

THE LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY IN MATTERS OF LITURGY

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The sure foundation for any inquiry into the authority of various parties in liturgical matters is to be found in God, inasmuch as He Himself is the source of the substance of the liturgy and of many of its forms. The initiative in this matter therefore comes from our Creator and not from human beings; it is He who has entrusted to us the deposit of faith, the Holy Scriptures and the sacraments.

Thus, it is not a matter of human '*creativity*', nor even of ritualised pedagogy or the self-celebration of a congregation seeking an 'extra touch of soul' with a view to human and sociological improvement, but of the worship of the living God. The content of the liturgy transcends human nature and even the intellect of the most gifted and best-educated of men: it concerns the supernatural order, the prayerful and sanctifying contact with the mysteries of *God*.

In the Old Testament, we see God dictating with great precision the feasts to be observed and the rites to be performed, right down to the material of the instruments and the origin of the fire to be used; He punishes with death those who wilfully transgress His *precepts*; the episode of Korah, Dathan and Abiram is highly significant in this regard (cf. Num. 16).

In the New Testament, it would seem that the divine precepts leave more room for human initiative. There is a certain deepening of knowledge of the things of God; the Church benefits from some two thousand years of biblical tradition and is animated by the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit.

However, man remains fragile, with a tendency to reduce everything to the whims of his pride, his desires and his fancies. This is why God had to establish an authority guaranteed by Himself, to which He entrusted the custody of the deposit of faith. This authority is that of Peter and his successors. And given the close link between worship and faith, it is only natural to conclude that this same authority is the equally indispensable guarantor of the liturgy.

One might also consider the question from another angle, in the manner of Cardinal Ratzinger: he expresses this in a more theological way and takes the argument further

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, no. 1. Here, in a nutshell, is the eminent prelate's line of thought. Man, he says, can only address God by entering into the internal dialogue of the Holy Trinity, the eternal conversation between the Father and his Word. This is made possible solely because the Word has united himself with human nature. Consequently, human speech and human prayer reach God only through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

This dialogue between time and eternity can take place in its fullest form only within that privileged 'space' created by the divine will itself: the Church. Viewed in another light, we can apply to the marriage between Christ and the Church the words 'the two shall become one flesh': the union is so inseparable that, although the distinction between 'I' and 'You' remains, they form a perfect, complete unity. And so our union with God through the grace of the sacraments and prayer can only be realised through the Church. Let us therefore learn to 'speak' within her and to make her own words our own.

To avoid 'drifting too much into generalities', this study will focus primarily on the Roman Missal. Indeed, as the Missal is by far the most widely used liturgical book, and the rites of the Mass are the most 'substantial' nourishment both for the inner life of priests and for the faith of the faithful, it is also the part of the liturgy to which the Holy Church has always devoted the most scrupulous care.

We shall not enter into a discussion concerning the origins of its form, rites and words: whether they stem from early improvisation subsequently codified, a mosaic of successive elements, or an apostolic origin. This falls outside the scope of the subject. Let us merely note that many Eastern liturgies have always claimed a purely or chiefly apostolic origin.

What is certain is that, from the earliest centuries, we see the Popes intervening with increasing precision in liturgical matters, introducing changes, particularly to the canon of the Mass. This seems to demonstrate the existence of a form accepted by all, a canonical form that has become part of customary law. Here we have the system of liturgical law during the first fifteen centuries of the Church's history: a customary law subject to adjustments and/or corrections by the authority of either the bishops (individually or in assemblies) or the Supreme Pontiffs.

¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, **Das Fest des Glaubens**, Einsiedeln 1982, pp. 28 ff.

It seems important to me to introduce a few points here in an attempt to clarify the most important concepts relating to customary law.

Concepts of customary law

As a definition of *customary law*, we might adopt the following: ‘the body of norms established by the constant practice of a community capable of being the passive subject of a norm approved, at least implicitly, by the legislator²’.

The concept of custom therefore comprises two components: the substantive element, which is the behaviour of the community (*consuetudo facti*), and the formal element, which includes all the legal requirements that a custom must fulfil (*consuetudo iuris*).

Custom in the material sense can be described as the frequent repetition of similar acts within a given community. Once again, we are not examining here the cause of this repetitive similarity in early liturgy, whether it be the legacy left by the Apostles or a gradual standardisation of rites and words. These acts must be not only uniform but also public. One might, of course, ask to what extent variations can be tolerated without undermining uniformity.

Furthermore, these acts must have been *performed* with the intention of establishing a custom. On this point, F. Otaduy writes in the *Manual* of Pamplona: ‘As regards the will (*animus*) of the community: for its acts to give rise to the creation of a custom, in the formal sense of the term, they must be fully human, that is to say, conscious and voluntary; amongst other things, the community must have the intention of introducing a custom (or of maintaining it).’ This clarification naturally rules out copying errors and surreptitious variations. On the other hand, the introduction of a new festival with the intention of making it a permanent fixture can certainly give rise to a new customary right.

As for the formal element of customary law, it in turn comprises two components : the legislature’s approval and the reasonableness of the custom. The first may be

² See F. OTADUY, ‘La Costumbre’ in Institut Martin de Azpilcueta, *Manual de Derecho canónico*, Pamplona, 1988, p. 261.

granted by express, non-formal acquiescence; by tacit acquiescence or implicit approval (for example, through the repeated use of a liturgical book); or by formal, legal approval.

This approval by the competent ecclesiastical superior, as Father U. Best tells us ^{e3}, is absolutely necessary because customary law is a law within the Church: it derives not from the customs of the people, but from the will of the legislator.

The requirement of rationality, for its part, was defined as early as the 13th century by Gregory IX in his decretal **Quum tanto** ⁴: custom must be in accordance with divine law and the fundamental principles of canon law. Nor is a custom reasonable if it has been expressly condemned by the legislator.

Thus, a custom that is contrary to natural or positive divine law cannot be reasonable. A missal, therefore, which contains euchological formulas not in accordance with the deposit of faith, could not establish a customary right, at least as regards a heretical prayer.

Similarly, a rite that reflects a ‘new’ ecclesiology (in the sense of diverging seriously from that of the Church) could not be accepted, even if it has been practised locally for generations.

Furthermore, with regard to customs in general, the active subject (the community introducing the custom) and the passive subject (the community for which this custom might have the force of law if it meets all the requirements) are one and the same. In the case of missals, the situation is somewhat different. The active subject, particularly in the case of printed missals, is usually either the competent authority (the Pope, the bishop, but also, in certain cases, the supreme religious moderator), or someone possessing sufficient authority in the matter (the cathedral chapter, for example).

An interesting feature of customary law is that it adapts, in a somewhat natural way, universal law to local requirements and practices, particularly with regard to custom *praeter legem* (which, in a sense, fills the practical gaps in written law). This is what the current Code expresses when it echoes the classical adage: *Consuetudo est op-*

³ U. Beste, **Introductio in Codicem**, Naples, 1956, p. 18.

⁴ GREGORY IX, letter *Quum tanto*, in AA.VV., *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, op. cit., II, 41.

tima legum ^{interpretes}.⁵ Thus, over a period of time of varying length, universal law is, in a sense, shaped by the customs which, in practice, constitute its local application. What contemporary liturgists and legislators are obliged to achieve through lengthy interdisciplinary studies, and with much hesitation and sometimes even errors, customary law had, in a sense, already accomplished in the Middle Ages.

On the other hand, what might be called the main shortcoming of customary law is a certain inability to correct itself in the event of ‘deviation’, especially if the legislator—whose approval is necessary for its establishment—is either deficient or unable to monitor the development of new customs. We shall see that this was the case with regard to liturgical books in the ^{fifteenth} and ^{sixteenth} centuries.

Customary law in liturgical matters

In fact, the liturgy in the Middle Ages was chiefly governed by this customary law. With regard to the Mass and the missal, in particular, written legislation was relatively rare and usually concerned only relatively minor points. In the *Decretum Gratiani*, a sort of encyclopaedia of 12th-century ecclesiastical law, there are only ten provisions concerning the Holy Sacrifice. To give an idea of their content, let us cite: the prohibition on celebrating Mass outside sacred places⁶; Mass must not be celebrated in wooden vessels (Council of Tribure, can. 9)⁷; except at Christmas, Mass must not be celebrated before Terce (St Telesphorus)⁸; the obligation to be fasting in order to celebrate Mass (Council of Carthage)⁹;

⁵ Canon 27, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Rome 1983.

⁶ GRATTIAN, *Decree* or **Concordia discordantium canonum**, Part III (*on consecrations*), Distinction I, Case 14, (usually cited as D.I, c. 14, **De consecratione**) in Various Authors, **Corpus Iuris Canonici** (ed. Friedberg), I, Leipzig, 1889, 1298. Admittedly, the reference provided by Gratian points to the Epistle of Saint Clement to the Apostle Saint James, an epistle now generally recognised as not having been written by its purported author; however, owing to its inclusion in the Camaldolese monk’s collection (and in several other earlier legal collections), it can be said that it had the force of law in practice; indeed, although Gratian’s collection is not official, owing to its universal use in the teaching of law and in the legal practice of the time, even if the sources are apocryphal, the texts it presents have the force of law.

⁷ Ibid., D.I, c. 44, *De consecratione*.

⁸ Ibid., D.I, c. 48, *De consecratione*. Here again is a reference to a pope whose works and decretals are not generally accepted as authentic by modern historical scholarship (his pontificate spanned the years 125 to 136). However, the decretal—or, more accurately, pseudo-decretal—appears in the *Decretum Gratiani*.

⁹ Ibid., D.I, c. 49, *De consecratione*.

Mass must be celebrated only in the morning (St Leo, Letter to Dioscorus) ¹⁰; at least two people must be present at the Mass celebrated by the Bishop (St Anacletus, Epistola I) ¹¹.

Admittedly, in another legal compendium, one finds the requirement for the Kyrie and the Sanctus ‘as is the practice in Rome, in the East and throughout Italy’ ¹²; but these are prayers that were already being recited at Mass ‘in Rome and throughout the West’. In this case, therefore, we have the explicit prescription of a custom, probably to give it greater force and perhaps also to extend it, or more likely to remedy new practices that ran counter to it.

Thus, whenever a cathedral, parish or other church wished to acquire a new missal, the old missal was copied out – by hand! – incorporating, at most, any customs that might have developed since the old book was compiled. But the rule was simple and formal: to follow both universal and local customs. However, as the copy was almost inevitably unique, there was little scope for comparison between missals; and in the event of errors, only a few people might be aware of them ... and ‘the matter was closed’.

This right and its observance are affirmed on the flyleaves of old missals. For example, a missal from Constance dated 1504 bears the opening inscription: **Incipit Ordo missalis secundum chorum Constantiense**. Reims, for its part, produced in 1505 a **Missale ad consuetudinem insignis ecclesie Remensis**. It is interesting to note a Swiss parish missal from 1523, from a valley served by the Canons Regular of the Great St Bernard: *‘Incipit ordo missalis ad usum Sancti Bernardi Montis Iovis ad opus parrochiae Sancti Georgi de Liddes’*. Even as late as 1572, a **Missale secundum verum insignis ecclesiae Lingonensis usum** was found in Langres.

With the invention of the printing press, this state of affairs was to change. The first printed missals date from 1470 (Constance) and 1474 (*Missale Romanum*). These works circulated, comparisons were made, and it became apparent that a number of variations and errors had crept in. The ^{Fifth} Ecumenical Council of the Lateran had already prescribed that books dealing with

¹⁰ Ibid., D.I, c. 51, *De consecratione*.

¹¹ Ibid., D.I, c. 59, *De consecratione*. The same remark must be made here as for the writings of Saints Clement and Telesphorus.

¹² Second Synod of Vaison, 529; in MANSI, J.D., **Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio**, Paris–Antwerp, 1759–1827, vol. VIII, col. 725.

matters of faith and morals would henceforth be subject to the bishop's approval prior to their publication¹³. Liturgical books are not explicitly mentioned, but they are certainly included within this provision.

In fact, we see the emergence of episcopal oversight, which would go on to increase. It was no longer a matter of individual copies, but of editions of the Missal numbering several hundred copies; before permitting their printing, it was only natural that the diocesan authority should check their conformity and accuracy. Furthermore, it was a matter of addressing the well-founded criticisms of the Protestant reformers.

Consequently, from this point onwards, missals began to bear titles such as: **Missale moguntinum denuo accuratissima cura recognitum et a prioribus quibusdam mendis...emendatum** (Mainz, 1507), without any explicit mention at the outset of the supervising authority. Later, in Paris in 1539, we find: **Missale ad usum ecclesie parisiensis noviter impressum ac emendatum per deputatos a Rmo Dno J. de Bellayo Pari-siensi episcopo ac a venerabilibus decano et capitulo ejusdem ecclesie canonicos ac doctores theologos**. Here, episcopal authority is clearly asserted; it is true that Cardinal Jean du Bellay was a man of great standing and intended to assert his authority, including in liturgical matters. But there is also, in a sense, mention of customary law, of which the cathedral canons are the natural guardians.

This episcopal law would, moreover, be affirmed after the Fifth Lateran Council by synods of bishops. For example, the provincial synods of Bourges and Sens-Paris (1528) stipulated that future liturgical books could only be printed with the approval of the respective ordinari¹⁴.

Transition to pontifical law

However, it would appear that this remedy was not sufficient: at the opening of the Council of Trent, there were numerous calls for more vigorous 'treatment'. For example, in 1546, one year after the opening of the Council of Trent, the Fathers of that illustrious assembly lamented that, due to a lack of ecclesiastical control, there had crept into

¹³ Fifth Lateran Council, sess. X, 4 May 1515, in MANSI J.D., *Sacrorum Conciliorum, op. cit.*, vol. XXXII, col. 912–913.

¹⁴ JEDIN H., *Chiesa della fede, Chiesa della storia*, Brescia 1972, 395.

the printed missals! Furthermore, we can already see the emergence of a call for a single missal for the entire Latin rite, a call that would be taken up by the Archbishop of Braga, then again in an Italian memorandum in 1562 and, in the same year, in the Spanish memorandum on reform, not to mention the request also made in 1562 by Emperor Ferdinand I himself in the same sense¹⁵. However, in 1547, a commission was set up to draw up a list of abuses ‘in the celebration of Mass, practices concerning indulgences, etc.’ The work of this commission was protracted and was not completed until 1562. Two drafts were then presented to the Fathers of the Council: a *Compendium*, followed by a decree entitled **Canones de abusus circa celebrantes vel audientes missae**¹⁶. These documents deal primarily with votive Masses, Mass fees, new prefaces, etc. However, at the beginning of the first draft, there is a call for the unification of the rite of the celebration of Mass for the whole Church, with the intention that it be imposed on all; not only does the draft describe the abuses, but it also presents a solution to remedy all abuses, both past and future, concerning the Mass¹⁷. Finally, the draft was approved without difficulty at the 22nd session, on 17 September 1562, without any mention at that time of a revision of the Missal itself¹⁸.

Work began immediately, and a commission was formed in Trent itself to undertake this revision of the Missal. From Rome, the Secretary of State—and nephew of Pius IV—Saint Charles Borromeo, sent the finest altar books available. However, time was short, and the Council concluded with a decree, dated 1562, requesting the Supreme Pontiff to carry out this work¹⁹; both the commissioners and the materials were then transferred to Rome.

The work, begun under Pius IV, was not completed until the reign of his successor, the zealous Saint Pius V, who promulgated the requested Missal, accompanied by the bull **Quo Primum** of 14 July 1570. This project was completed by Sixtus V in 1588 upon the creation of the Sa-

¹⁵ Jedin, *Chiesa...*, op. cit., 399, 407 and 408.

¹⁶ *Concilii Tridentini Actorum* (ed. EHSSES S.), VIII, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1934, 921–923 and 926.

¹⁷ JEDIN H., *Il concilio di Trento*, IV/1, Brescia, 1979, 298.

¹⁸ **Concilii Tridentini Actorum**, op. cit., 962–963.

¹⁹ *Concilii Tridentini Actorum*, op. cit., IX, 1935, 1106, *On the Index of Books, the Catechism, the Breviary and the Missal*: (Having instructed the Pope to draw up a list of books for the Index) *He also ... ordered that a list be drawn up for the Missal and the Breviary*.

... established the Congregation of Rites, charged, amongst other things, with ensuring that this reform was properly carried out everywhere.

Thus, over the course of three generations, by the will of the bishops, with regard to the organisation of the liturgy – the fate of the Missal having a significant bearing on the entire body of norms governing *the munus orandi* – there was a shift from a law based chiefly on custom to pontifical law. In fact, this is not a revolution or the usurpation of authority from lower levels in favour of the higher level, but the application of sound ecclesiological doctrine. The office of Peter, indeed, entails above all the preservation of the unity of the Church and the safeguarding and transmission of the deposit of faith. Now, the manner in which Missals are drafted and the Mass is celebrated directly affects both these areas; it is therefore logical that the drafting of the Missal should be entrusted to the Supreme Pontiff.

This state of affairs persisted into the 20th century, with varying degrees of acceptance – one need only think, for example, of the Gallican rites of the 17th and 18th centuries – and the incorporation of certain modifications (the introduction of new feasts, hymns, etc.). Thus, Pope Pius XII recalled in 1947: ‘This is why the right to recognise and establish any practice concerning divine worship, and to introduce and approve new rites, belongs solely to the Supreme Pontiff ... It is the right and duty of bishops to watch diligently over the exact observance of the precepts of the sacred canons concerning divine worship’ .²⁰.

The work of the Second Vatican Council

But at the Second Vatican Council a new concern emerged. It was no longer so much a question of the unity of the Roman rite as of adapting it to the diversity of times and places. After much discussion and revision, the Fathers agreed on paragraph 22 of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

‘§ 1. The regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church: which indeed resides with the Holy See and, in accordance with the law, with the Bishops.

§ 2. By virtue of the authority conferred by law, the regulation of liturgical matters, within the prescribed limits, falls within the competence of various kinds of territorial episcopal assemblies lawfully constituted.

²⁰ Pius XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, 20 November 1947, in *AAS* (1947), 543.

§ 3. 'Therefore, no one else whatsoever, even if he be a priest, may of his own accord add, omit or alter anything in the Liturgy' ²¹.

The traditional principles are maintained, but with a few 'nuances'. The principal authority still rests with the Holy See; the diocesan bishop remains the moderator of the liturgy in his diocese. However, with a view to facilitating adaptations to different countries, certain decisions, within clearly defined limits, are entrusted to the Episcopal Conferences and other regional episcopal assemblies, as specified in numbers 38 to 40 of the same Constitution.

It is already clear from these texts that any notion of improvisation or creativity on the part of the celebrant is formally ruled out. The implementing measures, instructions and normative texts that followed merely confirmed this position.

The first document published following the Constitution on the Liturgy was Paul VI's Motu Proprio **Sacram Liturgiam**, dated 25 January 1964²², barely a month and a half after the promulgation of the said Constitution. This document regulated the implementation of a number of decisions taken by the Council Fathers. In particular, the tenth paragraph specified the composition of the Episcopal Conferences competent to apply § 2 of **Sacrosanctum Concilium**. The document concluded with a stern warning, which was, alas, to go unheeded in many countries: the right to introduce innovations belongs to the Holy See and, within the limits of the law, to diocesan bishops, but under no circumstances to ordinary celebrants.

Six years later, on 5 September 1970, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published the ^{Third} Instruction for the Correct Application of the Constitution on the Liturgy, **Liturgicae instaurationes**. ²³. No new measures were introduced, but emphasis was placed on observance of the Roman rites as described in the typical editions and the books approved for the various countries. It stated in particular:

²¹ §1. The governance of the liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church: it belongs to the Apostolic See and, in accordance with the rules of law, to the bishop.

§2. By virtue of the power conferred by law, the governance of liturgical matters also belongs, within the prescribed limits, to the various legitimately constituted assemblies of bishops with jurisdiction over a given territory.

§3. For this reason, absolutely no one else, not even a priest, may, on his own initiative, add, remove or alter anything in the liturgy.

²² Paul VI, Motu Proprio **Sacram liturgiam**, AAS 56 (1964) 139–144.

²³ Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, Third Instruction for the Correct Application of the Constitution on the Liturgy **Liturgicae instaurationes**, 5 September 1970, AAS 62 (1970) 692–704.

- The liturgy must not be stripped down any further. Liturgical reform is not aimed at desacralisation or ‘secularisation’; ‘The rites must retain their dignity, solemnity and sacred character’ (n. 1);

- it is never permissible to substitute biblical texts with other readings taken from religious or secular authors (no. 2);

- it is not permitted to alter liturgical texts on one’s own initiative. The entrance and communion antiphons must be taken from books approved by the Holy See or by the Episcopal Conferences (no. 3);

- the celebrant may address the assembly with very brief remarks at the beginning, before the Preface and before the dismissal; he must not do so during the Eucharistic Prayer (no. 3f);

- the Eucharistic Prayer, by its very nature, belongs solely to the priest, for ‘in the liturgy, each person must perform only and entirely that which is proper to him’ (SC 28) (n. 4).

In short, this document concretely reiterates the principles set out in SC 22: the regulation of the liturgy belongs to the Holy See and, within the limits of the law, to the diocesan bishops (individually or collectively), whilst celebrants must adhere to the approved rites.

In 1994, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship published its ^{Fourth} Instruction for the correct application of the conciliar Constitution on the liturgy, **De liturgia romana et inculturati* one*²⁴. As the same difficulties continue to arise, the Church’s Magisterium reiterates once again that only the Holy See, the Bishops and the Episcopal Conferences have the right and authority to adapt the sacred rites (n. 28). It also requests, in accordance with SC 23, that ‘as far as possible, there should be no significant ritual differences between neighbouring regions’ (no. 51).

Finally, in the year 2001, the ^{Fifth} Instruction in the series **De Usu lingua-rum popularum in libris liturgiae romanae edendis** was published. This document provides further clarification on the mutual relations between the Holy See—more specifically the Congregation for Divine Worship—and the Episcopal Conferences with regard to the translation of liturgical books

²⁴ S.C. FOR DIVINE WORSHIP, *Fourth Instruction for the correct application of the conciliar Constitution on the liturgy* **De liturgia romana et inculturatione**, 25 January 1994, **Notitiae** 30 (1994), 116–151.

and their publication. The aim is to ensure that these books, whilst being adapted to different cultures, remain entirely faithful to the Roman Liturgy.

Current division of responsibilities

1. The Holy See

The Pope has the role of ‘perpetual and visible head and foundation of the unity which binds together both the bishops and the multitude of the faithful’. This role comprises, on the one hand, the safeguarding of the deposit of the Faith and, on the other, the preservation of the unity of the Church of Christ. These two attributes, or aspects of the same function as Supreme Shepherd, complement one another inseparably.

The power that results from this is not only ordinary (linked to the office itself and not the result of any delegation), plenary (residing in the person of the Pontiff himself; his decisions therefore do not need to be approved by others to be enforceable) and supreme (there is no higher authority), but also immediate (the Pope, in exercising his authority over all, collectively and individually, need not act through any intermediary) and universal (extending to both the Latin Church and the Eastern Churches). The Pope is the legislator for the universal Church.

He is assisted in these functions by the bodies of the Roman Curia; these therefore have a subsidiary role and share in the Supreme Pontiff’s supreme authority by delegation.

As a result, on the one hand, of this role as universal moderator and, on the other, of historical circumstances (liturgical anarchy, delegations from the Council of Trent concerning liturgical books, etc.), the Popes were led, from the 16th century onwards, to centralise in their own hands virtually all normative authority in matters of worship, particularly following the establishment of the Sacred Congregation of Rites by Sixtus V.

With the Second Vatican Council, this situation was to change: a growing awareness of the role of residential bishops led to a degree of decentralisation in favour of the Episcopal Conferences and individual bishops. Decisions which, until then, had been the exclusive prerogative of the Holy See were entrusted to them.

However, infallible teaching on matters of faith and morals concerning the sacraments and divine worship remains the exclusive prerogative of the Pope. Similarly, certain decisions of great importance—concerning, for example, the matter and form of the sacraments—are reserved to him personally. Thus, to cite but one example, the commission tasked, following the last Council, with preparing the reform of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick considered that this reform should be initiated by papal authority. This was the subject of the Apostolic Constitution **Sacram unctione**,²⁵ no. 25. Similarly, the new **Ordo** of the Mass was promulgated by the Apostolic Constitution **Missale Romanum** of 3 April 1969.

Generally speaking, all legislation concerning the universal Church on matters of importance therefore emanates directly from the Successor of Peter. However, in certain cases, he may delegate this legislative power to one or other body of the Roman Curia (which he ordinarily does with regard to the Pontifical Commission for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts). However, the bodies of the Roman Curia, and the dicasteries in particular, have only an administrative role in their own right.

The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments deals primarily with liturgical matters. Its role is defined by Articles 62 to 70 of the Constitution **Pastor Bonus**²⁶. Essentially, this involves ‘dealing with all matters falling within the competence of the Holy See, without prejudice to the competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith²⁷, concerning the regulation and promotion of the sacred liturgy, in particular the sacraments’ (PB, art. 62).

More specifically, the main functions of the said Congregation, as described in the Apostolic Constitution of 1988, are as follows:

- the protection of the discipline of the sacraments and their valid and lawful celebration;
- the granting of indulgences and dispensations in these matters which exceed the competence of bishops;
- the promotion of liturgical pastoral care, especially with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist;
- the compilation and correction of liturgical texts;

²⁵ PAUL VI, *Apostolic Constitution *Sacram unctionem**, 30 November 1972, **AAS** 65 (1973) 5–9.

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus**, 13, 20 November 1988, (hereinafter PB) *AAS* 80 (1988) 863.

²⁷ And of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, the text might have added, as we shall see later.

- the revision of particular liturgical calendars;
- the revision of translations and adaptations of liturgical books by the Episcopal Conferences;
- cases of invalidity of sacred ordinations;
- the veneration of holy relics and the confirmation of heavenly patrons.

In practice, as far as our subject is concerned, the standard editions of liturgical books therefore fall within the remit of this dicastery; however, for some of them, deemed to be of greater importance to the universal Church, their promulgation is effected by means of a pontifical document: thus, the Apostolic Constitution **Missale Romanum** of 1969 accompanied the ‘release’ of the new missal in 1970²⁸.

Each episcopal conference, or group of episcopal conferences sharing the same language, then prepares the translation of the missal (or other liturgical book) into its own language. This translation must be submitted to the Congregation for approval. It is also this Congregation which examines requests for more substantial adaptations that may be submitted to it by the episcopal conferences, in accordance with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n 40²⁹.

On the other hand, in the area of concern to us—that is, the competent authority in liturgical matters—offences against the faith and more serious offences against morality committed during the celebration of the sacraments fall within the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In practice, therefore, when a bishops’ conference, for pastoral reasons, requests the adaptation of a prayer or a rite—whether within the ordinary form of the Mass or for a particular celebration—and that adaptation is deemed likely to entail doctrinal consequences, the request is also referred to this Congregation for examination³⁰.

The Congregation for the Oriental Churches, for its part, has all the powers of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments with regard to the Churches *sui iuris* subject to it³¹.

²⁸ C. 838, § 2. *It is the task of the Apostolic See to regulate the sacred liturgy of the universal Church and to publish liturgical books.*

²⁹ C. 838, § 3. *It is the responsibility of the Bishops’ Conferences to prepare versions of the liturgical books in the vernacular languages, suitably adapted within the limits defined in the liturgical books themselves, and to publish them, subject to prior approval by the Holy See.*

³⁰ *Pastor Bonus*, art. 52.

³¹ *Pastor Bonus*, art. 56.

2. Episcopal Conferences

It must first and foremost be clearly understood that Episcopal Conferences are not an additional level in the hierarchy of the Church, acting as a sort of intermediary between the Holy See and the residential bishops, but, according to the definition given in Canon 447³², they facilitate the joint exercise of certain pastoral functions by the bishops of a nation or territory in order to promote a degree of coordination, with a view to the greater pastoral good of the faithful. This body therefore does not ‘oversee’ the bishops in their pastoral ministry, but enables them to coordinate their actions in a number of areas where this is necessary.

As regards the liturgy, there are, in principle, two main areas in which the bishops of the dioceses within the same region must consult one another: on the one hand, the translations and adaptations of liturgical books; and on the other hand, a number of cases in which it is permitted to adapt universal laws to the circumstances of place and time. Indeed, given the mobility of people and the need to make the most of certain material resources on a large scale—particularly with regard to the publication of books—consultation and coordination amongst the heads of particular Churches now appear to be indispensable.

This mainly concerns the following issues:

- translations and adaptations of liturgical books (adaptations within the limits defined by the typical editions, which in some cases include modifications and additions to *the praeenotanda*; cf. Fifth Instruction on the Correct Application of the Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, 28 March 2001);
- other adaptations provided for in the legislation: for example, concerning sacred art and music, the age of Confirmation, materials for fixed altars, the liturgical calendar, sacred vestments, the conduct of the faithful during celebrations, and the age required to receive Confirmation;

³² This canon draws on the text of the conciliar decree **Christus Dominus**, 38, § 1, but, in my view, clarifies it further. The Council, in fact, defined Episcopal Conferences at that point as ‘an assembly in which the prelates of a nation or territory jointly exercise their pastoral office...’. It seems to me that this definition left the door open to all manner of encroachments by the Conference upon the authority of individual bishops, as indeed occurred in certain countries during the early years of these institutions’ operation following the Council. It should be noted that the position set out here is that which emerges from a reading of the Code and, amongst other sources, the document of the Congregation for Bishops, ‘Statuto teologico e giuridico delle conferenze episcopali’ (1988).

- certain initiatives to promote the liturgy, insofar as they concern an entire territory: for example, the liturgical directories adopted by the Bishops' Conference at its General Assembly or by the competent episcopal commission. It should be noted that, according to canon 455, § 1, the said Conference may issue general decrees only in the cases provided for by law. Thus, the authority of the Episcopal Conferences is strictly limited.

3. Resident Bishops

It must be clearly understood that residential bishops are not 'prefects', whose sole function would be to implement decisions issued by the central authority³³. Similarly, dioceses are not mere administrative subdivisions of the universal Church, but a 'portion of the People of God ... a particular Church in which the Church of Christ, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is truly present and active'³⁴. In other words, these are "particular Churches in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists"³⁵.

Diocesan bishops, 'who, by divine institution, succeed the Apostles, through the Holy Spirit given to them, are constituted as shepherds in the Church to be themselves teachers of doctrine, priests of the sacred liturgy and ministers of governance'³⁶; they have full legislative power within their diocese, but the laws they enact must fall within the framework of the canonical order of the universal Church in order to preserve its unity, and must be coordinated with those of the other bishops of the same Episcopal Conference, for the pastoral reasons we have already considered.

Before the Council, the need to integrate particular norms into universal legislation was understood in such a way—especially in liturgical matters—that, in effect, the bishop's authority was greatly curtailed: in practice, he could only determine certain applications

³³ Among the types of particular Churches, we shall consider here only the archetype: the diocese headed by a residential bishop; however, there are also dioceses governed by an apostolic administrator, territorial prelatures and territorial abbeys, apostolic vicariates and apostolic prefectures; the head of these structures shares in the powers of the residential bishop to varying degrees.

³⁴ Conciliar Decree **Christus Dominus**, 11, incorporated into canon 369 of the 1983 Code.

³⁵ Conciliar Constitution **Lumen Gentium** 23, incorporated into canon 368 of the Code of Canon Law.

³⁶ Conciliar Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 20 (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 2), incorporated into canon 375, § 1.

to specific cases and to grant dispensations from certain universal laws, most often by virtue of special powers granted by the Holy See.

Subsequently, the conciliar Decree *Christus Dominus* reversed this ‘praxis’ by proclaiming the right of bishops to grant dispensations from the general laws of the Church, unless specifically reserved by the Holy See. This represents a remarkable shift in perspective, which has allowed for a certain degree of decentralisation.

During the post-conciliar period, further rights were recognised and subsequently enshrined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Following T.J. Gree, n. 37, one might summarise the principal normative powers of bishops – in addition to the aforementioned power to grant dispensations – as follows:

- the bishop may, subject to certain conditions, permit forms of ‘sacramental exchange’ with ‘separated brethren’;
- with regard to the administration of the sacraments to the faithful, various options fall within his legislative authority, such as permission to celebrate solemn baptism in a hospital (c. 860, § 2), the possibility of keeping the Eucharist in a private home outside the church (c. 935), the prescription of Eucharistic processions (c. 944, § 3), etc.;
- where necessary, it is the bishop’s responsibility to decide on Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest (can. 1248);
- with regard to funerals, he may lay down rules concerning the church to be used; he may also require the keeping of a register of burials (can. 1182).

As can be seen, this is not a very extensive power, but rather concerns specific details linked to the prelate’s personal knowledge of his diocese and its specific needs. Furthermore, he is the regulator of liturgical activity within his diocese, which entails specific norms and personal decisions.

4. The celebrants

37 GREEN T.J., *The Church’s Sanctifying Mission: Some aspects of the normative role of the diocesan bishop*, *Studia Canonica* 25 (1991) 245–276.

Here, the focus is not on an authority competent in normative matters, but on those who are obliged to implement universal and particular norms. Celebrants have a serious duty to adhere to the prescriptions of canon law and the liturgical books. It is in this sense that the third paragraph of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 22 must be interpreted: ‘For this reason, absolutely no one else, not even a priest, may of his own accord add, remove or alter anything in the liturgy’.

The words of Saint Isidore of Seville apply particularly to the celebrant: ‘*Ri-tus ad iustitiam pertinet quasi rectum ex quo pium, equum et sanctum* . 38. ’ He is a minister of the Church: out of justice towards the Church and towards the faithful, he must perform the rite as the Church prescribes, so that the celebration may be truly ecclesial and holy.

However, his role as celebrant is not insignificant and is not limited to passive application. He must, in fact, adapt the celebration to the assembly of the faithful for whom it is intended, in each specific case, with a view to optimal participation. To this end, he must first have a thorough knowledge, in addition to general and specific theological principles, of the liturgical books he is to use, together with the options offered by these book , s. 39. Each service must be carefully prepared, thought through, meditated upon and prayed over. The celebrant must also take into account the advice of the faithful themselves. Naturally, suitable hymns must be chosen; often, too, the readings may be chosen to a certain extent. Furthermore, the various options permitted by the rubrics during the celebration should also be examined in advance.

38 Isidore of Seville, **Liber differentiarum**, 1, 122, *P. L.* , LXXXIII, 23.

39 In this regard, it is interesting to note the way in which the Roman Missal deals specifically with each rite, distinguishing between what is obligatory, optional or at the celebrant’s discretion; the terms used to express this are generally chosen judiciously and convey every nuance with precision. As is customary, it prescribes simply and clearly: *sa-cerdos (vel populus) facit*. Sometimes it will emphasise a prescription that is important or one which it fears might be omitted: *sacrum ... silentium... est servandum; de praecepto homilia habeatur*. But when it comes to an optional rite, or one that may be adapted, the rubrics—particularly in the **Institutio Generalis**—state this clearly: **adhiberi potest**; **omitti possunt**, etc. Sometimes a requirement is recommended but not obligatory: **expedit**, for example. Furthermore, there are choices which the celebrant may make, taking into account the circumstances of the place and the people (for example, regarding the hymns). See, in this regard, the interesting study published by the SPANISH COMMISSION FOR LITURGY, *Creatividad en la fidelidad (Notitiae* 22 (1986) 782–798).

In short, it is up to the celebrant to ensure that the parish or community liturgy is not merely a material, formal and quasi-mechanical performance of rites, but truly an encounter with the living God⁴⁰. in the ecclesial celebration.

The need to observe liturgical norms

A widespread pastoral trend holds that when the celebrant gives free rein to his spontaneous creativity, informed by his knowledge of the participants, he creates the ideal conditions for a liturgy that ‘resonates’ with the faithful present and, for that reason, offers them the greatest possible benefit. The first question one might ask, in view of some of these creative celebrations, is this: what exactly does the celebrant wish to ‘offer’? But the main question is whether, in doing so, he is truly a minister of the Church, faithful to her intention.

Let us set out a few reasons why this adherence to liturgical norms (whether those of the Code of Canon Law, those of the competent authorities, or those contained in the liturgical books themselves) is not only necessary but also useful and beneficial to all.

1. The worshipful nature of the liturgy

The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution **Sacrosanctum Concilium**, n. 7, defined the liturgy as ‘the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ... in which the entire public worship is carried out by the mystical body of Jesus Christ’. One might also see in this the Church’s continuation of the liturgy inaugurated by Jesus Christ during his time amongst men, and this until the end of time .⁴¹.

⁴⁰ It is in this sense that we can speak of ‘creativity’. It is not, therefore, a matter of reinventing the liturgy according to one’s personal whims, but of adapting it to the specific congregation by making use of all the options offered by the Missal with discernment, fidelity and zeal. The aforementioned study by the Episcopal Commission on Liturgy very aptly links the terms creativity, adaptation and fidelity, going so far as to state that fidelity is the true touchstone of genuine Catholic liturgical creativity (p. 786). The document goes on to emphasise that the role of the presider is not merely a matter of juggling the texts and options of the Missal, but that he must act as the community’s mystagogue—the one who initiates and guides it towards a fuller and better-understood celebration (p. 795). Here we find elements of great importance for the formation of future priests: courses in liturgy cannot be limited to the examination of a few rubrics and rules, but must certainly contribute to preparing future priests for their role as celebrants.

⁴¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 6, echoing an expression from Pius XII’s Encyclical *Mediator Dei*.

The character of public worship offered to God by the Church is therefore so inherent in the liturgy that, without it, the liturgy would lose its identity. Thus, a self-celebration by the assembly on its own, or a session of moral and humanitarian teaching—even if clothed in certain liturgical forms—would fall outside the Church’s framework of worship.

Admittedly, the Church must not remain detached from the problems faced by men and women today. Furthermore, one cannot celebrate today whilst disregarding the specific congregation gathered, especially since the introduction, in the post-conciliar period, of so many possibilities aimed at involving the congregation.

But as the trend continues towards ‘over-adaptation’—the desire to ground the celebration in the ‘concrete’, in everyday life—we often end up losing sight of the essentially transcendental nature of the liturgical act. Given, therefore, the ‘fragility’ of human beings, who are ever more inclined towards earthly things, there must be an authority and standards that set out how far one may go and what limits must not be crossed.

Moreover, it is by preserving the liturgy’s authentic worshipful dimension that we will highlight its pastoral significance, both from a supernatural perspective, of course, and on a natural level. Public worship is a source of grace, because it is truly an action of the mystical body of Christ, carried out in accordance with the prescriptions and procedures laid down by Our Lord Himself and developed by His Church. Conversely, if it is distorted by men, if God’s gift is ‘tampered with’ by men, it ultimately loses all its richness, even on the pedagogical and natural levels.

2. The validity of the sacraments

There is a fairly widespread modern tendency to emphasise the human and subjective values of the liturgy to such an extent that one ends up diminishing, or even, in extreme cases, implicitly or explicitly denying, the supernatural aspect of the sacraments. And the Church cannot allow this distortion, lest she become unfaithful to her divine Founder and to her mission of transmitting the deposit of faith.

The sacraments are gifts from God, which effectively convey grace through themselves, *ex opere operato*. In His infinite goodness, Our Lord Jesus Christ has given them to us as irreplaceable sources of supernatural strength and has entrusted them to the Apostles and

their successors so that they might be their faithful dispensers. He has given them to us with a precise and specific theological nature and, to a certain extent, with their ritual matter and form. The sacraments are therefore actions of Christ which the priest administers in his name.

The Church enjoys a certain degree of latitude in adapting them to different times and places; the liturgical books also provide for certain options on the part of the celebrant, depending on the specific people to whom he confers them. But under no circumstances may these adaptations affect the essence of the sacrament, nor the unity of the Roman rite, as far as the Latin Church is concerned.

This is expressed, in his beautiful Latin, by the Angelic Doctor as follows:

‘The Apostles and their successors are vicars of God insofar as they govern the Church established through faith and the sacraments of the faith. Unde, sicut non licet eis constituere aliam Ecclesiam, ita non licet eis tradere aliam fidem, neque instituere alia sacramenta. Sed per sacramenta, quae de latere Christi pendentis in cruce fluxerunt, dicitur esse fabricata Ecclesia Christi ’42.

3. Doctrinal truth

Whilst the validity of the sacraments is preserved, arbitrary alterations to the prayers that form the ritual framework of their celebration and administration—the ‘secondary rites’, etc.—may result in the expression of a theology that is not in accordance with the deposit of faith.

This was one of the main reasons, if not the main one, for the emergence of canonical legislation on liturgical matters: the aim was, in particular, to set limits on liturgical ‘creativity’. Thus we see the ^{Fourth} Council of Carthage, in the year 397, prohibiting the use of new prayers before they had first been submitted to the ‘more learned brothers’, *nisi eas prius cum instructoribus fratribus contulerit*. ⁴³ And St Augustine, writing at the same time, informs us that the reason for this measure was not only the mediocrity of certain compositions, but also the theological ignorance they revealed: *‘multa in eis reperiuntur contra catholicam fide’* ^{m 44}.

⁴² St Thomas Aquinas, **Summa Theologica**, III, q. 64, art. 2 ad 3.

⁴³ Fourth Council of Carthage, canon 23, in MANSI, Concil. ampl. coll., III, Paris, 1803, 933.

⁴⁴ ST AUGUSTINE, *De Baptismo*, 6, 24, 47, in CSEL 51, 323.

Yet the Church cannot allow the liturgy to express doctrinal errors in this way, on pain of allowing itself to be destroyed. Indeed, the *lex supplicandi* and the *lex credendi* are intimately linked, as the liturgy is meant to express the faith; if it comes to proclaiming error, it is that error which the faithful will believe, given that it is indeed chiefly through the celebrations that they are instructed in the faith. Thus, not only is the famous axiom attributed to Saint Celestine—‘*Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*’⁴⁵—confirmed, but so too is its reciprocal, insofar as beliefs are, in a sense, shaped by worship. It is through the rites that the faith is manifested and nourished.

4. The ecclesial dimension of the liturgy

‘The sacraments are “of the Church” in the double sense that they are “through her” and ‘for her’, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us ⁴⁶. The Second Vatican Council also clearly states that the liturgy is the work of the Church. And previously, Pius XII had proclaimed: ‘The liturgy is the public worship of the Church ’⁴⁷. Consequently, every celebration is ‘of the Church’ and must take place in her name; it must express this aspect through fidelity to liturgical norms.

If a celebrant performs a rite on behalf of an institution, everyone readily understands that he must conform to that institution’s prescriptions; if, on the other hand, he invents and improvises the gestures and words, he gives the impression that he is the master and creator of the ritual. Similarly, if a priest engages in improvisation during a liturgical ceremony, he is guilty of a kind of falsehood, or at the very least of misleading the faithful on a point that is by no means secondary. Furthermore, he commits an act of usurpation by attributing to himself an authority that is not his own, and he deprives the rite of one of its essential dimensions—namely, its ecclesial dimension.

For their part, the faithful who take part in a liturgical celebration are entitled to have it conducted in such a way that they can recognise its ecclesial character, and not to be drawn into celebrations whose nature would be determined solely by the celebrant’s own discretion.

45 SAINT CELESTINE, *Indiculus*, Chapter 8, in DENZINGER H. and SCHÖNMETZER A., *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, No. 246, 1973 edition.

46 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, op. cit., § 1118.

47 PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, op. cit., 528.

5. The fulfilment of the Church's mission

Another way of approaching the same issue is to start with the 'offices' that constitute the Church – the *muner*,⁴⁸. Our Lord did indeed establish the Church to transmit his doctrine to mankind and to administer the sacraments to them, giving it the charge and authority to 'shepherd' his flock, with the corresponding authority. It is therefore entrusted with the three offices of teaching, sanctifying and governing – *munera docendi, sanctificandi et regendi*. Admittedly, these three functions are also those of every bishop: 'These are [...] three aspects of the single office of pastor, successor to the Apostles'⁴⁹.

Let us also consider that 'it pleased God that men should not receive salvation and sanctification separately, without any mutual connection; on the contrary, He wished to make them a people who would know Him in truth and serve Him in holiness'. We are faced here with the dual nature of the Church: a divine and human society, 'hierarchically organised on the one hand and a mystical Body on the other'⁵⁰.

Consequently, by virtue of its nature as a structured human society, the Church must possess power—a governing authority—endowed with the means to fulfil its mission, that is to say, the three *munera*. With regard specifically to the *munus sanctificandi*, the ecclesiastical hierarchy must be able to oversee the conferral and administration of the sacraments, which entails ensuring their validity and their dignified administration at all levels. Consequently, this same hierarchy must be able to legislate in this matter and impose its laws on both ordained ministers and the faithful.

In practice, this legislative power, which forms part of the power of government, is exercised at two levels:

- 'formalisation', that is to say, the determination of the exact form of the sacraments, including gestures and words; Christ instituted, to a certain extent, the sacrament itself with its essential constituent elements, but it falls to the Church to specify how, in practice, they are to be celebrated;

⁴⁸ This section is not based on new material but, by drawing on information already discussed from other perspectives, it serves to highlight new aspects.

⁴⁹ St Matthew 16:18–19; 28:19; St John 21:16 and 17.

⁵⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution *Lumen Gentium**, 24 (cf. also nos. 8 and 9).

- the establishment of the structures necessary for the proper implementation of this ‘formalisation’, which entails a whole ecclesial structure comprising dioceses, seminaries, parishes, etc. Moreover, it is not merely a matter of establishing these structures, but also of ensuring that they remain sound and that ‘praxis’ does not deviate.

However, this legislative power must be accompanied by a governing power, which will organise all matters with a view to implementing what has been regulated (whilst working to encourage and promote the good in all its forms), and by a disciplinary or coercive power, to ensure that the laws are observed. Without these latter two powers, the enacted norms would remain a dead letter.

6. The richness of rites

The final point we shall address is that of the content of the rites, considered in its own right. Indeed, apart from the validity of the sacraments and the conformity of the celebrations with the deposit of faith, there is a wealth to be preserved in the liturgy, both from a doctrinal, moral and ascetic point of view, and from a historical, ecclesial and anthropological perspective, not to mention the beauty of the liturgy. Let us take, by way of example, a simple prayer from the Missal, the Collect for Christmas Day Mass, as it appears in the Roman Missal in Latin:

‘Deus, qui humanae substantiae dignitatem et mirabiliter condidisti et mirabilius re-formasti, da quaesumus nobis ejus divinitatis esse consortes, qui humanitatis nostrae fieri dignatus est particeps. Qui tecum vivit’.

These few words evoke the full beauty of creation, the immense blessing of redemption—which, in a certain sense, begins at the Nativity—the supernatural dignity of redeemed humanity, as well as its vocation to share in divine bliss (the richness of this prayer stems not only from the juxtaposition of doctrinal references, but also from their harmonious combination). This prayer dates back to the Veronese Sacramentary (c. 1239); furthermore, it incorporates ideas and imagery developed by Pope Saint Leo the Great, note 51: a priest who were to improvise his own collect would deprive himself and the faithful of this treasure of doctrine, spirituality, beauty and ecclesiastical tradition.

51 JOHNSON C.-WARD A., *‘The Sources of the Roman Missal’*, *Notitiae* 22 (1986) 618–620.

Another example: the various vestments and ornaments worn by the priest during the celebration of Mass each have a significance relating to the dispositions he must bring to this holy function: the amice symbolises the purity and vigour of the faith; the alb, the purity of conscience; the cord, of purity of morals; the stole, of holy hope in the New Covenant; the chasuble, of the sanctifying yoke of service to Christ , vol. 52.

Yet one must still be aware of these values. And here we come face to face with one of the great temptations: we do not understand, so we do away with it. Another attitude, perhaps even more superficial, consists of paying no attention to anything and simply improvising. The result in both cases is the same: the faithful—and, incidentally, the celebrant himself before them—are deprived of great riches. We might also mention the tendency to discredit the symbolic language of the liturgy by reducing it to the level of allegory.

Would it not be better to explain the meaning of the rites to the faithful, preferably outside the liturgical celebration? A whole process of catechesis (perhaps preceded by some training on the part of the priests) would need to be undertaken to help the faithful understand, appreciate and participate more fully in the rites of the Church in all their richness.

It should also be noted that many of these ‘details’—whether the rites themselves, the objects used, or the liturgical setting—help to signify the sacred nature of liturgical acts. This is yet another significant value, which risks being lost by many ordained ministers and communities of the faithful. Yet the loss of a sense of the sacred is highly likely to be a prelude to the loss of faith.

A particular rite, a prescribed liturgical gesture, an ornament or vestment, a prayer, etc., or even the combination of a gesture and a prayer, can convey one or even several meanings; they are often the legacy of liturgical traditions dating back more than a thousand years. They constitute true treasures that can greatly enrich the faithful. It should be noted that these are not merely relics of the past, which would ultimately be of interest only to those nostalgic for the past and to Church historians, but rather the entire context of acts of worship, the components of which, in addition to their abstract educational value, also serve as aids to the sanctification of ministers and the faithful, helping them to understand, amongst other aspects, the ecclesial and spiritual context within which the sacred rite takes place.

52 Explanations inspired by the ancient prayers to be recited whilst the priest was putting on the sacred vestments before Mass.