

the liturgy can draw them into the sacramental moment when, with the Church as a whole, they are offered an intimate relationship with Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and touched by the saving love of the Father. However indifferent they may seem, their presence at the liturgy can offer them an experience of belonging to the Church at prayer.

This is why it is important that the liturgy be allowed to speak powerfully of the mystery it contains. It is why hospitality and inclusion matter in our worship. It is why the liturgy can be a pivotal moment in evangelising and drawing people to conversion of heart. It can become the doorway to something deeper.

A second reflection arises when we realise that the Church which celebrates the liturgy is not just a particular worshipping community but the Church universal, the whole Body of Christ. Through its relationship with the bishop, the parish community represents the visible Church established throughout the world (SC 42). Our broad ecclesial unity is expressed in our common use of the same liturgical books, with the same cycle of readings and prayers, and shared patterns and symbols, many of them extending back to the early centuries of the Church.

This places each parish liturgy into a powerful context of communion and solidarity with believing communities in every part of the world. The wider unity of the Eucharist embraces impoverished and suffering communities everywhere. How can we celebrate the liturgy without being impelled towards action for justice and peace? The unity of the Church which the liturgy celebrates presumes the action of mission: a sending out to build the kingdom of God. The Church which breaks the Bread becomes the Body broken for the life of the world.

CONCLUSION

Since the Church at worship embraces the baptised not only of all places but of all times, our earthly liturgy is a participation in the eternal praise offered by all the choirs of heaven (SC 8). The sacred table of the Eucharist prefigures the heavenly banquet and allows us to live in expectation of God's glorious kingdom. At its deepest level, participation in the liturgy allows us to lead our lives in joy and hope, and sustains us in the midst of all our trials as we look to the time when there will be no more sorrow.

There is much still to be done in the ongoing work of liturgical renewal, but let us be glad for the grace that has come to us through the Council and for all those who contribute their time, energy and talent to ensuring a worthy celebration of the sacred liturgy.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. Now and for ever.



A SACRED ACTION SURPASSING ALL OTHERS

On the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary
of the Second Vatican Council's
Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
Sacrosanctum Concilium

Bishops Commission for Liturgy
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE
4 December 2013

INTRODUCTION

Zeal for the promotion and restoration of the liturgy is rightly held to be a sign of the providential dispositions of God in our time, a movement of the Holy Spirit in his Church (SC 43).

The reform of Catholic liturgy over the last fifty years continues to be a blessing from the Holy Spirit upon the Church in Australia. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy, we give thanks to God.

We give God thanks that the treasures of the Bible have been opened up more lavishly, providing people with a richer share in God's word (SC 51).

We give God thanks that the reform of both texts and rites have been drawn up to express more clearly the holy things they signify, offering the Church a liturgy marked by a noble simplicity (SC 21 and 34).

We give God thanks that we have been led to recognise that liturgical services are not private functions, but celebrations belonging to the Church which is the 'sacrament of unity', namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops (SC 26).

We give God thanks that, to promote active participation, people take part in the liturgy in their own language with acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons and hymns, as well as by actions, gestures, bearing and reverent silence (SC 30).

We give God thanks that, in Australia, so many people have given themselves zealously to the promotion of the liturgy: teaching and producing resources, preparing liturgy in parish communities, and helping to celebrate it well as priests, deacons and lay ministers of the word, holy communion, music and altar serving.

1. LITURGY AND GOD

The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and the fount from which all the Church's power flows (SC 10) because it makes God's work of our redemption a present reality (SC 2). The liturgy is not just human singing and praying; it is Christ the Priest offering himself on the altar of the Cross, Christ speaking when the Scriptures are read, Christ baptising in the water of the font (SC 7). The liturgy uses signs perceptible to the senses, but they signify human sanctification which is the work of God.

*In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a **sacred action surpassing all others** (SC 7).*

This is why we take such care in designing our church buildings and their decor, the sacred vessels and vestments we use in the liturgy, and it is why we devote such attention to the comportment of all who take part in the liturgy. For the liturgy is a sacred act to be approached with reverence, and the mystery of a transcendent God acting in our midst fills us with awe.

2. LITURGY AND THE CHURCH

'Who celebrates the liturgy?' asks the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The liturgy, it answers, is an 'action' of the whole Christ (*Christus totus*). It is the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates (CCC 1136 and 1140).

The Vatican Council made it clear that liturgical services belong to the Church; they involve the whole Body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it (SC 26). The Council stressed that this theological understanding extends to the manner of its celebration. Whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private (SC 27).

Liturgy as the communal prayer of the Church is the basis for the Council's desire that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the reform and promotion of the liturgy, this participation by all the people – at its heart, primarily spiritual – is central to what the Council taught. For it is the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit (SC 14).

When God gathers the Church for the liturgy, therefore, the people are present not as strangers or silent spectators but are joined to Christ in doing the liturgy, conscious of what they are doing and deeply involved (SC 48). This insight into the liturgy prompts two important reflections.

3. LITURGY AND THE WORLD

Liturgy is at the front line of the Church's mission of evangelisation. In Australia, many of those baptised as Catholics do not participate regularly in the Sunday Mass. However the liturgy offers unique moments for evangelisation. Very many of these people will have occasion to be present in the church at Christmas and Easter, for weddings and funerals.

This is not just an opportunity for them to hear the liturgical prayers offered and the Scriptures proclaimed and explained. It can be a profound involvement in the action of the Church and an exposure to the saving work of Christ. Since they are baptised,