of sacraments building up the body of Christ, what does it mean? What is your understanding of the sacraments beyond Eucharist?

Q. How might our celebration of all the sacraments enable people to understand their role in them better?

The final chapters of the Constitution (4-6) address the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office), the liturgical calendar, sacred music and finally sacred art and architecture. A whole chapter is dedicated to the role of music in the liturgy. It is one of those hot topics most often spoken about when commenting on the liturgy within our parishes. Fr. Tim reminds us that sacred music has the capacity to enhance our liturgy in an amazing way. At the same time, it is one aspect of the liturgy that frequently divides us. People have different views on what makes good liturgical music because music is something that affects us all differently. The Constitution emphasises that what is important is that it is worthy of what we are celebrating – that it lifts our hearts and minds to God.

Q. How can we ensure that music in our liturgy encourages full participation and avoids an over-emphasis on performance for performance sake?

Q. What kind of formation might we expect parish musicians to be offered to ensure they understand the role of music in the liturgy?

The final chapter of Sacrosanctum Concilium is on Sacred Art and Furnishing of the Church building. Again, different people have different tastes – some like the ornate and some like simplicity. However, the guiding principle called for in the constitution is for ‘noble beauty’, the priority being that all must be for the glory of God.

Q. Thinking of your own church building – what is attractive to you and why? In what ways does it draw you into prayer?

Q. What do you think ‘noble beauty’ looks like?

Fr. Tim finishes his talk by reminding us that the liturgy, the public prayer of the Church is an action of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is the prayer of Jesus to his Father. We are privileged to be drawn into that act of public prayer.

Reflect – what is my role in the liturgy and how can I engage more fully in the life of the liturgy in my own parish?

Concluding Prayer

Conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for the time together.

