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Audience with the participants in the 68th National Liturgical Week

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At midday today, in the Paul VI Hall, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 68th National Liturgical Week, on the theme “A living liturgy for a living Church”, on the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Centre for Liturgical Action.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present at the meeting:

Holy Father’s Address

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning.

I welcome you all and I thank the president, His Excellency Msgr. Claudio Maniago, for his words of introduction to this National Liturgical Week, seventy years on from the birth of the Centre for Liturgical Action.

This is a period of time in which, in the history of the Church and in particular in the history of liturgy, events have occurred which are substantial and not superficial. Just as we cannot forget Vatican Council II, so we shall remember the liturgical reform that flowed from it.

They are two directly linked events, the Council and the reform, which bloomed not unexpected but after long preparation. This is shown by what was called the liturgical movement, and the responses given by the Supreme Pontiffs to perceived shortcomings in ecclesial prayer; when a need is perceived, even if the solution is not immediate, it is necessary to take action.

I think of St. Pius X who presided over the reorganization of religious music[1] and the restoration of the Sunday celebration[2], and who instituted a commission for the general reform of the liturgy, aware that this would have

implied “a task both great and protracted”, and so, as he himself acknowledged, “it is necessary for many years to pass before this, so to speak, liturgical edifice ... reappear again resplendent in its dignity and harmony, once cleansed of the squalor of aging”[3].

The reforming project was resumed by Pius XII with the encyclical *Mediator Dei*[4], and the institution of a study commission[5]; he too made concrete decisions regarding the version of the Psalter[6], the attenuation of Eucharistic fasting, the use of living language in the Rite, and the important reform of the Easter Vigil and of Holy Week[7]. From this impulse, following the example of other nations, the Centre for Liturgical Action emerged in Italy, guided by bishops attentive to the people entrusted to them and inspired by scholars who loved the Church as well as liturgical pastoral ministry.

Vatican Council II then allowed to ripen, as a good fruit of the tree of the Church, the Constitution on sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, whose lines of general reform responded to real needs and to the concrete hope of a renewal; a living liturgy was desired for a Church entirely enlivened by the mysteries celebrated. It was hoped to express in a renewed way the perennial vitality of the Church in prayer, taking care “that Christ’s faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration” (*SC*, 48). Blessed Paul VI recalled this in explaining the first steps of the announced reforms: “It is good to be aware that it is proper to the authority of the Church to wish for, promote and ignite this new form of prayer, thus augmenting her spiritual mission ... and we must not hesitate to be first disciples and then supporters of the school of prayer, that is about to commence”[8].

The direction traced by the Council took shape, following the principle of respect for the sound tradition and legitimate progress (cf. *SC*, 23)[9] of the liturgical books promulgated by Blessed Paul VI, well received by the same bishops who were present at the Council, and by now universally used in the Roman rite for almost fifty years. The practical application, guided by the Episcopal Conferences for the respective countries, is still in progress, as it is not sufficient to reform liturgical books to renew the mentality. The books reformed in conformity with the decrees of Vatican II gave rise to a process that requires time, faithful reception, practical obedience, and wise implementation in celebration first by ordained ministers, but also by other ministers, cantors and all those who participate in the liturgy. In truth, we know, the liturgical education of Pastors and faithful is a challenge that must always be faced anew. The same Paul VI, a year before his death, said to the Cardinals gathered in the Consistory: “The moment has come, now, to set aside definitively the disruptive ferments, equally harmful in one sense or another, and to fully apply according to their just inspiring criteria, the reform we approved in the application of the votes of the Council”.[10]

There is still work to be done today in this direction, in particular in rediscovering the reasons for the decisions made regarding liturgical reform, overcoming unfounded and superficial readings, partial acceptance and practices that distort it. It is not a question of rethinking the reform by reviewing decisions, but rather of knowing better the underlying reasons, also through historical documentation, and of internalizing the inspiring principles and observing the discipline that regulates it. After this teaching, after this long path we can affirm with certainty and magisterial authority that the liturgical reform is irreversible.

The task of promoting and safeguarding the liturgy is entrusted by right to the Apostolic See and to the diocesan bishops, on whose responsibility and authority I count at the present moment; national and diocesan liturgical pastoral bodies, institutes of formation and seminaries are also involved. In this formative field in Italy the Centre for Liturgical Action is distinguished for its initiatives, including the National Liturgical Week.

After remembering this path, I would now like to touch on various aspects in the light of the theme on which you have reflected in these days, namely: “A living liturgy for a living Church”.

The liturgy is “living” on account of the living presence of He “Who by dying has destroyed our death, and by rising, restored our life”. Without the real presence of the mystery of Christ, there is no liturgical vitality. Just as without a heartbeat there is no human life, without the beating heart of Christ no liturgical action exists. What defines the liturgy is, indeed, the implementation in many signs of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, or rather the

offer of His life to the point of opening His arms on the cross, a priesthood made present in a constant way through rites and prayers, most fully in His Body and Blood, but also in the person of the priest, in the proclamation of the Word of God, and in the assembly gathered in prayer in His name (cf. *SC*, 7). Among the visible signs of the invisible Mystery there is the altar, sign of Christ as a living stone, discarded by men but Who became the cornerstone of the spiritual edifice in which worship in spirit and truth is offered to the living God (cf. *1 Pt* 2: 4; *Eph.* 2: 20). This is why the altar, the centre towards which in attention converges in our churches,[11] is dedicated, anointed with chrism, incensed, kissed, venerated; the gaze of those in prayer, priest and faithful, convened in holy assembly around the altar, is directed towards it;[12] on the altar there is placed the offering of the Church that the Spirit consecrates as the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice; the bread of life and the chalice of salvation are bestowed from the altar, that we may become one body and one spirit in Christ (cf. Eucharistic Prayer III).

The liturgy is life for the entire people of the Church.[13] By its nature the liturgy is indeed "popular" and not clerical, being . as the etymology teaches us – an action *for* the people, but also *of* the people. As many liturgical prayers remind us, it is the action that God Himself performs in favour of His people, but also the action of the people who listen to God Who speaks and who react by praising Him and invoking Him, welcoming the inexorable source of life and mercy that flows from the holy signs. The Church in prayer brings together all those whose heart listens to the Gospel, without discarding anyone: small and large, rich and poor, young and elderly, healthy and sick, righteous and sinners. To the image of the "immense multitude" that celebrates the liturgy in the shrine of heaven (cf. *Ap.* 7: 9), the liturgical assembly overcomes, in Christ, every boundary of age, race, language and nation. The popular reach of the liturgy reminds us that it is inclusive and not exclusive, an advocate of communion with all but without homologating, as it calls to each one, with his or her vocation and originality, to contribute in edifying the body of Christ. The Eucharist is not a sacrament "for me", it is the sacrament of many who form a single body, the holy faithful people of God.[14] We must not forget, then, that it is first and foremost the liturgy that expresses the *pietas* of all the people of God, prolonged by the pious exercises and devotions that we know by the name of popular piety, to be valued and encouraged in harmony with the liturgy.[15]

Liturgy is life and not an idea to be understood. Indeed, it leads us to live an experience of initiation, or rather transformative in terms of how we think and behave, and not to enrich our own baggage of ideas about God. Liturgical worship "is not primarily a doctrine to be understood, or a rite to be performed; naturally it is also this, but in another way, it is essentially different: it is a font of life and of light for our pilgrimage of faith".[16] Spiritual reflections are different from liturgy, in which "it is proper to enter into the mystery of God; to let oneself be led to the mystery and to be in the mystery".[17] There is a big difference between saying that God exists and feeling that God loves us, as we are, here and now. In liturgical prayer we experience communion signified not as an abstract thought but as an action that has as its agents God and us, Christ and the Church.[18] Rites and prayers (cf. *SC*, 48), for what they are and not for the explanations we give for them, therefore become as school of Christian life, open to those who have ears, eyes and heart open to learning the vocation and mission of Jesus' disciples. This is in line with the mystagogic catechesis practised by the Fathers, resumed also by the Catechism of the Catholic Church which treats the liturgy, the Eucharist and the other Sacraments in the light of the texts and rites of today's liturgical books.

The Church is truly living if, forming a single living being with Christ, she is the bearer of life, she is maternal, she is missionary, she goes towards her neighbour, seeking to serve without following worldly powers that render her barren. Therefore, celebrating the holy mysteries she remembers Mary, the Virgin of the Magnificat, contemplating "as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be" (*SC*, 103).

Finally, we cannot forget that the wealth of the Church in prayer, inasmuch as she is "catholic", goes beyond the Roman Rite which, although the most extensive, is not the only one. The harmony of traditional rituals, of East and West, by the breath of the same Spirit gives a voice to the single prayerful Church, for Christ, with Christ and in Christ, to the glory of the Father and for the salvation of the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for your visit, and I encourage the heads of the Centre for Liturgical Action to continue, remaining faithful to the original inspiration, that of serving the prayer of the holy people of God. Indeed, the Centre for Liturgical Action has always been distinguished by its attention towards liturgical pastoral,

faithful to the instructions of the Apostolic See and those of the bishops, and enjoying their support. The long experience of the Liturgical Weeks, held in many dioceses in Italy, along with the magazine “Liturgia”, has helped to bring liturgical renewal into the life of parishes, seminaries and religious communities. Hardship has not been lacking, but neither has joy! It is again this commitment that I ask of you today: to help ordained ministers, as well as other ministers, cantors, artists and musicians, to cooperate so that the liturgy may be the font and pinnacle of the vitality of the Church (cf. *SC*, 10). I ask you, please, to pray for me and I impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.

[1] Cf. Motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, 22 November 1903: *ASS* 36 (1904), 329-339.

[2] Cf. Apostolic Constitution *Divino afflatu*, 1 November 1911: *AAS* 3 (1911), 133-638.

[3] Motu proprio *Abhinc duos annos*, 23 October 1913: *AAS* 5 (1913) 449-450.

[4] 20 November 1947: *AAS* 39 (1947) 521-600.

[5] Cf. Sacrae Congr. Rituum, Sectio historica, 71, “Memoria sulla riforma liturgica” (1946).

[6] Cf. Pius XII, Motu proprio *In cotidianis precibus*, 24 March 1945: *AAS* 37 (1945) 65-67.

[7] Cf. Sacrae Congr. Rituum Decretum *Dominicae Resurrectionis*, 16 November 1955: *AAS* 47 (1955) 838-841.

[8] General audience of 13 January 1965.

[9] “The reform of the rites and the liturgical books was undertaken immediately after the promulgation of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and was brought to an effective conclusion in a few years thanks to the considerable and selfless work of a large number of experts and bishops from all parts of the world (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 25). This work was undertaken in accordance with the conciliar principles of fidelity to tradition and openness to legitimate development (cf. *ibid.*, 23); and so it is possible to say that the reform of the Liturgy is strictly traditional and in accordance with “the ancient usage of the holy Fathers” (cf. *ibid.*, 50; *Institutio generalis Missalis Romani*, Prooemium, 6)” (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus quintus annus*, 4).

[10] “A particular point of the life of the Church draws the attention of the Pope again today: the undoubtedly beneficial fruits of liturgical reform. From the promulgation of the Conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* a great process was undertaken, which responds to the premises proposed by the liturgical movement from the last moments of the nineteenth century, and has fulfilled its deep aspirations, for which many men of the Church and scholars have worked and prayed. The new Rite of Mass, promulgated after a long and responsible preparation by the competent organs, and in which there have been introduced alongside the Roman Canon, which remained substantially unchanged, other Eucharistic eulogies, has borne blessed fruits: greater participation in liturgical action; a more lively awareness of sacred action; deeper and wider knowledge of the inexhaustible treasures of the Sacred Scripture; and an increase in the community sense of the Church. The course of these years demonstrates that we are on the right path. But there have been, unfortunately – despite the great majority of healthy and good forces among the clergy and the faithful – abuses and liberties in application. The moment has come, now, to set aside definitively the disruptive ferments, equally harmful in one sense or another, and to fully apply according to their just inspiring criteria, the reform we approved in the application of the votes of the Council” (Allocution *Gratias ex animo*, 27 June 1977: *Teachings of Paul VI*, XV [1977] 655-656).

[11] Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 299; *Rite of the dedication of an altar*, Introduction, Nos. 155, 159.

[12] “Around this altar we feed on the Body and Blood of your Son to form your one and holy Church” (Rite of dedication of an altar, no. 213, Preface).

[13] “Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the "sacrament of unity," namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops. Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it “(SC, 26)

[14] *Homily on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ*, 18 June 2017, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 189-20 June 2017, p.8.

[15] Cf. SC, 13; Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 122-126; AAS 105 (2013), 1071-1073.

[16] *Homily in the Holy Mass of the III Sunday of Lent*, Roman parish of Ognissanti, 7 March 2015.

[17] *Homily in the Mass at Santa Marta*, 10 February 2014.

[18] “This is why the Eucharistic commemoration does us so much good: it is not an abstract, cold and superficial memory, but a living remembrance that comforts us with God’s love. ... The Eucharist is flavoured with Jesus’ words and deeds, the taste of his Passion, the fragrance of his Spirit. When we receive it, our hearts are overcome with the certainty of Jesus’ love”. (*Homily of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ*, 18 June 2017 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19-20 June 2017, p.8).
