

POPE LEO XIV

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM



May 27, 2026

2. THE REFORM OF THE LITURGY: TRADITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

In the Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, the Venerable Pius XII writes that “the Church is without question a living organism, and as an organism, in respect of the sacred liturgy also, she grows, matures, develops, adapts and accommodates herself to temporal needs and circumstances, provided only that the integrity of her doctrine be safeguarded” (no. 59).

In full accordance with this principle, the Second Vatican Council, in the Introduction to the Constitution

Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC), recognizes “particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy” (no. 1). The Council assembly was gathered, in fact, with the desire to “impart an ever increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church” (ibid.).

At that moment in history, there was a strong sense of the need for a renewal of the ritual forms through which, for centuries, the Church had glorified God and sanctified the Christian people. Thanks to the

This is the second talk Pope Leo XIV gave on a Wednesday to those gathered in Rome about the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Liturgical Movement, the conviction had matured—later expressed by Saint John Paul II—that “a very close and organic bond exists between the renewal of the liturgy and the renewal of the whole life of the Church. The Church not only acts but also expresses herself in the liturgy, lives by the liturgy and draws from the liturgy the strength for her life” (Letter *Dominicae Cenae*, 13).

To encourage the access of the faithful to the richness of the gifts of grace dispensed by the sacred liturgy, the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* thus indicates, with a very effective phrase, the direction to take: “That sound tradition may be retained, and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress” (SC, 23).

Pope Benedict XVI grasped in this declaration of intent the “reform programme” of the Council Fathers, “a balance between the great liturgical tradition of the past and that of the future”, noting that “tradition and progress are often clumsily opposed”, whereas “actually, the two concepts merge: tradition is a living reality, which therefore includes in itself the principle of development, of progress. It is as if to say that the river of tradition also carries its source in itself and flows towards the outlet” (Address to participants in the Congress promoted by the Pontifical Athenaeum of Saint Anselm on the 50th anniversary of foundation, 6 May 2011).

The Council affirms the legitimacy of this progress, rooted in authentic Tradition, distinguishing within the liturgy “immutable elements, divinely instituted” from “elements subject to change [which] not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the

intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it” (SC, 21). Changes of this type have taken place constantly over the centuries in order to enable the faithful to participate fruitfully, through ritual actions, in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the foundation of the Christian faith. The Church’s worship has thus been “embodied” in the cultural forms of each age and has been able to influence them and even transform them. The liturgy has thus been, for centuries, a driving force for evangelization. Today, this energy must be renewed in continuity with the authentic and living Catholic tradition, that is, in accordance with a dynamic aimed at introducing believers to the fullness of the truth.

It is therefore understandable why the Council Fathers recommended that the revision of the rites, when

Magisterium, in this way, thus calls for the avoidance of confusion amongst the faithful, discouraging anyone from adding, removing or altering anything in liturgical matters on their own initiative (cf. SC, 22). The progress evoked in the Conciliar Constitution in no way compromises ecclesial communion: rather, it seeks to confirm and foster it.

I therefore urge all those called to prepare the celebration of the divine mysteries, in particular priests who exercise the ministry of liturgical presidency, to always uphold that respect for the texts and regulations of the liturgy which springs from an inner attitude of openness and trust in God, manifesting humility before His greatness and sincere fidelity to ecclesial communion.



“the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them”, must be carried out taking care that “any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing” (SC, 23). For the good of the entire Church, every reform must always be preceded by careful “theological, historical and pastoral” investigation (ibid.). The Council