

Pope Francis says with magisterial authority: the Vatican II liturgical reform is ‘irreversible’

Seeking to put an end to various attempts to roll back the reform of the liturgy introduced by the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis this morning stated unequivocally that “the reform of the liturgy is irreversible.”

He declared this in a major address for National Liturgical Week in Italy, marking the 70th anniversary of Center for Liturgical Action. A source close to the pontiff told *America* the remarks were intended not only for the Italian liturgists present but the Church worldwide.

In his talk on Aug. 24, Francis reminded his audience that over the past 70 years “substantial and not superficial events” have happened in the life of the Church and in the history of the liturgy. Vatican II and the reform of the liturgy are “two events directly linked,” and “they did not flower in an unexpected way but were prepared over a long time.”

He recalled that this preparation came through the liturgical movement that began many decades before the council and in the responses of the different popes in the first half of the 20th century.

St. Pius X took a first major step, the pope said, when he issued a decree in 1903 about the reordering of sacred music and the revival of the celebration of Sunday Mass. He also set up a commission for the general reform of the liturgy that he envisaged would take “many years.”

The reform project was next taken up by Pius XII in 1947 when he published the encyclical “*Mediator Dei*” and established a commission to study reforms in the liturgy. He introduced reforms around the Eucharistic fast, the use of “the living language” in the liturgy and, most important, the Easter Vigil and Holy Week.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) brought all these efforts to maturity when it approved the “*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*,” whose general lines of reform “responded to real needs and to the concrete hope of renewal: it wanted a living liturgy for a Church made alive by the mysteries it celebrated,” Pope Francis said. Vatican II, he continued, sought to ensure “that the faithful would not assist as outsiders and mute spectators at the mystery of faith but, understanding it well through the rites and prayers, would participate in the sacred action knowingly, piously and actively.”

He recalled that in January 1965, Blessed Paul VI, explaining the first steps of the reform that were then underway, made clear that “it is the Church’s authority that wished [this reform]” and wanted “to promote and set alight this new way of praying” and that everyone should come on board as disciples of the Lord.

Francis said the direction traced by the council “took form...in the liturgical books promulgated by Blessed Paul VI, that were welcomed by the very bishops that were present at the council and that have now been in universal use in the Roman Rite for almost 50 years.”

The pope underlined the fact that “the practical application” of this reform, “guided by the bishops’ conferences in the respective countries, is still under way. Because it is not sufficient to reform the liturgical books to reform the mentality.” He said “the books reformed, according to the decrees of Vatican II, have started a process that requires time, faithful reception, practical obedience, wise active celebration, first on the part of the ordained ministers but also of the other ministers, of the singers and of all who participate in the liturgy.”

“In truth,” he said, “the liturgical education of pastors and faithful is a challenge always to be faced anew.” He recalled that Paul VI, one year before he died, told the cardinals at a consistory, “The time has come, now, to definitely leave aside the disruptive ferments, equally pernicious in one sense or the other, and to implement fully, according to its right inspiring criteria, the reform approved by us in application of the decisions [votes] of the council.” It is clear that Francis shares this position.

Vatican II Liturgical Reform (Page 2)

“Today, too,” Francis added, “there’s much [work] to be done in this direction, by recovering the reasons for the decisions taken through the liturgical reform, overcoming unfounded and superficial readings, partial receptions and practices that disfigure it.”

He emphasized that “it is not a matter of rethinking the reform by revisiting the choices [made] but of knowing better the underlying reasons, also through historical documentation, so as to interiorize the principles that inspired them and to observe the discipline that regulates [the reform].” Indeed, Pope Francis declared, “after this magisterial and long journey we can affirm that the liturgical reform is irreversible.”

After this general reflection, Francis went on to address some specific aspects of the Italian conference that focused on the theme “*A live liturgy for a live Church.*”

“The liturgy is ‘alive’ because of the living presence of Christ,” he said. “Just as without a heartbeat there is no human life, so too without the pulsating heart of Christ there is no liturgical action.”

While some have spoken of celebrating the liturgy looking “to the East,” Francis today emphasized that “the altar is one of the visible signs of the invisible mystery, the sign of Christ the living stone.” For this reason, the altar is “the center to which the attention converges in all our churches.”

Moreover, seeking to counter a clerical mentality in celebrating the liturgy, Francis emphasized that “the liturgy is life for the entire people of the church,” and “by its nature the liturgy is in fact ‘popular’ and not clerical” because “it is an action for the people but also of the people.”

He recalled that the council’s constitution on the liturgy has stated clearly that “liturgical actions are not private actions but celebrations of the Church.”

There has been a tendency to use the liturgy to exclude people, but Francis has had little time for this approach. Today again he said, “The Church in prayer gathers all those whose have a heart that listens to the Gospel, without excluding anyone: The small and the great are called, as are the rich and the poor, children and old people, the healthy and the sick, the just and sinners.

He said “the liturgical assembly overcomes, in Christ, all confines of age, race, language and nationality”; it is “inclusive and not exclusive” and fosters “the communion of all.” He emphasized that “the Eucharist is not a sacrament ‘for me,’ it is the sacrament of many that form one body, the holy, faithful people of God.”

Some have sought to downgrade popular piety, something that Francis greatly values. And, in his talk, he said it should not be forgotten that “the liturgy above all else expresses the piety of the whole people of God, that is prolonged then by pious exercises and devotions that we know by the name of popular religion, which should be valued and encouraged in harmony with the liturgy.”

Pope Francis concluded his talk by emphasizing yet again that “the liturgy is life, not an idea to be understood.” Liturgical worship “is not above all a doctrine to be understood or a rite to be accomplished,” the pope said. “It is a wellspring of life and of light for our journey of faith.”