

## THE FIRST SESSION

By Joseph Ratzinger

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*A lecture that has attracted wide attention delivered in the University of Bonn on January 18, 1963, by Dr. Joseph Ratzinger, professor of fundamental theology at that University, and personal theologian of His Eminence Cardinal Frings of Cologne at the Council. We have selected only the parts more pertinent to the liturgy schema from the full translation of the lecture that appeared in the May Furrow.*

On arriving in Rome one felt a certain exhilaration, a mysterious feeling that the opening of the Council induced, a feeling that rouses one as no other does, intensified as it was by the realization of witnessing an event of great historical importance...

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

At the opening ceremony in St. Peter's, the splendid basilica, the magnificence of the ancient liturgy, the colorful variety of the visitors from all over the world – all this was most impressive. But on the other had there was present a distinct uneasiness, the most obvious symptom of which was the discontent with the almost interminable ceremonies. This certainly may not be a very objective criterion, but it revealed something deeper.

The liturgical ceremonies of the opening day lacked that community quality which makes everyone feel he is included. Neither were they sufficiently compact. Is it really proper for 2,500 bishops, to say nothing of the many other members of the faithful, to be condemned to be mute spectator of a liturgy in which, apart from official liturgists [*i.e.*, *leaders of the ceremonies – ed.*], only the Sistine Choir has any voice? The active participation of those present was deemed unnecessary, a symptom of a state of affairs that needed to be put right. And why, one may ask, had the *Credo* to be recited in full after the Mass, when there was room within the Mass itself for such a profession of faith? Why, to put another question, was the formal liturgy of the word necessary, seeing that there is an epistle and gospel in the Mass? And why was it necessary that litanies be sung in full when one can still recognize those places in the Mass where prayers of intercession can be inserted?

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Two liturgies had been juxtaposed without being properly connected. One could clearly recognize in this the dangerous archaism which imprisoned the liturgy of the Mass since the Council of Trent, so that one could scarcely any longer perceive the real meaning of its individual parts, or see that the Mass itself contains an enthronement of the Gospels, a profession of faith and intercessions.

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It must have instinctively occurred to the observer that a symptom of the success of the Council would be the degree by which the closing ceremonies differed from those of the opening day. From this point of view, may not one regard it as a gratifying sign that, on the initiative of the bishops, on December 8 at the conclusion of the first session, the responses and the ordinary of the Mass were sung in unison by the bishops and all those present? ...

#### PRIORITY OF THE LITURGY SCHEMA

The real work of the Council began with the discussion of the schema on the sacred liturgy on Monday, October 21. From the total of approximately seventy schemata which had been prepared, seven were printed and submitted to the Fathers a few weeks before the opening of the Council. The titles were: The Sources of Revelation; Maintaining the Purity of the Faith; Morals; Marriage and Virginity; Sacred Liturgy; Modern means of Communication; Unity of the Church. It was clear that the first four drafts, which had been drawn up by the Theological Commission under the chairmanship of Cardinal Ottaviani, were bound to provoke strong opposition, while the last two were not fully mature. For this reason, in those comments which the Fathers were asked to give before the Council opened, the wish was frequently expressed that proceedings should begin with the discussion on the reform of the liturgy.

The Praesidium, whose task it is to decide the order of the day's work, approved of this proposal, and in doing so, as was soon to become apparent, made a very happy decision.

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The liturgy schema was a well-considered and, at the same time, a courageous document which allowed the Council to begin with a positive task, a good omen for the future. It created a spirit of optimism and permitted the progressive forces to get working immediately.

It would have been much more difficult to get the Fathers to focus their attention on a matter requiring much critical discussion. Here it was possible to do constructive and progressive work which won over the hesitant, because the draft showed them that there was question not of destructive criticism but of achieving greater fullness, since it gave an answer to those questions which were troubling missionary bishops for a long time. If during the debate on this text which, on the one hand, was sufficiently well-developed to form a satisfactory basis for discussion, and, on the other hand, was sufficiently open to allow plenty of questions to be raised, the Council could give final shape to its thought, it could also find itself spiritually and, above all, test its technical ability. ...

The decision to give precedence to the liturgy schema was right, and not merely from the technical point of view: its significance goes deeper than that. It was a public avowal of where the true center of the Church lies – in her espousal, ever young, to her Lord, which finds its completion in the mystery of the Eucharist and in which by partaking in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ she fulfills her most intimate mission – the adoration of the triune God. Problems that were more in the foreground and which for that reason may have appeared more important than they were in reality, were passed over for the

moment, and the Faith now publicly avowed what is the true life-spring of the Church and the real starting-point of all renewal.

Since the text did not content itself with alterations here and there in the rubrics, but had been based on this deeper concept of the liturgy, it included within itself a whole system of ecclesiology. This exercised an effect, difficult to overestimate, on the main theme of the Council as a whole; and on the Church's teaching as well which was thereby set from the "hierarchological" (Congar's word) stranglehold of the last few centuries, and brought back to its sacramental starting-point. ...

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## BASIC TENDENCIES

It would be impossible to enter here into the details of the proposed liturgical reforms. Nor is there need to do so. I shall merely try to pinpoint certain basic tendencies which characterize the text as a whole.

1) One may speak first of a return to origins and a removal of the various strata piled up over the years, which now frequently conceal to a large extent the kernel of what the liturgy had been really intended to convey. For example, the primacy of Sundays, orientated to the feast of Easter, over the feasts of the saints; of the Eucharist over other kinds of devotion; of the basic structure over the many superadded forms. This will affect principally the structure of the Mass.

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The ritual stiffness in which, as I tried to show in my comments on the liturgy of the opening day, the meaning of each single action was often scarcely grasped, defeats the attempt to make the Church's worship once again a means of proclaiming the word of God in a manner that will have a meaning and appeal for our time. The same stiffness destroys the dialogue character of all liturgical ceremonies, the means by which God's

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people are meant to worship Him together. This naturally implies that less stress is to be laid on private Masses and more on the celebration of the liturgy in common. This is clearly expressed in the text, especially in the lapidary statement: "The dialogue Mass is to be preferred." A corollary of this

was the attempt to extend the practice of con-celebration. Much more discussion will have to take place before this matter can be formulated precisely.

2) Stronger emphasis will be laid upon the Word as a matter of special importance next to the Eucharist. On this point the text makes following observation.

In order that together with the Eucharistic Table the table of the Word of God may be richly laid for the faithful, the treasures of the Bible will be opened wide, so that in the course of a number of years the more essential parts of holy

Scripture will be read aloud. The homily, which is itself part of the liturgy, is emphatically recommended on Sundays and holydays of obligation.

We may expect, then, a new arrangement of extracts from the Bible that will make its treasures liturgically accessible on a larger scale than formerly.

3) One of the special concerns of the liturgical movement, as I have already indicated, is to secure more active participation of the laity by involving those who share God's Table in the holy sacrifice. A particularly clear indication of the extent of this feeling is the proposal, which received wide attention, that permission should be given for the administration of Communion under both species to all the faithful in certain cases.

4) A point of unusual importance is the decentralizing of liturgical control. The first chapter of the liturgical schema, in its final form, which has already been accepted by the General Assembly, contains a decree which constitutes a radical innovation for the Latin Church. With certain limitations, conferences of bishops will now be empowered to legislate in liturgical matters for their own countries. In doing so these bishops will be acting not as mere delegates of Rome, but in the exercise of a power which belongs to themselves.

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This decree makes it possible to give the liturgy once again that Catholicity which the Fathers of the Church saw foreshadowed in the image of the bride with the "garment of many colors" (Psalm 44 [45]). It makes it possible also to bring into the liturgy once more the entire richness of all that is vital in the Church.

At the same time this decree has immense ecclesiological significance. We must bear in mind that until now bishops' conferences did not exist, from the standpoint of canon law. They had no kind of legislative jurisdiction, but were gatherings of a merely deliberative character. Now that they possess as a right a definite legislative function, they appear as a new element in the ecclesiastical body-politic, and form a link of a quasi-synodal kind between the individual bishops and the pope. A synodal element has thus been inserted into the structure of the Church as a permanent factor and a new function has thereby accrued to the body of bishops.

To that extent one may perhaps say that this small paragraph which establishes conferences of bishops as a canonical factor for the first time, will in the end have greater significance for the theology of the episcopate and for the universally desired strengthening of episcopal authority than the actual schema dealing specifically with the Church, with all its erudite statements. For here a fact has been established; and the weight of the factual, as history teaches, in a matter of this kind is greater than mere exposition. With little fuss and almost unnoticed by the public, the Council has already taken a fundamental step in the renewal of ecclesiology.

5) The greatest part of the discussion on the liturgy was, rather surprisingly, taken up with the debate over the language of the liturgy. The apostolic constitution *Veterum Sapientia*, it will be remembered, had only a short time before given a weighty preliminary decision in favor of Latin. This clearly shows how unyielding entrenched interest still was in this department, and how heavy was the weight of a tradition going back over fifteen hundred years. The discussion had its amusing side. Quite often glowing eulogies on Latin were delivered in heavy bog-Latin, while the most impressive champions of the vernacular could express themselves in good classical Latin. ...

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Only the person who reflects on the significance of language in human affairs and how far it is from a mere superficial and casual expression, is, on the contrary, an embodiment of the mind which can express its thoughts only through human speech, only such a one can realize

the extent of the revolutionary change proposed here. To that extent the toughness and thoroughness that characterized this discussion were certainly justified.

A decision on the language of the liturgy is one of far-reaching consequence and for this reason will have to be worked out in detail, with great care and delicacy. But it is one capable of giving considerable help to Christianity in its encounter with the spirit of the present day. It can hardly be denied that the sterility to which Catholic theology and philosophy has in many cases been condemned since the end of the Enlightenment was due, not least, to being tied to a language in which vital decisions of the human mind were no longer made. Theological decisions which were worked out and expounded in a dead language were often superficial and not really fertilized by contemporary thought. Theology of this sort was incapable of transforming itself. ...

## HAPPY AUGURY

The debate on the liturgy, which in the opinion of many had dragged out far too long, concluded on November 14, 1962, with a vote on whether the schema, subject to certain alterations to be carried by the Commission, should be adopted in principle. It was carried by a majority which even the optimists did not expect – 2,162, as against 46 votes (there were seven invalid votes). It was a decision that augured well for the future, and was at the same time a very encouraging sign that the strength of the movement for renewal was greater than anyone had ventured to hope.

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