

# THE INEXHAUSTIBLE REALITY: JOSEPH RATZINGER AND THE SACRED LITURGY

ROBERT SARAH

“We do not create [the liturgy]; we celebrate it as it is given to us with reverence and humility, always seeking to give of our best in the worship of almighty God.”



## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the publication of the motu proprio *Summorum pontificum* (2007), one commentator was quick to complain that its author “was not a trained liturgist,” and while he agreed that the author was someone who “has shown interest and sensitivity in liturgical matters,” the commentator insisted that he had demonstrated “a real misunderstanding of the liturgy’s role in the life of the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

The author was, of course, Pope Benedict XVI—Joseph Ratzinger—a priest, bishop, cardinal, and pope who had more than enough academic degrees but, seemingly, had committed the unforgivable sin of speaking (indeed legislating) about the sacred liturgy without a specific liturgical training.

---

1. Mark Francis, CSV, “Beyond Language,” *The Tablet*, July 14, 2007.

Joseph Ratzinger's liturgical training—let us use the more accurate term “formation”—took place not in a liturgical institute or seminar but in his parish and family home, where his gradual initiation into the riches of the sacred liturgy as he grew older was permeated by his conscious, indeed wide-eyed, participation in its celebration and nourished by the successive gifts of the *Schott* missal designed for children, teenagers, etc. Of this formation he recalls,

Every new step into the Liturgy was a great event for me. Each new book I was given was something precious to me, and I could not dream of anything more beautiful. It was a riveting adventure to move by degrees into the mysterious world of the Liturgy which was being enacted before us and for us there on the altar. It was becoming more and more clear to me that here I was encountering a reality that no one had simply thought up, a reality that no official authority or great individual had created. This mysterious fabric of texts and actions had grown from the faith of the Church over the centuries. It bore the whole weight of history within itself, and yet, at the same time, it was much more than the product of human history. Every century had left its mark upon it. . . . Not everything was logical. Things sometimes got complicated and it was not always easy to find one's way. But precisely this is what made the whole edifice wonderful, like one's own home. Naturally, the child I then was did not grasp every aspect of this, but I started down the road of the Liturgy, and this became a continuous process of growth into a grand reality transcending all particular individuals and generations, a reality that became an occasion for me of ever-new amazement and discovery. The inexhaustible reality of the Catholic Liturgy has accompanied me through all phases of life, and so I shall have to speak of it time and time again.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth asserting that a man formed thus in his youth, who enters seminary formation and proceeds to advanced theological studies, who receives the grace of holy orders and indeed is called to their fullness in the episcopate, does not perhaps need an extrinsic liturgical training—for the sacred liturgy itself had already initiated him in its ways.

---

2. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones. Memoirs: 1927–1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 19–20.

Let us consider something of his understanding of that “inexhaustible reality” of which he has felt the need, over many decades, to speak “time and time again.”<sup>3</sup>

#### A THEOLOGICAL ENTHUSIAST FOR LITURGICAL REFORM

As a seminarian prior to the Second Vatican Council, Joseph Ratzinger admits to having had “reservations about the liturgical movement” because, he said,

In many of its representatives I sensed a one-sided rationalism and historicism that concentrated too much on forms and historical origins and exhibited a remarkable coldness when it came to dispositions of mind and heart that allow us to experience the Church as the place where the soul is at home.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the professor responsible for the personal and priestly formation at his Munich seminary, Josef Pascher, who discharged his task “inspired by the spirit of the liturgy,” had a “profound and decisive” impact in overcoming these reservations,<sup>5</sup> leading Ratzinger to the point where he could say,

Pascher’s conferences, and the reverential manner in which he taught us to celebrate the liturgy in keeping with its deepest nature, made me a follower of the liturgical movement. Just as I learned to understand the New Testament as being the soul of all theology, so too I came to see the liturgy as being its living element. This is why, at the beginning of the [Second Vatican] Council, I saw that the draft of the Constitution on the Liturgy, which incorporated all the essential principles of the liturgical movement, was a marvelous point of departure for this assembly of the whole Church, and I advised Cardinal Frings in this sense.<sup>6</sup>

---

3. The most comprehensive collection of his writings on the sacred liturgy may be found in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Collected Works*, vol. 11: *Theology of the Liturgy*, ed. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

4. Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 56.

5. *Ibid.*, 50.

6. *Ibid.*, 57. Joseph Ratzinger was the theologian (*peritus*) advising Cardinal Joseph Frings at the council. The citation above continues: “I was not able

Ratzinger's enthusiasm for the council's discussion of liturgical reform and his appreciation of its ecclesiological implications were articulated in a lecture he gave in Bonn in January 1963. The lecture merits close study, but it suffices to recall his view that the council's decision to give precedence to the debate of the schema on the sacred liturgy was right:

It was a public avowal of where the true centre of the Church lies—in her espousal, ever young, to her Lord, which finds its completion in the mystery of the Eucharist and in which by partaking in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ she fulfils her most intimate mission—the adoration of the triune God.<sup>7</sup>

Ratzinger envisaged no difficulty with a liturgical “return to the origins and a removal of the various strata piled up over the years, which now conceal to a large extent the kernel of what the liturgy had been really intended to convey,”<sup>8</sup> and saw the schema's granting of competences in some liturgical matters to episcopal conferences as a “fundamental step in the renewal of ecclesiology.”<sup>9</sup> He expressed delight at the overwhelming vote of the Council Fathers in November 1962 (2,162 against 46) to adopt chapter one of the schema on the liturgy: “It was a decision that augured well for the future, and was at the same time a very encouraging sign that the strength of the movement for renewal was greater than anyone had ventured to hope.”<sup>10</sup>

---

to foresee that the negative sides of the liturgical movement would afterward reemerge with redoubled strength, almost to the point of pushing the liturgy toward its own self-destruction.”

7. Joseph Ratzinger, “The First Session,” in *Worship* 37, no. 8 (August–September 1963): 529–35, at 531. *Worship* edits the text of the lecture, confining itself to items of specifically liturgical interest. The full text of the lecture appeared as “The Second Vatican Council: The First Session,” *The Furrow* 14, no. 5 (May 1963): 267–88, at 274.

8. Ratzinger, “The Second Vatican Council: The First Session,” *The Furrow*, 275.

9. *Ibid.*, 534.

10. *Ibid.*, 535.

## A POSTCONCILIAR REALIST

But three years later Ratzinger sounded a different note. “The most striking result of the Council has been the liturgical reform,” he declared in 1966. “But this very reform, so eagerly longed for and so joyfully welcomed, has become for many people ‘a sign of contradiction,’” he admitted.<sup>11</sup> He continued,

It would seem that the thing about the liturgical reform which gives so much scandal is simply the fact that it is naive enough to want to understand liturgy in its original true meaning, in other words, to take liturgy seriously for what it is. In fact . . . it can be asserted that there is no one who has done more to demonstrate how necessary and how timely the liturgical reform was than its opponents, since what they champion is a misunderstanding of the liturgy and all that they can succeed in proving is that the liturgy, in the form in which we have had it heretofore, was in grave danger of perpetuating the acceptance of this misunderstanding as the genuine article. It is inevitable therefore that a liturgical reform should give rise to a certain amount of scandal and misunderstanding and should cause some dissatisfaction in certain quarters, but on the other hand we must realise that the success of a liturgical reform cannot be measured by whether it has increased the numbers of churchgoers but simply and solely by whether it conforms to the essential nature of Christian worship as such.<sup>12</sup>

Ratzinger held that “the Council’s liturgical reform . . . may be seen to be not only justified but even necessary,” but cautioned that “the same cannot be said of all the ways in which it has been realised in practice.”<sup>13</sup> He lamented that the theological roots of the liturgical movement had infected it with an “archaism,”

which has for its purpose the restoration of the Roman liturgy in its classical form before it became overlaid by medieval and Carolingian accretions. This view would set

---

11. Joseph Ratzinger, “Catholicism after the Council,” *The Furrow* 18, no. 1 (January 1967): 2–23, at 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

13. *Ibid.*, 10.

up as the criterion of liturgical renewal not the question: How should it be? but rather the question: How was it at that time? To which we can only say that whereas to know how things were at that time is of invaluable help to us in coping with the problems of our own time, it cannot be simply the standard by which reform is measured. It is very important and helpful, for instance, to know how things were done under Gregory the Great, but that is no reason at all why they should be done in the very same way today. This archaism has often made us close our eyes to the good things which have been evolved in later developments and has caused us to set the taste of one period up on a pedestal; admittedly, it was a splendid period which rightly commands the greatest respect and affection, but its taste can no more be made a matter of absolute dogma than the taste of any other period.<sup>14</sup>

“Mere archaism does not help matters along,” he warned, adding, “but neither does mere modernisation,”<sup>15</sup> explaining (in a passage that has retained its pertinence in the decades since) that

the liturgical reform calls for a very generous measure of tolerance within the Church, which in the given situation is only another way of saying that it calls for a great measure of Christian charity. And the fact that this charity is often so little to be found is perhaps the real crisis for liturgical renewal in our midst. The “bearing with one another” of which Saint Paul speaks, the diffusion of charity of which we read in Saint Augustine. It is these alone that can create the setting within which the revival of Christian worship can grow in maturity and achieve its true flowering. For the real divine worship of Christianity consists in charity.<sup>16</sup>

I have cited extensively from this somewhat unknown 1966 lecture—let us remember that it was delivered just one year after the closing of the council and only three years after the promulgation of the council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (1963)—because I believe we have here, in embryo, in the words of the thirty-nine-year-old Professor Ratzinger, the historical basis of his liturgical writing and activity thereafter.

---

14. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 11.

16. *Ibid.*, 13.

For he will never renounce the good and right intentions of the council, just as he will become ever more realistic about the official liturgical books promulgated in their name, their widely varied local implementation and the ongoing role of the older, unreformed liturgical rites—something that would probably have surprised the young professor, but which the experienced cardinal prefect with a singularly privileged insight into the life of the Church, and particularly into the nature of her bishops, came to see ever more clearly.

In 1975, to the upset or surprise of his theological colleagues, Ratzinger insisted: “We must be far more resolute than heretofore in opposing rationalistic relativism, confusing clap-trap and pastoral infantilism. These things degrade the liturgy to the level of a parish tea party and the intelligibility of a popular newspaper.”<sup>17</sup> He continued, “With this in mind we shall also have to examine the reforms already carried out,” giving voice for the first time to the idea of a reform of the liturgical reform, to which subject we shall return later.

Hence, in 1981 Ratzinger would preface a small collection of articles on the sacred liturgy with the following assertion:

Faced with the political and social crises of the present time and the moral challenge they offer to Christians, the problems of liturgy and prayer could easily seem to be of second importance. But the question of the moral standards and spiritual resources that we need if we are to acquit ourselves in this situation cannot be separated from the question of worship. Only if man, every man, stands before the face of God and is answerable to him, can man be sure of his dignity as a human being. Concern for the proper form of worship, therefore, is not peripheral but central to our concern for man himself.<sup>18</sup>

---

17. “Thesen zum Thema ‘Zehn Jahre Vaticanum II’” (typescript), as cited in Joseph Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 121.

18. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 7. That it took five years for an English translation of the German original (published in 1981) to appear is perhaps indicative of how underrated the “question of the liturgy” was in those years, even given the higher profile of Cardinal Ratzinger as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from November 1981 onward.

“Concern for the proper form of worship . . . is . . . central to our concern for man himself”—in these words, which bear repeating almost like a mantra, we find the profound pastoral basis of Ratzinger’s growing liturgical disquiet. He takes the council’s teaching that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 10) at its word; and therefore, for the sake of the “good of man” (and not out of some psychological conservatism or fetishized traditionalism that he is somehow personally unable to overcome), he insists that the question of how we should worship is of the first order in tackling the crisis faced by the Church following the Second Vatican Council.

So too, his personal involvement as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to achieve a reconciliation with the estranged Society of St. Pius X headed by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, and the personal sense of failure that Cardinal Ratzinger felt when the Archbishop nevertheless went ahead with the illicit consecration of four bishops on June 30, 1988, convinced Ratzinger that the older, unreformed liturgical rites were not the “problem.” He had, as prefect, been a member of a commission of cardinals set up by Pope St. John Paul II to study the impact of the indult *Quattuor abhinc annos* (October 3, 1984) permitting the use of the older form of the Mass under strict conditions, and to advise the pope with respect to it.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the cardinal increasingly came to understand that the older liturgy *could not* be forbidden, and thus to accept and begin to bear witness to the fact that its continued celebration was something good in the life of the postconciliar Church, which bore much fruit—increasingly so in the Institutes that celebrated these rites in communion with the Holy See after the 1988 consecrations.<sup>20</sup>

---

19. See Alcuin Reid, “The *usus antiquior*—Its History and Importance in the Church After the Second Vatican Council,” in Alcuin Reid, ed., *T&T Clark Companion to Liturgy* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 455–82, 462–64.

20. Cardinal Ratzinger personally celebrated a pontifical Mass according to the older rites at the seminary of the Fraternity of St. Peter (founded by former members of the Society of St. Pius X in 1988) in Witzgratzbad, Germany, on April 15, 1990.



Thus, Joseph Ratzinger, the hard-working and enthusiastic council *peritus*, became one of the few who were prepared to offer a nuanced critique of the liturgical reform in public. That he was called to episcopal ministry and then to serve as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith gave him a deeper insight into the issue, and indeed to its worldwide implications. And, as a high-ranking official of the Holy See, his critiques received a great deal of attention.

#### A NEW LITURGICAL MOVEMENT

One of the critiques that gained wide attention was contained in a small text Cardinal Ratzinger published as a tribute to the German liturgical scholar Klaus Gamber, which was published in German in 1989 and subsequently translated into other languages. The text begins by recalling the words of a young priest: “Today we need a new liturgical movement.” Reflecting on this, the cardinal wrote,

This expressed a concern that can be avoided nowadays only by deliberate superficiality. This priest was not interested in winning even more audacious freedoms—really, what freedom has not been taken already? He sensed that we again need a beginning from within, as the liturgical movement at its best had intended, when it was concerned not about making texts or inventing actions and forms, but rather about the rediscovery of the living heart, about entering into the interior fabric of the liturgy to a new celebration that is shaped from within. The liturgical reform, as it was carried out, concretely distanced itself more and more from this origin. The result was not revival but devastation.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, the cardinal asserted that, following the council,

instead of the developed liturgy, some have set up their self-made liturgy. They have stepped out of the living process of growing and becoming and have gone over to making. They no longer wanted to continue the organic *becoming* and *maturing* of something that had been alive down

---

21. “In Memory of Klaus Gamber,” in Ratzinger, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, 536–38, at 536.

through the centuries, and instead they replaced it—according to the model of technical production—with *making*, the insipid product of the moment.<sup>22</sup>

If we consider the charged atmosphere in which these words were written (Archbishop Lefebvre had carried out the illicit consecration of bishops the previous year), these words of a serving cardinal prefect are very strong indeed. But they are not meant to be inflammatory. Rather, their incisive analysis forms—in classical Ratzingerian fashion—the basis of a medicinal proposal: that (after the example of Klaus Gamber) we could “make a fresh start.”<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned above, Ratzinger had opined in 1975 that it was necessary “to examine the reforms already carried out.” Here, he advocates not only a reexamination of the reforms but a return to and a recapturing of the spirit that motivated the early-twentieth-century liturgical movement before it became preoccupied with making changes to the rites; he proposes, in other words, a postconciliar liturgical *ressourcement*, as it were: a *new* liturgical movement, all the wiser in avoiding the pitfalls into which the old movement with its insipid “products of the moment” had fallen, and which resulted not in revival but in devastation.

The key to this call is the interiority upon which it is based. As it has been noted, Cardinal Ratzinger became increasingly convinced of the goodness and value of the unreformed liturgical rites, and indeed of the defects of the reformed ones (as rites, that is, as promulgated, before they could be distorted by faulty translations or abused at a local level). Yet even though he would increasingly advocate the availability of the older rites,<sup>24</sup>

---

22. *Ibid.*, 537–38.

23. *Ibid.*, 538.

24. Cardinal Ratzinger’s remarks in his 2000 interview with Peter Seewald are not without significance here, even in our own day: “For fostering a true consciousness in liturgical matters, it is also important that the proscription against the form of liturgy in valid use up to 1970 should be lifted. Anyone who nowadays advocates the continuing existence of this liturgy or takes part in it is treated like a leper; all tolerance ends here. There has never been anything like this in history; in doing this we are despising and proscribing the Church’s whole past. How can one trust her at present if things are that way?” (Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002], 416).

he was no closed-minded traditionalist. He knew the council and the noble aims of the liturgical movement too intimately to reject them out of hand. But he also knew that the liturgical products of the council often lacked interiority; that they were too frequently estranged from the true spirit of the liturgy by a false creativity or by superficial motives insufficiently grounded in the fundamental disposition necessary for any celebration of the sacred liturgy: we, God's creatures, come before him in all humility and reverence to worship him as worthily as we are able.

The publication of Cardinal Ratzinger's book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in the jubilee year 2000 should be understood in the light of this reality. It can be seen as a work that the cardinal (approaching the ecclesiastical age of retirement and fully expecting that he would not be in office all that much longer) foresaw as his liturgical testament. He intentionally chose the title in imitation of Romano Guardini's 1918 work of the same name so as to offer

an aid to the understanding of the faith and to the right way to give the faith its central form of expression in the liturgy. If this book were to encourage, in a new way, something like a "liturgical movement," a movement toward the liturgy and toward the right way of celebrating the liturgy, inwardly and outwardly, then the intention that inspired its writing would be richly fulfilled.<sup>25</sup>

Before considering the book itself, let us note two important elements present in the cardinal's presentation of it. First, he once again expresses the desire for a renewal of liturgical momentum, of liturgical *ressourcement*, as it were. As we have seen, Ratzinger had mentioned this a decade earlier in his commendation of Klaus Gamber's work. Clearly, he had become more convinced of the importance of such a renewal, such a reconnection with and an ever more profound knowledge of that which motivated the pioneers of the early-twentieth-century liturgical movement—Guardini included.

Second, this new movement would have as its aim the correct interior and exterior celebration of the liturgy. This is important, for it addresses, on the one hand, the lack of the necessary

---

25. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 8–9.

interiority that had arisen in some liturgical celebrations (leading to “active” participation in the sense of “doing” things at the liturgy while not necessarily joining oneself to the liturgical action with heart, mind, and soul); on the other hand, it addresses the need for a return to objectivity in respect of the rites themselves: the liturgy is given to us in the tradition of the Church and is not modified according to our own particular tastes or desires. We do not create it; we celebrate it as it is given to us with reverence and humility, always seeking to give of our best in the worship of almighty God.

In the two decades since its publication, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* has rightly become the *vademecum* of what may broadly be called the “new liturgical movement.” Younger clergy, religious, and committed laity have found in it precisely the desire that its author intended: an impetus toward a greater orthopraxy in worship, interiorly and exteriorly. It has formed them in the liturgical spirit and introduced them to the saving realities that the liturgy celebrates and makes present.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, we may rightly call Cardinal Ratzinger the father of the “new liturgical movement,” and as such we may turn again and again to his writings as a sound guide.

*The Spirit of the Liturgy* appeared at a crucial moment, thirty years after the promulgation of the missal of Paul VI in 1970 and more than twenty years into the consolidating pontificate of St. John Paul II. It sought to present briefly the theological essence of the sacred liturgy and then to apply it practically to some contemporary issues in liturgical practice and celebration. As he would note in 2008 when introducing the liturgical volume of his collected works, “Unfortunately almost all the reviews jumped on a single chapter, ‘The Altar and Direction of

---

26. It is worth noting, however, the phenomenon that has arisen in recent years of young people being liturgically formed (or indeed de-formed) by what they read and see online and either like or not according to their particular preferences or prejudices. There are many good online resources and sites, of course, but online discussion of the sacred liturgy can become as infected with subjectivism as were the various abusive liturgical celebrations of recent decades, forming people in the idea that true liturgy is what they like, regardless of any authority or indeed any objectivity or integrity in respect of its celebration. Such liturgical subjectivism (whether it be oriented to more modern or more classical liturgical reforms) must be overcome precisely by the kind of *ressourcement* desired by Cardinal Ratzinger.

Liturgical Prayer,”<sup>27</sup> with the result that the more general thrust of the work was often ignored in public discussion, which became almost enraged at the idea of anyone seriously suggesting that a return to *ad orientem* liturgical celebration could be appropriate in our day.<sup>28</sup>

One of the “unnoticed” but important contributions of *The Spirit of the Liturgy* is its reflection on authority—specifically papal authority—and the sacred liturgy. Noting that the Western liturgy is something that (borrowing the words of J. A. Jungmann, SJ) “has come to be,” that is “an organic growth,” not “a specially contrived production,” “something organic that grows and whose laws of growth determine the possibilities of further development,” Cardinal Ratzinger observes that in modern times

the more vigorously the [Petrine] primacy was displayed, the more the question came up about the extent and limits of this authority, which of course had never been considered. After the Second Vatican Council, the impression arose that the pope really could do anything in liturgical matters, especially if he were acting on the mandate of an Ecumenical Council. Eventually, the idea of the givenness of the liturgy, the fact that one cannot do with it what one will, faded from the public consciousness of the West. In fact, the First Vatican Council had in no way defined the pope as an absolute monarch. On the contrary, it presented him as the guarantor of obedience to the revealed Word. The pope’s authority is bound to the Tradition of faith, and that also applies to the liturgy. It is not “manufactured” by the authorities. Even the pope can only be a humble servant of its lawful development and abiding integrity and identity. . . .

The authority of the pope is not unlimited; it is at the service of Sacred Tradition.<sup>29</sup>

---

27. Ratzinger, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, xvi.

28. I was to have a similar experience with respect to my 2016 lecture “Towards an Authentic Implementation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” in Uwe Michael Lang, ed., *Authentic Liturgical Renewal in Contemporary Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3–19.

29. Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 165–66. As Pope Benedict XVI, he would develop this theme with respect to the wider Petrine ministry in his homily on the occasion of taking possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, May 7, 2005.

In this assertion of the objectivity of the sacred liturgy in its developed ritual forms, and of the duty of the highest authority in the Church to respect this reality,<sup>30</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger laid the theological foundations for the consideration of a reform of the liturgical reform, or even for legitimately leaving aside the reformed rites in favor of their predecessors. Uncritical obedience to papal authority—already something long since abandoned in many places, but clung to by others as the guarantee of orthodoxy in turbulent times—was dealt a blow, at least with respect to the liturgical reform, by one of the highest ranking prelates in the Church (albeit writing in a private capacity).

As has been said, this is Cardinal Ratzinger writing at a time when he presumes he is near the end of his “working” life. One has the impression that, out of profound personal conviction, he set out to furnish future generations with the means to continue the critical consideration of what became known as “the question of the liturgy” as it stood at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to encourage its discussion.

This was certainly the intention of the discrete gathering of liturgists and other experts at the French abbey of Fontgombault, over which Cardinal Ratzinger presided, on July 22–24, 2001. His concluding remarks revolve around increasingly familiar themes: the spiritual and historical components of the liturgical movement; the problem of Roman rites within the Roman rite; the “reform of the reform”; the future of the missal of St. Pius V.<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that the publication of the proceedings of the conference facilitated further discussion of them.

But three years later, and presumably ever more conscious of his impending retirement, Cardinal Ratzinger returned more explicitly to the question of the pope’s authority with respect to the sacred liturgy and of the nature of a liturgical rite:

With respect to the Liturgy, he has the task of a gardener, not that of a technician who builds new machines and throws the old ones on the junk-pile. The “rite,” that form

---

30. A reality taught by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1124–25.

31. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Assessment and Future Prospects,” in Alcuin Reid, OSB, ed., *Looking Again at the Question of the Liturgy: Proceedings of the July 2001 Fontgombault Liturgical Conference* (Farnborough, UK: St. Michael’s Abbey Press, 2003), 145–53.

of celebration and prayer which has ripened in the faith and the life of the Church, is a condensed form of living Tradition in which the sphere using that rite expresses the whole of its faith and its prayer, and thus at the same time the fellowship of generations one with another becomes something we can experience, fellowship with the people who pray before us and after us. Thus the rite is something of benefit that is given to the Church, a living form of *paradosis*, the handing-on of Tradition.<sup>32</sup>

And he made an incisive theological and pastoral contribution to the importance of the development of the liturgical rites in continuity:

It is important, in this connection, to interpret the “substantial continuity” correctly. The author expressly warns us against the wrong path up which we might be led by a Neoscholastic sacramental theology that is disconnected from the living form of the Liturgy. On that basis, people might reduce the “substance” to the matter and form of the sacrament and say: Bread and wine are the matter of the sacrament; the words of institution are its form. Only these two things are really necessary; everything else is changeable. At this point modernists and traditionalists are in agreement: As long as the material gifts are there, and the words of institution are spoken, then everything else is freely disposable. Many priests today, unfortunately, act in accordance with this motto; and the theories of many liturgists are unfortunately moving in the same direction. They want to overcome the limits of the rite, as being something fixed and immovable, and construct the products of their fantasy, which are supposedly “pastoral,” around this remnant, this core that has been spared and that is thus either relegated to the realm of magic or loses any meaning whatever. The Liturgical Movement had in fact been attempting to overcome this reductionism, the product of an abstract sacramental theology, and to teach us to understand the Liturgy as a living network of Tradition that had taken concrete form, that cannot be torn apart into little pieces but that has to be seen and experienced as a living whole. Anyone who, like me, was moved by this perception at the

---

32. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Preface” to *The Organic Development of the Liturgy: The Principles of Liturgical Reform and Their Relation to the Twentieth-Century Liturgical Movement Prior to the Second Vatican Council*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 9–13, at 11.

time of the Liturgical Movement on the eve of the Second Vatican Council can only stand, deeply sorrowing, before the ruins of the very things they were concerned for.<sup>33</sup>

Cardinal Ratzinger's words here are remarkable for their strength and for their insight: Neoscholastic reductionism? Ruins? One presumes that they were written to provoke further study, thought, prayer, and even action by a younger generation of scholars and clergy at a time when he himself, past retirement age, expected to be departing soon from the public arena.

#### A POPE OF THE SACRED LITURGY

As we know, Cardinal Ratzinger's long-held desire for some years of quiet retirement were denied him by his 2005 election as Pope Benedict XVI. Those who knew his writings on the subject hitherto were not surprised when the new pope, even though "not a trained liturgist," quickly became a pope of the sacred liturgy.

The key to the acts of Pope Benedict's governance, liturgical or otherwise, was set forth in his seminal discourse to the Roman Curia in December 2005, when famously he spoke of the hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity. He observes of the life of the Church since the council:

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call "a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture"; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the "hermeneutic of reform," of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm

---

33. *Ibid.*, 11.



many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.<sup>34</sup>

We find the liturgical application of this principle in Pope Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (February 22, 2007). In article three, he insists that "the changes which the Council called for need to be understood within the overall unity of the historical development of the rite itself, without the introduction of artificial discontinuities"; he notes, "I am referring here to the need for a hermeneutic of continuity also with regard to the correct interpretation of the liturgical development which followed the Second Vatican Council."

The pope did not mention a "reform of the reform" explicitly, but the implication that there had been incorrect interpretations of the liturgical development following the Second Vatican Council certainly facilitated its consideration. What *Sacramentum caritatis* did do, however, using the threefold structure of the blessed Eucharist as a mystery to be believed, celebrated, and lived, was to present an integral catechesis on the blessed Eucharist (and therefore on the sacred liturgy) that is at once doctrinal, liturgical, and pastoral. If *The Spirit of the Liturgy* was Joseph Ratzinger's *vademecum* for the new liturgical movement, *Sacramentum caritatis* was Pope Benedict XVI's manual of liturgical formation (theologically, ritually, and pastorally) for the universal Church. As such, it is a document of perennial value that warrants constant reference.

Pope Benedict's most famous act of liturgical governance was, of course, his *motu proprio Summorum pontificum* (2007), "On the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970," establishing that the older liturgical rites were "never abrogated" (1) and could therefore be freely used, and indeed that the requests of groups of the faithful for their celebration must be accepted. Bishops could no longer a priori exclude their celebration. Pope Benedict's regulation of these principles was permissive, marking a sharp change to the parsimonious approach of too many bishops up to that point.

---

34. Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings (Vatican City, 22 December 2005).

His accompanying “Letter to the Bishops on the Occasion of the Publication of the Apostolic Letter ‘*Motu Proprio Data*’ *Summorum Pontificum* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970” of the same date, dealt deftly with the loud opposition that this measure had attracted even before it appeared; he noted the pastoral reality that “young persons too have discovered this liturgical form, felt its attraction and found in it a form of encounter with the mystery of the most holy Eucharist, particularly suited to them,”<sup>35</sup> and appealed to the bishops: “Let us generously open our hearts and make room for everything that the faith itself allows.” The pope stated clearly,

In the history of the liturgy there is growth and progress, but no rupture. What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behoves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church’s faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place.

Again, for those who knew the liturgical thought of Joseph Ratzinger, this stance is no surprise. His openness to the realities concerned—historical, theological, and pastoral—is clear. But for those who shared neither his vision nor his openness, these were retrograde acts calling into question the Second Vatican Council and its liturgical reform.

The argument, such as it was, was won over time by what has come to be known as “the liturgical peace of Benedict XVI,” wherein the “liturgy wars” of previous decades which had established “old rite” and “new rite” factions subsided and, certainly thanks to many of the younger generation of bishops, gave way to a peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and even a degree

---

35. Benedict XVI, Letter to the Bishops on the Occasion of the Publication of the Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio Data*” *Summorum Pontificum* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970 (Vatican City, 7 July 2007).

I also can testify to this reality from many encounters with young people—lay men and women, religious, seminarians, and priests—whose vocations in the world either to Christian marriage or to the religious or the apostolic life are grounded in and nourished by the older liturgical forms in a truly life-giving way. In this respect, I can never forget my visit to the Paris-Chartres Pentecost pilgrimage in 2018: what hope these young people give to the Church of today and of the future!

of mutual enrichment between the liturgical forms that lasted well beyond the end of his pontificate, repairing the unity of the Church to some extent and enhancing it while respecting legitimate differences of expression within the Church of God.

It is profoundly to be regretted that the *motu proprio Traditionis custodes* (July 16, 2021) and the related *Responsa ad dubia* (December 4, 2021), perceived as acts of liturgical aggression by many, seem to have damaged this peace and may even pose a threat to the Church's unity. If there is a revival of the postconciliar "liturgy wars," or if people simply go elsewhere to find the older liturgy, these measures will have backfired badly. It is too early to make a thorough assessment of the motivations behind them, or of their ultimate impact, but it is nevertheless difficult to conclude that Pope Benedict XVI was wrong in asserting that the older liturgical forms "cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful," particularly when their unfettered celebration has manifestly brought forth good fruits.

#### CONCLUSION

One of the consolations of old age is to look at one's children and grandchildren as they get on with the business of life, to share in their joys, and to assist their perseverance in the face of adversity when it arises. One hopes that the father of the new liturgical movement, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, was able to do this as he saw the younger generations of lay men and women, clergy and religious, formed by the clear doctrinal teaching of St. John Paul II and led into that unique encounter with Christ living and acting in his Church today in and through the sacred liturgy by none other than himself, living ever more deeply from the spirit of the liturgy he came to know and love even as a boy.

For once one has been immersed in the inexhaustible reality of the sacred liturgy, once one has encountered its tender beauty and sustaining light, even (especially) in adversity, it cannot be set aside or forgotten. Because of this I am confident that the new liturgical movement—understood broadly and inclusively—has a singularly important contribution to make to the liturgical life of the Church in our day and in the future. For if we are to be faithful custodians of the liturgical tradition of the

Church that has been handed on to us, we must know it from within, we must come to love it as our own, and we must live from it and find in it that source and summit of our Christian life of which the Second Vatican Council spoke (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 10). We must also faithfully hand that living tradition on to those who come after us.

That Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke so eloquently of the sacred liturgy in our times, and that in God's providence he was called to the See of Peter and, as Pope Benedict XVI, taught us even more clearly about its centrality to the Christian life and its importance in the life of the Church, are singular graces for which we must thank almighty God—by bearing witness in living ever more faithfully and fruitfully from the treasures of this inexhaustible reality. □

*ROBERT SARAH* is a Guinean cardinal and prefect emeritus of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments.