

What is the Liturgy's Connection with Tradition?

Unlike our modern practice of individual confession and absolution, the early Church practiced what has been called “canonical penance.” For serious sins—murder, apostasy, or adultery—penitents confessed their sins privately and were then enrolled by their bishop in the public “order of penitents.” Those in the order performed satisfaction for their sins during their enrollment (which could last a number of years) and were dismissed prior to the eucharistic liturgy of the Mass. When satisfaction had been made, penitents were reconciled usually on Holy Thursday.

Although the Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of many early and traditional practices, the practice of “canonical penance” was not one of them. So why did it choose to restore some things and not others?

When the Council Fathers called for the restoration of the liturgy, they first explained how the liturgical tradition relates to the conditions in which the Church finds herself today. The most fundamental principle guiding this restoration is that the liturgy “is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change” (n. 21). Of these changeable elements in the tradition, the *Constitution* continues, they “not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it” (*ibid.*). While some elements in the rite of the Mass have become duplicated or added and should be discarded, other elements have been changed or confused and ought to be restored “to the vigor which they had in the days of the holy Fathers” (n. 50).

But although some of these changeable parts of the liturgy ought to be changed “in order that the Christian people may more certainly derive an abundance of graces from the sacred liturgy (n. 21),” the changes are not to “come out of nowhere” (Pope Paul VI, *Missale Romanum*). Rather—and this is a point the *Constitution* makes again and again—whatever new forms result, they “should in some way grow organically from forms already existing” (*CSL*, n. 23).

Some of liturgical practices found in the tradition and restored by the Council are concelebration (n. 57), the catechumenate for adults, now the RCIA (n. 64), praying the Liturgy of the Hours at the proper hour of the day (n. 84), and the singing of certain hymns (n. 93). Many other items, rather than being restored, were to be maintained, since they are a part of the long-standing liturgical tradition, such as the use of the Latin language (n. 101), Gregorian Chant (n. 116), the use of the pipe organ (n. 120), and the Church's treasury of sacred art (n. 123).

Other liturgical practices—such as canonical penance—had not been considered “useful or necessary” to the Council (n. 50), and hence not restored. This in itself illustrates an important point when considering history and the liturgy. Just because some practice has occurred at some point in the Church's tradition does not mean that it is useful or permissible today. Again, while some practices are unchangeable, either originating with Christ himself or found in the constant and unbroken tradition of the Church, others are changeable and fitting for particular circumstances in the Church's history. For this reason, all restorations are to be carried out under the authority of the Church, i.e., the Apostolic See and the bishops. Apart from these, “no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority” (n. 22).

In short, whatever form the restoration of the liturgy was to take, it was, and is, carried out with a view to “the needs of our own times” (n. 1) and “the light of sound tradition” (n. 4). And to understand the Mass it is likewise necessary to understand not only our own day but the liturgical tradition out of which our celebrations are formed.

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