

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, 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 Catholics have had since long before the European Reformation in the sixteenth century.

The focus on music in the liturgy, with Gregorian chant as the prime example of how music blends with texts in the rituals of the Latin (Roman) Church, is now more than a century old: It received its first papal impetus with Pope St. Pius X’s 1903 *motu proprio, Tra le sollecitudini*. Throughout the twentieth century, pastoral musicians and music educators taught chant, even as they also studied the traditions of hymnody and sung prayer in various popular cultures. All of this work—nearly a century’s worth—has come into play in the past forty years, and we are still working on the best ways to engage congregations in sung prayer, drawing on what the Second Vatican Council called the “treasure of sacred music” that is our heritage and equally on the work of composers to “cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasures” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 114, 121).

After the Council, for the first time since the liturgy was translated from Greek into Latin in North Africa, so that the people could understand worship in their own language, we are rejoicing in and struggling with appropriate ways to express the prayer of the Latin Church in

contemporary language. (Latin remained the language of worship in the middle ages, but it had become the language of scholars; after about the sixth or seventh century most ordinary people no longer spoke a language that would be recognized as Latin.) The revised English translation of the *Roman Missal*, third edition, to be fully implemented in Advent 2011, is an example of that continuing struggle. Its language differs markedly, in some places, from the liturgical English that has been familiar for forty years; it marks a new stage in our search for an appropriate way to pray in our own language. The new translation is closer to the Latin and echoes the roots of our Latin texts that were developed at a time of profound biblical scholarship, sometimes great Latin poetry, and a form of address to God drawn from royal court etiquette. Consider the new text as the *Roman Missal* 3.0, an upgrade from the version 2.0 that we’ve been using. Will it be the final form that our vernacular worship will take in English? Probably not; liturgy evolves and calls us to continuing renewal. Will it aid our prayer in the twenty-first century? Certainly, for it will bring us closer to our biblical roots, to the heritage in which we pray, and to the way Catholics using other languages are shaping their prayer. Will it contain glitches that need to be worked out? Certainly; all upgrades do.

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.