



What is the Sacred Liturgy?

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), when the word liturgy sprang into more common usage, its definition (from the Greek *leitourgia*) – the work of the people or work on behalf of the people – soon resulted in an emphasis solely on the first, rather than the more important second understanding. Some explain this as a consequence of the Council’s call for “full, active and conscious participation” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 2, 14) in the worship of the Church as the “right and duty” of the Christian people, particularly as individuals and the entire assembly gradually assumed a more active role in liturgical celebrations. It is true that, immediately after the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, the tendency was to focus on the assembly’s role in the celebration of the Liturgy while failing to recognize the more important “work of God” being accomplished in the assembly’s midst. While a better balance in understanding both aspects of the Liturgy now exists, an even greater grasp of what the Church believes and teaches about the Sacred Liturgy will bring forth much fruit for the life of the Church.

Source and Summit

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us that “in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions,” (SC, 11) in short, we must be

prepared. If we are prepared, we will realize that the Sacred Liturgy is the Church’s official public and communal worship. But it is more than that. As we prepare, we must realize that the Eucharistic Feast is “the font from which all her power flows” (SC, 10) and simultaneously, it is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” (SC, 10). As our *source and summit*, Sacred Liturgy moves the faithful to be “one in holiness” (SC, 10). Imagine that: prepare, celebrate, and be joined with one another in holiness. What a gift!

As the Church’s principal act of worship, the Liturgy also includes the celebration of the six additional sacraments, the official daily prayer of the Church (the Liturgy of the Hours), and liturgies for special celebrations. As the Church’s official worship, each of these liturgies has at its heart the celebration of the “Mystery of our Faith” – that is, the sacred Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This mystery, known as the Paschal Mystery, is the continuing work of our redemption by Christ and through his Church.

Mystery Made Manifest

Sacrosanctum Concilium also reminds us that the Old Testament, as the history of God’s amazing deeds among the people of Israel, was “but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God” (SC 5, 2; cf. St. Augustine). By his obedience to the Father’s will and plan of

salvation and by his redemptive self-sacrifice, Jesus, the new Adam, destroyed the power of sin and death and made possible eternal life.

The Gospels tell us that, as he hung upon the cross, there came forth from Jesus’ wounded side blood and water – understood in time as symbolic of the mystery of the





Church – a mystery made manifest at Pentecost in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, witnesses and believers. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they grasped ever more clearly the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection as the way of salvation for all people. In time, *leitourgia* in the New Testament referred to the participation of early Christians in the "work of God," the continuing work of their redemption (Jn 17.4). While *leitourgia* also referred at times to the proclamation of the good news and charitable works, it referred particularly to the gathering of small Christian communities for prayer and, especially, for the "breaking of the bread" (Acts 2: 42). There, at the meal, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they "knew him" as he broke the bread. They recognized him as being present in their midst and continuing in them his redemptive work of Calvary.

At That First Eucharist

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of His Body and Blood (SC, 47, cf. Mt. 26:17-30, Mk. 14:12-26, Lk. 22:7-39 and Jn. 13:1-17:26). The Eucharist we celebrate today is both memorial and sacrifice. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body" (CCC, 1362). "Because it is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is manifested in the very words of institution: "This is my body which is given for you" (Lk 22:19-20) and "This cup which is poured out for you is the New Covenant in my blood." (Mt 26:28). In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (CCC, 1365).

Therefore, the Eucharist is a time to remember the sacrifice and is a sacrifice in itself "because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross," (CCC, 1366). It is a sharing in the grace of Christ's Death and Resurrection. It is a sacred meal, united through all of time to that holy night before he died. "The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith,

should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action *conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration*" (SC, 47) (emphasis added).

Held as sacred by the Church through the ages, the Sacred Liturgy is understood as an "exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ" (SC 7, 2-3). It is he who, as both victim and priest, continues his self-offering to the Father, interceding on our behalf at every Liturgy. It is he, as head of his body the Church, his Mystical Body on earth, who makes present in the midst of the assembly his work of redemption. It is he who also joins to his eternal sacrifice the humble self-offering of the gathered faithful. And it is through him, with him, and in him that our grateful praise and thanksgiving reach the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Liturgy is, then, our participation in Jesus' prayer, in his obedience and self-offering to the Father. Through that participation, the Liturgy becomes our work, the "work of the Church."

For this reason, the Constitution on the Liturgy says that every liturgical celebration is "a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy" (SC 7, 2-3). Thus, the Church to this day proclaims, celebrates and rejoices in the saving work of Jesus Christ – the Paschal Mystery – which is made present principally in the Mass, but also in all liturgical celebrations.

We, as Catholics, must understand every liturgical celebration first and foremost as the work of God – through, with, and in Jesus Christ; it is his saving work for us and in us, and only then can we understand it as "our work" of responding with praise, thanksgiving, supplication and fidelity. This understanding is, with the Holy Spirit's help, the way to a deeper experience of a most profound mystery of our faith.