PASTORAL CONVERSION AND LITURGY

Pope Francis’ Gospel Vision in Context

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
15 September 2014
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Pastoral Conversion and Liturgy

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I. Introduction

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis makes an urgent appeal for renewal in the contemporary Church. He seeks a:

“path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (*EG*, 25),

and adds that “even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them” (*EG*, 26),

and, so speaks of a “renewal of structures [that is] demanded by pastoral conversion”(*EG*, 27).

As the Supreme Pastor of the Church, the Holy Father’s ecclesial perspective is necessarily broader than any one of ours could possibly be. His contact with the life of the Church is unique and, from his wide experience, and with that remarkable skill of perspicacity, something of which he displays every day, he reads the signs of the times and with utter conviction looks upon not only what is needed today, but looks ahead to the challenges of which, we too, know are forming in the distance. It goes without saying, that in any pastoral scrutiny of Catholic life, the liturgical life of the Church is an enormously important part of any missionary regeneration. At first glance, it may not seem to be the most urgent thing that needs attention. There are many pieces of the jigsaw that a Bishop has to attend to – not all of equal importance, not all urgent and possibly not all essential. But we know only too well, even from our own limited experience, that taking the eye off any ball for too long may indeed lead to an unwelcome goal. Bishops can begin the day with a clear idea of what lays before them, what your intended achievements are, only to be scuppered by an hitherto unknown factor that demands your urgent attention, despite the fact that were circumstances different it would not occupy your attention at all. The liturgy, however, remains a constant factor for the Bishop as the ‘chief liturgist’ of the diocese, for it is the life-force of the entire community and, as such, requires our continual attentiveness. Chief liturgist? But then, you may very well think, I’m a chief in a lot of other ways too – welcome or unwelcome! Being on the front line of the Church demands many qualities and talents, not least a swiftness of foot. But the Eucharist is what lies pre-eminently at the heart of the life of the Church – Christ’s life-giving source - that gives us the energy, inspiration, determination and courage to do whatever it is that we have to do and, willingly or unwillingly have to take responsibility for.

It is true that in *Evangelii Gaudium* the Holy Father is not really implying much of anything about the liturgy per se. He is certainly not talking about the need for a ‘reform of the reform’. The reform has already taken place under conciliar direction and constitution.
Nevertheless, the Holy Father’s call for renewal unavoidably has liturgical implications for, any rekindling of the spirit in the life of the Church, if it is to be fruitful, must be connected to the liturgy in some manner. So from this perspective, I would like to explore two themes with you in this address:

a) First, by way of background and for the sake of context, I wish to say a few words about the fact that a significant “renewal of structures” in the liturgical life of the Church has already taken place, which, in a way, anticipated in some sense the current appeal of the Holy Father. Therefore, I’d like briefly to review with you how this renewal took place, and in particular I would like to highlight the ways in which the movement leading up to this renewal shared many of its goals with those expressed by the Holy Father in Evangelii Gaudium. I believe that this story has something important to say to us still.

b) Then, second, I would like to offer some thoughts as to how this urgent appeal for renewal might find expression in the liturgical life of the Church in your Dioceses.

II. The Liturgical Movement as forerunner of renewal

“Pastoral and missionary conversion” was clearly the primary objective of the Second Vatican Council, which as we know did not leave things as they [were]. Everything the Fathers of the Council said was aimed at the kinds of pastoral decisions that would lead to deeper conversion. It can be taken for granted, therefore, that a conversion of heart – from the well springs of eternal life - was the primary objective of the very first document approved by the Council Fathers in the renewal of the life and the mission of the Church, the “living body of Christ” in the world.

The adoption of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, on 4th December 1963, exactly 400 years after the closing session of the Council of Trent, was a significant event not only for the liturgy but also for the life and direction of the Catholic Church. It was the first document to be approved by the Council. As Pope Benedict XVI said at his final meeting with the clergy of Rome: I find now, looking back, that it was a very good idea to begin with the liturgy, because in this way the primacy of God could appear, the primacy of adoration. "Operi Dei nihil praeponatur": this phrase from the Rule of Saint Benedict (cf. 43:3) thus emerges as the supreme rule of the Council.¹ The vote in favour was decisive: 2147 for, and only 4 against. This in itself is indicative of the general belief by the Fathers of the Council that a liturgical renewal would assist to orient the Church towards a “pastoral conversion” through the celebration of the mysteries of Christ.

In reality, this renewal came about as a result of over a hundred years of a growing desire for ecclesial renewal through the biblical, patristic, liturgical and ecumenical movements that were beginning to sprout in various parts of the Church. The scholars and pastors who studied the sources during these years – especially ancient liturgical and patristic texts – and their

¹ Meeting with the Parish Priests and the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome (14 February 2013)
hermeneutics - were led to carefully compare what they found in those ancient sources as against what they experienced in the then current state of the Church’s life. Was the spirit of ‘living in Christ’, which was so evident in the ancient sources, still to be found as plainly evident in the contemporary Church? As a result, these studies led to the emergence of a new emphasis on the Church as the ‘People of God’ and as a praying community in contrast to reducing the idea of the Church to a hierarchical structure. They also encouraged a rediscovery of the value and meaning of the liturgy for the vitality of the Church. And so the Liturgical Movement gained considerable momentum in the latter half of the 19th century and through the first half of the 20th. One of its main driving forces was to reconnect the faithful to an understanding of sacred signs and of their personal participation in them. Without doubt, this was a movement towards a “pastoral conversion” of the kind demanded in our day by Pope Francis.

It is generally agreed by scholars that this Liturgical Movement began with the work of Prosper Gueranger (+ 1875), founder and Abbot of the French monastery of Solesmes. His contribution was to reawaken a love for the liturgy in monastic life and, at the same time, it reached out to the laity through popular publications. His work demonstrated a desire for renewal, through an increase in understanding and appreciation of the great treasure house that the liturgy is, instead of the all-too-easy style of “going through the motions” in the celebration of the mysteries of our salvation.

Gueranger’s work stirred up a great deal of interest, and a decisive impulse to this was given by Pope Saint Pius X (1903-1914), who, at the beginning of the 20th century, proposed to bring the ‘faithful closer to the liturgy’, making it more “popular” – popular in the sense of being “accessible” to the people of God. In response to the question of where can Christians really tap into the true spirit that makes them Christian (that is, “alive in Christ”), St. Pius X had no hesitation in answering that the faithful get their “true Christian spirit” by drawing on “its primary and indispensable source, which is the active participation in the most sacred mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” (Tra le sollecitudini, 22 November 1903).

St. Pius X courageously began the difficult work of liturgical reform. For example, he worked to restore the liturgical sense of “Sunday” by freeing it from the feasts of saints, which had a tendency to overshadow the primary Christian festival. He initiated a reform of the Breviary, and pushed for the renewal of sacred music and song, indicating the criteria which were truly at the service of the liturgy and not governed by any other purpose. He realised that this would not be easy due to the complexity of such a reform, and wrote in 1913: In truth, and in the opinion of the experts, all this will require an extensive work; and necessarily, therefore, it will be several years before this liturgical edifice ... reappears again resplendent in its dignity and harmony, having been cleaned of the dreariness of aging. (Abhine duos annos, 23).

This Papal initiative gave implicit endorsement to those who had followed in the footsteps of Gueranger, such as Dom Lambert Beauduin OSB (+ 1960) of the Belgian abbey of Mont-César and the Benedictine Abbey of Maria Laach in Germany. These abbeys gave birth to a great variety of associations, periodicals, congresses, and weeks of study. Initiatives quickly flourished
at diocesan level and also on a national and international scale, one example being in Ottawa in May 1931, where it was said two ‘liturgiologists’ came from Belgium. The important thing to note is that while these efforts were founded on seeking a deeper understanding of the liturgy through the study of theological, scriptural and patristic sources, this was always carried out with an increasingly pastoral objective in view.

The Holy See, at the time, not only noted these developments, but also began to take an active role in this movement itself. Pope Pius XI wrote the Apostolic Constitution *Divini cultus* in 1928 and established the Historical Section of the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1930 (which, of course, was the precursor of the Congregation for Divine Worship). Pope Pius XII followed this by sanctioning the contribution made by the liturgical movement for the renewal of Christian life in his encyclical *Mediator Dei* (20 November 1947). This was then followed by the encyclical *Musicae sacrae discipline* (25 December 1955) and the creating of a commission to make concrete proposals for a general plan towards liturgical reform. At the same time he made important decisions on other matters. He issued a new Latin version of the Psalter to facilitate the understanding of the Psalms; he mitigated the Eucharistic fast to facilitate easier access to Holy Communion; he authorized the use of the vernacular in certain circumstances for certain parts of sacramental rites and also in the reading of the Sacred Scriptures at Mass; he gave wider permission for evening Masses to be celebrated in order to meet the changing needs of the faithful; he simplified the rubrics of the Breviary and the Calendar; and, perhaps most importantly, he authorized a reform of the Easter Vigil in 1951 and Holy Week in 1955. The thing most worth emphasizing here is that all of these developments were driven by pastoral considerations – by a desire to help the faithful interiorize the truth of the liturgy and to make their participation in it more accessible. One only has to consider the fact that before the reforms of the mid-fifties, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil all took place in the early morning and generally without the lay faithful being present.

This drive continued under Pope Saint John XXIII, even before the opening of the Second Vatican Council. With an eye to the need for a wider and more fundamental undertaking, rubrics for the Missal and Breviary were revised, new typical editions of the liturgical books were published, and an important decree for the ordering of an Adult Catechumenate was issued.

Following the Pope’s announcement that he was calling a Council, preparatory work began by undertaking a survey of the world’s Bishops, in the hope that there would be some consensus around the most important themes worldwide. There was a 77% response from just over 2,500 bishops. Twenty percent of these were entirely about the liturgy. They included a call for the enhancement of the teaching and the educational character of the liturgy, the simplification of the rites, the introduction of the vernacular, greater adaptation to different cultures, and greater participation by the faithful. This response from the world’s Bishops demonstrated that the

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2 From ‘The Tablet’ 9 May, 1931: “CANADA A LITURGICAL WEEK.--Taking for its general theme “The Holy Mass,” a Liturgical Week has been held in Ottawa. Dominicans set the ball rolling, and two Benedictine liturgiologists came over from Belgium to help. The “missa dialogata” was among the subjects discussed. It is intended to hold a similar week every year in some Canadian city”.

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expectations of the Church as a whole coincided with the work of the scholars and promoters of the liturgical movement.

The culmination of all this activity is well-known: namely the instruction found in Sacrosanctum Concilium and the subsequent revision of the Roman Rite carried out by the Consilium and approved by Pope Paul VI. Alongside this Constitution I believe we must also always place the important Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum. The Liturgical Movement – from its beginnings to the time of the Council – had worked to bring the people closer to the liturgy by increasing their understanding by means of scholarship, formation and education. At the same time, it also (and this is very significant) worked to bring the liturgy closer to the people, in the sense of modifying it where necessary in order to make it more accessible. Pope Francis speaks of a need for a “renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion”. It occurs to me that the Liturgical Movement serves as a good example for us of this, and may still hold for us today indications to assist us in the ongoing renewal of the Church, called for by the Holy Father.

III. Liturgical implications of the Holy Father’s appeal

Keeping this background in mind, I would like to consider the current liturgical situation in light of the Holy Father’s appeal for new pastoral activity aimed at deeper conversion.

At the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Saint John XXIII famously said that there was no need at that moment to discuss fundamentals of Catholic doctrine, because (he said) We presume that these things are sufficiently well known and familiar to you all. Instead, he called for something different: What is needed at the present time is a new enthusiasm, a new joy and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the entire Christian faith.

It seems to me that the situation with doctrine, described by the Good Pope John in 1962, is analogous to the liturgical situation in 2014. The rites have been revised which was the fruit of scholarship and of an assessment of the needs of the faithful in a new era. Such talk as “a reform of the reform” fails to take full account of this. What is needed, I believe, is for a joyful and enthusiastic putting into practice of the treasure that is the Church’s liturgy. The celebration of the liturgy is a key part of the Church’s pastoral activity, and thus a key part of ongoing conversion. Apart from its importance for practicing Catholics, there are countless tales of conversion to Catholicism by those who have come into contact, intentionally or otherwise, with the liturgy.

In this vein, I would venture to suggest three ways that the pastoral imperative of Pope Francis might have some “liturgical implications”. These can be summarised in three short phrases: proper celebration; ongoing formation; effective preaching.
a) My first suggestion is: we must celebrate the liturgy properly.

I would suggest that those of us who have been given the privilege and responsibility of celebrating the Sacred Liturgy – along with those who assist us – ought to have a renewed confidence that the Church has given us Rites that balance, on the one hand, our Catholic tradition with, on the other hand, the needs of a modern Church. Such conviction ought to give birth to a real acceptance that a correct and reverent celebration of the liturgy is one of the most powerful tools we have for bringing people to a deeper sense of personal conversion.

Included in this, is the awareness that the liturgy is first and foremost focused on God. In the liturgy we offer worship to God and we offer him our thanksgiving. What the liturgy does for us, as the community that celebrates, is an entirely secondary matter. The priority of the worship of God needs to be uttermost in the minds of those who celebrate the liturgy and in the minds of those who assist them.

A related principle to this is that those who celebrate the liturgy also need to have a clear sense that what they celebrate is the Church’s liturgy, not their own. The liturgy is something “bigger” than any one of us, and where the Church doesn’t ask us to be creative we ought not to presume to insert our own innovative preferences in what is, in reality, the prayer of the Church and not that of a single community alone. The liturgy is not a tool or an instrument – it is an end in itself, but nonetheless an end that has powerful and surprising ramifications if allowed to be what it is really meant to be.

Linked to this, I would like to place Pope Francis’ insistence in Evangelii Gaudium that the parish institution is not outdated and that it is one of the primary places where evangelization happens. As we well know, Sacrosanctum Concilium referred to the liturgy as a “summit” and as a “source”. In other words, it is the most important thing we do (the summit of the Christian life) and it is something that gives us the energy to go out and to carry on doing the other vitally important things (which comes from the source of the Christian life). More than anywhere else, this dynamic takes place in the parish. When people come to a parish and find the liturgy celebrated correctly, with dignity, sensitivity, with beauty, solemnity and prayer, with a wise combination of music and silence, they are able to offer to God the adoration and thanks that is his due. There is no doubt, as constantly witnessed by bishops from throughout the world, that where this is the case it inspires people to live out their vocations with generosity and to be committed disciples and enthusiastic evangelists of Jesus. This lies at the heart of the conversion that the Pope so ardently wants to see as the fruit of our pastoral activity.

It is clear that the Holy Father has a strong sense of the power and grace that comes to us in the Eucharist. Earlier this year on the feast of Corpus Christi he said: Besides physical hunger, man experiences another hunger, a hunger that cannot be satiated with ordinary food. It’s a hunger for life, a hunger for love, a hunger for eternity. How can this hunger
b) My second point for your consideration is: part of our pastoral work must always involve liturgical formation.

The Liturgical Movement began with a desire to increase everyone’s understanding and love of the liturgy, both by clergy and by laity. As the movement evolved over time, there developed a strong consensus that reform of the liturgy itself was necessary. As already indicated, that work has now been done. But the initial goal of the liturgical movement remains! If the moment for reform has passed, the moment for formation is always with us. Each generation needs to be formed with a good liturgical sense, and re-formed with an ever deepened appreciation of what God does for us in the sacred mysteries. The attitude that anything goes, or it doesn’t matter how it’s done or why, introduces corruptive elements, taking the focus away from God and his presence, and putting it firmly on ourselves – one consequence of which is to make the Church more inward looking.

Part of the liturgical formation that is so important and urgent in our day involves an accurate interiorisation of what the Council Fathers taught about the liturgy – and what they didn’t teach! I’m thinking in particular of the key idea of “participation” that was at the heart of Sacrosanctum Concilium. You’ve heard this a thousand times, I’m sure. Participation by the faithful in the liturgy must be fully conscious, and active (SC, 14), and they should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes (SC, 30). How conscious are people of this? Are people encouraged today to pray with their bodies, to observe the liturgical gestures that are instructive of themselves and deeply formative in a reverential awareness of God and indeed our neighbour? A sense of participation has so often been misconstrued to mean a sort of “activism”, such that too many have come to embrace the idea that they must be “doing” something in order to participate in the liturgy. This is not what the Fathers meant by “active participation”. I often wonder whether actusoria participatio wouldn’t be better translated as engaged participation. More than anything else, participation is internal, and is the fruit of understanding what is happening in the liturgy, and joining in that act with our whole mind and heart.

Another kind of formation that is closely intertwined with liturgical formation, and that is very close to the heart of Pope Francis, is formation in popular piety. The Holy Father acknowledges that it is possible to give an exaggerated attention to the outward traditions and expressions (EG, 70) of a distorted kind of popular piety. However, he also observes that in the face of many difficult cultural problems, popular piety itself can be the starting point.

3 Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 19 June 2014
point for healing and liberation from these deficiencies (EG, 69). Thus a good liturgical formation can and should include a proper formation in popular piety – a pastoral strategy that can yield tremendous fruit in the evangelizing work of the Church (EG, 122-126).

Possibly the initial enthusiasm of the early days of the Liturgical Movement has faded, and also the liturgical enthusiasm that was present in the years following the Council. Perhaps the novelty has worn off, and we’ve come to take the reformed liturgy for granted. As pastors, we quickly learn that despite everything being said in the vernacular it does not mean that everyone is listening attentively! Liturgical formation is an ongoing pastoral imperative for all those who have the care of souls. Ironically, in this age of instant communication, there is perhaps less interest in reading serious periodicals or scholarly studies of the liturgy. But, where there is a challenge, there is also an opportunity. The Pope’s phrase is that our efforts should be constantly driving and sustaining. If the liturgy has the power that our Faith says it does, then it is worth every effort we make toward the ongoing formation of ourselves as Bishops, the clergy and our lay faithful.

c) My third and final point is: a new emphasis must be given to effective preaching.

No one can fail to notice the prominence given in Evangelii Gaudium to the one aspect of the liturgy that receives extended treatment by the Pope, namely, the homily. In my two years in the Holy See’s Dicastery for Divine Worship, we have received Bishops’ Conferences on ad limina visits from Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa and all of them, without exception, raise their concerns about poor and ill prepared homilies. Yet, Pope Francis, notes that the homily is the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people (EG, 137) and passionately insists on the great evangelizing opportunity that the homily provides. Perhaps Chapter Three of the Apostolic Exhortation – or even just its central section, numbers 135 to 159 – could form the basis for study days for priests and deacons in your diocese. The Congregation for Divine Worship, in response to the Synod on the Word of God, has, in fact, prepared a Homiletic Directory as requested that draws from this and other Papal teachings and that is aimed at assisting those who preach in the liturgical context to improve their skill and the overview of what they are doing. This now awaits approval. What we do know, is that people have a massive spiritual hunger which needs to be nourished not only with homilies that are honest and thought-out, but also with homilies that offer something of substance, connecting the real life of people with the real life of God.

The homily is one of the places in the liturgy where a certain creativity is possible and where the individual personality of the celebrant can have a role to play. I hasten to comment that I am not thinking here of clownish entertainment, but rather of the kind of creativity that is driven by a constant desire to understand the circumstances in which people find themselves and to communicate the truths of the faith to them in ways that bring the Gospel to life in their own daily lives. If our culture is ever to be renewed, it is
the lay people who will achieve this, and an indispensable part of their formation is undoubtedly assisted by the homily.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it strikes me forcibly that Pope Francis takes care to emphasize the connection between the Church’s worship and the Church’s mission. One without the other is not to take the Christian prerogative seriously. At an audience earlier this year he said that, the mission and the very identity of the Church flows from there — from the Eucharist — and from there always takes its shape. A wonderful phrase! Our identity and our mission is shaped by the Eucharist. He also pleads with us hold this link steadily, not be hypocrites who celebrate liturgies but are not faithful to our mission, so that, and I quote, there may be coherence between liturgy and life.\(^4\)

The ‘urgency’, of which he speaks, is driven by a pastoral love for the flock. The love and the care of a shepherd are the Holy Father’s motives – invigorating him and even leading him to think “outside the box” in encouraging ways. We have a wonderful, living example each day of the care of a shepherd who lives with the smell of his sheep, whose daily homilies touch us and challenge all of us to the core; whose celebration of the Mass is serene and reflective and whose pastoral outreach is indefatigable and deeply touching and persuasive. I finish with his own words: [If the Eucharist] … does not lead us to encounter Jesus Christ, it is unlikely to bear any kind of nourishment to our heart and our life. Through the Eucharist, however, Christ wishes to enter into our life and permeate it with His grace, so that in every Christian community there may be coherence between liturgy and life.\(^5\)