

# ‘Do this in memory of me’

Pope Francis reminds us that ‘Christian faith is either an encounter with Jesus or it does not exist’. And it is in the liturgy that this encounter takes place / By NEIL XAVIER O’DONOGHUE

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**I**N THIS HOLIEST of weeks, Christians celebrate the institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper, on the night before he died. Henri de Lubac’s insights, “the Church makes the Eucharist” and “the Eucharist makes the Church”, shaped the theology of the Second Vatican Council. And the way forward for the Church, despite the many new and different challenges it faces, is still to be discovered not around a conference table or in meetings, but in the fruitful celebration of the Eucharist.

The command to “Do this in memory of me” is perhaps the most important instruction the Church received from Jesus. As the Anglican Benedictine monk, Dom Gregory Dix, wrote in his 1945 classic, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, the celebration of the Eucharist has always been at the heart of the Church, irrespective of the circumstances in which Christ’s disciples found themselves. “For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country, and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge

of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.” The Church has found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America ... “And best of all,” writes Dix, “week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unflinching, across all parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this to *make the plebs sancta Dei* – the holy common people of God.”

This is not to absolve us of the supreme effort needed to face the many challenges in ensuring that our celebrations are as worthy as is humanly possible, or to paper over our internecine liturgical wars by declaring them to be unimportant. These struggles are vital; indeed, the future of the Church depends on how we celebrate the liturgy. But we will never fully get liturgy “right”. The Church always needs to be purified through penance and renewal, because it is made up of sinners. It should come as no surprise that differences surrounding the celebration of the Eucharist have always been part of the life of the Church.

The Church needs to be purified through penance and renewal

The account of the Last Supper in the gospel of John tells of the Apostles squabbling over who should wash the feet – there was even arguing over who should sit where. The letters of St Paul and St James decry a lack of unity over the celebration. History is replete with real and alleged liturgical abuses and no age has been without scandal, unworthiness and crimes associated with the celebration and the Christians who partake in it. The many lists of sins against the Eucharist codified in the Penitentials of the early Irish Church frequently mention the possibility of a monk or other Christian vomiting up the host, due either to sickness or drunkenness, and this being in turn eaten by a dog. There is no golden age of liturgical practice to which we can return.

**THE TWENTIETH** century was a century of eucharistic revival; our best way forward is to build on these most recent foundations as we draw strength from the celebration itself. In the early twentieth century

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Pope Pius X championed frequent Communion, thus ushering in a liturgical renewal almost unparalleled in the history of the Church. From the time of the Fathers, most Christians received Communion very infrequently. Such was the problem that the Fourth Lateran Council specified that Catholics could not normally be considered to be practising if they did not receive Communion at least once a year. Before the twentieth century annual reception of Communion was the norm for most Catholics. Additionally, Pius X pioneered the need for “active participation” in the liturgy, a term that he coined to capture a concept that would have a huge significance in later decades.

The Liturgical Movement took the concept of active participation and ran with it. In the twentieth century, Christians faced the challenges of a rapidly evolving society. In Western Europe the Church appeared discredited and the masses abandoned its practice. The theologian Romano Guardini could ask whether the person of his day was even capable of participating in the liturgical act at all. Both pastors and theologians discerned that these challenges were best addressed by promoting a liturgical life where the faithful did not simply “attend” or “listen to” Mass but participated in it with their full lives. When Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, “active participation” was to take centre stage.

The council considered participation in the sacraments, and in the Eucharist in particular, as the source of the universal call to holiness. The Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, would explain that “such participation by the Christian people as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’ is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”

Without constant renewal, the Church withers and dies. We see this before our very eyes. We fool ourselves if we think “secularisation” is the key issue facing the Church. The key issue is the inner life of the Church: and without the ongoing renewal of the liturgy, the People of God cannot “draw water from the wells of salvation”, and certainly cannot draw that life-giving water “with joy” (Isaiah 12:3).

**THE RHETORIC** of our culture of the individual veils the needs of the Body of Christ, and points us in a fruitless direction. It is the

corporate body, the People of God as a whole, that needs renewal, and this renewal can only happen in shared communal experience. In the Catholic tradition, that shared communal experience always has been and will always be liturgical. The renewal of the liturgy and the renewal of the Church go hand in hand.

Some consider Vatican II to have been “done”. They are searching for the latest novelty. Pope Francis is closer to the truth when he says that an ecumenical council takes a hundred years to sink in and be fully implemented. Some aspects of Vatican II’s liturgical reform still need to be fully worked out. Most of the low hanging fruit of the liturgical reform has been picked. While they required a huge amount of specialist work, the produc-

tion of new liturgical books and the reordering of churches were relatively simple to achieve. The renewal, however, still remains superficial: the renewal called for by the council requires the ongoing renewal of the lives of every member of the Church.

While evangelisation and mission is a vital part of the life of the Church, its pastoral priority must also be to live the mysteries of the faith with those who actually form part of its liturgical assemblies. They must be encouraged and formed to participate more actively

### At Mass, Catholics are invited to a re-enchantment of their faith by a renewal of eucharistic wonder

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## At the Garrick, a nice woman – stylish, Catholic – appeared to be sitting on the lap of a gent

in the Church's liturgical life. The fact that the Church has retained millions of members, in spite of modern challenges, is in great part thanks to our partial implementation of the liturgical renewal of Vatican II.

An abstract concept of the Eucharist does not, by itself, constitute the “source and summit” of the life of the Church. The actual text of this much-cited quotation from *Lumen Gentium* makes clear that our *participation* is necessary: “When [the faithful] take part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the source and the culmination of all Christian life, they offer to God the divine victim and themselves along with him; and so both in this offering and in Holy Communion all fulfil their own part in the liturgical action.”

At Mass on Easter Day, as on every Sunday, Catholics are invited to a re-enchantment of their faith by a renewal of eucharistic wonder. Pope Francis has often invited the Church to embark on this voyage of rediscovery. He dedicated his 2022 Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi* to the need to promote the liturgical formation of the People of God. Not only does he affirm, referencing *Traditionis Custodes*, that “the liturgical books promulgated by St Paul VI and St John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite”. More importantly, he invites all Christians to have an experience of “astonishment at the paschal mystery”.

**ACCORDING TO FRANCIS**, “Christian faith is either an encounter with [Jesus] alive, or it does not exist”. The liturgy guarantees the possibility of such an encounter. “A vague memory of the Last Supper would do no good,” Francis writes in *Desiderio Desideravi*. “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 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.”

At Mass we are all invited to meet Christ in the liturgy so that, in the words of the Collect on Holy Thursday, “we may draw from so great a mystery, the fullness of charity and of life.”

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SOMETHING fell into my peripheral vision – bigger than a fly, smaller than a badger. It was a medal, the medal my great-uncle Dick had found on the battlefield in the First World War. It bears an image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, patroness of Cambrai, with the invocation PPN – *Priez pour nous* – and Jesus with his Sacred Heart on the reverse.

Now medals don't just fall into one's peripheral vision like blossom. It turned out that a thin gold chain round my neck had parted. I had once been invested with the woolly scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a painless procedure which brings benefits that I have forgotten but from which I mean implicitly to profit. The medal deputises for the wool scapular.

My intention being to wear it day and night, alive or dead, I examined the damage. The tiny catch had come open. It is, I find, called a lobster clasp and can be slid open with a fingernail.

But my head is too big to pull the chain over. Then, in engaging the ends of the chain, it got entangled in my beard. Thirdly, since I last tried this exercise, I have grown short-sighted and my fingers crabbed, or perhaps lobstered.

Attempting the job in the mirror proved deceptive. I can tie my tie in the mirror, but not much else. Things go a different way, as you have probably heard. In fumbling, dropping and tangling, I soon assumed expressions like those in nineteenth-century photographic studies of the criminally insane.

After a few hours, or what seemed like it, the lobster snapped together and the medal hung safely in front of my sternum (a scapular between scapulas).

In the last resort, what does the scapular mean? I was parted from it a few years ago when I decided to have my appendix out (rather than die, as our ancestors would have done). The scapular had to be removed first. I felt like Job: “Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

JESUS, with hair at least as long as the hair in Dürer's self-portrait, stands in a brown smock on some white steps. The pale daylight that picks him out from the consuming darkness also falls on a

kneeling woman, presented by a knot of elderly buffers in a variety of glittering headwear. Higher up, something is going on in a dim religious light behind two Solomonic pillars.

This is Rembrandt's depiction of *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. Human figures take up less than a quarter of the height of this 33-inch panel, but the painter conveys the calm authority of Jesus and the sympathetic vulnerability of the woman.

Last week the National Gallery gave it a new frame, or rather an old one, for a curlicued nineteenth-century French gilt frame was replaced by a lovely seventeenth-century smooth ebony moulded frame. The change didn't convince everybody on X. “The second frame looks like a cheap tacky Ikea frame,” said one idiot. “The painting looks like it needs a good cleaning,” said another.

Rembrandt's painting was one of 38 bought by the government under Lord Liverpool from the heirs of John Angerstein 200 years ago, to begin the National Gallery, which is limbering up for the anniversary. Of those 38, perhaps Raphael's portrait of the bearded and sad *Pope Julius II* is best-known. A handful are not on display. *St John the Baptist* lounging in the wilderness, filling a bowl with water from a convenient spring, was thought the work of Annibale Carracci. Not now. In any case the saint is an unusual shape in the middle.

PARTLY BECAUSE it has such nice pictures, I was delighted to have lunch at the Garrick, and I hadn't seen my host for ages. The club has been in the headlines. The head of the Secret Intelligence Service resigned from it, realising after a few years that women are not allowed to be members.

I can't, out of hidebound convention, say anything of what was said there. But it seemed less hostile to half the human race than it is cracked up to be. In the coffee room, a very nice woman – stylish, Catholic and married to a pillar of the establishment – appeared to be sitting on the lap of a gent at the long table. Everyone was having a lovely time, and just at the moment that is scarcely tolerated.



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