

The Gift of the Liturgical Reform

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Fifty years ago this Advent, on November 30, 1969, the reform of the Eucharistic liturgy called for by Vatican Council II and promulgated by Pope Paul VI went into effect, and Catholics around the world celebrated Mass for the first time in a form very different from what they had known.

Much has happened since then. The decades of ecclesial tumult and chaos following Vatican Council II were followed by a period of relative stabilization during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, then by a return of confusion and polarization during the present pontificate. Meanwhile, the western world has witnessed a precipitous decline in practice of the faith, even as the Church grows rapidly in Africa and other parts of the developing world.

Western culture, having banished God to the margins, has become a culture increasingly marked by an absence of the sacred — a culture of superficiality, of banality, of perpetual noise and stimulation, of relentless focus on the body and material things. It is a disenchanted world that has left many people, especially the young, with an intense longing for [beauty](#) and transcendence. The absence of the sacred has crept into Church as well. Many Catholics have been distressed by the experience of liturgical abuses and irreverent, bland liturgies where few people — or even the celebrant — seemed aware of the sacred mystery in which they were participating. Last summer's Pew [survey](#), showing that less than two-thirds of Catholics who attend Mass weekly believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, is one more sobering [sign](#) of a crisis in the faith.

One way the thirst for the sacred is being expressed is in a groundswell of enthusiasm for the Extraordinary Form of the Mass (also called the Tridentine Mass, or the Mass celebrated in accordance with the 1962 Missal of St. John XXIII), the liturgy as it existed prior to the reforms of Vatican II. Those who are drawn to the Extraordinary Form speak of its beauty, its aura of mystery, and its connection to centuries of tradition.

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In some quarters, the extolling of the older usage is unfortunately accompanied by a denigration of the reformed liturgy and even a vilification of Vatican II itself. Now that a half-century has passed, the time is ripe for a calm, charitable, and theologically substantive discussion about the liturgical reforms.

It has become common to blame today's lack of Eucharistic faith and fervor on the revised rite. Critics rightly point to certain weaknesses such as collects that are less expressive of God's majesty, and the omission of important biblical texts from the lectionary. Another unfortunate change is the elimination of the Octave of Pentecost, giving the impression of downgrading the great solemnity that culminates the Easter season. The primary problem, however, is not the reformed rite itself but its flawed implementation, due to poor — and, in some cases, catastrophically defective — theological and spiritual preparation among clergy and laity alike. Too often, the liturgical changes were accompanied by a downplaying of the notion of sacredness. A casual attitude toward the liturgy was fostered, and beautiful churches were “wreckovated.” Lukewarm liturgy has, tragically, obscured the authentic renewal called for by the Council itself.

The Council's mandate for liturgical reform sprang from a great renewal in biblical, patristic, and liturgical theology that took place in the early twentieth century. The goal was *ressourcement*: to revitalize the life of the Church by drinking deeply from the wells of Scripture and Tradition, which would in turn better enable the Church to proclaim the Gospel anew to the modern world. As Pope John Paul II and other participants attested, the Council was an experience of a “new Pentecost” in which the breath of the Holy Spirit blew through the Church, leading her to rediscover the treasures of her ancient heritage.

The revised liturgy is the fruit of that renewal. It is in some respects closer to the liturgy as celebrated in the first millennium than is the Tridentine Mass. It is the Ordinary Form of the Mass in the Latin Rite given to the faithful by the Church, the form in which more than 95 percent of Roman Catholics celebrate Mass today. A greater appreciation for what the Council did, and why, can help Catholics deepen their love for the gift of the Mass and, in the words of John Paul II, “rekindle Eucharistic amazement.”

A Rich Banquet of the Word

One of the most important changes mandated by Vatican II was the biblical enrichment of the Mass. Over the centuries the readings had become biblically impoverished. Prior to Vatican II, there were only two readings for each Sunday; most weekday Masses simply repeated the Sunday readings or used those of feasts, rituals, or votive Masses. On saints' days, the same readings were used again and again, for instance, the parable of the ten virgins on feasts of virgins. There was no continuous reading of a biblical book from day to day or week to week. In all, only 16% of the New Testament appeared in the Mass, and *a mere 1% of the Old Testament*.⁵ The virtual absence of the Hebrew Scriptures easily lends itself to a view of Jesus and the Church detached from their Jewish roots. And the fact that all the readings are disconnected excerpts, jumping from passage to passage seemingly at random, makes it more difficult for people to grasp the overarching unity of God's plan.

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The reformed liturgy, in contrast, provides the faithful with a rich banquet of the Word. The new three-year cycle for the Sunday lectionary and two-year cycle for the daily lectionary allow for a much broader selection of biblical passages. The faithful who attend daily Mass now hear 72% of the New Testament and 14% of the Old Testament, and even Sunday Mass alone offers more than three times as much Scripture as in the older missal (41% of the New Testament, 4% of the Old). Each Sunday Gospel is paired with a related Old Testament passage, which helps instill in the hearers the ancient understanding of the spiritual sense — the magnificent way all God’s words and deeds in the old covenant prefigure, prophesy, and prepare for the fullness of his plan in Christ.

Why is it crucial that the liturgy provide abundant fare from God’s word? As the Fathers of Vatican II recognized, God always reveals himself by means of both deeds and words, which have an inner unity: “the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.”⁶ So the celebration of a sacrament is always to be preceded by the proclamation of the word, precisely so that the people can fully appropriate all that is given in the sacrament. This is preeminently true of the Eucharistic liturgy. “For this reason, the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body” (CCC 103). In the liturgy of the word Jesus is proclaimed; in the liturgy of the Eucharist we enter into intimate communion with the Jesus we have come to know through his word.⁷ This is why the liturgy is not just one place to hear Scripture, it is the *native home* of Scripture — the setting where God’s word is proclaimed in its fullest power.

The pattern of a liturgy of the word to which the people respond in faith, followed by a liturgy of sacrifice and banquet, goes back to the beginning of salvation history. It is the basic pattern of Israel’s covenant ritual at Mount Sinai (Ex 24) and of the great renewal of the covenant under King Josiah (2 Kgs 23). It appears most clearly after Jesus’s resurrection, in his encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus: he revealed himself to them first by breaking open the Scriptures, and then in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:13–32). The pattern continued in the early life of the Church (see Acts 20:7–11).

Another, closely related reform of Vatican II was the reinstatement of the homily as an integral part of the Mass — one so essential that on Sundays it “should not be omitted except for a serious reason.”⁸ The homily is indispensable for opening up the Word so that people receive it in all its power to convict, console, instruct, and counsel, as when Peter preached at Pentecost and “they were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). It is also essential for showing how all Scripture speaks of Christ, as Philip did for the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading from the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:30–36). The Book of Nehemiah records that when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, they were renewed in their identity as God’s people precisely by the liturgical proclamation *and explanation* of God’s word: the Levites “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. . . . And all the people went their way . . . to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (Neh 8:7–8, 12).

We honor God's word by believing it and obeying it, and in order to do that understanding is necessary. The seed sown on good soil, Jesus taught, is "he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit" (Mt 13:23).

The Language of the People

For similar reasons, Vatican II called for greater use of the vernacular in the Mass.⁹ The fact that this practice was quickly adopted by bishops' conferences around the world, with approval from Rome, is not a sign of infidelity to tradition but rather of an instinct of faith. In Christ, God has become one of us and made himself utterly accessible. He speaks to us in human words that we can understand, and we can in turn worship and pray to him in our own language. "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Rom 10:8). Nothing can take the place of a person's mother tongue in enabling him or her to pray to God intimately, from the heart. That is why in the earliest days of the Church the liturgy was translated from the Apostles' native Aramaic into Greek, then later into Latin, Coptic, Gothic, Slavonic, and other languages that were in use at the time.

A liturgy that is entirely in Latin inevitably distances all but a small percentage of congregants from the liturgical prayers and action. It is true that Latin has a uniquely venerable place in the Roman Rite; those who love the Latin Mass should have the opportunity to attend it, and all Catholics should be taught the common responses in Latin. But if the entire Mass were available solely in Latin, only a tiny percentage of Catholics would ever have enough proficiency to understand the prayers and readings well. The problem is serious enough for speakers of European languages like English that have some Latin roots; it is vastly increased for those whose native languages have no relationship to Latin at all. It is not unintelligibility that enhances our sense of the divine mystery; rather, it is our understanding that reveals God's gift as a mystery beyond understanding. To attend a joyful, reverent liturgy in Ibo, or Vietnamese, or Hungarian, or Arabic is to have a whole new appreciation for the Church universal — all those "ransomed for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

Banquet and Sacrifice

One of the common complaints regarding the liturgical reform has been that it de-emphasized the notion of sacrifice. After Vatican II there were heated debates as to whether the liturgy is primarily a sacrifice or primarily a meal. But these debates revolved around a false dichotomy. To the ancient Israelites (and every culture surrounding them), the very question would be absurd. A sacred banquet always entailed first sacrificing to God the animal to be eaten. Likewise, the culmination of a sacrifice was often a sacred banquet in which the flesh of the sacrificed animal would be consumed. This was preeminently true of the high point of Israel's sacrificial system, the Passover, in which an unblemished lamb was sacrificed and eaten — the very rite that Jesus transformed into the new covenant Passover (Mk 14:16–25). Thus the Eucharistic liturgy is inseparably *both* the Lord's Supper *and* the sacrifice of his body and blood (see CCC 1328–32).

The revisions to the liturgy helped restore this twofold meaning. Some references to sacrifice were removed — especially during the Offertory, where they had led to some confusion and the erroneous view that the Mass is two consecutive sacrifices, one of the Church and one of Christ — but others remain or were added.

For instance, the people's response immediately before the Eucharistic Prayer is "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands." At the same time, there are clearer references to the Mass as a sacred banquet — indeed, the joyous messianic wedding banquet foretold in Scripture, where sinners are reconciled to God. "Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb," the celebrant proclaims in the Communion Rite.

Of equal significance is the restored permission to distribute Communion under both kinds. Of course it is true that Christ is present in both forms: whether I eat the host or drink from the cup, I receive the whole Jesus — body, blood, soul, and divinity. Distributing Communion under the species of bread alone is sometimes necessary for unavoidable pastoral reasons. But as a general restriction it loses sight of the sign value of the sacraments. A sacrament is an efficacious *sign* that is perceptible to the senses. God has given us sacramental signs because we are bodily persons, for whom a full human experience involves the senses and emotions as well as the mind. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* notes this fact when it states that Communion under both kinds is a "clearer form of the sacramental sign," in which "the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom."

The sign of bread, the most basic kind of sustenance, signifies that Jesus is our spiritual food, our "super-essential food" without which we have no life within us (CCC 2837). Wine, on the other hand, conveys abundance, joy, festivity, and celebration; no host at a wedding serves the guests with bread only. The sign of wine more clearly points to Jesus as the messianic Bridegroom who lavishes on us the wine of divine life, the "sober intoxication" of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, drinking from a shared cup is a vivid symbol of fellowship with one another (see Lk 22:17). We who share in the chalice of Christ's blood become "blood relations," so to speak: brothers and sisters in the new covenant family of God. We drink of that very blood that flowed from Christ's side on the Cross as the all-sufficient atonement for sins and gift of divine life.

One Loaf, One Body

The Tridentine Mass strongly emphasizes the vertical dimension of the liturgy — our communion with the all-holy, transcendent God. That dimension is paramount. But the reformed liturgy highlights that which is equally necessary but had been neglected: the horizontal dimension of *our communion with one another in Christ*. St. Paul reveals the deep link between the Eucharist and the Church, referring to both as the body of Christ: "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16–17). To say the Church is the body of Christ because the Eucharist is the body of Christ is not a picturesque metaphor; it is an existential reality that is meant to be lived and experienced. The Eucharist makes the Church.

As St. John Chrysostom explains, What is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ — not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made of up many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ.

St. Augustine, similarly, exhorts his congregants to approach Holy Communion with a deep awareness of their communion with one another in Christ: “The Body of Christ,” you are told, and you answer “Amen.” Be members then of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. . . . Consider that the bread is not made of one grain alone, but of many. . . . Be then what you see, and receive what you are! Now for the Chalice, my brethren, remember how wine is made. Many grapes hang on the bunch, but the liquid which runs out of them mingles together in unity. So has the Lord willed that we should belong to him and he has consecrated on his altar the mystery of our peace and our unity.

When we approach the altar to receive the body of Christ, we are giving our solemn “Amen” not only to Christ the Head, but also to all the members of his body. To receive Communion while holding a grudge against another person, or judging others, or fueling division, or even while being simply indifferent to the needs of those around one, is therefore a very real form of sacrilege. “Whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20). Love means more than simply that I bear no ill will toward the people in the pews around me; it means I share some responsibility for their well-being and their holiness. I am my brother’s keeper. To treat the Mass as if it were a purely private affair between God and me would be antithetical to its very meaning. This does not, of course, mean we are obliged to form relationships with every single one of our fellow parishioners. But it does mean that the Eucharist is the high point of what is meant to be a community life of mutual love and care animated by the Holy Spirit, concretely expressed in acts of service toward one another, in which our “hearts are being knit together in love” (Col 2:2).

The revised Order of Mass restores this dimension by reinstating the ancient Christian practice of the sign of peace, in accord with the exhortations of St. Paul and St. Peter: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”¹⁵ The rite of peace is placed immediately before Communion precisely so we can grasp the connection between communion with Christ and communion with the members of his body. The actual form of the sign of peace (a handshake, a kiss, a bow) may vary in accord with customs and culture, but its purpose is unchanging. It is a symbolic reminder to examine our hearts before we receive Christ himself, to ensure that there is no buried resentment, no one excluded from our love. Or if there is, as Jesus taught, “leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:24).

A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

Another essential truth brought to light by Vatican II is that the liturgy is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The very word Eucharist (*eucharistia* in Greek, *todah* in Hebrew) means “thanksgiving.” In ancient Israel, one of the most important kinds of sacrifice was the *todah*, the thanksgiving sacrifice.¹⁶ It would be offered by someone who had been in mortal danger or had suffered some other terrible trial, whom God had delivered. The rescued person would show his gratitude to God by sacrificing a lamb in the temple and then eating the lamb, along with bread and wine, in a celebratory banquet with his family and friends, accompanied by prayers and songs of thanksgiving. The prophet Jonah, for example, vowed to offer a *todah* if he were delivered from the belly of the whale (Jo 2:3–10). King David offered a *todah* after being rescued from his enemies and bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chr 16). The ancient rabbis gave a striking prophecy about the *todah*: “In the coming age, all sacrifices will cease except the *todah* sacrifice. This will never cease in all eternity.”

Israel's greatest annual feast, the Passover, is its national *todah*: a celebration and memorial of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, in which they sacrificed a lamb and consumed it in a banquet with wine and unleavened bread, accompanied by hymns of praise. It is *this* feast that Jesus celebrated on the night before he died, and transformed into the everlasting *todah* — the memorial and celebration of his passion and resurrection, the new exodus through which God has delivered his people from sin, Satan and, death. In his sacrifice, Jesus replaces human sin with its opposite: he gives God the perfect praise that human beings had failed to offer. His sacrifice is thus inseparably both thanksgiving and atonement for sin.¹⁸

From the beginning, the early Christians called the Lord's Supper the Eucharist (*todah*) because in its very essence it is an act of overflowing gratitude to God for his saving deeds in Christ. Praise and thanksgiving therefore have an indispensable place in the liturgy. Because we are corporeal beings, we praise God not just interiorly but with acclamations, antiphons, hymns, and songs as well as bodily gestures.¹⁹ Scripture constantly exhorts us to give praise to God aloud: "Shout to God with loud songs of joy! . . . Sing praises to our King, sing praises!" (Ps 47:1, 6). "Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings!" (Is 40:9). Indeed, such verbal praise not only accompanies a sacrifice, it *is* a sacrifice: "The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me" (Ps 50:23).

Over the centuries, the responses at Mass had been gradually taken over by the servers and the choir; the verbal participation of the congregation was reduced to a minimum. Vatican II recognized the need to restore the participation of the people both in spoken responses and in congregational singing, while also preserving periods of reverent silence. Of course, there is a place for a relatively brief Mass without music — for instance, a weekday Mass that busy working people can attend. But at the Sunday liturgy, the center and high point of the life of the local church, the whole community ought to be joining with one voice in sung acclamations and hymns that lift their hearts and minds in joyful thanksgiving to God. As St. Augustine is reputed to have said, "He who sings prays twice." In a real though invisible way, we who celebrate the liturgy enter into the heavenly worship of the angels and saints that goes on eternally before God's throne.

Facing the People

One of the changes in the Mass most discussed today is that of the direction in which the celebrant prays: should it be toward the east (*ad orientem*) or facing the people (*versus populum*)? This question was not addressed by Vatican II but was one of the changes that was permitted after the Council and quickly became almost universal. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* states that Mass facing the people "is desirable wherever possible," although *ad orientem* is practiced today by some priests in the Ordinary Form as well as the Extraordinary Form.

From ancient times, Christian prayer facing the east has been a way of expressing faith in Jesus our coming King, whose return in glory will be "as lightning comes from the east" (Mt 24:27). The liturgy is indeed filled with anticipation of his glorious coming, which we await with joyful expectancy: "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again." Although in the earliest liturgies the celebrant faced the congregation, within a few centuries the practice changed so that, during the prayers, both the celebrant and congregation faced east, which meant the celebrant had his back to the people.²² The Church recognizes both ways as legitimate. But there are good theological as well as pastoral reasons to consider *versum populum* as better corresponding to the symbolic structure of the liturgy.

Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, which, as noted above, was a Passover meal, a *todah* sacrifice that Jesus transformed into the memorial and celebration of his once-for-all sacrifice on the Cross. A supper is by its very nature a profoundly interpersonal event, in which the participants enjoy one another's company and conversation while sharing food and drink. In the Old Testament, a covenant would typically be sealed through a shared meal, in which the parties forged a bond of kinship by sitting at table together. Throughout his public ministry Jesus shared many a meal with both righteous people and sinners, all a sign and foretaste of the glorious messianic banquet that will be celebrated in heaven.²³

This interpersonal nature of the covenant is essential to the liturgy. At the heart of the liturgy of the Eucharist is the Eucharistic prayer, the whole of which is addressed to God the Father. But at the heart of the Eucharistic prayer are the words of institution, which are a quotation of Jesus's words at the Last Supper addressed to *us*, his people: "Take this, all of you, and eat of it . . ." In this most sacred part of the Mass, the priest most fully carries out his task of acting *in persona Christi*: he is the visible sign of Christ the divine Bridegroom, who gives himself entirely and without reserve to the Church his bride. A bridegroom faces his bride.

Jesus instituted the Eucharist, moreover, as the making-present of the event that stands at the center of human history: the act of love in which he died for us on the Cross. Again, on the Cross, the Lord was *facing* his disciples — at least those few (Mary, John the beloved disciple, and the women disciples) who remained faithful to him in his hour of trial. He was also facing sinners, including his tormentors and all those who did not recognize the divine gift. In facing us as he offers himself to the Father, he brings us into the mystery of Trinitarian communion, the eternal exchange of love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is so movingly depicted in Rublëv's famous icon of the Holy Trinity.

The celebrant's facing away from the people at the heart of the liturgy makes this deep underlying symbolism less evident. A leader at the front of a group of people all facing the same way evokes the idea of a procession, or perhaps a military captain at the head of a march into battle. While these are valid images of Christ and the Church, they are not what most aptly brings to light the deepest meaning of the Mass.

The Eucharist is simultaneously God's total gift of himself to us in Christ, and Christ's total gift of himself to the Father in which all the members of his body participate. But it is God's gift that is prior. Throughout salvation history, every offering of human beings to God is in response to the good gifts God has first given to us. God's grace always precedes and enables our response. This is preeminently true of Christ's saving passion, which is made present at every Mass. While celebrating *ad orientem* accents our self-offering to God in union with Christ, celebrating *versum populum* accents the more foundational reality of God's gift of himself to us in Christ.

The pastoral effect of *ad orientem* is also not insignificant. The effect, even if unintended, is to distance the people from the central liturgical action. They cannot see the elements on the altar. The fulcrum of the Mass, the consecration, is invisible (and often inaudible) to the congregation, thereby losing much of its value as a sacramental *sign*. For many people, this inevitably contributes to the sense of being bystanders rather than active participants in the liturgy.

The *versus populum* position is sometimes inaccurately described as facing “away from God.” Of course, this is not the case: God is everywhere, and to face any direction in prayer is to face him — all the more so when one is facing the body and blood of Christ, as both priest and congregation do when the Eucharist is on the altar between them. It is worth noting that Jesus at prayer “looked *up* to heaven” (Mk 6:41). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that since many churches today are no longer built facing the east, celebration of Mass *ad orientem* is often not literally toward the east.

Critics also object that *versus populum* leads to a “priest as performer” mentality, in which the priest’s personality intrudes, as he feels responsible for making things as lively and interesting as possible. Unfortunately such misguided, self-promoting attitudes were common in the decades after Vatican II. But they are much less frequent today. The new rite does in fact demand more of the priest: he has to celebrate in such a way that he focuses the whole attention of the congregation not on himself but on God the Father and on the awesome mystery that is taking place in their midst. Even more, he has to let his whole life be shaped by the Eucharist — to be “a mystagogue who leads us through the witness of his own faith into the heart of the mystery.”

Reverence and Intimacy

The Eucharistic liturgy, when celebrated well, teaches us reverence, the right human response in the presence of the all-holy God. “Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). “Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord” (Zech 2:13). The older form of the rite, however, fosters a notion of *reverence* that seems to equate it with *remoteness*. In the Old Testament, there was a validity to this equation. All of Israel’s priestly rites were designed to instill a sense of God’s holiness, which means that he is utterly set apart from everything earthly. Part of the role of the Levitical priests was to strictly guard access to God’s presence, since it was not safe for fallen, sinful human beings to draw near to the holy God.²⁵ The Holy of Holies, God’s dwelling place in the inner room of the sanctuary, was surrounded by zones of restricted access: the Levites served in the courtyard, but only the priests could enter the sanctuary itself, and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and even he only once a year.

But this biblical background helps us grasp all the more clearly the radical transformation accomplished by Christ, our great high priest (Heb 4:14). At his baptism the heavens were torn open, and at his death the veil of the temple — symbol of closed-off access to God — was torn in two from top to bottom (Mk 1:10; 15:38). Christ’s role is in this respect precisely the opposite of the Levitical priests: he *opens access* to the Father. But he does this without compromising God’s holiness. His priesthood is exercised not by separating sinners from God, but by separating sinners from sin. So all those redeemed by him, in amazing contrast to the people of the Old Covenant, are invited to *draw near* and *enter* God’s holy presence, as the New Testament constantly exhorts. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb 4:16). “Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh . . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.”²⁶ Now even the lowliest believer has a privilege infinitely greater than that of the high priest of Israel: he or she can freely enter the sanctuary, the presence of the living God — and not only one day a year, but always. The whole life of a Christian is now qualified to be a priestly life, in which all our actions and sufferings can be offered as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1), caught up into the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ made present on the altar.

Various practices that developed over the centuries had, in a sincere but mistaken piety, fostered a return to the Old Testament idea that reverence is a matter of distance from God. The altar rail, like the ancient temple veil, cautioned lay people not to dare come too near. The tabernacle, placed behind the altar, could no longer be approached for intimate prayer with the Eucharistic Jesus. Communicants were not allowed to touch the host. Mass was celebrated in a language most people no longer understood, disengaging them to some degree from the liturgical action. The Eucharistic Prayer, moreover, was spoken inaudibly. It was no wonder that the custom arose of people doing other things during the liturgy that had no connection with it, such as praying the rosary or going to confession. The impression given was that the liturgy was a sacred drama carried out between God and the priest, which lay people could only observe from a distance.

A common criticism of the revised Mass is that it lacks the sense of mystery and transcendence of the Tridentine Mass. But that impression derives not from the rite itself but from a superficial idea of mystery and from the irreverent, bland, and blasé ways the liturgy has too often been celebrated. The answer lies not in distancing people from the mystery but rather in drawing them more deeply into it. The challenge the Church faces now is to foster authentic reverence without remoteness. When people have a lively awareness of what they are entering into — Christ the risen Lord becoming present to us in his eternal self-offering to the Father for our salvation, transforming us into himself by the Holy Spirit as he feeds us with his own body and blood — they show deep reverence. True reverence is where people put off their worldly, complacent attitudes and make pleasing God the primary aim of their life.

Bodily gestures, such as dressing up for Mass and genuflecting before the tabernacle, play an important role in fostering an attitude of reverence. At the same time, we need to guard against the perennial temptation to make external gestures a substitute for the true reverence of heart that God desires. Both the prophets and Jesus himself vehemently warned against an empty formalism, a perfunctory religiosity that did not spring from an obedient heart. “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men” (Is 29:13). Jesus warns, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Mt 23:23–24). Holiness is found neither in legalism nor in laxity, but in the inner conformity to Christ that only the Holy Spirit can work in us.

Full Participation of the Laity

The principal goal of Vatican II in revising the liturgy was to promote the “full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful” — a goal mentioned in the Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy no fewer than fifteen times. The Council Fathers recognized that changes over the centuries, including the disappearance of the offertory procession and the relegation of all acclamations to the servers and choir, had gradually diminished the conscious communal participation of the laity. A purely passive, interior role for the people is contrary to the very nature of the Eucharist as a divine-human interaction, the memorial and renewal of the new covenant between God and his people in Christ.

A passive role for the laity in the liturgy in turn fosters a passive notion of their role in the Church. It often goes hand-in-hand with a tendency toward clericalism, noticeable even in the usage prior to Vatican II by which “the Church” became virtually synonymous with “the hierarchy.” Lay people formed in this mentality tended to regard priests and religious as the “professionals” who carried out all the important activities of the Church, and the laity as a kind of second class. The renewal of the liturgy thus coincides with another immensely important goal of Vatican II: to reawaken the lay faithful to their call to holiness and their role as active participants in the mission of the Church. Their unique privilege is to bring Christ into the secular sphere, to transform the culture and all its institution and practices in light of the Gospel.

One of ways the revised Order of Mass expresses the participation of the laity is by restoring the offertory procession, a custom that goes back at least to the second century.²⁹ Lay people bring forward to the altar bread and wine, which are gifts of God’s creation as well as the result of complex human activity; they thus represent all that is good in human civilization and culture. It is these humble gifts, symbolizing the very best that we fallen human beings can offer, that are not destroyed or replaced but transformed by the Holy Spirit into Jesus himself, the bread of life and the cup of our salvation. With them, we symbolically bring our whole selves to be laid on the altar and transformed by God. God takes all that we give him, in our poverty and weakness — like five loaves and two fish — and turns it into the one perfect, divine sacrifice that fulfills all others.

One of the most important parts of the Mass is the “epiclesis,” the prayer imploring God to send the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (CCC 1105). The new Eucharistic Prayers composed after Vatican II express the epiclesis more clearly. Moreover, it is not only the bread and wine that the Holy Spirit consecrates. The Eucharistic Prayers also include the “epiclesis of communion,” the prayer calling on the Holy Spirit to come also *upon the people*, so that by receiving Christ’s body and blood we too are transformed into him (CCC 1109). This prayer is present in the most ancient liturgies, including the second-century prayer of St. Hippolytus (the basis of Eucharistic Prayer II) and the fourth-century Liturgy of St. Basil, still celebrated in the Eastern Churches today. It reveals the fact that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we become what we eat: we become Christ’s very flesh, his presence to one and other and to the world.

The epiclesis of communion also helps us see the deep link between the Eucharist and evangelization. At first glance, evangelization doesn’t seem to have much to do with the Eucharist. They involve opposite ends of the process of Christian initiation, the beginning and the end. Understood rightly, however, the Eucharist is the source and summit of evangelization.

On the one hand, the Eucharist is the source that leads to evangelism, because our desire and ability to bring Christ into the world springs from his total self-gift, made present anew in Eucharist. The Mass makes us missionary disciples. When Jesus says, “Do this in memory of me,” he means not only the liturgy, but our whole life! Through the liturgy we become Christ; then we can say to others, in effect, “Take, this is my body — my time, my gifts, my love and attention, my life.” Life becomes an extension of the liturgy, as we are sent into the peripheries of the world to love as Jesus loves. All our prayer and work becomes a share in Christ’s mission. We become the salt, light, and leaven in the world, the fragrance of Christ to those around us.

On the other hand, evangelism leads *to* the Eucharist because the ultimate goal of proclaiming the gospel to a person is to bring them into the fullness of communion with Jesus and the whole Church, so they too can be made ready for the eternal banquet in the Kingdom.

Scripture exhorts the people of God, “Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb 12:28). Many Catholics, including Pope Benedict XVI, have spoken of the need for a “reform of the reform” of the liturgy. The reform that is most needed is a profound conversion of the hearts of the faithful through a deeper understanding and more intense spiritual participation in the liturgy. The revisions to the Mass following Vatican II have more fully brought to light the treasures of the Eucharistic mystery in all its dimensions, but, sadly, many Catholics have yet to experience those depths. From the gift of the reformed liturgy flows a task: to form God’s people in a full understanding of the Mass and to celebrate it with the fervor, love, and reverence it deserves.