A Day to Remember

It was a beautiful autumn day. The rain which had fallen continuously the day before and through the night gave way that morning to bright sunshine and warm temperatures. Surely an omen befitting so historic a day! It was October 11, 1962, the day Vatican II began.

At 9:00 that morning, almost 2500 Council Fathers from around the world made their way from the Apostolic Palace into the sunlit colonnade surrounding St. Peter's square. It was a grand procession. Imagine a flat-bottomed U. The procession began at the top of shorter right arm, turned right at the bottom, crossed into the square, and then turned right again on the longer left arm that led to the entrance to St. Peter's Basilica.

Four-by-four they processed, some clad in the red robes and white miters of Roman Catholic cardinals and bishops, others in the variegated robes and distinctive headdress of prelates of Eastern Christianity. It was thrilling and awesome to witness this solemn entrance procession of church leaders from around the Christian world. I was standing midway along the bottom of the U, amid the hundreds of thousands who thronged the square. It took an hour for the procession to pass by where I stood. I wondered how the prelates (including some who were quite elderly), swathed as they were in layers of garments and vestments, could bear the heat as they marched a proces-sional route that was over an eighth of a mile long.

As the procession made its way toward the Basilica, I wondered what thoughts, what sense of history, filled the minds of those who walked that path. They mounted steps flanked by heroic-sized statues of Sts. Peter and Paul, pillars of the early Church. The Basilica's façade above them was surmounted by statues of John the Baptist, Christ, and the Apostles—the precursor of Christ, Christ who founded the Church, and the college of apostles, the foundation on which it was built. Majestic doors welcomed them into the Basilica at the heart of the Catholic Church and its history, into the solemn ceremonies which would open the twenty-first ecumenical council.

Pope John XXIII, seated on the sedia gestoria (a portable throne), brought up the procession. His face was wreathed in a joyous smile as he blessed the cheering crowds. It was a shining moment for him, the realization of his dream for a Council that would energize the faith of the Church, invite Christians into closer relations, and open the Church to the world of today. It was a day to remember.

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A Path-Opening Debate

Two days later Vatican II began its working sessions. Despite some initial expectations that the Council's work could be completed within one year, that work would continue for four years. The Council met during the autumn of each of those years for a period of three months. I was a doctoral student in Rome during the first two periods, in 1962 and 1963. Providentially for my future work, the Council's agenda for those two years opened a new path for the teaching ministry for which I was preparing. More importantly, it also opened up an unexpected path for the Council itself. At the request of Pope John, the document on the liturgy had been moved to the head of the Council's agenda. It was the first document to be taken up for conciliar debate. Many of the Council Fathers saw it as the document most ready for debate; others saw it as a way to make an immediate impact on the Church at large and to establish firmly the pastoral character of the Council. The next item on the agenda was the document on the Church.

The debates on the liturgy document were the major agenda item during October and through much of November. There were vigorous exchanges over such things as liturgical dance, drums, and the vernacular. The more significant outcomes of the debates, however, were embedded in the first paragraphs of the document. These included the centrality of the Paschal Mystery in the liturgy, the baptismal insertion of the faithful into that mystery, and the fourfold expression of Christ's presence in the liturgy (in the assembly, the proclamation of the word, the person of the presider, and the eucharistic species). Also of great significance was the pastoral principle that full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful is the pastoral aim to be considered above all else. To enable that participation, there were pastoral decisions to simplify the rites, to allow some use of the vernacular, and to provide liturgical catechesis.

These debates and decisions were to have profound meaning for the remainder of the Council and for the life of the Church. In them the Council subtly envisions a new kind of ecclesiology. Liturgical celebrations in which the entire assembly, priest and people, celebrate the liturgy, along with Christ their Head, manifests the Church as the People of God. Liturgical celebration adapted to the language and arts of a people implies an ecclesiology of the local church with a measure of decentralization. It also signals that reform is to be an ongoing feature in the life of the Church. Those implications became apparent when, in late November of 1962, the Council turned its attention to the document on the Church.

During the months that followed the close of the 1962 session of the Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) underwent some final adjustments and refinements. These changes were approved in the next period in autumn of 1963, and a final vote was taken on November 22. The Constitution was formally promulgated at the closing general session of this period on December 4, 1963.

A Life-Shaping Event

What have these conciliar developments meant for me? How have they shaped my life and my ministry? The momentous events of the approval and promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy in 1963 coincided with my last days in Rome. I had completed my doctoral defense in late November and was about to return home to take up teaching in my province's theology seminary in January of 1964. To my great delight, I was able to buy a Latin copy of CSL in the last days before I left Rome. I read it avidly on the flight home, discovering for the first time the full details of the coming renewal of the liturgy. The adventure of celebrating the reformed liturgy and teaching others about the liturgical renewal still lay ahead as I boarded the plane.
I had already had a first taste of celebrating that reformed liturgy during the month of November, 1963. I was among twelve students at our university in Rome, one of many such places, chosen for an experimental celebration and assessment of the proposed rite of concelebration before it was finalized. The rite used was the familiar 1962 Latin Rite; the only difference was that we proclaimed some parts of the Eucharistic prayer in unison, much like the Mass celebrated at the rite of ordination. Analysis of the rite of concelebration was to become an area of research and publication for me later on.

The first changes in the Mass were the provisional introduction of English prayers, first some of the collects, and by 1967 the Eucharistic Prayers. I discovered two things during these years. One was my reaction to using English. I had celebrated Mass in Latin since ordination in 1960. Sixteen years of studying and using Latin in my seminary and doctoral studies had given me an ease and fluency in reading, writing, and speaking Latin. Even so, when celebrating Mass in Latin I could easily be distracted during the prayers of the liturgy. To my amazement, I discovered that those distractions vanished when I began to preside in English. Even intrusive coughing fits and babies crying in the assembly did not break my concentration. By contrast, as the full reform of the ritual actions and gestures was introduced in 1973, I experienced an unexpected bodily discomfort. Through seminary training and years of practice, my body had learned to perform these actions in the inward-looking, carefully detailed manner prescribed by the rubrics. When the new rubrics said simply, “the celebrant proclaims the prayer with arms extended,” how was this to be done when no other details were prescribed? It took hours of thoughtful practice to arrive at meaningful liturgical gestures that ultimately became embedded in muscle memory free of self-monitoring.

There were similar adjustments in teaching about the liturgical renewal. During January of 1964, when I began teaching, and in the years immediately after that, we did not yet have the advantage of knowing what exact shape the reformed liturgy would take. My seminary and doctoral studies had approached the sacraments in abstract, neo-Scholastic terms (primarily Aristotelian) with very little attention to the rites themselves. In light of the conciliar call for reform of the rites and the priority of active participation, that was clearly inadequate. It was only when the new shape of the rites began to emerge that teaching could become more performance-oriented. The first revised rites, those of infant baptism and marriage, were issued in English in 1969. The fully revised Eucharistic rite did not appear in English until 1973. Teaching before then had to be content with imparting information about the future pastoral directions proposed in the Constitution. After 1973, one could take full account of the ways in which the ritual signs and symbols signified the effects which the sacraments were to bring about, as CSL had taught. The celebration of the liturgy itself became “first theology.” In addition, the Constitution had directed that liturgy was thereafter to be ranked among the compulsory and major courses in the seminary curriculum. That meant that teaching liturgy would not just be one of several areas for which I would be responsible but the principal one.

In the early 1970s, I began to realize that the catechetical preparation called for by Vatican II and offered to people about the liturgical changes was often minimal and ineffective. (In my mother’s parish it had consisted of a short letter from the bishop asking people to accept and obey the pope’s decision to implement the new liturgy!) I began realize that liturgists had a pastoral responsibility for a fuller liturgical formation of the faithful, and so I began to offer workshops for liturgical ministers and parishioners. My goal was to help them understand not just the external changes but also the deeper spiritual meaning of the Vatican II liturgy. In the course of those sessions with ordinary worshippers, I discovered that just giving input was insufficient. I began to develop an approach which first elicited the people’s experience of the liturgy, helping them to name it and reflect on what that might mean for future practice and for life. Input from history and theology could be interspersed in the process. Providentially, I discovered the approach which Thomas Groome had developed for adult education and made it my own. This experience eventually led to my publication of a book on liturgical catechesis, which appeared in 1986, and to a
continuing interest in mystagogical reflection on the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. That interest has become a current writing project for me.

At that same time, I also began to reflect on the quality of the 1973 English prayers. There was much to commend in their more authentic English style, their accessibility, their pithy and concise manner of expression, their contemporary feel, and their freedom from the archaic devotional diction of the previous decades. I also became aware of their mixed quality, from poetic to banal, and their limited capacity to engender memorable phrases that resonated in the memory of people and engaged their religious imagination and faith. I began to explore other channels of communication in the liturgy—actions and objects, gestures and postures, times and seasons, liturgical space. A year of sabbatical study in the late 1970s spent exploring what social psychologists were saying about non-verbal communication confirmed my intuition that liturgy communicates largely through a broad range of channels, of which words may not always be the most effective. At that same time I found supportive colleagues in the North American Academy of Liturgy’s annual seminar, in which we explored what the various social sciences had to say about ritual. Drawing on those ritual studies has become for me a constant feature in teaching about the liturgy.

In the mid 1980s I was drawn back into the area of liturgical language when I was invited to join the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL). For the next fifteen years I served on ICEL’s Advisory Committee, chaired the Subcommittee on Translation and Revision of Texts, and was a member of the General Editorial Committee for the revision of the Sacramentary. There were some 2,500 texts to be translated from the Latin for that project. From the other translators and general editors I learned the nuances of shaping English prayer texts that were theologically accurate, faithful to the Latin original, and attentive to the needs of public proclamation for English-speaking people. The other two editors with whom I worked were both experts in the oral rhythms of English dating back to the Elizabethan period. Our goal was to shape texts that embodied the best of that tradition and to bring it into service of the public prayer of the Church. Our work on the Sacramentary was completed in 1998. It was set aside when Rome issued a new editio typica of the Roman Missal and changed the principles used to guide a new translation. Involvement in this aspect of the liturgical renewal also led to publications on liturgical language and contributions to two commentaries on the 2011 Roman Missal, which were published recently under the auspices of the Catholic Academy of Liturgy.

There is one final path which the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy opened up for me. As noted above, I had learned through my experience in adult education that the liturgy speaks to people not only through words but also through a wider array of non-verbal “languages.” Among these are the “languages” of liturgical arts and liturgical space. For several decades the meetings of Form/Reform, a conference on liturgical arts and places of worship, drew my avid participation, often as a presenter. Liturgical space in particular claimed my attention. It coincided happily with my early experience in working with my father and brothers during my high school and college years as our own construction firm, building houses and farm buildings in rural Nebraska. As the liturgical renewal continued to sink deep roots, it had become clear to me that the revised shape of the liturgy and its ministries needed a space specifically designed to support the reformed liturgical rites, a space designed to house the People of God at prayer. I have come to believe that places of worship are in fact a built theology of liturgy, a built ecclesiology. They are integral to liturgy as “first theology.” I welcomed the invitation extended to Catholic Theological Union by the Chicago Archdiocesan Office of Divine Worship in the mid 1980s to design a program to prepare people to serve as liturgical consultants for communities renovating or building places for worship. The Institute for Liturgical Consultants (ILC) welcomed its first participants in 1988 and continued to serve that need for almost twenty-five

1 These texts can be found online at https://wikispooks.com/wiki/Template:1998Sacramentary.
years, and I was delighted to serve as its director. Working with colleagues in Form/Reform and ILC led naturally to my involvement in a related area, the formation of the Association of Consultants for Liturgical Space (ACLS), a professional organization for those working to renovate and build places of worship.

Vatican II has truly been a life-shaping event for me. Little did I dream, standing in St. Peter’s square on that memorable day in October, 1963, that the Council then opening would shape my work in the field of liturgy in so many new and exciting ways. One of the gifts the Council has given me has been to find myself in a position to be a bridge between the pre-Vatican II liturgy and that of Vatican II. I live in hope that the amazing liturgical renewal set underway by the Council will continue to bring God’s People into an ever deeper and richer experience of what it means to offer God praise and petition in and through our one mediator, Jesus Christ, and in his name to speak his amen, God’s amen, to our world in its yearning for peace, justice, and liberating grace for all.