



INVITATION TO READ
THE APOSTOLIC LETTER

DESIDERIO DESIDERAVI

The freshness of the liturgy

A CONTRIBUTION SO THAT
CATHOLIC ACTION MAY DECISIVELY MAKE
THE APOSTOLIC LETTER ON THE LITURGICAL
FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD



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Desiderio desideravi, the freshness of the liturgy

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The apostolic letter *Desiderio desideravi* (DD), signed by Pope Francis on 29 June 2022, offers an intense and approachable reflection about liturgy, spirituality and pastoral care. This short and richly informative document deserves to be read carefully. It takes up the fundamental themes of Francis' teaching and relaunches a formative journey of liturgical pastoral care for tangible communities. We propose a key to understanding it by reflecting together and giving the floor to Francis himself as often as possible.

Liturgy according to Pope Francis

The teaching of his writings

Pope Francis' teaching on liturgy has never been concerned with being systematic. Yet, even a quick glance at the list of his numerous interventions on the subject reveals the breadth and centrality of the theme in his pontificate. Three main issues run through it:

1. Maintaining continuity with the Second Vatican Council
2. The link between celebration and the form of the Church
3. The great work in progress of ministries today.

Vatican II was a service to the Gospel and to the people

The constant reference to the conciliar constitutions is evident. For Francis, already in his first interview in 2013, this was to be kept in mind in the form of a providential event:

Vatican II was a re-reading of the Gospel in the light of contemporary culture. It produced a movement of renewal that simply comes from the Gospel itself. The fruits are enormous. Just think of the liturgy. The work of liturgical reform was a service to the people as a re-reading of the Gospel starting from a concrete historical situation. Yes, there are lines of hermeneutics of continuity and discontinuity, but one thing is clear: the dynamic of reading the Gospel actualised in the present day, which was characteristic of the Council, is absolutely irreversible¹.

It is the very theological nature of the liturgy, as specified at the Council, that pushes us vigorously beyond what we experience in celebration, demanding a true active participation of all the faithful that does not yet exist. For this reason, ecclesial discernment led Pius XII to open the gigantic project of accurately rewriting all Catholic rituals. But one thing must be very clear: liturgical reform was conceived as a means and not as an end in itself. The goal is to allow ourselves to be patiently converted to the Lord, to be shaped by Him through the discipline of ritual action, to be reformed as a synodal community presided over by Him on the journey towards the Kingdom. DD is a letter that fits almost spontaneously into this first great stream, in continuity with the Council.

¹ A. SPADARO, *Interview with Pope Francis*, La Civiltà cattolica 2013, 449-477, 467.

What kind of Church emerges from the liturgy

Continuing this process clearly justifies the frequency of Francesco's interventions on the subject of ecclesiology and ministries. On the first front, among the most significant texts, *Magnum Principium* (2017) certainly deserves mention. The instruction regulating the translation and adaptation of rituals in various languages and cultures, a document that entrusts local churches with an unprecedented and central responsibility, and *Traditionis Custodes* (2021), the *motu proprio* that unequivocally establishes the uniqueness of the Roman rite in fidelity to the Council:

It would be trivial to read the tensions, unfortunately present around the celebration, as a simple divergence between different tastes concerning a particular ritual form. The problematic is primarily ecclesiological. 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 Sacrosanctum Concilium, a document that expresses the reality of the Liturgy intimately joined to the vision of Church so admirably described in Lumen gentium. For this reason, as I already expressed in my letter to all the bishops, I have felt it my duty to affirm 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 of the Roman Rite.” (DD 31).

The great work of ministries and the breath of blessing

The work carried out with regard to ministries is also highly significant. In this regard, Francis has corrected the gap between law and liturgical reality, recognising the reservation of instituted ministries to males established by Paul VI could now be dropped (*Spiritus Domini*, 2021). In the same year, he established the new ministry of catechist (*Antiquum Ministerium*, 2021), confirming that

the link with liturgy is the foundation of every ecclesial service, because it is born from it with an instituting rite and always returns to it, because it is at the service of the unity of the ecclesial body. Finally, the innovative and non-traditional theology of blessing contained in *Fiducia Supplicans* is significant, as it contains a logic of frontier liturgy that does not stop at the just logic of belonging typical of the sacraments, but seeks to respond to the nature of the freedom of God's grace and the universal openness of the living to Him.

One must also avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of blessings to this point of view alone, for it would lead us to expect the same moral conditions for a simple blessing that are called for in the reception of the sacraments. Such a risk requires that we broaden this perspective further. Indeed, there is the danger that a pastoral gesture that is so beloved and widespread will be subjected to too many moral prerequisites, which, under the claim of control, could overshadow the unconditional power of God's love that forms the basis for the gesture of blessing. (Fiducia Supplicans, 12)

The teaching of gestures

However, there is a whole magisterium no less important than the written one that should be noted, stubbornly implemented by Francis not in texts, but in events in which he has involved the Church and the world since the beginning of his pontificate. And literally from the very first moment: as soon as he appeared at the loggia of St Peter's on 13 March 2013, Francis took the crowd's breath away and gave them a voice, involving them in the patristic ritual of the people praying for their new shepherd. Francis wanted to receive the first liturgical gesture before giving it, and this is already a very explicit teaching on what Christian liturgy is. If it is, in fact, an event that has its origin in God's work involving humanity, the structure of every celebration is always dialogical. Thus, the participating people become an assembly

and not just recipients, subjects who are solicited and then recognised as depositaries of a certain prophetic 'intuition'.

Celebrating on the fractures of the world

Just two weeks after his election, and then whenever possible, Francis celebrated the Mass *of the Lord's Supper* in a prison. Washing the feet of male and female prisoners (in 2016, the Pope himself changed the rubric of the missal that required only male persons to be chosen) means exceptionally to force the ritual and starting the Holy Triduum outside the cathedral. The liturgy is displaced onto the fractures, among those 'who, deprived of their freedom, daily feel the harshness of detention and its restrictions, lack of affection and, in more than a few cases, lack of respect' (SPN 10).

His first organised apostolic journey – after seeing images of one of all too tragic shipwrecks of migrants – was to Lampedusa on 8 July 2013. Here, the liturgy was preceded by the laying of flowers in the sea at the gateway to Europe, in a watery graveyard, and celebrated by asking for the gift of tears against the globalisation of indifference.

As a rule, after each of his trips, Francis stops for a private act of devotion at the Marian icon *Salus populi romani*, venerated in St Mary Major. In these small acts of worship, the Pope performs one of those acts of popular piety that he recognised in *Evangelii Gaudium* as a 'theological place' (EG 126).

Liturgy as magisterium

It would be wonderful to reconstruct step by step the whole story of this magisterium of gestures performed by the Pope. How can we forget the extraordinary vigil of 27 March 2020? When the engine of the world came to a dramatic halt due to the Covid pandemic, Francis accepted Don Marco Pozza's suggestion and made another memorable liturgical gesture. That day, the world, locked in their homes, saw the

procession of a single man, limping up to the empty parvis of St Peter's in the rain: 'I walked like this, alone, thinking of the loneliness of so many people. An inclusive thought, a thought with my head and my heart, together. I felt all this and walked.'" For the first time in human history, a tragedy had also frozen rituals: the Pope then celebrated amid the sirens of ambulances in a ghostly Rome, involving the world in silence before the sleeping Christ in the storm of Mark 4 and on the Cross of St. Marcello al Corso. Whereas during the plague people used to ask for mercy from God, suspected of being the instigator of the scourge, and dramatic prayers were used against the disease, Francis instead takes on the wise and humble tone of someone who asks for help and calls on everyone to learn to live respectfully 'on the same boat'.

This vital character of the liturgy is so strong that, on some occasions, the Pope has deemed it necessary to resort to ritual gestures even in very tense and delicate contexts, such as when, in April 2019, he painfully bent down to kiss the feet of each of the representatives of the factions fighting a bloody war in South Sudan, imploring them to feel their responsibility, to discuss animatedly among themselves, but to show unity before people, to become 'fathers of the nation'.

From the peripheries, brothers all

There are numerous other liturgical gestures that could be mentioned, all capable of pushing the liturgy onto the fractures of history and society. Let us at least evoke the penitential liturgies in which shame was confessed for the scandals of abuse, the blessing of the devotions of peoples brutalised by colonists, as in Canada on Lake St. Anne. The Pope has repeatedly shown his commitment to making rituals welcoming to people with disabilities ("Either everyone or no one!"), infants, and marginalised people. He has created cardinals from tiny churches (Mongolia) and has repeatedly pushed for adapted rites (those of Zaire or those mentioned in *Querida Amazonia* 82), so that

the catholicity of celebrations may not be uniformity but communion in differences. We cannot overlook momentous occasions such as the visit to the Lutheran Church of Sweden for the 500th anniversary of Luther's theses, with common prayer, or the moments of listening and spirituality shared with leaders of different denominations: the image of the Pope standing with the elderly Ayatollah Sistani in Dadjaf evokes the standing of two patriarchs in peace.

Desiderio desideravi is therefore the result of intense intellectual and pastoral work, a document capable of putting the crucial question back on the table for everyone: ‘*Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist*’ (DD 10).

Why is it a *unique* document?

Since 2005

Before going into the specifics of the text, it is still useful to pick up the letter and wonder what it is about in particular. One could say that the first stroke of the pen in this writing dates back to a wish expressed in Rome by the then Cardinal Bergoglio on March 1 2005, when, speaking of *ars celebrandi* at the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, he asked the strategy desired by the Council to be completed, recognising a bishop as the key figure in the reform of the liturgy and the Church. This correct approach was to be accompanied by a whole programme of formation for small communities in the territory, priests and lay ministers. Bergoglio asked this not to be set out in other fundamental texts. He said:

I would hope for a document that is clear and concise in its expression, with a biblical and liturgical flavour; a text for meditation rather than a theological treatise; exhortative or, better still, capable of offering motivation rather than being legalistic or rubrical. However, it should be distinct from a generic exposition on priestly spirituality, so as to be a practical text that considers the celebration of the Eucharist and, in particular, the various aspects of what the priest must accomplish. (Ponenza, 01/03/2005).).

We feel the need to meditate together, rather than read a theological treatise. We desire language that is encouraging and exhortative rather than corrective, because we need to rediscover the desire to celebrate. The Church's attention should now shift from the bishop to the priest, not separated from his community of the baptised, where the Eucharist is lived.

In 2015, the request is to proceed

Returning to this same point, after becoming pope, Francis relaunched the same suggestion, speaking to the priests of the diocese of Rome on 19 February 2015 about the need to rediscover the wonder of faith. In his very concrete reflection, he cited the many difficulties of our liturgy, abuses and fragilities that have not been greatly affected by clear and timely magisterial interventions. What, then, should be done? The Pope seems to think it more useful to adopt a different style, one that starts afresh from the desire and gesture of the Lord.

It is not appropriate for it to become a kind of vademecum or handbook [...], nor should it deal with topics such as sacred music or sacred art. To be successful, it must, on the contrary, calmly resist the temptation not only to say everything about everything, but also to say a lot about a lot: it should say little and in a targeted way; it should say it well, in a

| *convincing and persuasive manner. (Osservatore Romano, 19 February 2015)*

He thus explicitly requested the drafting of a new *sui generis* tool on the theme of *ars celebrandi*, in a 'frank, direct and simple style, excluding sophisticated expressions'. The focus will be on the spiritual and pastoral attitude of the celebrating priest because this is one of the ways now felt to be appropriate for reaching everyone else. Thus began an intense period of work that lasted more than seven years, because composing simple things is often more difficult than formulating complex things.

An unusual theme for liturgical theology: *desir*

A change of strategy

After seven years, the letter was published with the title: *Desiderio desideravi. On the liturgical formation of the people of God*. Now, we have just shown the explicit intention in 2015 was that it should be a text on the theme of *ars celebrandi* and addressed primarily to priests. What happened? Meditating carefully on the final text, one realises the choice that slowly came into focus. The theme of the art of celebrating already has a recent and significant magisterial literature, which is quoted in the text and in its few notes. Yet, in recent years, speaking explicitly about this theme has not greatly shifted the many struggles continually emerging with regard to the way we continue to celebrate. On the contrary, it has risked being absorbed into controversial issues we would like to stay out. Hence the choice to speak of the liturgical formation of the whole people of God, so that the swords and spears of liturgical wars may be melted down into ploughshares and sickles

for serious and passionate work in the fields of concrete communities. In this way the beginning of the prophecy reaches the word 'desire'.

Desire and liturgy

What is the relationship between desire and liturgy? Isn't this the great disappointment with regard to the expectations clearly expressed by those who participated in the Second Vatican Council, namely the liturgy we have worked so hard on is not desirable after all? The reform and the entire Liturgical Movement that preceded it can be explained by the project to break down the wall between liturgy and spirituality. Once its true nature had been understood and its ritual dynamics restructured, the expectation was that we would be formed by the liturgy into a desirable, vital action. To communities that seem weary in their celebration, the Pope now shows a way that can heal their desire, namely, to proclaim that they themselves are the object of desire, God's desire for humanity. When DD speaks of desire, the subject is God:

“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” (Lk 22:15) These words of Jesus, with which the account of the Last Supper opens, are the crevice through which we are given the surprising possibility of intuiting the depth of the love of the persons of the Most Holy Trinity for us. (DD 2).

A sick desire can only be healed if it perceives itself within the desire of another. Grand plans for liturgical pastoral formation or severe pronouncements against abuses are of little value if believers do not first regain the desire to celebrate in a manner worthy of the gift they have received, the passion to respond to what has always been prepared for us.

Prima della nostra risposta al suo invito – molto prima – c'è il suo desiderio di noi: possiamo anche non esserne consapevoli, ma ogni volta che andiamo a Messa la ragione prima è perché siamo attratti dal suo desiderio di noi. Da parte nostra, la risposta possibile, l'ascesi più esigente, è, come sempre, quella dell'arrendersi al suo amore, del volersi lasciare attrarre da lui. Per certo ogni nostra comunione al Corpo e al Sangue di Cristo è stata da Lui desiderata nell'ultima Cena (DD 6).

At the Last Supper, Jesus' confession, '*desiderio desideravi*' (*you desired desire*), extends to the end of the world, and that 'eating with you' includes all people throughout history, even those who do not yet know that they are invited to the banquet of the Lamb. Desiring means to become lacking and vulnerable: humanity is therefore not only the recipient or victim of that desire, but even becomes capable of hurting God, capable of crucifying him: '*Necessary because every gift, to be gift, must have someone disposed to receive it*' (DD 3). Here we are, caught up in a dramatic and risky game of life and death. But let us pause briefly to give the word "desire" its full meaning.

Scripture: desire, suspicion, amorous adventure

A word with a controversial etymology, desire is a very common biblical term. Scripture knows both its positive interpretation and the one that teaches its limits.

Wisdom literature knows how to value the vital drive of desire. Ecclesiastes encourages us to rejoice in youthful desires, in harmony with God's judgement, driving away melancholy and pain (Eccl 11:7-11). Sirach echoes this same sentiment: '*Deprive not yourself of present good things, let no choice portion escape you*' (Sir 14:14). Man is a being who desires, and in desire lies the truest truth of each person. Because, as monastic spirituality will later explain clearly on the theme of *stabilitas*, we are truly in one place only from the day when deep desire reaches us. The faithful person, in fact, is not the one who

remains, but the one who desires to remain. It is not those in the choir who pray, but those who sing and desire to be exactly where they are. It is not those who do not desert their work who are devoted to, but those who labour, choosing what they are doing. We could continue this litany, but the refrain is clear: the authentic human being is the being of his desires, the one in whom the breath of divine life continues to blow (Gen 2:7).

Yet Scripture itself warns us: if we do not learn moderation, desire will soon turn into need. The two seem similar but have opposite structures and outcomes. Need is a longing that can be satisfied, an appetite in which the other is often an obstacle or a tool. Desire, on the other hand, is symbolic and infinite, and it preserves the face of the other, before whom we find recognition and limit ourselves. Desiring is an action that knows its own tendency towards impossibility knows how to rejoice in limited symbolic anticipations, preserves the unsaturated gap and the space of the other who inhabits it with me. God is fully complicit in this dynamic of life and limitation, desire and sobriety. God saves desire by setting a limit, because no desire can survive where everything is permitted and possible. Original sin is all about the seduction of a fruit that has become desirable to the eyes. In the Decalogue of Exodus, it is worth noting that the law of freedom includes two out of ten words that command us 'not to desire'. If greed is the gateway to many evils, wisdom is finding flavour in what is limited and lawful. Human desire is so overwhelming that if it is not educated, self-destruction is inevitable. But to eradicate a sick desire – think of even the most dramatic cases of pathology – the way forward is not to limit it, but to allow oneself to be invaded by a much greater desire that takes away all the strength from the small desires that have become obsessive.

Here we are in the extraordinary paradox of *Desire desired*. Scripture can be reread in the form of the dramatic dialogue of the Song of Songs, and it all plays out in the arc between *the 'Where are you, Adam?'* of Genesis and the *'Come, Lord Jesus'* that closes the

Apocalypse. Only entering into this great mutual desire between God and humanity will tear us away from our miserable conflicts. And the logic of this desire will train us in the sobriety of an art of celebration, which will be the delicacy of those who do not want to hurt a beloved body that has become fragile.

Scrolling through the text as a whole

The structure

The letter consists of 65 paragraphs and is developed in a well-articulated structure. Each section carries out an intense theological work and opens up to the next one. It could be summarised as follows:

- **Some introductory numbers (nos. 1-3)** make explicit the occasion and nature of the writing, explain the reason for its title based on Luke 22:15, and thus introduce the first handled issue.
- **What is liturgy? (nos. 4-16)**. The disproportion between the immensity of the gift and the smallness of those who receive it introduces a robust theology of the rite of the Last Supper as the key to entering into the mystery of Christ. Jesus chooses a ritual action that prolongs his salvation into the present day. This theological reading of the liturgy leads to some concrete considerations that follow.
- **The beauty of celebration (nos. 17-26)**. The two poisons of spiritual worldliness (Gnosticism and neo-Pelagianism) can extinguish the vitality of faith. Liturgy is the antidote, capable of awakening all the senses of the body of the celebrant, leading him to an experience of wonder. From this height, we can finally understand the double meaning of the conciliar expression 'liturgical formation'.

- **Liturgical formation (nos. 27-47).** An initiation into the symbolism of reality and of celebration is necessary in order to live the liturgy, and this patient work has many fields of commitment. But this first sense of formation *in* the liturgy then opens up to a deeper sense, which is that of formation *from* the liturgy. The outcome of the Church's ritual practice is the conformation to Christ of a humanity finally capable of symbols once again. At this point, sufficient intensity has been achieved to deal with the art of celebration.
- ***The ars celebrandi* (nos. 48-60).** Included in the theological definition of liturgy as the action of Christ (SC 7), it reflects on the many dimensions involved in the art of celebration. To achieve this, assiduous application, a love of beauty and diligent dedication are necessary. We are finally in the best position to understand what *discipline* in liturgy is: not obedience to an external will, but tenderness for a gesture that does not belong to me. Here we are at the point of maturation of the whole discourse. Only starting from God's desire and man's wonder does the Pope offers severe and very concrete reminders about the art of participating and presiding.
- **The one rite of the Church, in space and time (nos. 61-65a).** The value of the conciliar reform is that it is a means and not an end, for a liturgical act that achieves the intensity described. It is therefore time to overcome divisions and polarisation on the liturgy, in order to practise a ritual action in the liturgical year and on the Lord's Day that continually forms us.
- The document closes with **an exhortation to communion** (no. 65b), to rediscover the liturgy as an experience of God's love, capable of transforming existence and generating unity in the Church, and with an intense quotation from St Francis of Assisi, taken from his *Letter to the Whole Order*.

Three precious pearls, among many others

What we propose now is not an orderly commentary on the text. Its clarity and linearity would make it cloying and useless. Instead, let us try to take up only three of the many precious pearls of the letter, giving DD itself the floor as often as possible, in the hope that this work may give rise to some basic liturgical formation activities and invite a personal rereading of the text itself, which deserves every attention.

What is liturgy?

Liturgy, where all truths come together

Adapting Chesterton's well-known and striking phrase about the Catholic Church, one could say that liturgy is the place 'where all truths meet'. Looking at a community celebrating a rite, in fact, one perceives too clearly its struggles and joys, what it considers precious, what tensions run through it, what personality the person presiding over it has, and even a formidable clue as to the form of faith of each of those present. Paradoxically, liturgy is both a public and a personal act, so delicate that humanity has always been divided and quarrelled over rituals, because they reveal what is otherwise hidden. Even our own age knows liturgical wars, so scandalous and so pervasive. Francis begins and ends DD by asking us to emerge from this conflict:

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. (DD 65)

The invitation consists in letting ourselves be captivated by the beauty of the theology of liturgy, which is recounted almost in the form of a

spiritual meditation with a calm and wise tone, at times moving. The karst river of pain for the scandal of divisions between Catholics, between Christians and between all men flows throughout the text and re-emerges from time to time. The prayer of Jesus from which Christian liturgy arises judges our historical divisions and those that are continually renewed:

The priestly prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper that all may be one (Jn 17:21) judges every one of our divisions around the Bread broken, around the sacrament of mercy, the sign of unity, the bond of charity. (DD 16)

Allowing oneself to be carried away by another current

But there is another river to which we can indulge, that of the Trinity's desire for every living being. The poverty of those sent to prepare the place for the banquet of the Lamb does not diminish the intensity of that original current and, at the same time, is a necessary presence in its fragility, which echoes that of the disciples at the Last Supper, because there is no gift without someone to receive it. God's infinite desire for communion with us will be insatiable until his return: *'for this reason that same Supper will be made present in the celebration of the Eucharist until he returns again'* (DD 4).

The act of faith is preceded by practices of listening, celebration and fraternity. This has always been the case: liturgy is not added to a trust in God that is kindled elsewhere, but brings it about. And for this reason, the Last Supper is the true sacrifice of Christ, on which his cross and resurrection also depend.

If we had not had the Last Supper, that is to say, if we had not had the ritual anticipation of his death, we would have never been able to grasp how the carrying out of his being condemned to death could have been in fact the act of perfect worship, pleasing to the Father, the only true act of worship, the only true liturgy. Only a few hours after the Supper, the

apostles could have seen in the cross of Jesus, if they could have borne the weight of it, what it meant for Jesus to say, "body offered," "blood poured out." It is this of which we make memorial in every Eucharist. When the Risen One returns from the dead to break the bread for the disciples at Emmaus, and for his disciples who had gone back to fishing for fish and not for people on the Sea of Galilee, that gesture of breaking the bread opens their eyes. It heals them from the blindness inflicted by the horror of the cross, and it renders them capable of "seeing" the Risen One, of believing in the Resurrection. (DD 7).

Jesus himself performs and commands the repetition of a ritual in his memory, because without this key, the cross will be interpreted as those who devised it, to demonstrate that this man though dies nobly is not the Son of God. Only the supper gives the meaning chosen by Jesus for his Passover, even in his appearance as the risen one. Their eyes remain unable to recognise him until they are healed by his voice and his gesture. Also our eyes are like theirs, and for us the Eucharist cannot be just a vague memory of his supper. We need to be present, to hear his voice and encounter him.

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. It 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. (DD 11).

The encounter with Jesus does not take place through mental adherence or ethical behaviour, but through baptismal immersion in his own death and resurrection. The gesture is the opposite of magic,

a practice that claims to give us power over the divine. Baptism is performed in blessed water in which we see all of God's care in creating it for us with the Spirit that blows upon it, in perfecting it to save us from evil, in uniting it with the blood of the Son to give himself entirely to us (DD 13). And so it is we who, descending into the water, perform the anti-magical gesture and surrender all our power to Him, out of love.

Liturgy, participation in salvation

For the believer who loves God intensely, it is not enough to think of Him or obey His law. Those who love desire His presence: baptism immerses us and incorporates us into Christ, and in Him we can unite ourselves to His perfect act of worship towards the Father.

From the very beginning the Church had grasped, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that that which was visible in Jesus, that which could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, his words and his gestures, the concreteness of the incarnate Word — everything of Him had passed into the celebration of the sacraments. (DD 9).

This is what liturgy is, says Francis, quoting St. Leo: it is the incarnate life of the Son that continues in a certain way and can be seen and touched by us. For this reason, the Council did well to call for a reform so that full, conscious, active and fruitful participation might be possible, pointing to the liturgy as the primary and indispensable source of genuine Christian spirit (SC 14).

For group sharing:

- Let us meditate together on the passage about the Last Supper in Luke 22:14-23. Let us pause to consider Jesus' intense desire to eat the Passover meal with us.
- What do I find in the celebrations I have experienced and continue to experience that corresponds to this description made by Desiderio desideravi?
- What feelings do I experience when I hear that 'we may not be aware of it, but every time we go to Mass, the primary reason is because we are attracted by his desire for us'?

The wonder of the liturgy saves us from spiritual illness

Spiritual worldliness

In DD we also find the theme dear to Francis of the danger of spiritual worldliness. He has spoken about it on several occasions, and at length in *Gaudete et exsultate*, in which he devoted the entire chapter II to the "two subtle enemies of holiness": contemporary Gnosticism and Pelagianism. In DD, however, reference is made in particular to *Evangelii Gaudium* (nos. 93-97). Here, spiritual worldliness is clearly explained:

Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. [...] It is a subtle way of seeking one's "own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:21). It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not

always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, “it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral. (EG 93).

He then introduces the two most common forms of spiritual worldliness, which Francis considers to be two forms of ancient heresy that continue to spread today with alarming relevance. These are Gnosticism, or the form of spirituality in which the subject remains closed in the immanence of his own reason and feelings. And neo-Pelagianism, the faith of those who feel superior to others because they rely on their own strength. These two subtle enemies of holiness, in different ways, are united by the fact that they leave no room for grace. Precisely for this reason, they cause faith to become ill and have disastrous consequences for the life of the Church, far greater than obvious scandals.

The wonder of the liturgy as an antidote

Francis clearly states that if we maintain a high sense of the liturgy, then these poisons, from which we are all somewhat affected, will find forces that effectively counteract them precisely in the celebration. The beauty of the liturgy will certainly be stronger than them. But the beauty we are talking about does not emerge only from the scrupulous implementation of the rubrics: this is necessary but not sufficient. Of course, the time has finally come to put aside the long season in ‘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’(DD 22). What is decisive, however, is the element that underlies the care for space, time, gestures, words, objects, vestments, singing and music, namely the wonder at the Paschal mystery that is now present for us. The wonder we are talking about is not a vague sense of bewilderment facing an

enigmatic ritual or an obscure God. On the contrary, the wonder that saves us is:

...marvelling at the fact that the salvific plan of God has been revealed in the paschal deed of Jesus (cf. Eph 1:3-14), and the power of this paschal deed continues to reach us in the celebration of the “mysteries,” of the sacraments. It is still true that the fullness of revelation has, in respect to our human finitude, an abundance that transcends us and will find its fulfilment at the end of time when the Lord will return. But if the astonishment is of the right kind, then there is no risk that the otherness of God’s presence will not be perceived, even within the closeness that the Incarnation intends. If the reform has eliminated that vague “sense of mystery,” then more than a cause for accusations, it is to its credit. Beauty, just like truth, always engenders wonder, and when these are referred to the mystery of God, they lead to adoration.(DD 25).

When we recover the ability to enter into the beauty of the ritual symbol, then we are amazed at how it draws us into what it represents. ‘How can the misfortune of distancing ourselves from the allure of the beauty of this gift happen to us?’(DD 24). In this sense, then, the two major spiritual illnesses are revealed and cured.

L’individualismo è guarito dall’oggettivo.

Gnosticism finds fertile ground today, thanks to the post-modern man's struggle to break free from his subjective beliefs and the absoluteness of his feelings. The digital infosphere works, even if we do not always realise it, so that we agree with ourselves as much as possible, thus consuming our time and resources. As a result of what the algorithm proposes to us, our convictions are reinforced and our opinions are polarised. Everything is accelerating, and the exhausting anxiety of keeping up with the pace is treated with massive doses of dopamine, of small, pleasant and easy things, from a very young age. It is not surprising that we then seek in spirituality a compensatory practice according to our individual tastes, practices that do not tire us by

challenging us with tiring words and gestures. Christian liturgy, however, is offered to us as both the total opposite of these practices and the Gnostic tendencies that make them desirable. If contemporary society were to happily place its trust in Christian ritual, it would discover that:

The action of the celebration does not belong to the individual but to the Christ-Church, to the totality of the faithful united in Christ. The liturgy does not say “I” but “we,” and any limitation on the breadth of this “we” is always demonic. The Liturgy does not leave us alone to search out an individual supposed knowledge of the mystery of God. Rather, it takes us by the hand, together, as an assembly, to lead us deep within the mystery that the Word and the sacramental signs reveal to us. And it does this, consistent with all action of God, following the way of the Incarnation, that is, by means of the symbolic language of the body, which extends to things in space and time. (DD 19).

Rhythms, silences, words and spaces are not mine, but 'ours', belonging to a potentially universal, Catholic 'us'. There is an objective element in the liturgy that is worth more than personal taste, even that of the presider. In this objective 'we', the 'I' is not erased or reabsorbed, but understood, in the form of a single voice in a choir, of the gesture of each person harmonizing with the others. In order to heal, we need to reawaken the sense of the great style of prayer, so great that it involves our whole life: *‘The way to achieve this, though, is through discipline, through giving up weak sentimentality; through serious work, carried out in obedience to the Church, on our religious being and acting’* (DD 50).

Presumption is healed by gratuitousness

The other form of contemporary heresy is the one which introduces itself in the committed and generous form of those who live their lives, professions and faith as asceticism and commitment: neo-Pelagianism.

This, in addition to risking a judgmental attitude towards those who are less capable of exerting their will, reinforces the spirituality of the autonomous individual who saves himself, already so akin to the culture of merit. The Word, on the other hand, proclaims that every good first fruit must be recognized as grace, because ‘*my father was a wandering Aramean*’ (Deut 26:5), and if I have fruit from a land on which to labour, I must recognize that he, the nomad, was no worse than me because he did not have any, but rather it is thanks to him and to God that I now have a basket of first fruits in my hand. If neo-Pelagianism intoxicates us with the presumption of well-being and salvation earned by our own efforts, the liturgy shifts our consciousness to another economy:

the liturgical celebration purifies us, proclaiming the gratuity of the gift of salvation received in faith. Participating in the Eucharistic sacrifice is not our own achievement, as if because of it we could boast before God or before our brothers and sisters. The beginning of every celebration reminds me who I am, asking me to confess my sin and inviting me to implore the Blessed Mary ever virgin, the angels and saints and all my brothers and sisters to pray for me to the Lord our God. Certainly, we are not worthy to enter his house; we need a word of his to be saved. (cf. Ma 8:8) We have no other boast but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. (cf. Gal 6:14) The Liturgy has nothing to do with an ascetical moralism. It is the gift of the Paschal Mystery of the Lord which, received with docility, makes our life new. The cenacle is not entered except through the power of attraction of his desire to eat the Passover with us: Desiderio desideravi hoc Pascha manducare vobiscum, antequam patiar (Lk 22:15) (DD 20).

Here too, there is an objective reality that comes to meet me, without contesting my uniqueness, but removing it from isolation. There is a desire that is not mine that precedes my acceptance, however generous it may be. And even my shortcomings do not give rise to that anxiety about performance that so much poisons the best of us today. We can finally strip ourselves of these burdensome habits in order to welcome

‘the wedding garment of faith which comes from the hearing of his Word (cf. Ro 10:17). The Church tailors such a garment to fit each one with the whiteness of a garment bathed in the blood of the Lamb. (Re 7:14)’ (DD 5).

For group sharing:

- What can I recognise in myself of the spiritual illness that makes my reasons and feelings seem so indispensable?
- In my rigidity, can I recognise what makes faith an effort of will and prevents me from marvelling at the gift of grace?
- How can we cultivate an attitude of wonder before the mystery? what gestures, rituals, words, and attitudes does the liturgy invite us to practice with?

Liturgical formation

We need serious and vital liturgical formation

If our ecclesial energies cease to be scattered in a sterile contestation of liturgical reform or in hasty and crude practices it has too often been trivialized in, then it becomes clear that we have a crucial mission before us: *‘how can we grow in our capacity to live in full the liturgical action? How do we continue to let ourselves be amazed at what happens in the celebration under our very eyes?’*. Francis responds clearly: *‘We are in need of a serious and dynamic liturgical formation’* (DD 31). The Council was extremely explicit on this point, proposing not only the need for reform of the rites but also a serious program of

liturgical formation. At the same time as affirming this, the Church confesses that liturgy will never function on its own, but structurally needs patient work capable of initiating and forming us in it. When we speak of liturgical formation, it must be very clear that we do not mean the need to provide the minimum amount of information sufficient to understand what will then be experienced in the rite. The challenge is much broader and cannot be exhausted in the useful work of culture alone.

Therefore, 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. (DD 27).

Tornare ad esser capace di simboli

At the beginning of the 20th century, Romano Guardini – the most quoted author and true spiritual father of this apostolic letter – lamented how modern man had become illiterate with regard to the symbolic depth of reality and rituals. A century later, we can echo the warnings of this priest, who was passionate about pedagogy and came to study and work in liturgy precisely because he realised that only through a new liturgical literacy we could help educating young people in the faith. Guardini's research is still useful to us today: while postmodernism has certainly not solved this problem, we can affirm, as Francis does, that the fragmentation of meaningful discourse has actually worsened.

This raises the crucial question of liturgical formation. Guardini says: 'Thus, the first practical task is also outlined: supported by this inner transformation of our time, we must learn anew to approach the religious relationship as human beings in the full sense of the word'. This is what the Liturgy makes possible, and this is what we must train ourselves to

do. Guardini himself does not hesitate to say that without liturgical formation, 'reforms in ritual and text do not help much'.

Formation in the liturgy

For Guardini, it is clear: the symbolic is fundamental to be truly human. Only in this way can we return to the sensitivity of those who, like St Francis, can see behind an element of creation all its gratuitousness, which is never to be taken for granted and which recalls the grace of the gift of life and of being. Or to be able to look at food with the depth of those who glimpse the miracle of its goodness. Or to perceive the human body in the symbolic depth that preserves its mystery.

We no longer have the gaze of St. Francis, who looked at the sun — which he called brother because so he felt it to be — and saw it beautiful and radiant with great splendour, and, full of wonder, he sang that it bears a likeness of You, Most High One. To have lost the capacity to grasp the symbolic value of the body and of every creature renders the symbolic language of the Liturgy almost inaccessible to the modern mentality. And yet there can be no question of renouncing such language. It cannot be renounced because it is how the Holy Trinity chose to reach us through the flesh of the Word. It is rather a question of recovering the capacity to use and understand the symbols of the Liturgy. We must not lose hope because this dimension in us, as I have just said, is constitutive; and despite the evils of materialism and spiritualism — both of them negations of the unity of soul and body — it is always ready to re-emerge, as is every truth. (DD 44).

'Liturgy is not about knowledge, but about reality,' wrote Guardini in *Liturgical Formation* in 1923: it is not about learning something, but about being in the world without reduction. To achieve this ability, a demanding task begins, starting with the serious study of liturgy and not neglecting the delicate mediation of what has been unveiled to everyone. But liturgical formation, as we have seen many times, is not

a matter of courses or academia, but of ordinary celebratory action. Rather than schools, Francis places his trust in concrete communities:

I think of the regular rhythm of our assemblies that come together to celebrate the Eucharist on the Lord's Day, Sunday after Sunday, Easter after Easter, at particular moments in the life of each single person and of the communities, in all the different ages of life. Ordained ministers carry out a pastoral action of the first importance when they take the baptized faithful by the hand to lead them into the repeated experience of the Paschal Mystery. Let us always remember that it is the Church, the Body of Christ, that is the celebrating subject and not just the priest. The kind of knowledge that comes from study is just the first step to be able to enter into the mystery celebrated. Obviously, to be able to lead their brothers and sisters, the ministers who preside in the assembly must know the way, know it from having studied it on the map of their theological studies but also from having frequented the liturgy in actual practice of an experience of living faith, nourished by prayer — and certainly not just as an obligation to be fulfilled. On the day of his ordination every priest hears the bishop say to him: "Understand what you will do, imitate what you will celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross." (DD 36).

It is essential that ordained ministers have had a solid liturgical formation during their years of preparation, but this is not enough. It will require the humility of those who, throughout their lives and for the love of God and their community, continue to form themselves and cultivate wonder. But this is only the first meaning of liturgical formation and, perhaps, also the most practised.

Formation from liturgy

When, on the other hand, we place our trust in the celebration, we allow ourselves to be caught up in its rhythm and enter into its symbolic action, then the various Christian rites can finally express their nature, which effectively transforms those present into the Mystical Body of Christ.

This existential engagement happens — in continuity with and consistent with the method of Incarnation — in a sacramental way. The Liturgy is done with things that are the exact opposite of spiritual abstractions: bread, wine, oil, water, fragrances, fire, ashes, rock, fabrics, colours, body, words, sounds, silences, gestures, space, movement, action, order, time, light. The whole of creation is a manifestation of the love of God, and from when that same love was manifested in its fullness in the cross of Jesus, all of creation was drawn toward it. It is the whole of creation that is assumed in order to be placed at the service of encounter with the Word: incarnate, crucified, dead, risen, ascended to the Father. It is as the prayer over the water at the baptismal font sings, but also the prayer over the oil for sacred chrism and the words for the presentation of the bread and wine — all fruit of the earth and work of human hands. (DD 42).

This would be the mature point the reform of the rites and of the Church imagined by the Council can reach. Celebrating means retracing the path of the Incarnation and learning grace from the concrete things we involve in the rite. Having relearned the enchantment of blessed creation, we will be led to see the symbolic depth of our own body, leaving behind the contemporary excesses that make it an idol that should always remain young or an object to be exploited, as if it were not the temple of the Spirit. *‘The fact is that value cannot be given to the body starting only from the body itself. Every symbol is at the same time both powerful and fragile. If it is not respected, if it is not treated for what it is, it shatters, loses its force, becomes insignificant’*(DD 44). Only a long and patient practice of the act of faith offered to the little ones and celebrated restores the ability to look at everything with the necessary enchantment. But there comes a time when the liturgy is adopted:

A From that moment forward that gesture, its symbolic force, is ours, it belongs to us; or better said, we belong to it. It gives us form. We are formed by it. Not many discourses are needed here. It is not necessary to

have understood everything in that gesture. What is needed is being small, both in consigning it and in receiving it. The rest is the work of the Spirit. In this way we are initiated into symbolic language. We cannot let ourselves be robbed of such richness. Growing up we will have more ways of being able to understand, but always on the condition of remaining little ones. (DD 47)

The art of celebrating and liberating discipline

The outcome of liturgical formation is the practice of the art of celebration. Like any art, this too requires serious study, which is necessary but not sufficient. It is also a form of listening to the Spirit at work in every celebration: it is sensitivity to His delicate inspiration that frees us from any unacceptable subjectivism or act of cultural abuse – which has nothing to do with inculturation. For this reason, *the ars celebrandi* excludes all improvisation and manipulation. It is more a matter of being possessed by the rite than of possessing it:

Like every art, it requires consistent application. For an artisan, technique is enough. But for an artist, in addition to technical knowledge, there has also to be inspiration, which is a positive form of possession. The true artist does not possess an art but rather is possessed by it. One does not learn the art of celebrating by frequenting a course in public speaking or in persuasive techniques of communication. (I am not judging intentions, just observing effects.) Every tool can be useful, but it must be at the service of the nature of the Liturgy and the action of the Holy Spirit. A diligent dedication to the celebration is required, allowing the celebration itself to convey to us its art. (DD 50)

It is clear that the attitude of the ordained ministers will be decisive in this sense, but it is the entire celebrating assembly that becomes capable of this artistic inspiration. When the gathered community knows how to come together, walk together, listen in silence, acclaim in unity, and sing, it does not mortify diversity, but educates us to

discover the taste for unity and communion. The effect is not the acquisition of liturgical etiquette, but of a sublime discipline which, in the sense in which Guardini speaks of, brings order to our inner world and knows how to involve the personal and communal body in its entirety. Francis devotes special attention to some significant and subtle liturgical gestures: silence (DD 52) and kneeling (DD 53). At the various moments when it is required by the rite, silence is not a moment in which everyone takes refuge in their private interiority, but on the contrary, it is the culmination of all the ritual tension because it is the symbol of how the Holy Spirit speaks to us and shapes us together. Kneeling also has its own art: we bow our pride before the Merciful One, we beg Him to intervene, we thank Him for what we have received, we adore Him. The gesture is both physical and interior. Finally, very strong words are addressed to priests to numbers 54-60 who influence "for better or for worse" the way in which communities experience the celebration. Francis asks with refined severity that the time, which has already lasted too long, of inappropriate and exasperated attitudes of celebratory personalism, which reveal an unhealthy craving for protagonism, should come to an end. There is no need to publish further directives or canonical censures: the minister will change only when he recovers the sacramental delicacy of his role.

The highest norm, and therefore the most demanding, is the reality itself of the Eucharistic celebration, which selects words, gestures, feelings that will make us understand whether or not our use of these are at the level of the reality they serve. It is obvious that this cannot be improvised. It is an art. It requires application on the part of the priest, an assiduous tending to the fire of the love of the Lord that he came to ignite on the earth. (DD 57)

If the priest is formed by this wonder, then he will not preside as if sitting on a throne, he will not steal the centrality of the altar, he will modulate his voice with refinement according to the texts he proclaims or sings.

For group sharing:

- Let us read numbers 48-60 of DD together. Let us examine together: what are the strengths of our community's way of celebrating?
- I will try to discern a clear and achievable goal on which I could personally further develop my art of celebration.

Conclusion and invitation

Pope Francis' *Desiderio desideravi* represents a unique in liturgical teaching. The serenity of the text hints at the gravity of the moment, but chooses to place trust in the spirituality of all God's people. We are offered a *unique* text which, through accessible and encouraging language, aims to renew active and conscious participation in the liturgy, overcoming sterile controversies and promoting a Church on the journey towards the Kingdom.

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INVITATION TO READ
THE APOSTOLIC LETTER
ON THE LITURGICAL FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

DESIDERIO DESIDERAVI

The freshness of the liturgy

... If the resurrection were for us a concept, an idea, a thought; if the Risen One were for us the recollection of the recollection of others, however authoritative, as, for example, of the Apostles; if there were not given also to us the possibility of a true encounter with Him, that would be to declare the newness of the Word made flesh to have been all used up. Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist.

The Liturgy guarantees for us the possibility of such an encounter.

Desiderio desideravi, 10-11