

WORLD, WORD, WORSHIP
The Liturgy in Context according to Vatican II

Lift Up Your Hearts National Liturgy Conference
 Wollongong, 15-18 January 2014

Archbishop Mark Coleridge

Among the documents bequeathed to us by the Second Vatican Council, the four Constitutions hold pride of place. They are, in order of promulgation, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (On the Sacred Liturgy, 4 December 1963), *Lumen Gentium* (On the Church, 21 November 1964), *Dei Verbum* (On Divine Revelation, 18 November 1965) and *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World, 7 December 1965).

The Council never explained its choice of the term “Constitution” for these four documents.¹ It seems clear, however, that the term means that these four documents were intended to be more authoritative than the Council’s “Decrees” and “Declarations”. In a sense, the four Constitutions function in the same way as the four Gospels in the New Testament and indeed the entire Bible as Christians read it. In that sense, the four Constitutions are the core, and

¹ Nor did the Council make clear the difference between a “Dogmatic” Constitution (*Lumen Gentium*) and a “Pastoral” Constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*). But we are given a clue in a footnote to the title of *Gaudium et Spes* where we read: “Although it consists of two parts, the Pastoral Constitution ‘The Church in the World Today’ constitutes an organic unity. The Constitution is called ‘pastoral’ because, while resting on doctrinal principles, it sets out the relation of the Church to the world and to the people of today. In Part I, therefore, the pastoral emphasis is not overlooked, nor is the doctrinal emphasis overlooked in Part II.” Therefore, the qualifiers “Dogmatic” and “Pastoral” should not be over-interpreted.

together they are the key for interpreting all the other documents. That will be the claim underlying this presentation.

Nor can any of the four Constitutions be read alone; they mutually interpret each other. They function as an organic unity. Any attempt therefore to place the four in a hierarchy of importance rather than read them symphonically runs the risk of a kind of ideological discolouring, by which I mean pushing an agenda or grinding an axe. There is debate about how the Constitutions should be ordered in the printed collections of the documents. The best listing may be a chronological one: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Gaudium et Spes*. That at least avoids the potential tendentiousness of more personal arrangements, and it does not imply that earlier means more authoritative. In fact, it is clear that the Council's understanding on certain points matured from document to document as time went by. In that sense, it might be argued that the later documents have a maturity, if not an authority, which the earlier documents do not. But that is not a claim I would want to press.

That having been said, I intend in this presentation to reverse the chronology of the Constitutions for reasons that will become apparent. I will start with the last *Gaudium et Spes*, proceed through *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium* and finish with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. In each Constitution, I will focus upon what is said about the Bible, trying to build a symphonic sense of

what Vatican II draws from Scripture, without claiming to offer an exhaustive account of what each Constitution says or all of them together say of the Bible. Here I recall the words of Pope Francis in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “All evangelization is based upon [the word of God], listened to, meditated upon, lived, celebrated and witnessed to. The sacred Scriptures are the very source of evangelization” (174).

So let us turn first to the Constitution to which the Council turned last, *Gaudium et Spes*. There we read the following:

12. Sacred Scripture teaches that the human being was created “in the image of God”, is capable of knowing and loving the Creator, and was appointed by God as master of all earthly creatures that he might subdue them and use them to God’s glory.

The first thing to note here is the Bible’s vision of human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and has the capacity to know and love the Creator, which is also the capacity to know and love the human being made in the image of the Creator. But there is more, because the human being is also appointed by God to a unique task in the creation—the task of exercising lordship, a power delegated by the one who alone is Lord of the creation. God calls the human being to share in the divine task of ordering the chaos—bringing forth the great harmonics of Paradise which redound to the glory of the Creator. This is a dazzling vision of human dignity and of the relationship between Creator and creature. It was revolutionary in its own time and culture where the general understanding was that the all-powerful God had created the

human being to be a slave, to do the dirty work which was beneath the dignity of the Creator. It is no less revolutionary in our own or any other time. The vision reaches full maturity only when Jesus Christ rises from the dead, but what is found on the first page of Scripture and echoed here by the Council already paves the way to Easter.

Paragraph 12 of the Constitution then goes on:

God did not create the human being as a solitary, for from the beginning “male and female he created them”. Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.

According to this, to be created in the image of God is to be created for communion, since God is communion, as the revelation of the Blessed Trinity makes clear—three Persons bound together by a love so perfect that there is only one God. From this abyss of perfect love, the human being has come forth, bearing indelibly the stamp of that love. That is what it means to say that humans are by their “innermost nature” social beings. This does not mean simply that we are gregarious, as sheep and cattle are by instinct. No: we are created from the perfect love and called to return to it in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. On that journey of return, which is a matter of choice not instinct, we can live in harmony with our “innermost nature” only by choosing love, which means finally choosing God.

The primary form of this love is nuptial love, which takes its rise from the Creator's decision to create them "male and female". By this account, gender is no accident of biology or construct of culture, but is deeply embedded in the Creator's plan. There are many forms of what the Council calls "interpersonal communion", but the primary form is the marriage of man and woman in which human beings are called to share most deeply in the ongoing creative work of God. But all forms of true interpersonal communion are to be prized, according to this report of biblical teaching by the Council, for all point to both the origin and destiny of the human being.

Elsewhere, *Gaudium et Spes* says this:

37. Sacred Scripture teaches the human family what the experience of the ages confirms: that while human progress is a great advantage to the human being, it also brings with it a strong temptation. For when the order of values is jumbled and bad is mixed with good, individuals and groups pay heed solely to their own interests, and not to those of others; and the world then ceases to be a place of true brotherhood.

The Constitution, we have seen, puts before us the truth of the human being as created in the image of God and therefore created for interpersonal communion. But this truth, we now see, is threatened by the darker forces of what is called "human progress". With the undeniable advantages of progress, there also come the temptations, which if yielded to lead to a denial of the truth of the human being. This has always been so in human history, but it is true in new ways in the modern world as the Constitution sees it. The denial of the truth of

the human being leads to the sense of the human as made for self, not for interpersonal communion or for what *Gaudium et Spes* calls “true brotherhood”.

This implies the prior sense that the human being is made not in the image of God and destined to serve God in the liberating bond of love, but is made in the counter-image of God, always doomed to see God as the enemy. The human being seeks to replace God, searching for a total liberation – a search which always produces the opposite. This is the fundamental jumbling of values, where the Creator is made a creature and *vice versa*; and from the fundamental jumbling flow all the other jumbblings found in a world which denies the truth of the human being. Such a world is invariably a world of wrong relationship at every level—between God and the human being, between human being and human being, between the human being and the created world. This is the opposite of Paradise which for the Bible is the world of perfectly right relationship—the right relationship of which the Trinity is the *fons et origo*. In biblical translations, the word often found for this right relationship is “righteousness” or “justice”, neither of which seems adequate.

I turn now to *Dei Verbum*, which obviously has a great deal to say about Scripture. For my purposes here, however, I want to look at three brief passages of the Constitution. Here is the first:

2. God chose to reveal *himself* and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which, through Christ the Word made flesh, we might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, the invisible God, out of the abundance of his love, speaks to human beings as friends and lives

among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with *himself*.

In this text, I have italicised the word “himself”, which occurs twice; and it is here that I want to focus, because the point is essential to an understanding of both the history and teaching of the Council. First the history. In the lead-up to the Council, the Preparatory Theological Commission, headed by Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of what has become the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, prepared a schema on Divine Revelation for the consideration of the Fathers.

In introducing the schema, Cardinal Ottaviani admitted that it was open to criticism and that there was room for improvement. What he did not expect, however, was outright rejection of the schema; but that is what he got. It was Cardinal Liénart of Lille who led the charge, declaring that the schema was “a cold scholastic formula, while revelation is a supreme gift of God—God speaking directly to us”. Cardinal Frings of Cologne followed suit, complaining that “what is even worse than the presentation is the doctrine itself”. By this he meant the schema’s notion of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition. Cardinal Ruffini of Palermo disagreed with Liénart and Frings, but he did concede that the Council was “faced with a question of extreme importance”, indeed, he said, “the heart and centre of the Council”.

It was the French Bishop Schmitt who insisted that “all revelation comes in the person of Christ, for he is the author, the Word of God” and that was the

view which carried the day. There were not two sources of revelation but only one, and that was Jesus Christ himself. “Let us not”, Schmitt went on, “reduce Christian revelation and Christianity itself to a kind of ideology..., something purely intellectual”. To which most of the Council Fathers said, “Hear, hear!”— at which point the original schema was dead in the water, and the Council was on the way to its understanding of revelation as God’s self-communication which finds expression here in *Dei Verbum* and which may be judged, in Cardinal Ruffini’s words, “the heart and centre of the Council”.

The same sense of divine revelation emerges a little later in the Constitution where we read as follows:

3. God, who through the Word creates all things and keeps them in existence, gives human beings an enduring witness to *himself* in created realities. Planning to make known the way of heavenly salvation, God went further and from the start manifested *himself*...

And again:

6. Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate *himself* and the eternal decisions of his will regarding human salvation. That is to say, God chose to share those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.

Reading these texts of *Dei Verbum* with the texts of *Gaudium et Spes* that we have already seen, we may say the following: God created the human being in his own image and conferred upon the human being the dignity of co-creator, seen most profoundly in the nuptial union of man and woman. In that sense, God from the first wanted to involve the human being in an ongoing partnership

and the dialogue which that implies. Revelation is to be understood within the context of that dialogue. As part of the interpersonal relationship which God wants with the human being, God reveals what the human being alone could never have come to know—the full truth of who God really is, the mystery of the Trinity. This communication of the truth of God’s own self begins with our first parents in the Garden of Eden, and it comes to its fullness in the Word made flesh when he rises from the dead and is met by Mary Magdalene in a garden which is different but the same (cf John 20:15). When God reveals to the human being the truth of himself, he also reveals the full truth of the human being. This sense of Christ as the fullness of the revelation of both God and the human being is central to the teaching of the Council, as is the sense that faith is indispensable as the human being’s response to that revelation.

At this point, we turn to *Lumen Gentium*, which does not say much about Scripture, but does say this:

6. In the Old Testament, the revelation of the Kingdom is often conveyed by means of *metaphors*. In the same way, the inner nature of the Church is now made known to us in different images taken either from tending sheep or cultivating the land, from building or even from family life and betrothals, the images receiving preparatory shaping in the books of the Prophets.

The word I have italicised here is “metaphors”, and it is here that I want to focus.² The text also uses twice the word “images”, but metaphor implies

² In doing so, I am conscious that *Dei Verbum* moves to a more dynamic sense of the biblical texts in keeping with the Council’s sense of revelation as God’s self-communication. In paragraph 12, *Dei Verbum*

something different and more important than the more general sense of images. Images can convey the sense that we are dealing with something which is largely decorative or illustrative. But metaphor is more than that. It is in fact the fundamental form of biblical discourse and—some would claim—the fundamental form of all human discourse. Be that as it may, we are clearly touching upon something which is more than merely decorative or illustrative in biblical communication. So let us consider the nature and function of metaphor for a moment.

In its simplest form, metaphor occurs as something like “John is a lion”. We know of course that John is a human being, but we are trying to say something deeper and more elusive about his character. Beyond this simple metaphor, there are of course much more complex forms.³ But metaphor in general is that basic form of human speech which yokes together two things normally not associated at all. It does so in order to undermine conventional perceptions of the thing to which the metaphor refers; in a sense, then, its initial purpose is subversive. But it breaks up conventional perceptions only in order to bring to birth new perceptions of the thing to which the metaphor refers; in that sense, its final purpose is revelatory.

acknowledges the historical-critical method, but then goes on to say that “in determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid...to literary genres”. Here I intend to heed that advice.

³ The great poets are the makers of brilliantly revealing new metaphors which feed not only the imagination but also the language. William Shakespeare is probably the greatest maker of metaphors that English has known, and he draws hugely from the Bible; and in the course of making his metaphors, he also made the English language or at least a good part of it.

The Bible is full of metaphors of every kind, from the simplest to the most complex. Indeed, the Bible is in one sense nothing other than a great tissue of metaphors, with even its many stories to be read as narrative metaphors. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Old Testament speaks of the Kingdom of God metaphorically. It goes on to say that the New Testament speaks of the Church metaphorically, which is true; but it is also true that the New Testament speaks at least as metaphorically of the Kingdom of God as does the Old Testament, upon which it feeds at every turn. In other words, the Bible subverts conventional notions of the Kingdom of God, but only in order to bring to birth new perceptions of the Kingdom and to make possible new experiences of the Kingdom. The crucifixion of Jesus was doubtless an event, but it stands as an event with vast metaphoric force, turning on their head all conventional notions of the Messiah and doing the same to conventional notions of the Kingdom of God and its coming. It is worth adding here that the coming of the Kingdom will mean the restoration of the world of right relationship, the return to Paradise, which is the world where the truth of God and of the human being created in God's image appear in all their fullness.

If we take the parables of Jesus as typical of biblical metaphor—in this case in narrative form—we can follow the thought of *Lumen Gentium* when it notes that, in speaking of the “inner nature” of the Church, the New Testament takes its cue from everyday things like tending sheep, tilling the land, building a house, and marriage and the family. All the parables of Jesus begin in a

familiar world; they never take us to a world other than the one we know. But at some point, not always immediately recognisable, they turn strange, and that is “the Kingdom-moment”, the point at which metaphor does its work. We do not leave the world we know, but the logic of that world and its underlying assumptions are turned on their head. Then finally the parables are open-ended; none of them ever finishes. This is because each of them is a call to decision on the part of the hearer or reader; it is only in the life of the hearer or reader that the parable can be finished. What is true of the parables is true of the Bible as a whole: it too is unfinished, open-ended. Its final cry in the Book of Revelation is, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20)—a cry which looks to the end without ever recounting it. In the meantime, the Bible must find its many provisional endings in the life of the communities and individuals who hear or read the unfinished text.

God, we have seen, has created the human being in his own image and wants to enter into dialogue with the human being, a dialogue of love which involves God’s self-communication to the creature who bears his image. This dialogue takes place in a world where there is always the risk of a jumbling of values, where the order of Creator and creature can be inverted and interpersonal communion destroyed. It is a world where perception can grow dim and the human being can end up blind to the truth of God and of the human being. It is a world where there is an enduring need to cleanse “the doors of

perception”, as William Blake puts it.⁴ That is why metaphor is fundamental to the dialogue God wants to have with the human being, the metaphors of the Bible but also the metaphors of the Church’s sacramental life. To these we must turn again and again, lest our senses grow dull and we fail to see the truth right under our nose, the truth of God and of ourselves.

Against that background, I turn now—climactically in some sense—to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, since it is only now that we have the larger context of the Council’s teaching, which allows us to see the liturgy and its reform in something other than a vacuum.

Here is one of the things that the Constitution says about the Bible:

24. Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from Scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the orations and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the Scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning.

For the Council, Scripture is not just one element of the Church’s liturgy but the matrix of all its elements.⁵

Therefore, every element of our worship rises from the fundamental biblical understandings which the Council presents. The question is, How does

⁴ “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern”, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

⁵ This was one thing I came to see more clearly when I was working on the re-translation of the Roman Missal. The texts of the Missal are profoundly and consistently biblical, with citations, allusions and echoes found at every turn—though I had not been as alert to this as I became, chiefly because the earlier translations often muffled the voice of Scripture in the interests of clarity and brevity.

this or that element of the liturgy relate to the following understandings set forth in the Constitutions, each one of them a bomb?

- ❖ God creates the human being in his own image
- ❖ God calls the human being to be a co-creator with him
- ❖ God opens a dialogue of interpersonal communion with the human being, so that the human being may come to share in the divine nature
- ❖ Within this dialogue, God reveals to the human being the full truth of himself in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit
- ❖ God also reveals the full truth of the human being in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit
- ❖ Within this dialogue, God speaks metaphorically, lest the human eye cease to see or to see clearly

These six things are what we celebrate most deeply in the liturgy which is the epicentre of God's dialogue of love with us now. In the liturgy above all, God shows forth the truth of himself and the truth of the human being. He does this by way of metaphor—or, to use the language more familiar to liturgical discourse, by way of symbol. The word “symbol” itself derives from the Greek verb *symballein*, which means literally “to throw together”. Like metaphor, symbol throws or yokes together elements not normally associated—and this in order to break up conventional perceptions and bring to birth new ones and the

experiences which they enable. In a world where conventional perceptions of God are often false, absurd or at best incomplete, the liturgy shows forth the strange and magnificent truth of God. Similarly with the human being: beyond all conventionally false, absurd or incomplete perceptions, the liturgy shows forth the truth. When it takes up the key biblical metaphor of the nuptial bond, as it does in speaking of the Eucharist as the marriage-feast of the Lamb, the liturgy celebrates and makes possible a grand interpersonal communion between God and the human being and among human beings.

None of these six things is simply for the Church. They are for the world, which is as it must be for a Council which had as its overarching purpose the preparation of the Church for a new season of mission, for what John Paul II and Benedict XVI called “a new evangelization” and what Pope Francis has written about so tellingly in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This is another sense in which we cannot see the liturgy in some kind of vacuum. Just as the Council’s teaching on the liturgy cannot be understood unless seen within the larger context of the four Constitutions, so too the teaching cannot be understood without an eye to mission—in other words, without an eye on the world which lies beyond and often far beyond the bounds of the Church community. We cannot afford to be too churchy, too inward-looking or self-absorbed, if we want to understand and implement what the Council taught.

Sacrosanctum Concilium says that “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy”(14). This participation is clearly not restricted to the liturgical action; it does not occur in a vacuum. Full, conscious and active participation in the Church’s liturgy looks to and presumes full, conscious and active participation in the Church’s mission; and the Council leaves no doubt that the universal call to holiness leads on to the universal call to mission, which is demanded by the very nature of the Church.

Like the biblical metaphors from which it feeds and the mission to which it looks, the liturgy is always incomplete, unfinished. The final dismissal looks to mission, to the work of evangelization which alone can complete the liturgical action. Every time the Church proclaims the Good News, the liturgy finds a provisional ending. But this looks finally to the time when there will be only the Good News, when God will be “all in all” (cf 1 Cor 15:28), and the Bible and the liturgy will find their completion, their true ending that comes with the return to Paradise.

The title of this Conference is *Lift Up Your Hearts*, words of the liturgy which are a call not only to the gathered community as we enter the Eucharistic mysteries but to the whole world to whom the mysteries look. The simple-seeming phrase *Sursum corda* is hard to translate, as we discovered when we

tried to translate it anew. The Latin is very compressed, having no verb. Literally it means, “Hearts up!”, which does not quite work. So we settled for what we had, failing to find anything better. But if the phrase is hard to translate, it is even harder to put the call into action. What does it require to lift up the heart of the world, or even to lift up the hearts of those who are downcast right on our door-step? Part of an answer is that it will require that we lead people, indeed the world, to see the great truths proclaimed by the Bible, passed on by the Council and celebrated in our worship. Hearts are downcast inevitably when human beings do not see these truths and make them their own, as we are called to do. But when we or they do, then even the most downcast heart can rise and sing. That is the goal of the new evangelization. It is also the goal of the sacred liturgy and its reform by the Second Vatican Council. That reform has deep roots, and it also has distant trajectories. Unlike this presentation of mine, it is far from complete. So, as we look back across these fifty years, let new energies be unleashed.