

POPE LEO XIV

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM



June 3, 2026

3. RITE, SIGN AND SYMBOL

Dear brothers and sisters,

As we continue our catechesis on the Conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), we wish to pause and reflect on some of the fundamental elements of the sacred liturgy, such as the rite, the sign and the symbol.

The Second Vatican Council, building on the valuable work of the Liturgical Movement, has helped us to rediscover a truth that was very much alive in the consciousness of the early Church and in the teaching of the Fathers. The rites of the Christian liturgy are not a mere external

covering of the sacramental mystery, a collection of arbitrary ceremonies, but are the ecclesial mediation through which the divine gift reaches us. Precisely for this reason, the Council invites us to understand the *Mysterium fidei* which is realized in the liturgy through rites and prayers (cf. SC, 48).

The rite gives shape to liturgical action and, through it, to our lives, generating a spiritual sensibility in us that makes us capable of savouring the presence of God through Jesus Christ. Naturally, this happens if we do not remain strangers or silent spectators (cf. *ibid.*) with regard to the liturgy, but rather participate in it fully — body, mind and heart — in obedience to the Lord's command. Through the sacred rite we are thus

In his third catechesis on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Leo XIV delves into the Rite, Sign and Symbol of our liturgy.

formed in listening to the Word of God, in giving thanks and in adoration, in fraternal sharing and in ecclesial communion. We discover that we are an assembly with many faces, united by the same faith.

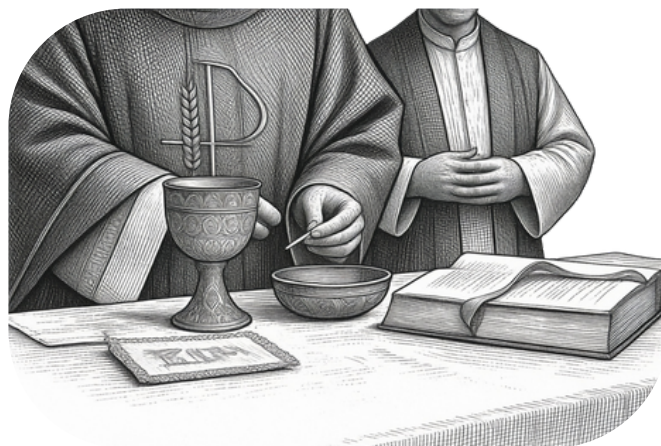
The rite involves us in a well-defined sequence of gestures and prayers, which can sometimes be at odds with our individual tendency towards spontaneity. Its logic, however, is not to constrain freedom within rigid frameworks. On the contrary, with the solemn simplicity of its rhythms, the rite interrupts our frenetic activities, leading us back to what is essential. We thus discover another dimension of action that is not guided by calculations of productivity, and another experience of time and space. In the rite, we experience a logic of gratuitousness, we find a pause that regenerates the heart, we recognize that we are preceded by divine grace and we learn to live in a rhythm inhabited by the Holy Spirit.

The grammar of the rite is interwoven with the signs and symbols proper to the liturgy. In it, as the Council states, “the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs” (SC, 7). The Catechism of the Catholic Church explores the value of these signs, recalling that “their meaning is rooted in the work of creation and in human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ” (no. 1145). The sign of water is emblematic: from the origins of Creation to the Flood, from the crossing of the Red Sea to the Jordan, right up to the water flowing from Christ’s side, which

becomes a sacramental sign of immersion in his death and resurrection.

“Sign” and “symbol” are terms that are often used as synonyms. In reality, a sign is symbolic when it is able to refer not only to an idea, but to an entire system of meanings and values. In this way, for example, when we are sprinkled with holy water, our awareness of the gift received at Baptism and our commitment to new life in Christ is rekindled. Secondly, symbols are essentially practical in nature, being first and foremost actions: some simple and common, such as kneeling and exchanging the sign of peace, or more demanding, such as the constitutive acts of each Sacrament. Above all, symbols have a unique performative and transformative dimension, both in relation to the material elements of which they are composed and to

become once again capable of symbols” (no. 44). We need to allow ourselves to be educated by the rites of the liturgy, caring for the beauty of our celebrations with a delicate touch and without arbitrariness, and committing ourselves to an authentic mystagogy. The experience of a living and devout liturgy, accompanied by appropriate mystagogical catechesis, is the best resource for reawakening in everyone that openness to the encounter with God which, in the logic of the Incarnation, can only take place by involving the whole person: spirit, soul and body (cf. 1 Thess 5:23).



those who come into contact with them, engendering a sense of belonging, touching the heart and mind, and giving rise to authentic ecclesial relationships.

In the Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi*, Pope Francis, echoing a statement by Romano Guardini, identified “the first task of the work of liturgical formation: man must