Because we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, I’d like to begin with some remarks about Vatican II.

Whenever the Second Vatican Council is brought up, our feelings about continuity and change come quickly to the fore. Were the changes brought about by the Council too many? Were they too few? Were the changes intended, or were they unintended consequences owing to the times?

This Old House

Have you ever watched the program, “This Old House”? Maybe you’ve rehabbed or renovated a house yourself. There’s a lot one can do. As long as you don’t move a structural wall, you can even create new doors and windows, move things around. When an old house is beautifully renovated, in the end people may come in the door and exclaim: “Wow this is gorgeous! It’s not the same house!”

But it is the same house.

My husband and I just bought a new apartment, in a 1928 vintage building. We love it because it’s old. But we also appreciate the fact that the previous owners renovated it. So the lighting is wonderful, the kitchen is up to date, and there are electrical outlets in all the right places. The original beauty comes through, but there is something more: it’s fit to live in today.

Is it the same apartment? It is, but you can understand how people would say “Wow, it’s a whole new place!”

This is an important point for understanding Vatican II. Today we hear some Catholics critical of Vatican II, saying people wrongly got the idea somehow that it’s a new church. “It’s not a new church!” But… in a certain sense, it is.

Conversion

My first example was something exterior. Let’s go deeper and talk about change on the level of the human person. Ever know someone to go through a conversion? Have you ever been through a conversion yourself? Here is a definition of conversion:

*I experience or take part in a community event powerful enough to make my previous images start to disintegrate. They become strange and distant. I am not longer at ease with what I do or how I do it. I begin to respond to other images / stories or values that*
are presented to me, and I take on new images of God, neighbor and self. I start to act out of these images within a new community of meaning.

Old ways of doing things become strange and distant. We gain new images of God, neighbor, and self and begin to act out of those images.

When a person has gone through a conversion, one can see the difference. Truly, if there’s no perceptible change, it’s not a conversion at all. Those observing might even say, “She’s a new person! ... She was always so grumpy, and now she’s happy,” or “she used to be very self-centered, and now she’s much more engaged with others.” Her life is one. Yet something has changed inwardly, and she will act differently as a result.

The Church of Vatican II is a Church that underwent a conversion. Fifty years ago, something profound happened. The assembled leaders, truth to tell, did not come expecting this to happen. But when they met together they found that the majority was ready to give birth to new images of God, community, and self – and to renew the Church as a result.

**Paradigm Shift**

Let’s take this a step further. Are you familiar with the term “paradigm shift”? A paradigm is a pattern, a way of conceiving things as a whole so that the pieces are organized within an overall vision or pattern. You might say our overall picture of “the way things are” constitutes a paradigm.

A very famous book written by Thomas Kuhn in 1962 called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* brought the term “paradigm shift” into common use. Kuhn argued that, in the sciences, change doesn’t always come about by a gradual addition of new knowledge, as is sometimes thought. Rather, at very long intervals, there’s a kind of imaginative leap forward, in which a new pattern or paradigm emerges. Then it becomes the work of what he called “ordinary science” to work out the implications of the new paradigm.

Some examples of a paradigm shift in the sciences might be: the shift from thinking the earth is flat to thinking that it is round. Or the shift between Newtonian physics and the physics of Albert Einstein. Aristotle is not “bad Newton,” he’s working out of a different paradigm. And the old paradigm will continue to fit certain phenomena, or “work” if you will, as far as it goes. But it won’t be adequate to account for all that we know. That’s the reason, after all, why paradigms shift. The old paradigm runs into something that it can’t account for, and the new paradigm arises in order to adequately take account of it. The beginning of a new paradigm is always an imaginative shift.

The idea of paradigm shift has been applied to human relations, philosophy, and the sociology of knowledge as well. To illustrate how this works in human interactions, let me tell a couple of stories. (*The captain and the lighthouse; the father and children on the train.*)

In these examples, what happened? People came up against a FACT that didn’t fit, and it was that collision which gave rise to a new paradigm -- one that would allow them to make
sense of the reality before them. Now, one might ask, what “fact” had the Church run into, which necessitated an imaginative shift to take place at the Council?

First of all, one might say that, in the largest sense, the “fact” that we encountered was modernity. But, within modernity, the fact that most of all necessitated a shift in the way we see things was the rise of historical consciousness.

We are so accustomed to thinking historically today, that it’s hard to even imagine a time when people thought differently, but in fact they did. The Church had been accustomed to thinking that everything we believe, and indeed all the features of our common life that related to the faith were unchanging. Everything that is, had always been. So, you had popular artwork showing Jesus at the Last Supper wearing a chasuble, giving the apostles communion on the tongue, kneeling. Or you had Catholic professors of Scripture who were obliged to say in their classes that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, even though they knew quite well that Moses didn’t write the Pentateuch. Because the fathers of the church believed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and they of course could not be wrong. All doctrines were unchanging. And Latin was always spoken. It was the true and eternal tongue of our worship.

So, we began to look at the evidence, however, and see that such much had changed over time. Throughout the long nineteenth century there had been an enormous gain in historical knowledge. We knew more about the past than ever before, and consequently we had to come to grips with history itself. Things HAD changed and the Church had adapted. Things could change again. Which left one with the challenging and frightening task of discerning what is essential.

Also, in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, we saw the end of a number of great empires as well as the collapse of colonialism. There was the fall of the German empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, the British empire, the Ottoman empire. European powers were giving up their colonial possessions, either by force because of revolutions, or by the orderly transfer of power to indigenous peoples. All around the world, one heard the cry of peoples who yearned for self-determination. Through the ages, of course, the Church has always to some extent drawn on societal models to express what is excellent and strong and awe-inspiring in the Church. So, in the eras of kings and queens, we had monarchical models; in the era of absolutism we had the idea that absolute monarchy had great virtues; and as empires flourished, the Church in certain ways took on aspects of empire.

So, at Vatican II, within the midst of such far-reaching changes in the world around us, the fathers of the Council were faced the implicit question: What kind of a Church are we going to be?

Will we have imperial Catholicism? It is no accident that Pope Paul VI not only retired the papal tiara, that symbol of the temporal powers of the Roman Catholic Church, but also he put aside the golden throne, sedia gestatoria, and the crane feather fans that were modeled on the Byzantine imperial court.
What kind of a Church are we going to be? The Church of the long nineteenth century had in many ways cohered by adopting the a strong stance against the outside world; the Church was a bulwark against error and sin. Would this fortress mentality be reaffirmed? Before the Council, the fathers were sent a questionnaire asking what they would like to see addressed at the Council. Some sent in lists of things they would like to see condemned. Some would always be happy with the fortress.

Yet there were other images of God, neighbor, and self that struggled to find expression, and they won out at the Council. The paradigm shifted.

**The New Paradigm**

What is this new paradigm? Some general features of the paradigm which Vatican II articulated are: the Church as a pilgrim people, the Church as communion; the universal call to holiness which the renewal of baptism expressed and supported; positive relationships with the outside world (dialogue, ecumenism); and the vital role of the Word of God.

In liturgy, the paschal mystery rose to prominence as the central theological concept of the liturgical reform; the liturgy was presented as the summit and source of the Church’s life; full, conscious, active participation of all the faithful was mandated; inculturation or adaptation to cultures around the world, was also mandated, and finally, a renewed ecclesiology centering on the Eucharist was held up as normative.

To realize this new paradigm in the liturgy, a whole host of concrete decisions had to be made after the Council, reflecting the principles that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had provided. Indeed, some of the elements of the liturgical reform most associated with Vatican II in the popular imagination were not mandated at the Council itself. They came about gradually. Things such as: fully vernacular liturgy, Communion under both forms on Sundays, altars facing the people, Communion in the hand, new texts, new Eucharistic Prayers, the three year Lectionary, and more, were produced and adopted as the result of a processes set in motion by the Council, not as decisions of the Council itself.

In order to assist in the work of implementing the Constitution, there have been five instructions issued on its “right implementation.” Three were issued close to the time of the Council itself:

- Inter oecumenici 1964
- Tres abhinc annos 1967
- Liturgicae instaurationes 1970

The other two were issued much later, during the pontificate of John Paul II:

- Varietes legitimae 1994 (on inculturation)
- Liturgiam authenticam 2001 (on translation)

These later two instructions are quite different in character from the first three. They are longer, more detailed and philosophical, and they have a strong disciplinary and centralizing focus.
The Unity of the Roman Rite

One of the very important paragraphs of the Constitution is article 38, which urges adaptation of the liturgy to the native genius of the various peoples of the world. Inculturation in Sacrosanctum Concilium was endorsed with a single qualification: That the substantial unity of the Roman Rite be preserved. This raises the question: In what does the unity of the Roman Rite consist?

Fifty years after the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, some assert that this unity is textual. The current executive director of ICEL, Msgr. Andrew Wadsworth, has said this (on several occasions; this quote comes from a recent contribution to the Tablet): “...the unity of the Roman Rite is now essentially a textual unity. The Church permits a certain latitude in the interpretation of the norms that govern the celebration of the liturgy and hence our unity is essentially textual: we use the same prayers and meditate on the same Scriptures.”

His predecessor, Msgr. Bruce Harbert, although not using exactly the same expression, likewise made it clear that one of the central concerns of the new translation of the Roman Missal was to achieve a single text of the Order of Mass worldwide.

In the case of the English language, he spoke of the ramifications of this standardization of texts upon other language groups as well. “The Missal will be widely used, not only in the eleven member-countries of ICEL, but in many others where English, though not the first language of the majority of the population, is used in the Liturgy, including many countries in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Thus the new English Missal will have a career like that of the Missale Romanum introduced in 1570 after the Council of Trent.”

He compared the new translation of the Roman Missal to the 1570 Missal, held in the hands of missionaries, who also brought bread, wine, chalice, paten, vestments to the new world. He concluded that Catholic unity achieved through a single text is “bought at a price.” The price being, evidently, diversity.

These views have a background in Liturgiam authenticam (2001) and in the latest edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002). The GIRM emphasizes the Missal as key to unity in nos. 397–99: “The Roman Rite has acquired a certain supraregional character” thus the Roman Missal “must be preserved in the future as an instrument and an outstanding sign of the integrity and unity of the Roman Rite.” What it means to “preserve” the Roman Missal is not altogether clear from this text, but it is clear that a curb is set on adaptation.

Liturgiam authenticam also takes this view when it says: “In preparing all translations of the liturgical books, the greatest care is to be taken to maintain the identity and unitary expression of the Roman Rite, not as a sort of historical monument, but rather, as a manifestation of the theological realities of ecclesial communion and unity.” (no. 5). [emphasis mine]

Ecclesial communion and unity are manifested by the IDENTITY AND UNITARY EXPRESSION of the Roman Rite, a task furthered by the most exact translation of the Latin editio typica.
The fourth instruction, which was on inculturation of the liturgy: “Varietates Legitimae” also says: “The process of inculturation should maintain the substantial unity of the Roman Rite. That unity is currently expressed in the liturgical books [emphasis mine], published by the authority of the supreme pontiff and in the liturgical books approved by the episcopal conferences for their areas and confirmed by the Holy See.” (no. 36)

**Substantial Unity**

But is the unity of the Roman Rite really about having a single text? If Burkhard Neunhauser OSB is to believed, textual unity was not what the fathers of the Council chiefly had in mind when they made the landmark decision to opt for the expression "substantial unity" rather than formal unity or uniformity.

What did they have in mind? In a wonderful little article called “Roman Genius Revisited” published in the book, *Liturgy for a New Millennium*, he spells this out in a most helpful and intriguing fashion.

Just a word first, however, about Fr. Neunhauser himself. He was a monk of Maria Laach Abbey. He died in 2003. He was a highly respected liturgical scholar, and he served as a consultor to the Consilium which carried out the liturgical reform. He, like the patron of this lecture series, Godfrey Diekmann, counts as one of the elders of the liturgical movement. He taught at Sant’ Anselmo, and those of you who are liturgy students will have seen his name on the works of Odo Casel, which he edited, for example.

I’d like to quote Neunhauser here, because I think what he had to say is very important. “The council wanted to allow the possibility of ‘legitimate variations and adaptations to meet the needs of different gatherings, areas and peoples... provided that the fundamental unity of the Roman Rite is preserved” (SC 38). J.A. Jungmann, SJ, interpreted this principle as being “in favor of a unity in essential features, along with a vast differentiation in details.” Again, we must ask, what are the essential features... of the Roman Rite?... Certainly it is not the Latin language, nor the details of the Ordo Missae, nor the order of the lectionary, the addition of a homily, the intercessions or other details. It is something much more important and fundamental.”

Then he pointed to the goal of the reform, which is (startlingly) outside the liturgy, by quoting from the first instruction on the right implementation of the Constitution, *Inter oecumenici*:

“It was not the intention of the liturgical reform simply to change the forms and texts, but to implement a pastoral practice, the decisive power of which “in eo posita est ut Mysterium Paschale vivendo exprimatur.”

This movement of thought is arresting, because there is a common tendency to regard the liturgy as a thing, as an object of study, a collection of texts, an archeological or historical
object. But his approach to the unity of the rite was, initially at least, to assert its *dynamism* in relation to how the human subject lives in the world.

What he is saying is that the first essential quality of the Roman Rite, its substance, is that it provokes (or precipitates or activates) the *living* of the paschal mystery.

To put it more bluntly: You cannot find the essence of the Roman Rite in the sacristy. *It’s not a book.* You cannot perceive what is essential to it, or preserve what is essential to it, without taking into account this dynamic relationship with what’s outside the celebration, that is, the life of faith as immersion in the paschal mystery.

**The Paschal Mystery**

A word about paschal mystery. It is an expression used frequently in the Constitution, and was noted by theologians (among them, Joseph Ratzinger) as the central theological concept of the whole liturgical reform. The paschal mystery is the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus *in which we share.* It is the journey from death to life. It is the movement of transformation.

As I listen to Catholics talk about what they want out of worship, I must say, I don’t always hear them longing for the paschal mystery. What I hear most often is what I call “the spirituality of the shrine” to the divine presence. They want to go somewhere to get in touch with the Holy, the Mystery. And, of course, that’s not a bad thing.

But here’s the rub. The “spirituality of the shrine” can be found in many if not all religions. What Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum* that fascinating and fearful experience in the presence of the Holy in his classic, *The Idea of the Holy,* is an experience that cuts across a wide spectrum of religions. What’s distinctively *Christian* is the paschal mystery of Jesus.

**The Heart of the Liturgy**

There’s more to Neunhauser’s description of the genius of the Roman Rite than just this reference to living the paschal mystery however. He went on to identify the bone and marrow of the liturgy, for which human cultures provide the flesh and blood.

I continue the quote:

“The celebration of the liturgy is an “actio sacra,” the “opus Christi sacerdotalis eiusque corporis quod est Ecclesia, acto sacra praecellenter” (SC 7), the “culmen ... et... fons” (SC 10). All this, I think, as described by the Second Vatican Council, equally forms part of the genius of the Roman Liturgy. It too is preserved more or less in its original state as the
heart of the liturgy even throughout periods of modification, and was rediscovered and especially stressed in the postconciliar reforms. Concretely, I am thinking of the theocentric and Christocentric orientation of worship: *ad Patrem per Christum Dominum in Spiritu Sancto*. The anamnesis of the “*Mysterium Christi*” is celebrated in an orderly fashion throughout the Liturgical Year. Central to it is the feast of Easter, and its weekly celebration on Sunday, the *Dies Dominica*. Although the memory of the saints also plays an important part in the Liturgical Year, still the feasts of Christ remain more important. The heart of all these different kinds of worship is the Eucharist, the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ, fulfilled in the Communion-offering, naturally under both species. All this is surrounded by the daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, worthily prayed ‘*in veritate temporis*.’

He goes on to say we must cherish these essential elements of the Roman Rite and *adapt ourselves to them*, not just in Africa or Asia, or Oceania, but in Europe and the Americas. And finally he returned to the pastoral goal articulated in the first instruction, even before the council was over: that the paschal mystery might be expressed in living.

So, you have all these dimensions present in, and constitutive of, the Roman Rite:

- The dynamic relationship of liturgy to the life of faith
- The action of Christ and his body, the Church, in liturgy
- Liturgy as summit and source
- The Trinitarian and Christological character of prayer
- Eucharist at the heart; communion of bread and wine
- The ordering of the liturgical calendar culminating in the paschal feasts
- The celebrations of the saints in right order to the mystery of Christ
- The prayer of the hours, to mark the times and the days

You could have a hundred books, all of them different in the details, but if they did all this, that *something* “much more important and fundamental” would be treasured and passed on in them, and there would be preserved that “substantial” liturgical unity which marks the Roman Rite.

**The Liturgy Debate**

Unity was much discussed in the liturgy debate on the floor of the Second Vatican Council. The question of the language in the liturgy gravitated again and again to the issue of unity. How to maintain it? How to assure it? How to express it?

Many of those who spoke in favor of Latin argued that the vernacular would endanger the unity of the Christian peoples symbolized in the unity of the liturgy—or perhaps we should say the “unitary expression” of the liturgy which only became possible through the advent of the printing press which coincided with the beginning of the Tridentine era. Cardinals
Ruffini, MacIntyre, Bacci, and Bishop Calewaert all spoke of Latin as a cause and expression of unity, as did others.

“Unity of faith presupposes one liturgy and one language” Archbishop Armando Fares of Catanzaro argued. Charles Calewaert, the bishop of Ghent, called the Latin language the symbol or external sign of unity as well as “the effective psychological agent of that unity.”

To these arguments, however, there were passionate rejoinders. “In order to be Christian and Catholic we are united not by some language” Bishop Frans Simons of Indore India declared, “but by the worship of one God and Lord, charity, life, Sacred Scripture, doctrine, and governance.” Although he concurred with the continuing usefulness of Latin for scholarship, he pointed out (with merciless clarity) that Latin, which was supposed to unite had actually become a source of division: between clergy and laity, between East and West, and between the Church and the world.

Bishop Charles Weber of Linyi, China pleaded with the Fathers to “enlarge your hearts” to allow the vernacular. Speaking of the challenges of materialism and atheism, he concluded that “Nothing, even the Latin language, is by itself the bond of unity.” Good and bad people will always use language as they wish. “Nevertheless,” he continued “we have a bond of unity: which is charity. Charity alone is the bond of unity among the people.”

Bishop Jorge Kemmerer, of Posadas, Argentina, speaking on behalf of a group of twenty bishops observed: “The unity of the church is threefold: a unity of governance, of truth, and of charity. ... this threefold unity can and ought to serve when there are different languages. The source of unity is the Holy Spirit, who overcame the obstacle of linguistic difference at the first Pentecost – and will overcome it in the future, not by a single language, Latin, but by oneness of mind, and a heart of love.”

Not all those who spoke in favor of adaptation were coming from outside of Europe. Bishop Otto Spüllbeck of Meissen, in East Germany, expressed great urgency in adapting the liturgy to the people, making it as accessible as possible, lest it be extinguished by the Communist regime which had made everything about being a Christian so much more difficult. He ended his intervention saying “Adaptation of the liturgy and active participation, among us, is a matter of life and death!”

There were many such interventions.

And the text of the constitution preserves both an affirmation of Latin and a permission for the vernacular according to pastoral need. The “use” of each is named. It does not say that Latin is the sign or the means of unity. It does not say anything about a unitary expression of the Roman Rite.

After the Council, the requests for permission to use the vernacular flooded in—something none of the Fathers expected, changing the balance in favor of the mother tongue.
Now, am I claiming these same Fathers who advocated broader use of the vernacular would have cast a withering glance on the prospect of a literal translation of the Missal? No one can claim that. The question never arose. They may have, if asked, been on either side of the question of strictness or latitude in translation, variety or sameness in the layout of the books.

But here’s the point, which the discussion DOES illustrate: the unity of the Roman Rite doesn’t depend on unitary expression. If it did, we would still have the liturgy celebrated in Latin. For all. Entirely.

**Conclusions**

Liturgical unity is a theological concept that was revitalized by the Council, through the way in which it described the essential features of the Liturgy anew. This renewed understanding of the Liturgy is one that is poorly served by an emphasis upon standardization of printed and spoken texts around the world, whether they are vernacular translations or Latin originals.

Liturgy is a system of signs. And it is incarnational. As Fr. Boniface Luykx said in Ephemerides Liturgicae in 1964, the scholastic maxim holds true: “Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur.” “Whatever is received is received in the mode of the one receiving.” Adaptation is essential for reception.

Thus I think that some real questions need to be raised about the trend toward conceiving of the unity of the Roman Rite in terms of the one great book, the Roman Missal. By placing so much emphasis on text as the means to unify the liturgy and thus the Church, we may paradoxically lose sight of the more important features that unite us, and end by actually quenching the Spirit.

We began by considering what happened at Vatican II as a paradigm shift, one that gave us a new overall view which organizes the many different pieces of our experience of Church. There’s a danger that we may interpret facts according to the former paradigm that really can’t make sense of them.

I am concerned that what *Liturgiam authenticam* calls “the unitary expression” of the Roman Rite is actually a piece of the old paradigm. The very image used by Msgr. Harbert so warmly when he described the missionaries to the new world bringing bread, wine, chalice, paten, vestments, and the Roman Missal, to evangelize the new world, is no longer apt.
Msgr. Harbert quickly acknowledged that the era of missionary expansion into the “new world” is past, yet that is the image: the Missal, the one book, like the Bible, except that this one comes from Rome and unites us all as one Roman Catholic community.

What is not in the picture is that those who received the Word of Life through those very missions are now speaking it back to us, in new ways. And we are listeners, as well as the ones who announce the message. Not only is this happening in Asia and Africa and Oceania, we in the Americas are speaking it in unique ways.

What we have liturgically in the Roman Rite of the council’s reform is flexible enough to be the vessel of that life in a global church, in a post-colonial world.

It would be a sad denouement indeed if, fifty years after Vatican II, the Vatican II paradigm were compromised in favor of a sort of new fundamentalism, placing expectations upon texts that render them brittle. Yes, there will be diversity, if the Vatican II paradigm—our articulation of Roman Genius—is held and carried out. But there will be unity as well.
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