

Christian Worship

The Teaching of Pope Pius XII on the Sacred Liturgy - A Summary

Summarized by Very Rev John Fennelly, P.P.
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This pamphlet might best be described as a summary or digest of the Encyclical on Christian Worship (*Mediator Dei*, 1947), addressed by Pope Pius XII to Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Ordinaries at Peace and in Communion with the Apostolic See.

It will give particular notice to statements bearing on the pastoral aspects of the liturgy. Pastors and others who desire more information are advised to refer to the full text of the Encyclical as translated by Canon J. D. Smith and published by the Catholic Truth Society, London. All quotations in this paper are taken from Canon Smith's work.

LITURGICAL REVIVAL HAS PROVED BENEFICIAL TO THE CHURCH.

At the outset of this long statement, Pope Pius XII expresses his pleasure at the unprecedented revival of liturgical studies during the end of the last (the nineteenth) century and at the beginning of the present one (the twentieth). The liturgical movement has proved beneficial to the spiritual life of many Christians. The venerable ceremonies of the Mass are in consequence better known and valued, the Sacraments more generally and more frequently received, the prayer of the liturgy more devoutly appreciated, and the worship of the Eucharist has come to be seen for what in fact it is — the source and centre of true Christian devotion. Another advantage of the movement has been to call special attention to the doctrine that all the faithful form one close-knit body, of which Christ is the Head, and that it is the duty of the Christian people to take its appointed part in the liturgy.

THE REVIVAL MOVEMENT NEEDS TO BE WATCHED AND CONTROLLED.

“Although We are greatly consoled by the beneficial result of these studies, yet, in view of extreme tendencies already apparent, Our duty requires Us to give careful attention to this "revival" and keep the movement free from exaggeration and error. For while We regret that in some quarters there is little or no interest in the liturgy, or understanding of it, at the same time, We observe elsewhere with anxiety and some apprehension, an undue fondness for innovation, and a tendency to stray from the path of truth and prudence. Certain plans and suggestions for the liturgical revival are mingled with principles, which, either in fact, or by implications jeopardize the sacred cause they are intended to promote, and sometimes introduce errors touching Catholic faith and ascetical doctrine.”

WORSHIP IS A SOCIAL AS WELL AS AN INDIVIDUAL DUTY.

Man's chief study, undoubtedly, is to devote himself and his life to God. He is our last end and to Him our choice must he constantly directed. Man is obliged to acknowledge His sovereign majesty and supreme teaching authority, and is bound to pay due worship and homage to Him. This duty

obliges men primarily as individuals: but the whole community of mankind, linked together by social bonds, is bound by it also; because the community too is dependent upon God's supreme authority. It is further to be noticed that this obligation rests upon men in a special way, because God has raised them to the supernatural order.

WHAT IS THE LITURGY?

Many definitions have been hazarded: Pope Pius XII gives an authoritative one: "The sacred liturgy is the public worship which our Redeemer, the Head of the Church, offers to the heavenly Father, and which the community of Christ's faithful pays to its Founder and through Him to the Eternal Father: briefly, it is the whole public worship of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, Head and Members."

It is a total misunderstanding of the true meaning of the liturgy to regard it as the merely external and visible element in Divine Worship, or as the outward splendour of ceremonial; it is equally wrong to see in it a mere catalogue of rules and regulations issued by the Hierarchy of the Church for the conduct of the Sacred Rites.

ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF THE LITURGY.

The practice of the liturgy began as soon as the Church had been divinely instituted. The earliest Christians occupied themselves continually with the Apostles' teaching, their fellowship in the breaking of bread and the fixed times of prayer. Wherever their Pastors are able to assemble the faithful, they erect an altar on which they offer sacrifice, and around which are disposed the other rites for sanctifying men and for glorifying God. According to circumstances and the needs of the faithful, divine worship takes shape, develops, and is embellished with new rites, ceremonies, and forms; the purpose always being that 'from these signs we may draw instruction, and through them become aware of the progress we have made.' (Saint Augustine). In this way, the soul is raised up and brought ever closer to God.

WORSHIP MUST BE BOTH EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL.

The whole of the Church's divine worship must be both external and internal. It must be external; for this is required by the nature of man, composed of soul and body, and it is required also by the divine plan, according to which 'while recognising God in visible form we may, through Him, be wrapt to the love of things invisible.'

Moreover, it is natural that the outpourings of the soul be expressed by the senses. Furthermore, divine worship is a duty for human society as such, and not only for individuals; and how can religion be social unless it too has external bonds and signs? Finally, the external element in divine worship is an important manifestation of the Unity of the Mystical Body; it also fosters its holy endeavours, invigorates its powers, and intensifies its activity.

THE CHIEF ELEMENT IN THE LITURGY IS INTERNAL WORSHIP.

The most important in divine worship is the internal element. If it is with Christ and through Him, that due glory is to be given to our Heavenly Father, then we must live in Christ and devote ourselves entirely to Him.

The sacred liturgy itself requires these two elements to be closely combined. Otherwise, religion becomes nothing but an empty ceremony and pure formalism. It must be well understood then, that God cannot be worthily honoured unless the mind and will are intent upon spiritual perfection, and

that for the achievement of holiness the worship, which the Church, united with her divine Head, offers to God, is the most efficacious possible means.

EFFICACY OF THE SACRAMENTS AND THE MASS.

It is certainly true that the Sacraments and the Mass possess an intrinsic efficacy, because they are actions of Christ Himself transmitting and distributing the grace of the divine Head to the members of the Mystical Body. But to have their proper effect they require also our souls to be in the right dispositions. For it must be borne in mind that the members of this Body are living members, endowed with intellect and will; therefore they must deliberately set their lips to the source of grace, absorb and assimilate this food of life, and uproot from themselves anything that may obstruct its efficacy. So the work of Redemption, though in itself something independent of our will, really calls for an interior effort from our souls if we are to attain to eternal salvation.

THE PLACE OF PRIVATE DEVOTIONS.

Private devotions and ascetical exercises strengthen the spiritual life of Christians and help them to take part with better dispositions in the august Sacrifice of the Altar and to receive the Sacraments more fruitfully. 'All this benefits not only the individuals concerned, but also the whole body of the Church.' There is no opposition between public and private prayer, between the active and the contemplative life, between the ascetical life and liturgical piety. It is true that liturgical prayer, being the public prayer of the august Bride of Christ, is superior to private prayer, but this superiority does not mean that there is any conflict or incompatibility between them. The two are harmoniously blended because they are both animated by the same spirit. Their purpose is the same: to form Christ in us.

PRAYING ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT OF THE LITURGY.

Frequently too much importance is attached to the external aspect of worship, whereas, it is the spirit that is important; to pray in accordance with the praying Church. The Church is very inclusive and understanding. In fact, her inclusiveness is astonishing. She accepts all manner of prayer, even very deficient and imperfect prayer, for she has pity on the weakness of man. "Very well," she says, "since you cannot pray otherwise, pray as you do, as long as you really pray." But when one wishes to know what She understands by prayer, that is an entirely different matter, and it is in the liturgy that one discovers her way. It is necessary to imitate the Church, and not to prohibit what she consents to accept in the matter of prayer. But one should seek to elevate this prayer, little by little, and to teach the faithful to pray as she prays. The liturgy is a very great thing. It is the most important organ of the ordinary teaching power of the Church.

CONTROL AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LITURGY.

'The liturgy being conducted primarily by priests in the name of the Church, it follows that its organisation, its government and its form are necessarily subject to the Church's authority. The Hierarchy of the Church has at all times used this right, regulating divine worship and constantly enriching it for the glory of God and the benefit of the faithful.' Indeed, she has even introduced changes — always respecting the substance of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Sacraments — in anything she considered not entirely suitable, and made additions where the greater honour of Jesus Christ and the Blessed Trinity, or the better instruction and more fervent devotion of the faithful, seemed to require them. For in the liturgy there are human elements as well as divine. The latter, obviously, having been established by the divine Redeemer cannot under any circumstances be

changed by men, but the human elements may be modified in various ways approved by the Hierarchy according as time, circumstances, and the needs of souls demand. The Church has always exercised control over the liturgy in order to protect the sacredness of divine worship against abuses introduced by individuals and by particular Churches. The sixteenth century saw a great increase in the number of such abuses, and privately invented devotions were proving a danger to the integrity of faith and devotion. "It was for this reason that Our Predecessor, Pope Sixtus V, in the year 1588, instituted the Sacred Congregation of Rites."

PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS HAVE NO RIGHT TO INTRODUCE NEW LITURGICAL PRACTICES.

The Sovereign Pontiff alone has the right to permit or establish any liturgical practice, to introduce or approve new rites, or to make any changes in them he considers necessary. It is the right and duty of Bishops, in their turn, to enforce vigilantly the observance of the canonical rules on divine worship. Therefore, private individuals, even among the clergy, cannot be allowed any interference with these sacred matters. 'We have learned with very deep regret that there are some who use the vernacular in offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice' (without seeking proper authorization). The use of the Latin language prevailing in a great part of the Church affords at once an imposing sign of unity and a safeguard against the corruption of true doctrine. Admittedly, the adoption of the vernacular in quite a number of functions may prove of great benefit to the faithful. "But to make such concessions is for the Apostolic See alone. Nothing may be done in this matter without her consent and approval, because, as We have said, the whole arrangement of the sacred liturgy is subject to her authority."

THE CENTRE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION IS THE MASS.

The summit, we may say also the centre, of the Christian religion is the Mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist, instituted by Christ the High Priest and by His command renewed perpetually in the Church through His ministers.

The august Sacrifice of the Altar is no mere simple commemoration of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ; it is truly and properly the offering of a sacrifice, wherein by an unbloody immolation, the High Priest does what He has already done on the Cross, offering Himself to the Eternal Father as a most acceptable victim.

THE SACRIFICE OF THE CROSS AND THE MASS.

In proclaiming the perfection and superabundance of the Sacrifice of the Cross, Saint Paul says that Christ "by a single offering has completed His work for all time, in those whom He sanctifies." The merits of this sacrifice are utterly boundless; without limits they extend to all men at all times and in all places. "Behold the transaction by which we were purchased; Christ hangs on the Cross, such is the price He paid for us. The buyer is Christ, the price is His blood; what He buys is the whole world" (Saint Augustine). But this purchase does not take full effect immediately. Having bought the world with this great price which is Himself, Christ has yet to take actual possession of men's souls.

If individual sinners are to be purified in the blood of the Lamb, Christians themselves must co-operate. 'Although Christ, universally speaking, has reconciled the whole human race to the Father by His death, yet He has willed that all men should come and be brought to His Cross, especially by

means of the Sacraments and the Mass, and so take possession of the fruits which through the Cross He has won for them.'

ALL THE FAITHFUL ARE BOUND TO TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN THE MASS.

It is important for all the faithful to understand that it is their duty and highest privilege to take part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and to take part in it, not passively or negligently or with distracted mind, but with such active devotion as to be in the closest union with the High Priest, according to the words of Saint Paul: 'Yours is to be the same mind which Christ Jesus showed;' and to offer it together with Him and through Him, and with Him to surrender themselves. By reason of their baptism, Christians are in the Mystical Body, and become by a common title members of Christ the Priest; by the character that is graven on their souls, they are appointed to the worship of God, and therefore, according to their condition, they share in the priesthood of Christ Himself.

THE MASS IS A CORPORATE ACT.

The Rites and Prayers of the Mass show that the offering of the victim is made by the priest together with the people. After the Offertory of the bread and wine, the sacred minister turns to the people and says: "Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable in the sight of God, the Father Almighty." 'Moreover, the prayers by which the Divine victim is offered to God are said for the most part in the plural, and they more than once indicate that the people have a part in the sacrifice as being offerers of it', for example:

"For whom we offer to Thee, or who offer to Thee — "We beseech Thee, Lord, graciously to receive this offering of us Thy servants, indeed of the whole of Thy household."

The faithful, therefore, must not be content to take part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice by the general intention, which all members of Christ and children of the Church ought to have; they ought, also, in the spirit of the liturgy, to unite themselves closely and of set purpose with the High Priest and His Minister on earth.

HOW TO UNITE CLOSELY WITH THE PRIEST ON THE ALTAR.

"We therefore highly commend the zeal which, to enable the faithful to take part more easily and profitably in the Mass, seeks to adapt the Roman Missal for their use, so that they may join in prayer with the priest, using his very words and uttering the sentiments of the Church herself. We also approve the efforts of those who want to make the liturgy a sacred action in which, externally also, all who are present may really take a part. There are several ways in which this may be done: The whole congregation, always conformably with the rubrics, may recite the responses in an orderly manner; they may sing chants corresponding to the various parts of the Mass, or they may do both. Or, at High Mass, the people may sing the responses and join in the liturgical chants."

VARIOUS METHODS OF HEARING MASS ARE POSSIBLE.

Although the methods above mentioned do externally indicate that the Mass is to be regarded as the act of the whole Mystical Body, it must be understood that they are by no means necessary to give it its public and communal character. A great number of the faithful are incapable of using the Roman Missal even in a vernacular translation; nor are all equal to a proper understanding of the rites and formulas of the liturgy. People differ so widely in character, temperament, and intelligence that it is impossible for them all to be affected in the same way by the same communal prayers, hymns, and sacred actions. Besides, spiritual needs and dispositions are not the same in all. Are we, therefore, to

say that all these Christians are unable to take part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice or to enjoy its benefits? Of course they can, and in ways which many find easier, for example, by devoutly meditating on the mysteries of Jesus Christ, or by performing other religious exercises and saying other prayers, which, though different in form from the liturgical prayers, are by their nature in keeping with them. In the variety of external methods and forms which the people's participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice may take, one thing must remain constant, an earnest desire that the souls of those present may be united as closely as possible to the divine Redeemer, and that their lives become holier and holier, and the glory of the Heavenly Father be ever increased.

HOLY COMMUNION ADVISABLE BUT NOT NECESSARY FOR THE LAITY AT MASS.

The august Sacrifice of the Altar concludes with Holy Communion. But, as everybody knows, the integrity of the Sacrifice requires only the priest to partake of the heavenly food; however desirable, it is not necessary for the people to communicate. It must be emphasised that the Eucharistic Sacrifice is essentially the unbloody immolation of the divine victim. The Communion belongs to the integration of the Sacrifice. And while it is quite necessary for the Sacrificing Minister, to the faithful it is only to be highly recommended.

It is very fitting that the faithful, in accordance with the liturgical rule should approach Holy Communion after the priest has communicated at the altar. Nevertheless, reasons frequently occur for distributing Holy Communion either before or after Mass. But while the Church makes concessions in her motherly desire to meet the spiritual needs of her children, these on their part must do all in their power to conform to what the liturgy recommends and, unless there is some reasonable cause to the contrary, do everything that may clearly manifest at the altar the living unity of the Mystical Body.

SUNDAYS AND HOLY DAYS SHOULD BE OBSERVED IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE

Sundays and holy days of obligation are to be set aside and consecrated to the things of God, to the worship of God and the heavenly nourishment of the soul. And although the Church commands us only to abstain from servile work and hear Mass, and imposes no command in regard to evening worship, yet she earnestly desires that we should do more than is actually of obligation. "We are deeply grieved to see the manner in which Christians these days spend the Sunday afternoon: theatres and public games are thronged to overflowing, but the churches are less frequented than they ought to be. Things should be otherwise." Everybody should go to Church, to learn Christian doctrine, to receive the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and so obtain help against the adversities of this life. Let everyone do his best to learn by heart the formulas that are sung at the evening prayer. Under their influence, they will share the experience, which Saint Augustine thus describes: "I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church's singing. Those sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart; so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them."

GREGORIAN CHANT SHOULD BE RESTORED TO GENERAL USE.

To enable the faithful to take a more active part in divine worship, let Gregorian Chant be restored to congregational use, so far as it is the function of the people to sing it. It is truly necessary that the faithful should not assist at the sacred rites as merely detached and silent spectators, but should be filled with a sense of the beauty of the liturgy and sing alternately with the priest or the choir. If they do this, we shall no longer have the spectacle of a congregation either not joining at all in the

Latin or vernacular prayers of the community, or else contributing only a feeble murmur. Encourage congregational singing in Church. Let it be well executed and with due decorum, for it does much to enliven and increase the devotion of the faithful. Let the loud and harmonious song of our people rise to heaven like a roar of the ocean waves, and let them give proof by their melodious voice that they are indeed of one heart and soul, as befits those who are brethren and children of the same Father.

MODERN MUSIC SHOULD NOT BE BARRED FROM THE CHURCH.

It cannot be maintained that modern music and singing are to be completely barred from Catholic worship. On the contrary, they are certainly to be admitted to our Churches, so long as they are free from a worldly spirit or anything unbefitting the sacred character of the place and the liturgical functions, and so long as 'they are not inspired by a meaningless striving after extraordinary effects'. Under these conditions, they can contribute greatly to the splendour of the sacred rites, help to elevate the minds of the hearers, and foster true devotion.

THE LITURGICAL YEAR OR CYCLE OF FEASTS.

All the year round the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice revolves, as it were, about the Person of Jesus Christ, the cycle being so contrived as to be wholly dominated by our Saviour in the mysteries of His humiliation, His redemptive work, and His triumph. In thus reminding the faithful of these mysteries of Jesus Christ, the sacred liturgy seeks to make them share them in such a way that the divine Head of the Mystical Body lives by His perfect holiness in each of His members. The liturgical year is like a magnificent hymn of praise offered by the Christian family through Jesus to the heavenly Father. It is no cold and lifeless representation of past events, no mere historical record. It is Christ Himself, living in His Church, and still pursuing that path of boundless mercy which He began to tread during His life on earth: Along this path of the liturgy which year by year opens out before us, under the sanctifying influence of the Church, helped by the assistance and example of the Saints, and especially of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, 'let us go forward with sincere hearts and in the full assurance of the faith to the great Priest that we may live with Him and feel with Him, and with Him be enabled to reach the inner sanctuary beyond the veil, there to honour the heavenly Father for all eternity.'

NON-LITURGICAL DEVOTIONS.

"In speaking of the meaning of true devotion, We observed that there can be no real incompatibility, between the liturgy and other acts of devotion — so long as they are properly conducted and directed to the right end; that there are certain pious practices which the Church strongly urges on clergy and religious. Nor is it Our wish that the faithful should be strangers to these practices; meditation, examination of conscience, retreats, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and special devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, above all, of course, the Rosary. Nourishing the spiritual life of Christians as they do, they cause them to take part with greater profit in the public functions, and prevent the liturgical prayers from degenerating into an empty ceremony. At the same time these practices of piety must be influenced by the spirit and principles of the liturgy, to the extent that no devotions should be introduced that are unsuitable or ill-befitting the glory of God's house, or contrary to sound piety. See, therefore, Venerable, Brethren, that the genuine and true spirit of devotion grows and flourishes under your guidance. Above all, be untiring in pointing out that the Christian life does not consist in a multiplicity of different prayers and devotional exercises, but

rather in the spiritual progress of the faithful, and therefore the benefit of the whole Church, that they promote."

A LITURGICAL SPIRIT SHOULD BE FOSTERED.

Everything that concerns the external conduct of divine worship has its importance, but the most necessary thing of all is that Christians should live the liturgical life, and nourish and foster the liturgical spirit in themselves. Strive earnestly by methods and means which your prudence judges most effective, to bring about a close union of mind and heart between clergy and people, that the faithful may take so active a part in the liturgy that it becomes really a sacred action in which both priest — especially the priest in his own parish — and people join in offering to Almighty God the worship that is His due. The august Sacrifice of the altar is the principal act of divine worship, and must therefore be the source and centre of all Christian devotion. That the Christian people may acquire more of these supernatural riches, see that they are instructed concerning the treasures of devotion which the liturgy contains, by sermons, dissertations, periodical courses and "Weeks" devoted to the study of the liturgy. Do not be dismayed by the difficulties that may arise, but let your pastoral energy never flag. Use every endeavour so that the faithful all over the world may thong our Churches and altars, united as living members to their divine Head, nourished by the grace of the Sacraments, with Him and through Him celebrating the August Sacrifice of the Mass and offering due praise to the Eternal Father.

ADDENDA.

"Among the cares of the pastoral office, not only of this Supreme Chair, but of every local Church, a leading one is without question that of maintaining and promoting the decorum of the House of God, in which the august mysteries of religion are celebrated, and where the Christian people assemble to receive the grace of the Sacraments, to assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the altar and to unite in the common prayer of the Church in the public and solemn liturgical offices. Nothing should have place, therefore, in the temple calculated to disturb or even diminish the piety and devotion of the faithful, nothing that may give reasonable cause for disgust or scandal, nothing, above all, which directly offends the decorum and sanctity of the sacred functions, and is thus unworthy of the House of Prayer and the Majesty of God. Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, We deem it necessary to provide before aught else for the sanctity and dignity of the temple, in which the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its primary and indispensable source which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church. It is vain to hope that the blessing of heaven will descend abundantly upon us, when our homage of the Most High, instead of ascending in the odour of sweetness, puts into the hand of the Lord the scourges, wherewith of old the Divine Redeemer drove the unworthy profanes from the Temple." (Pope Pius X 1903, Motu Proprio, *Tra le sollecitudini*).

Pope Pius XI wrote in 1928: "The chief object of Pope Pius X in the Motu Proprio which he issued twenty five years ago, making certain prescriptions concerning Gregorian chant and sacred music was to arouse and foster a Christian spirit in the faithful. The faithful come to Church in order to derive piety from its chief source by taking an active part in the venerated mysteries and solemn public prayers of the Church. It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies, they should not be merely detached and silent spectators, but, filled with a deep sense

of the beauty of the liturgy, they shall sing alternately with the clergy or the choir. If this is done, then it will no longer happen that the people either make no answer at all to the public prayers — whether in the language of the liturgy or the vernacular — or at best utter the responses in a low subdued murmur.” (Pope Pius XI 1928).

“These, Venerable Brethren, are the matters on which We wished to write to you. Our object has been that Our children and yours may come to understand and appreciate better the precious treasure that the sacred liturgy contains, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, representing and renewing the Sacrifice of the Cross; the Sacraments which are channels of divine grace and life; and the hymn of praise which earth and heaven daily send to God, We venture to hope that the admonitions of Ours may move the indifferent and the unwilling, not only to take a greater and more enlightened interest in the liturgy, but also to foster its supernatural influence in their lives.” (Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 1947).

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