

THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II AND THE LITURGICAL REFORM BETWEEN RECEPTION AND REJECTION

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Abstract. This study analyses the reception of the liturgical reform and the ongoing controversies surrounding its meaning and legitimacy sixty years after the Council. It highlights the deep historical roots of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, shaped by decades of liturgical renewal. The liturgical reform embodied a broader ecclesiological shift, integrating *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* to renew the Church and its relationship with the modern world. The postconciliar period, however, saw increasing polarisation, with debates framed between continuity and rupture. The *Summorum Pontificum* intensified the crisis by relativising the liturgical reform and empowering anti-conciliar trends. The liturgical debates reflect deeper ecclesiological tensions. The apostolic letters of Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes* and *Desiderio desideravi*, have sought to restore unity and reaffirm the authority of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform. Francis reconfirmed the postconciliar revised Missal as the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Catholic Church and emphasised the profound need for liturgical formation. He aimed to restore thereby the unity of the Church.

Keywords: Vatican II, liturgical movement, liturgical reform, liturgical debates, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Summorum Pontificum*, Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes*, *Desiderio desideravi*.

In the life of a person, the age of sixty signifies maturity. In the lifespan of a council, sixty may still signify young age. Viewed through the subjective perception of time in the twenty-first century, however, after sixty years the council appears as a distant event, even if, proverbially, the reception of a council requires a hundred

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years.² From the perspective of the reception of the Council and of the liturgical reform, the past sixty years were fraught by conflicts and attempts to delegitimise the conciliar reform and reverse its course.

This paper reflects on the reception of Vatican II, more specifically of the liturgical reform, sixty years after the conclusion of the Council, and on the response of Pope Francis to the liturgy debates. In the first part I briefly evoke the aims and guiding principles of the Council and of the liturgical reform, reminding that the liturgical movement was deeply rooted in the preconciliar liturgical movement. Looking at the reception, I recall the gradual delegitimisation of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform, notably during the turbulent period marked by the *Summorum Pontificum*. I then look at the way the magisterial documents of Pope Francis (*Traditionis custodes*, the Letter to the bishops, and *Desiderio desideravi*) have sought to restore and confirm the principles and desiderata of the liturgical reform.

What made Vatican II and its liturgical reform special?

A long preparatory stage

The Liturgical Constitution was not a theoretical document: the Council draw from and consecrated the insights and experience of the over fifty years of preconciliar liturgical renewal.³ The period preceding the council was a time of intensive theological reflection and quest; liturgists, systematic theologians, biblical scholars and ecumenists were seeking new paths and had the courage to act. The liturgical reform was one of the fields where this openness was particularly

2 “Es gibt Ideen und Verhaltensweisen, die von einer Restauration herrühren, der das Konzil grundsätzlich nicht akzeptiert hat. Das Problem ist nämlich, dass das Konzil in einigen Bereichen noch nicht akzeptiert wurde. Es ist auch wahr, dass es ein Jahrhundert dauert, bis ein Konzil Wurzeln schlägt. Wir haben also noch vierzig Jahre Zeit, um es zu etablieren!” Papst Franziskus im Gespräch mit den europäischen Kulturzeitschriften der Jesuiten (19.05.2022), *Stimmen der Zeit* (10.06.2022), <https://www.herder.de/stz/online/papst-franziskus-im-gespraech-mit-den-europaeischen-kulturzeitschriften-der-jesuiten/>.

3 Reiner KACZYNSKI, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Konstitution über die heilige Liturgie *Sacrosanctum Concilium*”, in Peter HÜNERMANN, Hans-Joachim SANDER and Reiner KACZYNSKI (eds.), *Sacrosanctum Concilium – Inter mirifica – Lumen gentium* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil 2), Freiburg: Herder, 2004, 1–261 (esp. 24–42).

manifest. The theological principles and practical initiatives of the liturgical renewal sought to make the liturgy the source and centre of spirituality.⁴ The liturgical movement started in a number of Benedictine communities and the liturgical apostolate strove to put the Mass at the centre of the life of the Church, and endorsed the participation of lay believers in the celebration of the Eucharist,⁵ particularly through liturgical formation and initiation in the spirit of the liturgy. Magisterial documents like the Instruction on Sacred Music *Tra le sollecitudini* of Pius X⁶ and the encyclicals of Pius XII⁷ paved the way for the liturgical reform of Vatican II.⁸

This long process of preparation can be seen as part of a wider process of historical reconciliation. Theologians developed a shared reflection and collaboration which removed barriers, resolved grievances, and healed the wounds inflicted by the wars. The 1913 meeting in Maria Laach, organised by Abbot Ildefons Herwegen, was later described by Robert Schuman as a cornerstone serving as foundation for the future Europe.⁹ Later, the Liturgical Conferences were a vivid testimony to the reconciliation among nations as well as events and expressions of the shared theological reflection. Through the choice of diverse locations, symbolic places of the West served as venues for liturgical reflection and action.¹⁰ The series of liturgical events culminated with the 1956 Assisi pastoral liturgical congress.

4 Andrea Grillo evokes Guardini's periodisation of the liturgical movement, distinguishing a first, "restorative phase (Solesmes); then an academic phase (Maria Laach, Beuron), and a realistic phase." Romano GUARDINI, Diary, 1953 May 26, quoted in Andrea GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V. Conflicting Interpretations of the Liturgical Reform* (trans. Barry Hudock), Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013, 11.

5 Lambert BEAUDUIN, *La piété de l'Église*, Leuven: Abbaye du Mont-César, 1914, 47; Id., "Das eigentliche Gebet der Kirche", *LJ* 9.4 (1959) 198–202; Romano GUARDINI, *Vom Geist der Liturgie* (Ecclesia orans 1), Freiburg: Grünwald/Schöning, 1922; Pius PARSH, *Das Jahr des Heiles*, Klosterneuburg: Volksliturgisches Apostolat, 1923.

6 *Tra le sollecitudini*, AAS 36 (1904) 325–329; Carlo BRAGA, Annibale BUGNINI, *Documenta ad instaurationem liturgicam spectantia 1903–1963*, Roma: CLV, 2000, 12–27.

7 *Mystici corporis*, AAS 35 (1943) 200–243; *Mediator Dei*, AAS 39 (1947) 528–580.

8 Nonetheless for a critical reflection on the limitations of *Mediator Dei*: GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 21–24.

9 Robert SCHUMAN, *Ein Blatt dankbarer Erinnerung*, *LJ* 9.4 (1959) 194.

10 Maria Laach (1951), Odilienberg (1952), Lugano (1953), Leuven, Mont César (1954), Assisi (1956), Monserrat (1958), München (1960).

With its 1,500 participants representing almost the whole Catholic Church, the Congress in Assisi may rightly be regarded as a small council.¹¹ Assisi displayed the universal character of the Catholic Church, a dimension that was to become a major feature of Vatican II. The festive event was not without shortcomings.¹²

The topics of the liturgical conferences were chosen in consultation with Rome, and the process was not always easy; nevertheless, negotiations proved fruitful and benefitted both parties.¹³ Remembering these perhaps now-forgotten events is important, because they expressed a deep desire to restore the centrality of the liturgy and the need to enhance the participation of the faithful in the Eucharistic celebration. The representatives of the liturgical movement recognised the signs of the times and sought to find responses to these challenges. This journey was on occasion fraught with tensions,¹⁴ yet determination and courage ultimately paid off, as the Council confirmed these insights and initiatives.

The spirit of the Council

Pope John XXIII convened the Council in this spirit of openness, dialogue, and attention to the challenges of the time. The Council was expected to be a new

11 The 1,500 participants represented the universal Church: Australia, Belgium, Germany, France, China, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, the US, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, and the Philippines. Johannes WAGNER, “Die Erneuerung der Liturgie aus dem Geist der Seelsorge unter dem Pontifikat Papst Pius XII”, *LJ* 6.4 (1956) 189–199. I could not find references to participants from Eastern Europe.

12 KACZYNSKI, “Theologischer Kommentar”, 41–42.

13 As indirectly attested by the *Mediator Dei*: “The same reasoning holds in the case of some persons who are bent on the restoration of all the ancient rites and ceremonies indiscriminately. The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But ancient usage must not be esteemed more suitable and proper, either in its own right or in its significance for later times and new situations, on the simple ground that it carries the savor and aroma of antiquity. The more recent liturgical rites likewise deserve reverence and respect. They, too, owe their inspiration to the Holy Spirit, who assists the Church in every age even to the consummation of the world. They are equally the resources used by the majestic Spouse of Jesus Christ to promote and procure the sanctity of man.” MD 61.

14 Max KASSIEPE, *Irrwege und Umwege*, in *Frömmigkeitsleben der Gegenwart*, Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1939, 15–16. August DOERNER, *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, M. Gladbach: B. Kühlen, 1941, 252–290.

Pentecost, to bring forth the spring of the Church,¹⁵ by promoting the renewal of ecclesial life, Christian unity, and an opening to the world.¹⁶ The Council was meant to “spread everywhere the light of truth”.¹⁷ Christian doctrine had to be defended and presented more effectively, investigated and presented it in timely manner.¹⁸ The aims of the Council associate faithfulness to tradition and accommodation to contemporary necessities with a look at the future. This tension between the two perspectives will be exacerbated during the council, as shown by the disagreement between the conservative and the progressive position.

As John O’Malley has noted, the vote on the Liturgical Constitution, the very first conciliar document to be promulgated, had implications that went beyond the liturgy. It reflected the principles of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*: the need to adapt the liturgy and implicitly ecclesial practice to the circumstances of the time and to return to the sources of the early Church – the Bible and the Church Fathers –, to reshape the liturgy: “The liturgists, that is to say, had returned to the ancient sources in order to find their way. The Mass was thus not so much

15 *Superno Dei nutu*, AAS 52 (1960) 433–437, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_letters/1960/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apl_19600605_superno-dei.htm (“*Superno Dei nutu* factum esse reputavimus quod Nobis, ad Pontificale Solium vix evectis, Concilii Oecumenici celebrandi, veluti flos inexpectati veris, subiit cogitatio.”).

16 *Ad Petri cathedram* (1959), 61–62, AAS 51 (1959) 497–531; Engl. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_29061959_ad-petri.html (the growth of the Catholic faith, the restoration of morals, the adaptation of Church discipline to the needs and conditions of our times; a wonderful spectacle of truth, unity, and charity that would be to non-Catholics a gentle invitation to seek and find unity); also *Superno Dei nutu*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_letters/1960/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apl_19600605_superno-dei.htm; *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 11, 14, 18–19

17 Allocutio Ioannis pp. XXIII in sollemni Ss. Concilii inauguratione *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (11.10.1962), 4; AAS 54.14 (1962) 786–796, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html; Engl. *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia. Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council*, <https://jakomonchak.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>

18 *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 11, 14 (Faithfulness to the unchanging truth did not dispense with accommodation in expressing it: “What is needed is that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which loyal submission is due, be investigated and presented in the way demanded by our times. For the deposit of faith, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed, but with the same meaning and the same judgement, is another thing”. GME 14).

‘modernized’ as made to conform more closely to fundamental and traditional principles.”¹⁹ However, the *ressourcement*, the return to the sources, a principle advanced by the *nouvelle théologie*, was not uncontested, as it questioned the idea of a continuous development, involving a return to an early or original point that had been forsaken, to which the Church had to return.²⁰ The principles of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* touched sensitivities in the Catholic Church, as they involved changing insights and practices that had been considered binding and immutable. Eventually, the Council adopted the principle of *aggiornamento*, according to which the Catholic Church had to adapt to the modern world. In doing so, it embraced certain values of modern culture. The return to the sources, Grillo argues, responded to a crisis of the liturgical practice. At the same time, *ressourcement* does not and cannot mean only a recovery of texts regarding the meaning and practice of the liturgy in the early Church; it requires the return to the liturgy itself as source, an initiation into the liturgy as expression of Christian faith.²¹

The radical decisions of the Council

Peter Hünermann argued that Vatican II involved a number of fundamental decisions involving a break with earlier paradigms. It expressed a new relationship with religions, following a break with the identification of the order of faith and of the Church with the state-church system (as articulated in *Dignitatis humanae*).

19 John W. O’MALLEY, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2008, 140.

20 On the mistrust towards the idea of *ressourcement*: O’MALLEY, *What Happened*, 41–42.

21 “In reality, no one has ever attempted such a radical rediscovery of the sources except in a situation of a grave crisis of praxis. The crisis is not the effect but the cause of the *ressourcement*. And yet *ressourcement* cannot be the ultimate solution to this crisis.” [...] “The crisis of the initiation of Christians into the rites and by means of the rites brought about a “return to the sources,” which in turn prepared for and brought about a “reform.” This reform can be brought to completion in Christian living only through an adequate liturgical initiation of believers into the Christian faith. We can say, in other words, that behind and before the “historical shift” that brought a new theological understanding of the rites through a “return to the sources,” there is the pastoral question of their actual significance as “sources of the life of the church’s faith.” GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 56, 57 (also 16, on the margin of Pius Parsch’ contribution).

Subsequently, the mission of the Church was viewed not as an imposition of a set of beliefs, but as an act of communication, dialogue and freedom, offering the opportunity to encounter the truth of the Gospel (*Ad gentes*). It involved the decision to part with the division between the Eastern and Western Church, abandoning the view of the Church as a monocultural Western church, and to end the division between Catholics and Protestant Christians within the Western Church (as attested by *Orientalium ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis redintegratio*). Finally, it transcended the condition of a church that falters on the threshold of modernity and expressed an understanding of faith in the context of modernity (*Gaudium et spes*). In sum, these profound and transformative decisions meant that the Catholic Church redefined its position in several respects: regarding the public sphere, the state, and supranational organisations, vis-à-vis non-Christian religions, non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities. Second, faith and church life were outlined for the modern age. This transformation resulted in a new theological profile.²²

The liturgical reform

The aims of the Council were reiterated by the Liturgical Constitution, which described the prominence assigned to the liturgy and the promotion of the liturgical reform as part of this endeavour:

This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy (SC 1).

22 Peter HÜNERMANN, “Die zentralen theologischen Aussagen des Konzils”, in Dirk ANSORGE, Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Impulse und Perspektiven (Frankfurter theologische Studien 70), Münster: Aschendorff, 2013, 23–51. Also, Peter HÜNERMANN, “‘...in mundo huius temporis’. A II. Vatikáni zsinat jelentősége korunk kultúrájának átalakulási folyamatában – a zsinati dokumentumok, mint alkotmányos szövegek”, tr. Görfföl Tibor, *Vigilia* 77.9 (2012) 642–649.

The Liturgical Constitution is not only a programmatic document on the liturgy and its reform, but an ecclesiological document. It reflects a vision of the Church both present in this world, and a pilgrim community, with a human, visible dimension subordinated to the divine, invisible, an incarnate Church, whose human, embodied, institutional dimension is open to change and renewal, and open to the world, a Church living from the Paschal mystery, a sacramental Church, living from the liturgy, from the baptism and the Eucharist, where liturgy is a celebration and the liturgy communicates to the people the work of our redemption.²³

The liturgy is defined as “the summit (*culmen*) toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font (*fons*) from which all her power flows” (SC 10).

Beyond emphasising the indispensable ministry of the priest in the Eucharistic celebration, the SC addressed the participation of the assembly of the people of God in celebrating the liturgy, and made the full, conscious and active participation (*participatio actuosa*) of the faithful the guiding principle of the liturgical reform. By recognising the plurality of rites and their distinctive features, including language and the manner of celebrating, as well as through a process of decentralization (manifested in the greater authority of the local bishops to decide on various aspects regarding the liturgy), the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reflected a broader vision of the liturgy and of the church.²⁴

As Andrea Grillo underscores, the participation of the entire people of God in the liturgy is fundamental to the liturgical reform,²⁵ and links it to the understanding of the liturgy as *fons*, as source of the faith and life of the Church. Thus, active participation does not mean merely an intellectual understanding of the liturgy. It means “practical ritual participation”, an initiation into the liturgy as *fons*, an experiential recovery of the “ritual-prayer level of eucharistic understanding”, of

23 Massimo FAGGIOLI, *True Reform Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012, 59, 65–71.

24 Albert GERHARDS, “Universalität und Partikularität. Zum Stand der liturgischen Erneuerung 50 Jahre nach Sacrosanctum Concilium”, in Dirk ANSORGE, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Impulse und Perspektiven* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 70), Münster: Aschendorff, 2013, 349–374.

25 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, xv (“The participation of the entire assembly in the single liturgical action is the fundamental purpose of the reform. If we forget the clarity and centrality of this decisive fact, the reform itself is rendered superfluous, almost effortlessly”); *ibid.*, 11: active participation as litmus test for the effectiveness of the liturgical reform.

the *actio sacra*.²⁶ Active participation also involves an “initiation of Christians into their rightful place in the church, always as subjects [...] but, most important, as witness-symbols (of gifts), that is, of an ecclesial identity marked – in body, in heart, and in mind – by the gracious and merciful lordship of Jesus”.²⁷

Reception or rejection?

The crisis

In the aftermath of the Council, after an initial enthusiasm, the changes and new emphases brought by the conciliar reforms stirred widespread fear. The position of the Council was gradually framed in terms of “break” or “continuity” with tradition, one side questioning the faithfulness and catholicity of the other.

Reflecting on the reception of the Council with special attention to the US, Massimo Fagioli argues that sixty years after its conclusion, the Council is no longer a point of encounter between different theological cultures in the Catholic Church, but its reception reflects a fragmented picture, related in part to the interruption of the conciliar tradition:

The relationship with Vatican II has changed, not only in terms of theological orientations, but also as a presence or absence of the event of the council and familiarity with its texts in the biographies, self-representation, imagination, and the lived faith of Catholics today. This fragmented picture is not simply the result of a natural shift in the role of Vatican II in the transition from generation to generation, but rather the result of processes of transmission and interruption of the conciliar tradition.²⁸

Conflicting interpretations of the Council have led over the past sixty years and in particular since the early 2000s to mutual alienation. In the US and in Western Europe, neoconservative theology gained momentum and influence. The liturgical

26 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 11, 18–19, 25–26. Also Andrea GRILLO, *A liturgia születése a 20. században. Tanulmány a liturgikus mozgalom és a (poszt)modernitás viszonyáról*, Pannonhalma: Bencés Kiadó, 2006, 290–291.

27 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 31.

28 Massimo FAGGIOLI, “Sixty Years from Vatican II: Points of No Return and New Uncertainties. Towards a Global and Synodal Reception of the Council”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 70.2 (2025) 5–18 (5).

reform became the focus of the clash. While initially the need for a “reform of the reform” was advanced, without an outright questioning of the Council, eventually the neoconservative stream targeted the very legitimacy of the Council and its liturgical reform. Over the past two and a half decades, especially in the US, the debates about the hermeneutics of the Council, about the liturgy and the liturgical reform acquired the outlook of liturgical wars (if not outright cultural wars).²⁹ This process was largely encouraged by the motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* of Benedict XVI (2007).³⁰ This gave extensive permission for the celebration of the so-called ‘extraordinary form of the Roman Rite’, the revised Tridentine Mass published in the Missal of John XXIII, recognised as “one of usages of the one Roman rite”, next to the Novus Ordo Missae (or later, the ‘Ordinary Form’), promulgated by Pope Paul VI.³¹ This gave unique legitimacy to the rite Vatican II considered in need of revision.³²

29 On the stages of the reception and the rejection of the Council, the increasing questioning of the legitimacy of the council by traditionalists: Massimo FAGGIOLI, *Vatican II: the Battle for Meaning*, New York: Paulist Press, 2012, 6–37; on the reinterpretation of the liturgical constitution and Benedict XVI’s emphasis on the need for a “reform of a reform”: 102–105, also 108–112 (the clash between the hermeneutics of continuity vs discontinuity). Also, John F. BALDOVIN, SJ, “The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy”, in Catherine E. Clifford, Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 148–166 (164–165); John F. BALDOVIN, SJ, “A Liturgical Reform in Peril? *Sacrosanctum Concilium Sixty Years On*”, in Clare V. JOHNSON, Gerard MOORE, Peter G. WILLIAMS (eds.), *Sacrosanctum Concilium. Exploring Liturgical Futures*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 9–22, on the postconciliar trends of the reinterpretation and rejection of the liturgical reform as part of the liturgical wars.

30 BENEDECT XVI, *Apostolic Letter Given Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html.

31 PAUL VI, *Apostolic Constitution Missale Romanum on New Roman Missal*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19690403_missale-romanum.html.

32 On the paradox of the coexistence of two rites and the problems it has caused: Martin KLÖCKENER, “Zwei Formen des einen römischen Ritus? Zur Überwindung eines problematischen Nebeneinanders”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 23–36.

The support of Benedict XVI for the “extraordinary form of the Roman Rite” undermined the normativity of the postconciliar liturgical reform. Martin Klöckener has shown that the recognition of the ‘extraordinary form’ endangered the progress reached with the conciliar liturgical reform. Such endangered results comprised the renewal of the liturgy of the word, a deeper understanding of the sacraments, the full, conscious and active participation of the faithful, the use of the vernacular languages, and the rich theology of the Eucharistic prayers and other rites, blessings and prayers. The emphasis on the importance of Scripture in the life of the Church and in the liturgy was followed by a reorganisation of the readings of the Mass. Biblical pericopes were also included in the celebration of the sacraments. The sacramental celebrations were revised so to express the essence of the sacraments. The *participatio actuosa* of the faithful in the liturgy, theologically grounded in baptism, is one of the most important principles of the Council; this was undermined by the clerical focus of the ‘extraordinary form’. The use of vernacular languages provided the basis for an understanding participation of the whole people of God. The new Eucharistic Prayers also enriched the liturgy of the Church.³³ The permissive position of *Summorum Pontificum* towards the ‘extraordinary form’ endangered these gains.

The delegitimisation of the Council reached a new peak with the attacks on Pope Francis, notably in the US. The causes were multiple: the ignorance of conciliar teaching, dissatisfaction with some of his positions, related for instance, to the issue of immigration (all the more as this aspect of the social teaching of the Church was less traditional).³⁴ Ultimately the Council itself became a target of the attacks. The fresh spirit and language of the Council, the emphasis on the people of God and the pilgrim Church, on brotherhood, collegiality, cooperation, and partnership signified for neo-conservative groups a break with traditional modes of expression. This language was amplified in Pope Francis’s forward discourse imbued with the appeal to mercy and compassion. Conservative ecclesial circles favoured a more authoritarian style of leadership, matching the political pattern

33 KLÖCKENER, “Zwei Formen”, 30–31. See also John F. BALDOVIN, “Liturgical Reconciliation: How to Get Beyond the «Exceptional Status» of *Summorum Pontificum*”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 37–43; Benedikt KRANEMANN, “Gottesdienst weiterentwickeln: Wohin soll der Weg der römischen Liturgie führen?”, in the same volume, 45–53.

34 FAGGIOLI, “Sixty Years”, 6–7.

whereby a firm hand is seen as providing security in times of uncertainty. This, in turn, has brought about hostility toward the perspective of the Council, and Francis was rejected for allegedly advancing modernism.

Attempts to exit the crisis: Pope Francis

Reflecting on the tasks of theology on the margin of the synod and on the inability of the Church to respond to contemporary challenges, Andrea Grillo reverses the charge of modernism brought against Pope Francis and against the conciliar paradigm change. Grillo shows that Trent was in fact the modern response to the crisis of tradition. Modern style and thought involved bureaucratisation, centralisation, and clericalisation. Vatican II was a response to the crisis of the modern, Tridentine paradigm that emerged during the 19–20th century, and developed a new way of engaging with tradition.³⁵ After the Council a new vocabulary, a new language of openness emerged, giving up the “bureaucratisation of faith” and the “institutional formalisation of tradition”, and a new ‘canon’ of action was developed. However, in recent times, paradoxically the Church uses the language of Vatican II but acts according to the Tridentine ‘canon’.³⁶ This goes for many aspects of the life of the Church but is especially true of the liturgy. Vatican II initiated a “translation of tradition” that produced a comprehensive reform of all the ritual actions of Christian life. Not surprisingly, this ‘new canon’ became the target of the most stubborn resistance from those who refused to abandon the ‘modern’, Tridentine understanding of the Church. Pope Francis gave a clear response to those who ‘suspended’ the liturgical reform, between 2007 and 2021 (a hint to the period between the *Summorum Pontificum* and the *Traditionis custodes*), and rejected the new liturgical ‘canon’ claiming nonetheless to be “Roman Catholic”.³⁷ The synodal style employed by Francis, the synodal process is restrained by the ‘wheellock’ of fear. Grillo notes that opposing a lexicon

35 Andrea GRILLO, “Fare teologia oggi. Il passaggio dalla società dell’onore alla società della dignità”, *Munera. Rivista Europea di cultura* (21.05.2025), <https://www.cittadellaeditrice.com/munera/fare-teologia-oggi-lonore-e-la-dignita-oltre-il-blocco/>.

36 “Spesso noi parliamo il lessico del Concilio Vaticano II, ma agiamo secondo un canone che resta quello tridentino.” GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid.* He follows here Pierangelo Sequeri.

37 GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid.* On the response of Pope Francis, also Felix NEUMANN, “Wer sich gegen die neue Liturgie stellt, stellt sich gegen die Kirche. Franziskus verteidigt das

of openness to the rigidity of a ‘modern canon’ is not sufficient: the Church has to address a whole series of issues that touch on the dignity of individuals.³⁸

Pope Francis responded with two apostolic letters to the questioning of the liturgical reform that gained impetus after the *Summorum Pontificum. Traditionis custodes*³⁹ and *Desiderio desideravi*⁴⁰ restrained the use of the Roman rite prior to the 1970 reform, expressed strong support for the conciliar liturgical reform and emphasised the importance of the liturgical formation of the entire people of God. *Traditionis custodes* introduces firm regulations regarding the use of the 1962 Roman rite. The accompanying Letter addressed to the bishops explains the decision.⁴¹ Thus, the concessions granted by John Paul II and Benedict XVI were intended to preserve the unity of the Church. However, the 2020 consultation of the bishops, conducted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the application of the *Summorum Pontificum* has shown that the concessions did not yield the expected outcome.⁴² Following these developments, the pope

Konzil gegen die Restauration”, *katholisch.de* (30.06.2022), <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/39918-franziskus-verteidigt-das-konzil-gegen-die-restauration>.

38 Deliberations must not be silenced. Acting otherwise would prove that mentally the Church continues to live in the modern, bureaucratic, and institutional forms of the 16th century. GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid*.

39 Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio by the Supreme Pontiff Francis “*Traditionis Custodes*” on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970 (16 July 2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html.

40 Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi* of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, to Consecrated Men and Women and to the Lay Faithful on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God (29 June 2022), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html.

41 Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops of the Whole World, that Accompanies the Apostolic Letter Motu Proprio Data “*Traditionis Custodes*” (16 July 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescoviliturgia.html>

42 “The responses [to the inquiry of the CDF] reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me, and persuades me of the need to intervene. Regrettably, the pastoral objective of my Predecessors, who had intended “to do everything possible to ensure that all those who truly possessed the desire for unity would find it possible to remain in this unity or to rediscover it anew”, [SP] has often been seriously disregarded.” *Letter*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescoviliturgia.html>

felt compelled to restore the unity of the Church, through unity in the liturgical celebration.

Pope Francis declared the post-conciliar, renewed Roman Missal “the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” and it established the exclusive competence of the bishops to authorise the use of the 1962 Missal, breaking with the far more permissive regulations of the *Summorum Pontificum*.⁴³ In the accompanying letter, Francis addressed the abuse of the pastoral intent of the *Summorum Pontificum*, which eventually failed to promote the unity of the Church,⁴⁴ and pointed to the rejection of the liturgical reform and of the Council based on the unfounded claim of betrayal of tradition and of the Church.⁴⁵ While repeatedly emphasising the continuity with the intention of Pope Benedict, expressed in *Summorum Pontificum*, *Traditiones custodes* and the accompanying Letter show that the concessions not only failed to achieve the unity of a Church embattled by debates over the appropriate form of the liturgy, but they contributed in fact to the divisions and to the delegitimisation of the Council.

Desiderio desideravi provides important insights regarding the liturgy and strengthens the reception of the conciliar liturgical reform and ecclesiology. The pope proposes a biblical-theological reflection on the liturgy. The apostolic letter

[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftnref12](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftnref12).

43 “The liturgical books promulgated by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” (TC 1). “It belongs to the diocesan bishop, as moderator, promoter, and guardian of the whole liturgical life of the particular Church entrusted to him, to regulate the liturgical celebrations of his diocese. Therefore, it is his exclusive competence to authorize the use of the 1962 Roman Missal in his diocese, according to the guidelines of the Apostolic See (TC 2).

44 “An opportunity offered by St. John Paul II and, with even greater magnanimity, by Benedict XVI, intended to recover the unity of an ecclesial body with diverse liturgical sensibilities, was exploited to widen the gaps, reinforce the divergences, and encourage disagreements that injure the Church, block her path, and expose her to the peril of division.” Letter, *ibid.*

45 “I am nonetheless saddened that the instrumental use of *Missale Romanum* of 1962 is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the Tradition and the “true Church”. Letter, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftnref13.

defines the liturgy as the actualisation (the “today”) of salvation history and as encounter with the living Christ through the Eucharist and the other sacraments. The liturgy is the glorification of God; it is the place of encounter with God, in the ongoing story of salvation which unfolds today. “The Liturgy gives glory to God because it allows us – here, on earth – to see God in the celebration of the mysteries.” (DD 43). The focus on the encounter with Christ and the immersion in the Paschal mystery can rightly be seen as the most important goal of every liturgical celebration (an exclusive emphasis on external aspects of the celebration misses the point).⁴⁶

The celebrating subject of the liturgy is the entire Church, the mystical Body of Christ (not just the priest, DD 36).⁴⁷ The theological depth of the liturgy is defined following the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as *culmen* and *fons* of the life of the Church.

The pope reaffirms the normative character of the Missal of Paul VI as the “unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” (cf. TC 1). The tension surrounding the form of the liturgical celebration is not simply a question of taste, but it is ecclesiological in nature. The rejection of the liturgical reform equals the rejection of the ecclesiological vision of the Church as developed in *Lumen gentium*, and of Vatican II as such, an attitude that would be incomprehensible in a Catholic.⁴⁸ This is one of the most notable statements with regard to the reception

46 Dariusz KWIATOWSKI, “The Reception of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi*”, *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 46 (2024) 143–158 (156).

47 Thus, the liturgy is not merely the concern of the clergy, nor is it sufficient to relegate it to the domain of legislation, nor is it simply the transmission of grace. FEHÉRVÁRY Örs Jákó, “Desiderio desideravi: Vissza (vagy előre?) a liturgikus mozgalomhoz!”, in ID., *Az ünnepélez művészete*, Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2024, 143–171. This does not dismiss or minimise the role of the priest. On the role of the priest as presiding at the Eucharist, as a gift of the Holy Spirit received in ordination, and as instrument of the presence of Christ and of the Holy Spirit: DD 56–60. By presiding at the celebration, the priest is formed in the liturgy.

48 “It would be trivial to read the tensions, unfortunately present around the celebration, as a simple divergence between different tastes concerning a particular ritual form. The problematic is primarily ecclesiological. I do not see how it is possible to say that one recognizes the validity of the Council — though it amazes me that a Catholic might presume not to do so — and at the same time not accept the liturgical reform born out of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, a document that expresses the reality of the Liturgy intimately

of the liturgical reform and the liturgical debates, as it underscores the deep link between ecclesiology and liturgical celebration: the rejection of the liturgical reform is rooted in the rejection of conciliar ecclesiology. This understanding of the liturgy is a response to the liturgical question, underscoring that the image of the Church always determines the interpretation of the liturgy. It also shows that the critique or rejection of the liturgical reform always also signifies the rejection of the teaching and theology of Vatican II.⁴⁹

The Letter to the Bishops and *Desiderio desideravi* point to the link between the aim of liturgical reform and the full, conscious and active participation of the whole People of God in the liturgy. The Letter highlights the continuity between this principle of the Liturgical Constitution and previous magisterial decisions.⁵⁰

joined to the vision of Church so admirably described in *Lumen gentium*. For this reason, as I already expressed in my letter to all the bishops, I have felt it my duty to affirm that “The liturgical books promulgated by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite.” [TC 1]. The non-acceptance of the liturgical reform, as also a superficial understanding of it, distracts us from the obligation of finding responses to the question that I come back to repeating: how can we grow in our capacity to live in full the liturgical action? How do we continue to let ourselves be amazed at what happens in the celebration under our very eyes? We are in need of a serious and dynamic liturgical formation.” (DD 31, cf. TC 1). On Francis’s emphasis on the intimate link between the documents of Vatican II: Massimo FAGGIOLI, “How Francis Talks About the Liturgy It’s his way of talking about Vatican II”, *Commonweal* (2023.03.12), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/how-francis-talks-about-liturgy>.

49 “The Liturgical Reform from 1963 until Today . . . and Beyond”, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32.2 (2016) 201–217 (202: “The example of the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), which is in schism, clearly shows that the rejection of the liturgical reform could not be kept under control, not even with the exceptions that John Paul II granted them in the postconciliar period.”). Also, Andrea GRILLO, “Superare lo stato di eccezione liturgica: restituire autorità alla *lex orandi* e ai Vescovi”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 67–76 (69–71).

50 “From the vota submitted by the Bishops there emerged a great insistence on the full, conscious and active participation of the whole People of God in the liturgy, along lines already indicated by Pius XII in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* on the renewal of the liturgy. The constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* confirmed this appeal, by seeking ‘the renewal and advancement of the liturgy’ [SC 1, 14], and by indicating the principles that should

According to the *Desiderio desideravi*, the principles of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* “continue to be fundamental for the promotion of that full, conscious, active, and fruitful celebration [SC 11; 14] in the liturgy” (DD 16). The intention of the liturgical reform, as established by the ecumenical council, was that “the faithful would not assist as strangers and silent spectators in the mystery of faith, but, with a full understanding of the rites and prayers, would participate in the sacred action consciously, piously, and actively”. (The Letter to the bishops quotes here SC 48.) It was this intention that led to the revision of the Roman Missal (initiated already by Pius XII, based on “ancient liturgical sources”, allowing the Church to raise “a single and identical prayer” in unity, in the variety of languages). Restoring the authority of the post-conciliar Missal is aimed to reestablish the unity of the Church, expressed in the liturgy.

The essence and purpose of active participation consist in understanding and living the spirit of the liturgy: “the fundamental question is this: how do we recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action? This was the objective of the Council’s reform. The challenge is extremely demanding because modern people – not in all cultures to the same degree – have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act.” (DD 27).

The *Desiderio desideravi* pleads therefore for a thorough liturgical formation, both as theoretical instruction *for* the liturgy and as participative, initiatory formation *in and by* the liturgy (DD 34). Stressing liturgical formation takes up a principle of the liturgical movement, emphasised already by Lambert Beauduin and Romano Guardini. The Pope explicitly quotes Guardini on several occasions. Liturgical formation involves an inner transformation and a new way of religious relationing, without which ritual and textual reforms are unhelpful.⁵¹ In view of the inability to understand symbols, this is “the first task of the work of liturgical

guide the reform [SC 3]. In particular, it established that these principles concerned the Roman Rite, and other legitimate rites where applicable, and asked that ‘the rites be revised carefully in the light of sound tradition, and that they be given new vigor to meet present-day circumstances and needs.’ Letter, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftn15.

51 DD 34, referring to Romano GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung* I, Rothenfels, 1923, quoted after Romano GUARDINI, *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1992, 43; also Romano GUARDINI, *Der Kultakt und die gegenwärtige Aufgabe der Liturgischen Bildung. Ein Brief*, Aschendorf, 1964, cited from id., *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, 14.

formation: man must become once again capable of symbols.”⁵² *Desiderio desideravi* also quotes Guardini extensively on the need to overcome individualism and subjectivism in religious life and the imperative of regaining “the sense for the ‘great’ style of praying”, “through discipline, through giving up weak sentimentality; through serious work, carried out in obedience to the Church, on our religious being and acting”. This discipline is manifested in the liturgical uniformity in gestures and voice, which raises in individual participants “the awareness of being one body”.⁵³ Liturgical formation is a continuous exertion: “Since the gift of the mystery celebrated surpasses our capacity to know it, this effort certainly must accompany the permanent formation of everyone, with the humility of little ones, the attitude that opens up into wonder.” (DD 38).

Francis also discusses the manner of celebrating, addressing the two extremes that emerged after the council: “the *ars celebrandi* cannot be reduced to only a rubrical mechanism, much less should it be thought of as imaginative – sometimes wild – creativity without rules. The rite is in itself a norm, and the norm is never an end in itself, but it is always at the service of a higher reality that it means to protect.” (DD 48).

Concluding remarks

Sixty years after the conclusion of the Council, the reception of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform is a marked by commotions and conflicts. After a couple of decades marked by enthusiasm and effervescence, an increasing polarisation developed. Although deeply rooted in several decades of liturgical renewal, the conciliar reform was branded as a break with tradition. The *Summorum Pontificum*, which recognised the pre-conciliar Mass as the “extraordinary form” of the Roman Rite, contributed to the delegitimisation of the liturgical reform and encouraged anti-conciliar positions.

The apostolic letters of Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes* and *Desiderio desideravi*, have sought to restore unity and reaffirm the authority of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform. Francis reconfirmed the revised Missal of Paul VI as a unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Catholic Church and emphasised the profound need for liturgical formation.

52 GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung*, 36.

53 DD 50–51, GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung* I, 81, quoted after GUARDINI, *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, 99.

Given the deep link between liturgy and ecclesiology, the fundamental question is ecclesiological. The resurgence of an apologetic form of Catholicism, self-styled as “true Catholicism”, has been accompanied by a rejection of conciliar teachings and of the liturgical reform (based on the claim that the Tridentine Latin Mass represented the authentic liturgy in line with the tradition of the Church). This stance reflects a defensive vision of the Church as besieged stronghold, seeking to safeguard tradition and thereby security, against perceived enemies in contemporary world. Conversely, the Liturgical Constitution and the apostolic letters of Pope Francis reflect a different ecclesiological vision. Pope Francis has consistently argued for a Church able to step out of the accustomed sphere, of the comfort zone, to go out to the periphery, following the example of Christ, to reach out to contemporary humanity. The reception of the Council presupposes the courage to step out from behind the walls. The Catholic Church has to find the language to address contemporary people and respond to their religious and spiritual needs. The Church is not defending fortresses, but are bolder, daring. The stagnation and decline of synodal reception, or lamenting over the past, will not lead anywhere.

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