Upgrading the Postconciliar Renewal

In the history of the Church at worship, since apostolic times, there have been many “moments” of liturgical renewal and many elements that made up each particular renewal. In any given time, one or another element of Christian worship has been emphasized, but many people in the Church at that time may have been at other “moments,” focused on other elements. That is one reason why it’s always important to ask for the grace to see the big picture in our ongoing liturgical renewal.

The years since the Second Vatican Council have given us a variety of elements to focus on; many of these have been a particular focus at other times in our history, but all of them have come together in the past forty years to offer rich possibilities for renewal of our worship. Key elements of this postconciliar renewal include: richer access to the Scriptures, recovery of the key role of music in Catholic worship, the ability to pray liturgically in our own language, and especially the full, active, and conscious participation of the whole assembly in the act of worship.

There was a time, early in Church history, when there were five readings from Scripture at every Sunday Mass. Immediately before the Council, the people heard two readings plus short excerpts from psalms and other biblical passages. Now we have access to three readings on each Sunday and major feast plus a richer choice of psalmody and other texts—the most access to the Scriptures that the people could understand worship in their own language, and especially the full, active, and conscious participation of the whole assembly in the act of worship.

But the goal of this phase of Catholic liturgical renewal, begun in the nineteenth century, reaching a high point in the twentieth century, embraced by the whole Church at the Second Vatican Council, and continuing into the twenty-first century and beyond, was expressed most clearly in Sacrosanctum Concilium:

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit . . . (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 14).

In fact, that has been the goal of the development of Christian liturgy since the Church’s early days. So long as it remains our goal, the work of liturgical renewal remains on track.