

**APOSTOLIC LETTER**

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**OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS**

TO THE BISHOPS, PRIESTS AND DEACONS, TO CONSECRATED MEN AND WOMEN AND TO THE LAY FAITHFUL ON THE LITURGICAL FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

*"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." (Lk 22:15)*

**On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God**

1. I write to share with you some reflections on the liturgy, a dimension fundamental for the life of the Church

I simply desire to offer some prompts or cues for reflections that can aid in the contemplation of the beauty and truth of Christian celebration.

*The Liturgy: the "today" of salvation history*

4. No one had earned a place at that Supper. All had been invited. Or better said: all had been drawn there by the burning desire that Jesus had to eat that Passover with them.

5. everyone is invited to the supper of the wedding of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). To be admitted to the feast all that is required is the wedding garment of faith which comes from the hearing of his Word (cf. Ro 10:17)... We must not allow ourselves even a moment of rest, knowing that still not everyone has received an invitation to this Supper or knowing that others have forgotten it or have got lost along the way in the twists and turns of human living. This is what I spoke of when I said, "I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation." (Evangelii gaudium, n. 27). I want this so that all can be seated at the Supper of the sacrifice of the Lamb and live from Him.

6. ...every time we go to Mass, the first reason is that we are drawn there by his desire for us.

7. ... if we had not had the ritual anticipation of his death, we would have never been able to grasp how the carrying out of his being condemned to death could have been in fact the act of perfect worship, pleasing to the Father, the only true act of worship, the only true liturgy. Only a few hours after the Supper, the apostles could have seen in the cross of Jesus, if they

could have borne the weight of it, what it meant for Jesus to say, “body offered,” “blood poured out... It is this of which we make memorial in every Eucharist. When the Risen One returns from the dead to break the bread for the disciples at Emmaus..., that gesture of breaking the bread opens their eyes. It heals them from the blindness inflicted by the horror of the cross, and it renders them capable of “seeing” the Risen One, of believing in the Resurrection.

8. If we had somehow arrived in Jerusalem after Pentecost...we would had no other possibility that that of searching out his disciples...We would have had no other possibility of a true encounter with him other than that of the community that celebrates. For this reason the Church has always protected as its most precious treasure the command of the Lord, ‘Do this in memory of me’.

9. From the very beginning the Church was aware that this was not a question of a representation... From the very beginning the Church had grasped, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that that which was visible in Jesus, that which could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, his words and his gestures, the concreteness of the incarnate Word — everything of Him had passed into the celebration of the sacraments. [1]

10 ...Christian faith is either an encounter with him alive, or it does not exist.

11. The Liturgy guarantees for us the possibility of such an encounter. For us a vague memory of the Last Supper would do no good. We need to be present at that Supper, to be able to hear his voice, to eat his Body and to drink his Blood. We need Him. The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, his every word, his every gesture, glance, and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments...The Lord Jesus who dies no more, who lives forever with the signs of his Passion [2] continues to pardon us, to heal us, to save us with the power of the sacraments...

12. Our first encounter with his paschal deed is the event that marks the life of all believers: our Baptism... In perfect continuity with the Incarnation, there is given to us, in virtue of the presence and action of the Spirit, the possibility of dying and rising in Christ.

*The Church: Sacrament of the Body of Christ*

14. ...— it was from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth “the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.” [4] The parallel between the first Adam and the new Adam is striking: as from the side of the first Adam, after having cast him into a deep sleep, God draws forth Eve, so also from the side of the new Adam, sleeping the sleep of death on the cross, there is born the new Eve, the Church.

16. ...With this letter I simply want to invite the whole Church to rediscover, to safeguard, and to live the truth and power of the Christian celebration. I want the beauty of the Christian celebration and its necessary consequences for the life of the Church not to be spoiled by a superficial and foreshortened understanding of its value or, worse yet, by its being exploited in service of some ideological vision, no matter what the hue.

*The Liturgy: antidote for the poison of spiritual worldliness*

19 ...The action of the celebration does not belong to the individual but to the Christ-Church, to the totality of the faithful united in Christ. The liturgy does not say “I” but “we,” and any limitation on the breadth of this “we” is always demonic.

22. The continual rediscovery of the beauty of the Liturgy is not the search for a ritual aesthetic which is content by only a careful exterior observance of a rite or is satisfied by a scrupulous observance of the rubrics. Obviously, what I am saying here does not wish in any way to approve the opposite attitude, which confuses simplicity with a careless banality, or what is essential with an ignorant superficiality, or the concreteness of ritual action with an exasperating practical functionalism.

23. Let us be clear here: every aspect of the celebration must be carefully tended to

...But even if the quality and the proper action of the celebration was guaranteed, that would not be enough to make the participation full.

*Amazement before the Paschal Mystery: an essential part of the liturgical act*

24. If there were lacking our astonishment at the fact that the paschal mystery is rendered present in the concreteness of sacramental signs, we would truly risk being impermeable to the ocean of grace that floods every celebration. Efforts to favour a greater quality to the celebration, even if praiseworthy, are not enough; nor is the call for a greater interiority. Interiority

can run the risk of reducing itself to an empty subjectivity if it has not taken on board the revelation of the Christian mystery. The encounter with God is not the fruit of an individual interior searching for Him, but it is an event given...

25. ...The astonishment or wonder of which I speak is not some sort of being overcome in the face of an obscure reality or a mysterious rite. It is, on the contrary, marvelling at the fact that the salvific plan of God has been revealed in the paschal deed of Jesus (cf. Eph 1:3-14), and the power of this paschal deed continues to reach us in the celebration of the “mysteries,” of the sacraments...

26. ...Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things. It is the marvelling of those who experience the power of symbol...

*The need for a serious and vital liturgical formation*

27. ... how do we recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action? This was the objective of the Council’s reform. The challenge is extremely demanding because modern people — not in all cultures to the same degree — have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act.

30. Closing the second session of the Council (December 4, 1963) Saint Paul VI expressed himself in this way: “The difficult, complex debates have had rich results. They have brought one topic to a conclusion, the sacred liturgy. Treated before all others, in a sense it has priority over all others for its intrinsic dignity and importance to the life of the Church and today we will solemnly promulgate the document on the liturgy. ... God must hold first place; prayer to him is our first duty. The liturgy is the first source of divine communion in which God shares his own life with us. It is also the first school of the spiritual life. The liturgy is the first gift we must make to the Christian people united to us by faith and the fervour of their prayers.

31. ...If the liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed, and at the same time the font from which all her power flows,” (Sacrosanctum Concilium, n. 10), well then, we can understand what is at stake in the liturgical question. It would be trivial to read the tensions, unfortunately present around the celebration, as a simple divergence between different tastes concerning a particular ritual form. The problematic is primarily

ecclesiological. I do not see how it is possible to say that one recognizes the validity of the Council — though it amazes me that a Catholic might presume not to do so — and at the same time not accept the liturgical reform born out of Sacrosanctum Concilium, a document that expresses the reality of the Liturgy intimately joined to the vision of Church so admirably described in *Lumen gentium*. For this reason, as I already expressed in my letter to all the bishops, I have felt it my duty to affirm that “The liturgical books promulgated by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite.” (Motu Proprio *Traditionis custodes*, art 1)

The non-acceptance of the liturgical reform, as also a superficial understanding of it, distracts us from the obligation of finding responses to the question that I come back to repeating: how can we grow in our capacity to live in full the liturgical action? How do we continue to let ourselves be amazed at what happens in the celebration under our very eyes? We are in need of a serious and dynamic liturgical formation.

32. ...On the morning of Pentecost the Church is born, the initial cell of the new humanity. Only the community of men and women — reconciled because pardoned, alive because He is alive, true because dwelt in by the Spirit of truth — can open the cramped space of spiritual individualism.

33. It is the community of Pentecost that is able to break the Bread in the certain knowledge that the Lord is alive, risen from the dead, present with his word, with his gestures, with the offering of His Body and His Blood. From that moment on the celebration became the privileged place — though not the only one — of an encounter with Him... Only the Church of Pentecost can conceive of the human being as a person, open to a full relationship with God, with creation, and with one’s brothers and sisters.

36. ...Let us always remember that it is the Church, the Body of Christ, that is the celebrating subject and not just the priest. The kind of knowledge that comes from study is just the first step to be able to enter into the mystery celebrated...

37. ...A liturgical-sapiential plan of studies in the theological formation of seminaries would certainly have positive effects in pastoral action. There is no aspect of ecclesial life that does not find its summit and its source in the Liturgy. More than being the result of elaborate programs, a comprehensive,

organic, and integrated pastoral practice is the consequence of placing the Sunday Eucharist, the foundation of communion, at the centre of the life of the community. The theological understanding of the Liturgy does not in any way permit that these words be understood to mean to reduce everything to the aspect of worship. A celebration that does not evangelize is not authentic, just as a proclamation that does not lead to an encounter with the risen Lord in the celebration is not authentic. And then both of these, without the testimony of charity, are like sounding a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (1 Cor 13:1)

38. For ministers as well as for all the baptized, liturgical formation in this first sense is not something that can be acquired once and for all. Since the gift of the mystery celebrated surpasses our capacity to know it, this effort certainly must accompany the permanent formation of everyone, with the humility of little ones, the attitude that opens up into wonderful relationship with God, with creation, and with one's brothers and sisters.

41. ...The celebration concerns the reality of our being docile to the action of the Spirit who operates through it until Christ be formed in us. (Cf. Gal 4:19) The full extent of our formation is our conformation to Christ. I repeat: it does not have to do with an abstract mental process, but with becoming Him.

...Leo the Great writes, "Our participation in the Body and Blood of Christ has no other end than to make us become that which we eat." [11]

43. The Liturgy gives glory to God not because we can add something to the beauty of the inaccessible light within which God dwells (cf. 1Ti 6:16). Nor can we add to the perfection of the angelic song which resounds eternally through the heavenly places. The Liturgy gives glory to God because it allows us — here, on earth — to see God in the celebration of the mysteries, and in seeing Him to draw life from his Passover...

44. Guardini writes, "Here there is outlined the first task of the work of liturgical formation: man must become once again capable of symbols." [13] This is a responsibility for all, for ordained ministers and the faithful alike. The task is not easy because modern man has become illiterate, no longer able to read symbols; ... Our body is a symbol because it is an intimate union of soul and body; it is the visibility of the spiritual soul in the corporeal order; and in this consists human uniqueness, the specificity of the person irreducible to any other form of living being. Our openness to the transcendent, to God, is

constitutive of us. Not to recognize this leads us inevitably not only to a not knowing of God but also to not knowing ourselves...

... We no longer have the gaze of St. Francis, who looked at the sun — which he called brother because so he felt it to be — and saw it beautiful and radiant with great splendour, and, full of wonder, he sang that it bears a likeness of You, Most High One. [14] To have lost the capacity to grasp the symbolic value of the body and of every creature renders the symbolic language of the Liturgy almost inaccessible to the modern mentality. ..

45. So, the question I want to pose is how can we become once again capable of symbols?...

46. Above all we must reacquire confidence about creation. I mean to say that things — the sacraments “are made” of things — come from God. To Him they are oriented, and by Him they have been assumed, and assumed in a particular way in the Incarnation, so that they can become instruments of salvation, vehicles of the Spirit, channels of grace. In this it is clear how vast is the distance between this vision and either a materialistic or spiritualistic vision. If created things are such a fundamental, essential part of the sacramental action that brings about our salvation, then we must arrange ourselves in their presence with a fresh, non-superficial regard, respectful and grateful. From the very beginning, created things contain the seed of the sanctifying grace of the sacraments.

47. Still thinking about how the Liturgy forms us, another decisive question is the education necessary to be able to acquire the interior attitude that will let us use and understand liturgical symbols. Let me express it in a simple way. I have in mind parents, or even more perhaps, grandparents, but also our pastors and catechists...

### *Ars Celebrandi*

48. One way of caring for and growing in a vital understanding of the symbols of the Liturgy is certainly the *ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating... The *ars celebrandi* cannot be reduced to only a rubrical mechanism, much less should it be thought of as imaginative — sometimes wild — creativity without rules. The rite is in itself a norm, and the norm is never an end in itself, but it is always at the service of a higher reality that it means to protect.

49. ...The action of the celebration is the place in which, by means of memorial, the Paschal Mystery is made present so that the baptized, through their participation, can experience it in their own lives. Without this understanding, the celebration easily falls into a preoccupation with the exterior (more or less refined) or into a concern only for rubrics (more or less rigid).

Then, it is necessary to know how the Holy Spirit acts in every celebration. The art of celebrating must be in harmony with the action of the Spirit. Only in this way will it be free from the subjectivisms that are the fruit of individual tastes dominating...

50. ... Guardini writes: “We must understand how deeply we remain entrenched in individualism and subjectivism, how unaccustomed we have become to the demands of the ‘great’, and how small the parameters of our religious living are. We must regain the sense for the ‘great’ style of praying,.. The way to achieve this, though, is through discipline, through giving up weak sentimentality; through serious work, carried out in obedience to the Church, on our religious being and acting.” [15] This is how the art of celebrating is learned.

51. Speaking of this theme we are inclined to think of it only in regards to ordained ministers carrying out the service of presiding. But in fact this is an attitude that all the baptized are called to live. I think of all the gestures and words that belong to the assembly: gathering, careful walking in procession, being seated, standing, kneeling, singing, being in silence, acclamations, looking, listening. There are many ways in which the assembly, as one body, (Ne 8:1) participates in the celebration. Everybody doing together the same gesture, everyone speaking together in one voice — this transmits to each individual the energy of the entire assembly. It is a uniformity that not only does not deaden but, on the contrary, educates individual believers to discover the authentic uniqueness of their personalities not in individualistic attitudes but in the awareness of being one body. It is not a question of following a book of liturgical etiquette. It is, rather, a “discipline,” — in the way that Guardini referred to — which, if observed authentically forms us...

52. Among the ritual acts that belong to the whole assembly, silence occupies a place of absolute importance. Many times it is expressly prescribed in the rubrics. The entire Eucharistic celebration is immersed in the silence

which precedes its beginning and which marks every moment of its ritual unfolding...

...Liturgical silence is something much more grand: it is a symbol of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit who animates the entire action of the celebration...

... It awakens a readiness to hear the Word and awakens prayer. It disposes us to adore the Body and Blood of Christ. It suggests to each one, in the intimacy of communion, what the Spirit would effect in our lives to conform us to the Bread broken. For all these reasons we are called to enact with extreme care the symbolic gesture of silence. Through it the Spirit gives us shape, gives us form.

53. Every gesture and every word contains a precise action that is always new because it meets with an always new moment in our own lives...

54. If it is true that the *ars celebrandi* is required of the entire assembly that celebrates, it is likewise true that ordained ministers must have a very particular concern for it. In visiting Christian communities, I have noticed that their way of living the liturgical celebration is conditioned — for better or, unfortunately, for worse — by the way in which their pastor presides in the assembly. We could say that there are different “models” of presiding. Here is a possible list of approaches, which even though opposed to each other, characterize a way of presiding that is certainly inadequate: rigid austerity or an exasperating creativity, a spiritualizing mysticism or a practical functionalism, a rushed briskness or an overemphasized slowness, a sloppy carelessness or an excessive finickiness, a superabundant friendliness or priestly impassibility. Granted the wide range of these examples, I think that the inadequacy of these models of presiding have a common root: a heightened personalism of the celebrating style which at times expresses a poorly concealed mania to be the centre of attention...Be sure you understand me: these are not the most widespread behaviours, but still, not infrequently assemblies suffer from being thus abused.

57. ...To preside at Eucharist is to be plunged into the furnace of God’s love. When we are given to understand this reality, or even just to intuit something of it, we certainly would no longer need a Directory that would impose the proper behaviour... The highest norm, and therefore the most demanding, is the reality itself of the Eucharistic celebration... It requires application on the

part of the priest, an assiduous tending to the fire of the love of the Lord that he came to ignite on the earth. (Lk 12:49).

60. It is the celebration itself that educates the priest to this level and quality of presiding... Approaching the altar for the offering, the priest is educated in humility and contrition by the words, "With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God." [20] He cannot rely on himself for the ministry confided to him because the Liturgy invites him to pray to be purified through the sign of water, when he says, "Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." [21] ...

... In the Eucharistic prayer — in which also all of the baptized participate by listening with reverence and in silence and intervening with the acclamations [22] (IGMR 78-79) — the one presiding has the strength, in the name of the whole holy people, to remember before the Father the offering of his Son in the Last Supper, so that that immense gift might be rendered newly present on the altar. In that offering he participates with the offering of himself. The priest cannot recount the Last Supper to the Father without himself becoming a participant in it. He cannot say, "Take this, all of you and eat of it, for this is my Body which will be given up for you," and not live the same desire to offer his own body, his own life, for the people entrusted to him. This is what happens in the exercise of his ministry...

61. In this letter I have wanted simply to share some reflections which most certainly do not exhaust the immense treasure of the celebration of the holy mysteries...

...We are called continually to rediscover the richness of the general principles exposed in the first numbers of Sacrosanctum Concilium, grasping the intimate bond between this first of the Council's constitutions and all the others. For this reason we cannot go back to that ritual form which the Council fathers, cum Petro et sub Petro, felt the need to reform, approving, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and following their conscience as pastors, the principles from which was born the reform...

...For this reason I wrote Traditionis custodes, so that the Church may lift up, in the variety of so many languages, one and the same prayer capable of expressing her unity. [23]

As I have already written, I intend that this unity be re-established in the whole Church of the Roman Rite.

62. I would like this letter to help us to rekindle our wonder for the beauty of the truth of the Christian celebration, to remind us of the necessity of an authentic liturgical formation, and to recognize the importance of an art of celebrating that is at the service of the truth of the Paschal Mystery and of the participation of all of the baptized in it, each one according to his or her vocation...

65. Let us abandon our polemics to listen together to what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Let us safeguard our communion. Let us continue to be astonished at the beauty of the Liturgy. The Paschal Mystery has been given to us. Let us allow ourselves to be embraced by the desire that the Lord continues to have to eat His Passover with us...

*Given in Rome...on 29<sup>th</sup> June...in the year 2022, the tenth of my Pontificate.*

NOTES (appearing in these extracts):