Sacrosanctum Concilium and its effects on women as agents in Roman Catholic liturgy

The purpose of this essay is to identify and to put in context a number of specific contributions made by Sacrosanctum Concilium (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) that worked particularly in favour of women’s increased participation in the liturgy and, in a wide theological perspective, the affirmation and development of women’s baptismal dignity in the Church.

Preface

The past three years have witnessed numerous congresses and colloquia worldwide marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, and assessing the Council’s long-term effects upon the Church and upon ordinary Catholics. The purpose of this essay is to identify and to put in context a number of specific contributions made by Sacrosanctum Concilium (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, hereafter SC) that worked particularly in favour of women’s increased participation in the liturgy and, in a wide theological perspective, the affirmation and development of women’s baptismal dignity in the Church.

For this purpose we will begin from the most basic sacramental and ontological level at which the dignity of both men and women in Christ is established: that of the sacrament of Baptism. The second foundation stone will be the background of the liturgical renewal embodied in SC in which women played relatively small but, for the times, remarkable roles. The selection of the particular paragraphs in SC rests upon the criterion of restored or newly-created openings for actualized expression of the active participation of the laity. We will then survey briefly developments that point to an acceptance and embrace...
of increased active agency in both formal liturgy and public prayer of the Church on the part of individual women and groups of women believers.

For the sake of clarification, this article will not limit its scope to a particular “place” for women, nor to “roles” played by women in the liturgy. One rarely speaks of restrictions on the “role” of males as gendered beings in the liturgy. The category “Women” will be used more as a juridical category than a gender assignment. In the field of gender a wide range of variation exists. Anything that might in the past have been posited as an essentialist characteristic of “women” could vary widely depending on race, culture, socio-economic or numerous other factors. We will not address theories of women’s nature, unique gifts, or feminine genius. We will use the designate “women” for a category of baptized persons who are subject to a particular set of legal and customary restrictions in ecclesial worship and common prayer, and the recent effects of a growing awareness of, and frequently discomfort with, these restrictions.

The centrality of Baptism

As recent commentators on the documents of Vatican II point out, particular statements need to be read and understood in continuity with the Council documents as a whole. The key concept underlying the unique dignity of all the baptized can be found well expressed, not in SC but in Lumen Gentium (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, LG) in paragraph 11: Baptism incorporates persons into the Church, orients them to the worship of God, and grants them rebirth as sons and daughters of God. Paragraph 7 of LG inscribes the theological core of Baptism as the incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ of his brothers and sisters who have died and risen with him in Baptism. Apostolicam actuositatem, the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, anchors the call of the laity to act as apostles in their particular life circumstances out of their baptism (paragraph 3.) SC of course, the first of the Council documents to be approved, reflects repeatedly the core significance of Baptism “in which men and women are implanted in the paschal mystery of Christ” and from which they gather on the first day of the week to celebrate in the Eucharist the Paschal Mystery.

The Council documents present classic Pauline theology particular in Romans 6: all those who are baptized have died and risen with Christ, all are transformed by putting on Christ, a permanent ontological transformation. As a result all of the baptized now reflect the living presence of the risen Christ – male and female, collectively, and as persons.

A recognition of the dignity given at sacramental and, in Catholic belief ontological dignity given at baptism can be discerned in female as well as male Christians. Being female (or any other human characteristic) does not, in fact cannot diminish or weaken the nature of baptism. There is no two-track baptism or multi-level baptism. The Trinitarian formula is the same regardless of gender, and so is the water.

The image of the Body of Christ so eloquently imaged already by Paul evolved from origins in the thought of the Tübingen Schule of the early nineteenth century, to a position
considered by some to be almost heretical in the 1920’s, to papal teaching in the 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. In the 1920’s as the Liturgical Movement was taking shape in Western Europe baptism was linked to the recognition of the Church and all its members as the Mystical Body of Christ, a term then considered somewhat dangerously egalitarian. As a balance the encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) placed Christ firmly at the top of the hypothetical pyramid as the Head of the Mystical Body, since *Mystici Corporis* brought the idea “safely” within the realm of orthodox Roman Catholic thought. The renewal of the theology of baptism in combination with this renewal in ecclesiology laid the foundations for a number of specific aspects of liturgical renewal that would become foundational law in *SC*.

Since baptism configures believers to Christ, in effect granting them rebirth into the image of Christ, how would any differentiation based on the physical characteristics of human persons be consistent with the deep theology of baptism? To answer this question one must look to the level of human metaphorical expression and imagery to discover that, in fact, a problematic gap exists.

Imagine for a moment – what would a female Christ look like? If Christ became incarnate in human flesh, then it was human flesh. Artists in different countries have attempted to depict Christ as female, occasionally to reactions of shock and accusations of scandal. A sizeable sculpture of a crucified woman – eyes hollow, arms deeply grooved with scars of beatings, one hand drooping off the cross and the other hand rigid – can be found almost concealed in the courtyard of one of the theological colleges in Toronto. Numerous painters have shown Christ as a woman suffering, and a very few depict “resurrected women.” In the African Museum in Tervuren near Brussels there is an African sculpture of a woman on the cross with a small child bound to her side, a strikingly Christic and maternal image. The curators keep it off display because they think it would be too upsetting for the general public.

These are fragments of awareness of the Christic identity of baptized women. The Christic identity of women means that the living presence of Christ inheres in baptized believers and practitioners of their Christian faith irrespective of gender assignment.

**The genesis of Sacrosanctum Concilium**

The concept that women can and do function as speaking subjects and acting agents within their own Church runs up against the cold fact of the absence of women in the portion of liturgical Tradition that is *SC*. No women wrote any portions of *SC*. The members of the preparatory committees and the consultants to the bishops, the “periti” and the bishops themselves who voted were without exception male, representatives of a single gender of humanity. It was only at the last session of the Council that women observers were permitted to be present to listen, not to participate. At the same time, some of these women were able to contribute an insight here and there through casual conversations held over coffee (although separate coffee lines were set up for the bishops and for the
women!) For example, one observer at the Council’s closing session, Mrs. Luz Longoria said in an interview in October 2012 that she had spoken up during a small-group discussion concerning the goals of marriage, that marriage did not exist only to satisfy one’s personal physical needs, but – just imagine – of love!1

Yet individual women exerted an often invisible yet pervasive influence precisely at the level at which the *sensus fidelium* that provided the practical foundation for the liturgical reforms of SC, in the decades preceding the Council. To a large extent this may have happened by happy fault.

The field of liturgical studies, considered by some as rather suspect in the first decades of the twentieth century, was assumed to be, until the mid-twentieth century, as a concern of the clergy – a male preserve, in other words, in which the ‘agent of liturgy’ was normatively the males at the altar – priest, deacon, subdeacon, servers. Publications such as the Louvain/Mont César journal *Questions liturgiques* were aimed at the remedial education of the clergy in the expectation that a deepened understanding of the origins and theological sense of the liturgy in all its forms and aspects, coupled with a renewal in liturgical spirituality, would trickle down to the masses in the pews. In fact this is just what the Council of Trent had encouraged: while retaining Latin as the only permitted language of the Mass, pastors were to explain the Mass to their parishioners in the language of the people.

In the 19th and 20th centuries the Lit Move in Europe and later in North-America first aimed at research and a return to the New Testament and patristic-era sources, and only later at simplifications and a restoration of the spirit of the liturgy itself that became incarnated in SC. Beginning in the 1920’s and early 1930’s, first in Germany and later in North America, we can find scattered evidence of contributions both formal and informal by women to the various projects, aims and endeavors of the Liturgical Movement in the period. Some of these women are more or less known: Sister Aemiliana Loehr, the protégée of the Benedictine monk and controversial sacramental theologian Odo Casel at the Abbey of Herstelle, who wrote on the nature of the liturgy and on the liturgical year; Justine Ward developed a method to instruct children in the singing of simple Gregorian chant; Therese Mueller brought her commitment to the new thinking in liturgy from Germany to the U.S. in the 1930’s and who pioneered liturgical catechesis in the family. In the period just after Vatican II Christiane Brusselmans fired up the vision and enthusiasm of parish catechists and lay leaders to implement the restored RCIA in a 20th century pastoral context. Twenty years ago Teresa Berger researched the effects of the Liturgical Movement and its pastoral experimentation on women at the grassroots in Germany in the 1930’s, and just recently Katherine Harmon surveyed influential lay women in the Lit Move in the United States5.

It should be stressed that, to a great extent, these examples represent willing reception and often creative implementation of renewed theological thinking and some of its logical outcomes in pastoral-liturgical practice, but not necessarily the type of innovative initiative that could only have emerged from independent research carried out by theologically trained scholars and supported by some sort of ecclesial community. Up until the mid-20th century women in the Catholic Church had no voice in the development
of the classical theological tradition. Women were not permitted to study university-level Catholic theology from the birth of the earliest universities in the 12th century until the 1950’s and early ‘60’s. The research, the insights, the new approaches and use of alternative sources of knowledge, above all the development of new visions of theology on the part of female professional theologians in the past fifty years has begun to create unanticipated and significant shifts in theological perspectives – sometimes by incorporation or by dialogue, occasionally by reaction.

Up until the liturgical reform of Vatican II, the formal rites of the Catholic Church did not contain a single word written authentically by a woman. Perhaps the earliest exception to this situation occurred because in 1970 the criteria for naming an exemplary saint as a Doctor of the Church were expanded to include mystical knowledge as a category of authoritative teaching. As a result the first female Doctors of the Church were named: at first Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, followed by Thérèse of Lisieux, and in 2012 Hildegard of Bingen. On their respective feast days an extract from their writings appears in the Office of Readings, however, only men and women religious, and a very few of the laity, would be exposed to this use of women’s texts in the public prayer of the Church.

Even today, one looks in vain for examples of ritual texts written by women in official Roman rites. An interesting exception is that of music composed by women, whether traditional hymnody, translations of hymns, choral works or new congregational song composed for use in women-friendly celebrations. The traditional involvement of women in liturgical space was limited arranging flowers and washing the altar linens. Just after Vatican II when laity began to serve as lectors and extraordinary ministers of communion, women were excluded from entering the sanctuary during Mass. The first General Instruction on the Roman Missal hedges around the question of women’s liturgical ministries and whether women were to be permitted to perform them in the sanctuary space. In any case, women still cannot be officially installed in the ministries of lector or acolyte, because they are women. We here know all this.

It was not by chance that in the 1990’s Marjorie Procter-Smith posed a provocative question concerning tradition, or more specifically “The Tradition”: whose Tradition is it? Is it women’s tradition, if women have never been permitted access to authoritative theologizing, decision-making or implementation of the evolving shape of the Tradition? Who constructed the Tradition? And what might be the shape of a normative tradition in which a broad spectrum of human persons, those who had no voice and no access, could co-determine the significant symbols and metaphors, the sacred texts, the music, visual elements, and physical insertion into the rites? “Constructing” a tradition is not as far-fetched, nor as artificial, as it might seem, nor need it be immediately condemned as a sort of rebellion or schism. An ecclesial community that is attentive to elements in the liturgy of the Church that act to exclude some, or to impose a mentality deeply alien to the community such as excessive penitential piety or dogmatic fundamentalism, or to inscribe potentially exploitative power relations, might well listen to its own collective conscience and embrace different worship customs. In this sense the ideal of full, conscious active participation moves toward full empowerment of all Christians, in virtue of their baptism, as ritual agents.
The good news of SC

I would argue that SC laid a stronger foundation than we might think for the development of an inclusive liturgical Tradition that might just turn out to play a pivotal role in restoring some degree of credibility to a considerably battered and discredited Catholic Church. Here are some examples of what I have in mind:

- **Full, conscious and active participation** can be found everywhere in SC. While the phrase can be tracked back to *Tra le sollecitudini* of 1903, a text that included directions that women were not to sing in the choir, what we can hear today in the text has to do with the dynamic dialogical interchange of call and response in the worshiping community. The dialogue Mass began already in 1921 and was spreading in the 1930’s. This internally dynamic interchange was linked closely to the renewal in the theology of baptism which granted a new recognition to the dignity of all those who have died and risen with Christ, and with the (re-)discovery of the concept of the Mystical Body of Christ, both of which were brought to light by research on the liturgical practices of the early Church and the ways that our ancestors in the faith prayed together.

- **The living presence of Christ**, par. Nr. 7 in which this presence is identified as inherent, incarnate if you will, not only in the bread and wine of the altar, but in the sacraments, in the presiding minister, in the Word of God, and “then the people pray and sing” (in the French translation, “lorsque l’Église prie et chante les psaumes”). Christ is present and alive in us ourselves, female and male Christians, Christians of all cultures, races and socio-economic circumstances. The direct message for baptized women – for those juridically defined as subject to specific restrictions due to gender – is that Christ is incarnate in our own – female -flesh, that we have a Christic identity. After all, what is not assumed is not redeemed. In this expanded sense the Paschal Mystery which underlies the liturgical reform begins with Incarnation.

- Several specific restorations illustrate the significance of a fully operative concept of the full equal dignity of women given in baptism, such as the Prayer of the Faithful or Universal Prayer. I would say this is the example par excellence of the people of God exercising their common priesthood by interceding directly to God for the needs of the small portion of the cosmos they see around them.

- Of course even the somewhat grudging permission given in SC par 36, 54 and for worship in the vernacular language made the liturgy immediately and aurally comprehensible – well, with judgment reserved in the case of the 2011 Roman Missal in English which occasionally renders the liturgy considerably less comprehensible than one would hope. Language functions as a symbol system, not merely a conveyor of content. This is why inclusive language is of tremendous importance as a component in the Church’s commitment to evangelize all persons and to build social justice in our world. Increasingly pastors and individuals change texts spontaneously (or not), or even drop awkward texts, to reflect what they believe to be the core message of the Gospel, and to avoid making women (or anyone else) invisible, inferior or nonexistent in the worship of the Church.

- The catechumenate for adults, Nr. 64, restored with stages and ritual steps, gave to the parish and the diocesan Church a model of initiation not of instruction followed by ritual, but of a journey – personal, flexible and spiritual in nature, subjective but not
individualistic – undertaken within the context of a supportive faith community. **This model of initiation was intended to work like leaven for an entire parish community, for the local church (in canon law, the diocese) and for the Church as a whole.**

In theory the richness of the three cycles of **readings** in the new Lectionary could give women at least a few more opportunities to hear the stories of heroic women in Sacred Scripture. In fact researchers already documented in the early 1990’s the almost systematic de-selecting of women or the deemphasizing of the strength and initiative of Biblical women. Often when a short and a long version of a reading is given, the short version eliminates a reference to a woman, or references to women who acted with individual initiative are not heard while passages on women's obedience to their husbands are. The risen Christ appears to Mary of Magdala, the Apostle to the Apostles, only in the Gospel for Easter Week Tuesday.

Paragraphs 37 to 41 are simply astonishing for the matter-of-fact openness given to the concept of the **inculturation** of the liturgy in a variety of countries and cultures, clearly with the emphasis on current or former mission territories. Just imagine how an earlier generation would hear, “The Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not affect the faith or the well-being of the entire community.” What does this do for those who have been excluded from the Tradition? While it would be too simplistic and in fact deceptive to apply the concept of inculturation to women in a way that presumes some unrealistically rigid and essentialist concept of women and culture, in fact we can see here a faint green light for the “incarnation” of public prayer using original elements and texts in defined communities. What began in the 1970’s and developed up to the present as women’s creative liturgical prayer services that acted as a sort of green space, a “safe” space for honest authentic expression and powerful prayer, has evolved into mixed gender ecclesial communities who adopt at least the freedom, if not specific practices, pioneered in women’s liturgies.

**Catholic women as agents of worship and shared common prayer**

Having looked at a few specific articles in SC that represent good news to those who have had little or no voice in the formation of the liturgical Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, we can set up some parallels and points of contrast between the Liturgical Movement that culminated in the reshaping of the Tradition itself at Vatican II, and what has been called the Women’s Liturgical Movement or the Feminist Liturgical Movement. To conclude, we will identify some growing edges that suggest a glimpse into the future of women in the tradition of RC liturgy.

The Women’s Liturgical Movement played a pivotal role in allowing women to become full, conscious, active agents of the liturgy within defined local gatherings, often but not always small in scale – prayer groups, house churches – or large congresses in convention halls. Such liturgies were usually characterized by a dynamic and strikingly creative approach, in the service of a healthy and affirming spirituality. They were characterized by eloquent symbolic language and actions, new and refreshing interpretations of familiar biblical passages, a diffuse concept of liturgical leadership, and a profoundly relational approach to common ritual prayer. New blessing and healing rites were carefully constructed for life
events and circumstances for which no rite exited in the official ritual books of the Church. The space would be arranged in a circle to facilitate welcome, inclusion and interaction. Natural symbols such as oil, water and plant matter were incorporated consciously and deliberately, as was a wider range of bodily movement, gesture and posture

Examples of women’s creative common prayer can be found across the world in very different cultures. At the 2001 congress of the European Society of Women in Theological Research participants were able to learn of similar ritual experimentation taking place in Lithuania that had been videotaped by journalist Laimė Kiškūnaitė. Any such proliferation of symbolic actions in the context of prayer might give rise to the question whether these events, which were called in the past “para-liturgical” activity, may be meeting legitimate pastoral needs not accounted for in formal liturgical and sacramental rites and verbal formulas.

In sharp contrast to the long-term Liturgical Movement that led to the reforms and renewal of SC, the Women’s Liturgical Movement developed under a number of handicaps. The monasteries that acted as research centres and think tanks for the liturgy benefited from the internal division of labor by which some monks could engage in study and publish their research in journals and books that enjoyed widespread distribution. The women’s experiments in prayer developed by contrast in relative obscurity, hampered by very limited financial means and lacking any institutional credibility. Such prayer services were difficult to research because few published resources existed and much mimeographed or photocopied original material disappeared after the event took place.

The Women’s Liturgical Movement was in only a limited position to research precedents for women’s leadership in worship in the ancient Church. But in fact the movement was grappling with a darker process – that of uncovering the deep roots of misogyny in the Christian faith and the many ways in which open contempt for women, and for the presence of women’s bodies in proximity to the Holy, had affected worship in mixed assemblies down through the centuries. The question here is not about rediscovering a hidden but precious tradition, but of bringing to light hidden and dangerous attitudes, suppressed fears of women’s bodies and of blood, and the question of why women were consistently banned from the sanctuary.

The 1980’s saw some steps forward in the reform of the Roman Catholic liturgy in ways that blunted or began to eliminate elements that seemed to target women. The American bishops, for example, authorized the elimination of the word “men” in the Nicene Creed: “for us and for all he came down from heaven…” while the Irish bishops permitted the lectionary reading from Ephesians 5 to omit “wives be obedient to your husbands.” Language that included women became more common, certainly in homilies and presider’s comments that did not require Vatican approbation. Each of these is but one small example of the fact that the English language was evolving, more quickly in some English-speaking countries than in others, toward more conscious inclusion of women, and the fact that, in a few small ways, bishops acknowledged the necessity of celebrating the liturgy in what was becoming the vernacular language. By way of contrast however, the late 1990’s saw a clear backlash against inclusive language taking shape and resulted in the 2001 translation document Liturgiam authenticam which appeared to aim at controlling official liturgical language and reinscribing the male-normative terms
of reference of twenty years before. This suspicion was borne out in the English version of the 2011 Roman Missal. Those who prefer the Extraordinary Form of the Mass even debate whether females should be allowed to serve at the altar.

**Conclusions**

Looking toward the future of women in Roman Catholic worship, we have already gestured toward some problematic indicators. Yet the grassroots growth in creative prayer services, in house churches, small basic communities or even at major conferences appears set to continue.

Proponents of the ordination of women as deacons have been heartened by changes in canon law that reserve the concept that the ordained minister acts “in persona Christ” to priests and bishops. Such a change could arguably open the diaconate to women, following its predecessors in the New Testament and the early Church. Less encouraging however is the clear implication that women, as a juridic category, cannot ever act in persona Christi in spite of their baptism into the Body of Christ. At this writing, renewed and serious discussion of the possibility of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate is taking place in Europe and North America, partly on the basis of the study of such research material as Cipriano Vagaggini’s study of the Didascalia and on the practical fact that today women pastoral workers and catechists perform a considerable and increasing amount of parish work.

My own perception as a scholar of liturgy, born out of twenty years of research on such liturgical phenomena as the old rite of the churching of women after childbirth and the gendered nature of the act of sacrifice including the sacrificial theology of the Eucharist, indicates clearly that some deep, probably unconscious, primordial level of fear and contempt for women is driving the refusal to face these questions of women’s presence as active agents in the liturgical life of the Church.

So we return to our starting point: the Christic identity of baptized women, and the unique, indelible, ontological dignity conferred in the ritual act of dying and rising with Christ in the font of Baptism. What would happen if the Church – the Mystical Body of Christ – actualized its sacramental theology? What if we actually did, what we profess? What would the future of the Roman Catholic Church look like? Building on the precedents established at the Second Vatican Council and the experience of implementation of its core principles and insights, I predict an irresistible energy wave of evangelization, healing and unshakeable hope.

**REFERENCES**


4 Mme Longoria told this story in a plenary session during the congress “Teologhe ri-leggono il Vaticano II / Women Theologians Re-read Vatican II”, at the Istituto Pontificio San’Anselmo, Rome, October 2012.


7 The company of women composers of worship music is slowly increasing and their work beginning to be taken up into official denominational hymnals. Among these works are such hymns as "We Shall Go Out" composed by British music professor June Boyce-Tillman, a hymn that was taken up into the official Catholic hymnal of English-speaking Canada (Celebrate in Song. Ottawa: CCCB. 2011) as well as a number of hymns composed by United Church scholar professor Ruth Duck of the United States. Female translators of hymns such as Catherine Winkworth were active in the nineteenth century.

8 SC paragraph 37 // Flannery. Ibid. P. 131.


11 Participants viewed the second in a series of videos, entitled "Apie mėnulio moterį".


LITERATURE AND SOURCES


SACROSANCTUM CONCILIVM AND ITS EFFECTS ON WOMEN AS AGENTS IN ROMAN CATHOLIC LITURGY


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