



A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

FURROW

The

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

Ardent Longing Fulfilled in the Liturgy

January 2023

Ardent Longing Fulfilled in the Liturgy

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

As a priest I do not consider myself to have been particularly coddled. I left Ireland when I was 18 and went to New Jersey to receive my priestly formation. But there, as a seminarian, I did a lot of pastoral work in the South Bronx. I lived for a year in Southeast Washington D.C. when it was the murder capital of the United States and I frequented lots of difficult places, working mainly in the Spanish-speaking communities within the Catholic Church in the United States. Two years after ordination, I was asked to return to the seminary to work in formation. But I continued to travel to the South Bronx twice a week to help in a parish there and often ministered in less-than-ideal circumstances.

When I returned to Ireland to help in seminary work here, I was asked to also take a parish appointment which I happily agreed to. I thought that if I hadn't seen it all, that I had at least seen a lot. Yet I must admit that I was surprised the first time that we had First Communion in the parish. The main concern in the organization of the liturgy was that there be no bloodshed. Apparently there had been a knife fight between members of a family the year previous and the main concern, pastoral, catechetical or otherwise, was that there be no repeat at that year's First Communion Mass.

I know that this is not a regular occurrence, and most Irish parishes are much calmer. But I do think that most will agree that people are often distracted during the First Communion liturgies and that not everyone appreciates what the Church teaches to be the centre of what is celebrated. I would suggest that Confirmation is even more in crisis than First Communion. In many parishes it has become a sort of graduation ceremony from the local parochial school. In the old days children often went to Confirmation afraid for their lives. They were expected to know all the questions of the Catechism by heart. There are 443 questions in the 1951 edition of the *Maynooth Catechism*. This was too big an expectation placed

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue is a Director of Liturgical Programmes in St. Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth and serves as Executive Secretary for Liturgy to the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

THE FURROW

on the children and the punishment of having to wait until next year to make your Confirmation if you got an answer wrong was manifestly unjust. However, today many Confirmation class groups would be unable to come up with a list of the Ten Commandments or the Seven Sacraments from memory, even if they were given all the time in the world and allowed to work as a group.

In no way do I wish to blame our Catholic schools and others who prepare young candidates for the Sacraments. Many people are working to the best of their ability in challenging circumstances. But the modern Ireland in which our young people are being formed could in no way be described as an Isle of Saints and Scholars. Obviously, things were a little better, 10, 20 and 30 years ago. But, no matter their age, many practicing Catholics today do not have any appreciation for what is happening in the liturgy. Some older people might remember something of their Catechism, but the majority have little knowledge and at most have a simple appreciation that Mass and some of the Sacraments are important. Most Irish Catholics today receive little catechetical formation after the age of 18 and many don't even study their Faith in secondary school.

The August 2022 Irish *Synthesis Document* for the national consultation for the Universal Synod confirms this worrying diagnosis. Perhaps the most worrying line for me in the document is the statement that “there was also a sense that in the future, people may not be reached through liturgy, *so a prior step is required in relation to encountering Jesus on a personal level.*” Given the renewed Eucharistic Ecclesiology of the twentieth century and the appreciation that “the Eucharist makes the Church,” I must stress that a Church without a Eucharist is simply not a Church.¹

I do appreciate that not all readers will immediately agree with me that a renewed attention to liturgical formation will be the key to parish renewal today. But *Sacrosanctum Concilium* did state that active participation in the liturgy “is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work” (14).

With this in mind, I think we can appreciate the significance of *Desiderio Desideravi*, the Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God that Pope Francis published last June. Personally, I think that it offers great help to the Irish Church in this present moment. About a year earlier, the Pope had

¹ For more on this see, Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* 2nd Ed.(Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2006), as well as John Paul II's 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

ARDENT LONGING FULFILLED IN THE LITURGY

written *Traditionis Custodes* a letter addressed just to bishops that regulated celebrations of the Mass according to the 1962 version of the Roman Missal (often called the Latin Mass). Many thought that letter to be overly negative, but this new letter is addressed to the whole Church and helps provide a way forward for the Church that goes beyond secondary issues.

The letter's Latin title, *Desiderio Desideravi*, is a something of a tongue-twister. But it is taken from the Last Supper account in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus tells his apostles, "I have ardently longed to eat this Passover with you" (Lk 22:15). There are two main themes to the letter. The *first* of these, which I consider to be the least important of the two, is to reaffirm the validity of the liturgical renewal that has taken place after the Second Vatican Council. As Francis explains, "I have felt it my duty to affirm [in *Traditionis Custodes*] 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* [law of prayer] of the Roman Rite.'" He continues in the same paragraph, explaining "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 [the Second Vatican Council's] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*." In the blogosphere this affirmation of the current liturgy is what has provoked most reaction.²

However, I think that the main importance of the letter is its emphasis on liturgical formation. Francis knows that there is a much more fundamental issue at stake here than whether we use a version of the Missal promulgated in 1962 or 2002. The vital problem is whether or not we have a personal relationship with Jesus. Pope Francis puts it bluntly, "Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist" (*Desiderio* 10). The Pope continues explaining that "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. In the Eucharist and in all the sacraments we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and of having the power of his Paschal Mystery reach us. The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, his every word, his every

2 For more reflection on this topic, I would refer those interested to a series of articles cowritten by John Cavadini, Mary Healy, Thomas Weinandy and available at the *Church Life Journal: A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life of the University of Notre Dame*. The series is available online here: <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/authors/john-cavadini-mary-healy-thomas-weinandy/>

gesture, glance, and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments. I am Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man possessed by demons at Capernaum, the paralytic in the house of Peter, the sinful woman pardoned, the woman afflicted by haemorrhages, the daughter of Jairus, the blind man of Jericho, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, the thief and Peter both pardoned. The Lord Jesus who dies no more, who lives forever with the signs of his Passion continues to pardon us, to heal us, to save us with the power of the sacraments.” Indeed, meeting Christ in the liturgy “is the concrete way, by means of his incarnation, that he loves us. It is the way in which he satisfies his own thirst for us that he had declared from the cross” (*Desiderio* 11). This *living* encounter with Jesus Christ is what we need to foster in our liturgies and parishes.

Francis is inspired by the German-Italian theologian, Romano Guardini (1885-1968). As a young priest, Francis had decided to write his (unfinished) doctoral thesis on Guardini. He quotes Guardini four times in the Letter and he is the only modern author to be quoted (other than Church documents). In 1964 Guardini had famously questioned whether the regular person was still capable of participating in “the liturgical act.” He felt that after World War II the world had become too technical and religion had become an individual matter for most people.³ Francis explains how, “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 priestly prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper that all may be one judges every one of our divisions around the Bread broken, around the sacrament of mercy, the sign of unity, the bond of charity” (*Desiderio* 16).

Clearly echoing Guardini, Francis explains that “the fundamental question is this: 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” (*Desiderio* 27).

With this grave situation in mind, we cannot be complacent, but rather “we must learn anew how to relate religiously as fully

3 Romano Guardini, “An Open Letter,” in Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh, eds., *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 3–8. For an introduction to Guardini’s thought see Robert Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997)

human beings” (*Desiderio* 34, quoting Guardini). Francis has an interesting proposal as to how we do this. He proposes *beauty*. We need to be “careful: for the antidote of the Liturgy to be effective, we are required every day to rediscover the beauty of the truth of the Christian celebration ... so that the Spirit, plunging us into the paschal mystery, might transform every dimension of our life, conforming us more and more to Christ” (*Desiderio* 21).

Interestingly, for Francis, this beauty is not simply about providing aesthetically pleasing music, art or architecture in our churches. He explains that “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. Let us be clear here: every aspect of the celebration must be carefully tended to (space, time, gestures, words, objects, vestments, song, music...) and every rubric must be observed. Such attention would be enough to prevent robbing from the assembly what is owed to it; namely, the paschal mystery celebrated according to the ritual that the Church sets down. But even if the quality and the proper action of the celebration were guaranteed, that would not be enough to make our participation full” (*Desiderio* 22-23).

In this sense what is required from us? How can we implement this Letter in Ireland? First of all, I would suggest that our liturgy be celebrated well. Particularly in these post-lockdown days, we need to realize that the liturgy is not just the work of the priest. “Let us always remember that it is the Church, the Body of Christ, that is the celebrating subject and not just the priest” (*Desiderio* 36). Francis proposes that all Christians, but priests especially work diligently at their *ars celebrandi* and that priests pay a lot of care to how they preside. “We could say,” he writes, “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 center of attention. Often this becomes more

THE FURROW

evident when our celebrations are transmitted over the air or online, something not always opportune and that needs further reflection” (*Desiderio* 54).

Then he leaves a lot of room to each to discern how best to foster liturgical formation. But I think that the most important encouragement that Francis gives us is to challenge us to place the liturgy at the centre of our pastoral work. The years after Vatican II saw a lot of excitement about the liturgy. But today, sometimes we take the liturgy for granted. We are constantly looking for new programmes and activities to revitalize our parishes. But this can lead us to neglect the liturgy that is always there, but sometimes forgotten. I challenge readers to actually read the full text of *Desiderio Desideravi* and to reflect on Francis’ suggestions. Everyone ought to strive to become better formed in the liturgy and to improve the liturgy in their parish or community.

Finally, we ought to heed Francis’ call to unity in the Church. The Eucharist is the “source and summit” of Christian life (*Lumen Gentium* 11), yet in our days it sometimes becomes a place where disunity is manifest. Francis concludes the letter with this encouragement: “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” (*Desiderio* 65).

Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble,
and let the heavens exult
when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar
in the hands of a priest!
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!
O sublime humility! O humble sublimity!
The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God,
so humbles Himself that for our salvation
He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!
Brothers, look at the humility of God,
and pour out your hearts before Him!
Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him!
Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,
that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!

Saint Francis of Assisi

A Letter to the Entire Order II, 26-29, Quoted at the conclusion of
Desiderio Desideravi.