

# LITURGY UNDER BENEDICT XVI

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FROM VOLUME 22, NUMBER 1

In this article I will explore Benedict XVI's beliefs about liturgy as well as the liturgical changes he has made as pope. Liturgy has become a controversial topic, so also the views and actions of Benedict XVI. Some claim that the pope is undoing the Second Vatican Council and forty-five years of progress in implementing the Council. Others claim that he is working to implement faithfully the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which means undoing the mistakes and misinterpretations of the past forty-five years and going back to what the Council really said. The truth is probably somewhere in between.

## TURNING TO THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Before turning more directly to the pope's views and actions, let us turn to the Second Vatican Council itself and the 1963 liturgy constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*.

Question: Which of the following two quotations is found in *Sacrosanctum concilium*?

#1: "There must be no innovations [in the liturgy] unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them."

#2: "Both texts and rites [in the liturgical reform] should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease."

The first quotation is cautious and even skeptical toward liturgical change. The second quotation suggests that texts and rites will need far-reaching changes for the sake of the people.

Perhaps the reader already knows that both quotations are taken directly from *Sacrosanctum concilium*—nos. 23 and 21 respectively. And this is the conundrum: Vatican II said many things, including things which seem to contradict each other, or at least stand in tension with each other.

The contradiction or tension between seemingly opposed positions is found throughout the liturgy constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*. Latin is preserved, but vernacular is permitted (no. 36). Choirs are to be promoted, but active participation of the people is the aim to be considered above all else (nos. 114, 14). Gregorian chant is to have first place, but the church has not adopted any style of art as its own (nos. 116, 123).

When liturgy becomes contested, as it is now, it becomes especially difficult to interpret the meaning of the Second Vatican Council. Various factions in the church are able to appeal to their

favorite passages, while conveniently overlooking passages which are not to their liking.

It is to this situation that Pope Benedict comes with his own strong convictions about how Vatican II should be interpreted.

Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) grew up in Germany, a land where the Liturgical Movement was very influential. This movement, dating at least to Pope Pius X at the beginning of the twentieth century, sought to open up the riches of the Latin liturgy to the faithful and to bring the faithful to participate in that liturgy with understanding. Ratzinger fell in love with the liturgy as a youth. He has maintained this love throughout his life, though liturgy was never his primary area of theological study. He is also attached to the masterpieces of European sacred music by composers such as Palestrina and Mozart.

Joseph Ratzinger distinguished himself early on as a theologian. Already at age 35 he was selected to be a *peritus* (theological expert advisor) to Cardinal Frings of Cologne at the Second Vatican Council. Ratzinger could be placed in the “reformist” camp of Vatican II theologians. He supported liturgical reform, decentralization of authority from the Roman curia to the world’s bishops, and greater fairness in how Rome investigated the writings of controversial theologians. But already as the final document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, was issued in 1965, Ratzinger questioned whether the document took an overly positive view of the modern world. Such questions would grow stronger in his mind in future years.

As a theology professor at the University of Tübingen, Ratzinger recoiled in horror at the student revolts of 1968. He retreated from Tübingen to the small and unrenowned Catholic University of Eichstätt, in a diocese where the bishop was quite conservative. Ratzinger became increasingly suspicious of the modern world and increasingly critical of liberal trends in the church. In 1972 he was cofounder of the conservative journal *Communio*, which was intended as an alternative voice to the more liberal journal *Concilium*.

Ratzinger became critical of the liturgical reform following Vatican II. In his memoirs in 1998 he wrote, “I am convinced that the ecclesial crisis in which we find ourselves today depends in great part upon the collapse of the liturgy.” He charged that all too often “the community is only celebrating itself.” He saw a “need for a new liturgical movement to call back to life the true heritage of Vatican Council II.”

In time Ratzinger came to believe that the liturgical reform after Vatican II had gone off the rails in one key aspect: the liturgy was now viewed as something of our own making, something that we construct for ourselves, rather than a gift, a precious inheritance to be accepted with gratitude. His criticism of post-Vatican II liturgical practice became rather sharp at times. His fondness for the pre-Vatican II liturgy seemed to become stronger over the years, although he continued to hold that this liturgy was in need of reform.

When Joseph Ratzinger was elected pope in 2005, he took the name Benedict. He is among the greatest theological minds ever to serve as successor to Peter. His public demeanor shows that

**THE PERSON OF THE  
POPE**

he is rather uncomfortable with large crowds, shy in disposition with a soft, gentle voice, but also capable of offending other religions with words requiring him to backtrack. The contrast between him and his immediate predecessor, the extroverted, athletic, attention-loving John Paul II, shows that the Lord calls all types of people to serve him.

**THE “HERMENEUTIC OF  
CONTINUITY”**

A key theme for Benedict XVI, already before he became pope, is that the Second Vatican Council is misinterpreted by many. On December 22, 2005, in an address to the Roman Curia, Pope Benedict criticized ways of interpreting Vatican II that he called “hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture.” The problem here, according to the pope, is that the church after Vatican II is treated as something entirely new, a complete break with the pre-Vatican II church. The impression is given that we are free to reinvent the Catholic faith as we wish.

In contrast to this, the pope proposed a “hermeneutic of reform,” which emphasizes the fundamental continuity between the church before and after the Council. He has also called this way of interpretation a “hermeneutic of continuity,” and it is this phrase that has become most identified with the pope’s viewpoint.

Applying a hermeneutic of continuity to liturgy, Pope Benedict stated: “For the life of the Church, it is dramatically urgent to have a renewal of liturgical awareness, a liturgical reconciliation, which goes back to recognizing the unity in the history of the liturgy and understands Vatican II not as a break, but as a developing moment.”

To be sure, Pope Benedict has a nuanced view of continuity and change, unlike some of his would-be followers. Some people have now turned “hermeneutic of continuity” into an all-encompassing slogan with which to criticize almost anything since Vatican II and advocate for almost anything from before Vatican II. In contrast to this, the pope admits that in a “hermeneutic of reform” there can be “discontinuities” within larger continuities. He approves of new elements in the 1969 missal of Pope Paul VI such as the simplified offertory prayers. But it does appear that Pope Benedict is placing a new emphasis on tradition and continuity. He is thereby revisiting, at least to some extent, liturgical changes both large and small made since the Second Vatican Council.

**THE LITURGICAL STYLE  
OF POPE BENEDICT XVI**

Since Benedict ascended to the throne of Peter in 2005, there have been some changes in papal liturgies, both in Rome and abroad. Traditional vestments from the storeroom have been put to use again. Crozier, miter, throne, altar crucifix, and other such accouterments are made in a traditional style, often enough because they are the actual pieces used by popes before Vatican II. In the Sistine Chapel, Pope Benedict has celebrated Mass *ad orientem* (“to the east”), that is, facing the apse rather than the congregation. At the pope’s instruction, more Latin Gregorian chant and traditional choral music are sung in the liturgies that he celebrates. In his trip to the United Kingdom in October 2010, he insisted on praying the eucharistic prayer in Latin at every liturgy. He administers Holy Communion only on the tongue to kneeling communicants, even when this is contrary to the liturgical norms of the country he is visiting. (He does not insist that other eucharistic ministers follow his personal practice.)

Some traditionalists who had hoped that the pope would issue new legislation to change the face of Catholic liturgy around the world have been disappointed. As much as he criticizes some practices connected with the postconciliar liturgy, he has not taken forceful moves to require changes in it. All the tradition-oriented changes noted above have remained practices which the pope simply employs himself without making them the norm for others. In accord with his belief in continuity, it is not Benedict's manner to bring about sudden change. Rather, he seems content to lead mostly by example.

Pope Benedict's goal is to put the reformed liturgy in a different light—not as something completely different from the old liturgy, but as something that stands within the entire preceding history of the liturgy. In his mind, he is not simply “going back” to pre-Vatican II practices; rather, he is applying to the reformed liturgy a hermeneutic of continuity.

In one area, however, Pope Benedict has made a significant change. On July 7, 2007, he issued *Summorum pontificum*. This document grants any priest the right to use the pre-Vatican II form of the Mass or other sacraments. Previously, under Pope John Paul II, one needed an indult (permission) from the bishop to celebrate the old liturgy. This previous legislation suggested, it could be argued, that the old liturgy was permitted as a pastoral concession for those already attached to it, and its use was an exception falling outside the normal liturgical usage of the Catholic Church. *Summorum pontificum* upholds the reformed liturgy in that this is now called the “ordinary form,” with the preconciliar liturgy now termed the “extraordinary form.” But the universal permission to employ the old liturgy means that this form of the liturgy now appears, more than previously, as a standard and normal feature of Catholic liturgical life.

**SUMMORUM PONTIFICUM:  
UNIVERSAL PERMISSION  
FOR THE PRECONCILIAR  
MASS**

When Pope Benedict issued *Summorum pontificum*, he also issued an accompanying letter of explanation. In this letter the pope sets out to calm his critics' fears by stating that use of the old Mass will be rather limited. He writes,

The use of the old Missal presupposes a certain degree of liturgical formation and some knowledge of the Latin language; neither of these is found very often. Already from these concrete presuppositions, it is clearly seen that the new Missal will certainly remain the ordinary form of the Roman Rite.

He also writes that it is “unfounded” to fear “that the document detracts from the authority of the Second Vatican Council, one of whose essential decisions—the liturgical reform—is being called into question.”

It is surely true that the “ordinary form,” the reformed liturgy of Pope Paul VI, remains the normal Sunday experience of liturgy for the vast majority of Catholics around the world. As much as the use of the “extraordinarily form” has increased greatly in the past three years, it remains limited to a tiny fraction of the Catholic faithful. The numbers suggest that the extraordinary form might be quite limited in its impact upon the church's liturgical life.

Still, it seems that Pope Benedict does hope to have at least some influence on the reformed liturgy with his new legislative measures. In his letter he states that “the two Forms of the usage of the Roman Rite can be mutually enriching.” He claims that “the celebration of the Mass according to the Missal of Paul VI will be able to demonstrate, more powerfully than has been the case hitherto, the sacrality which attracts many people to the former usage.”

The universal permission to celebrate the pre-Vatican II liturgy is probably the most significant of Pope Benedict’s actions in the area of liturgy. This is true even if the old liturgy is celebrated by only a few people, for *Summorum pontificum* has changed the terms of the discussion for the entire Catholic Church. The people in the pews may not have any reason to realize it, but the ground has changed for scholars and liturgists. Now, more than before, it seems legitimate to question any aspect of the post-Vatican II liturgical reform. Now it seems acceptable to uphold any aspect of the old liturgy and suggest that the reform should have preserved more of it.

It is surely the case that Pope Benedict upholds the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. As pope he publicly celebrates only with the Missal of Paul VI, never with the old missal. But he knows that *Summorum pontificum* has the potential to call into question many aspects of the reformed liturgy of Paul VI. Given his views about the post-Vatican II liturgical reform, he is probably at ease with that effect, and hopeful for a positive effect upon the celebration of the reformed liturgy.

**MAKING SENSE OF THE  
POPE’S LITURGICAL  
VIEWS AND ACTIONS**

No doubt an event as momentous as the Second Vatican Council will continue to be discussed and disputed for generations to come. Its interpretation will long remain controversial into the future. Fr. John O’Malley, SJ, an expert historian of the Council, takes up one particular question: whether or not Vatican II should be interpreted as an innovation introducing a rupture into the history of the church. In *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2008), he argues that the Council did innovate by introducing a new way of thinking. His view of Vatican II challenges, or perhaps provides a complimentary perspective, to Pope Benedict’s belief that the Council should be interpreted within a hermeneutic of continuity rather than rupture.

O’Malley points out the striking contrast between the language of Vatican II and that of preceding councils. In chapter 1 of *What Happened* he writes:

The councils from Nicaea to Vatican I had a characteristic style of discourse. . . . It consisted of words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment, words of a superior speaking to an inferior—or to an enemy. It consisted of power-words. . . .

The language projected an image of the church as a stern master, and the image in turn promoted the reality and helped it self-fulfill. . . . But Vatican II eschewed such language. It issued no canons, no anathemas, no verdicts of “guilty as charged.” In so speaking it marked a significant break with past councils. (45)

O'Malley examines the vocabulary of the Vatican II documents. He notes that “words of alienation, exclusion, enmity, words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment” are absent. “The church is never described as a monarchy, or the members of the church as subjects” (48–49). In all this, the words of Vatican II are untypical of the conventional vocabulary of councils.

O'Malley concludes: “When both genre and vocabulary are taken into account they convey a remarkably consistent message. The message is that a model-shift has occurred, or better, is struggling to occur” (51).

If O'Malley is reading Vatican II correctly, then the liturgical reforms carried out after Vatican II appear in a much more positive light. If Vatican II is the fundamental innovation that O'Malley believes it is, then it is to be expected that the liturgical reform would introduce great changes and innovations. It is legitimate that the reformed liturgy makes a break with the past, unlike anything before in the history of the liturgy.

There is another theme in Vatican II that should be considered when evaluating Pope Benedict's liturgical views and action. This is the very important theme of the church's relationship to the contemporary world. In the last document issued by Vatican II, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, the Catholic Church affirmed a relationship of dialogue and mutual respect between the church and the world of contemporary culture. *Gaudium et spes* explicitly rejected an attitude of skepticism, condemnation, and separatism toward the modern world.

The opening words of *Gaudium et spes* ring out in recognition of the deep bonds that unite Christian believers to the entire human family:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. . . . That is why this community [of the Church] realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.

Article 40 of the pastoral constitution states:

Everything we have said about the dignity of the human person, and about the human community and the profound meaning of human activity, lays the foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world, and provides the basis for dialogue between them.

It is not easy to navigate the relationship between liturgy and contemporary culture. The challenge is that we Christians are “in the world but not of the world.” We must reject everything

in the world that is sinful or contrary to the gospel; at the same time, we must recall that “God so loved the world . . .”

If we uncritically adapt everything in the liturgy to current trends, if we allow secular influences into the liturgy uncritically, if we toss out our liturgical traditions without consideration of their value, we risk emptying our liturgy of depth, beauty, holiness, and evangelical fervor. But on the other hand, if we retreat into our liturgical past, affirm only tradition but not renewal, and reject the art, architecture, music, speech, and customs of the people of our day, we risk making the liturgy irrelevant to many people in today’s world.

The liturgy must not become a museum appealing to the few with a cultured taste for that sort of thing. It should be a home for the great masses of people, beckoning and welcoming all sorts of people back to their heavenly Father. The liturgy must not become an escape from the real world; it should be the world at its most real, redeemed and sanctified by God.

It is to be expected that a movement of traditionalism and retrieval such as we see today would arise a half century after Vatican II. After the creativity and experimentation and iconoclasm of the first generation or two after the Council, the normal rhythm is that a movement of tradition and stability would arise as a response. Pope Benedict is speaking to a real need today as he calls us to reexamine how we have implemented the liturgical reform. It will be important, however, that we not carry Pope Benedict’s vision to excess. If we do that, we will betray the vision of *Gaudium et spes*, and we will miss Vatican II’s clarion call to remain in dialogue with today’s world.

**THE CONVERSATION  
CONTINUES**

Continuity or rupture? More tradition in liturgical style or more innovation? Clearer Catholic identity or more adaptation to the contemporary world? More European masterpieces of sacred art and music, or more drawing from all the cultures and ethnic groups of today’s world? Latin or vernacular?

Vatican II’s many and varied statements calling the church to reform and renewal will challenge us for generations to come. Pope Benedict XVI has emerged as an important theological voice moving the conversation in new directions. It is our privilege to join in the conversation, and to add our voice to a discussion that will long continue. ✠

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