

**THE CHRISTOCENTRIC ORIENTATION OF THE LITURGY IN  
JOSEPH RATZINGER/BENEDICT XVI**

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**Abstract**

*This article, which is necessitated by the recurrent liturgical anomalies noticed in recent times among some of our priests and worshipping communities, probes the theological and pastoral implications of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's liturgical vision in addressing these liturgical abuses. Through an examination of Ratzinger's emphasis on the Christocentric orientation of the liturgy, this study excavates the ontological and ecclesiological dimensions of the liturgy. The work argues that, grounded on the understanding of the Eucharist as the source and summit of ecclesial life, Ratzinger's liturgical vision challenges reductionist tendencies and cultural accommodations that compromise the liturgy's sacred character. It calls for a renewed catechesis, liturgical formation and Eucharistic devotion as crucial for reclaiming the liturgy's Christocentric essence.*

**Keywords:** Church, Liturgy, Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, Christ, Faith

**1. Introduction**

On the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary last year, 15 August 2024, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) issued a statement in which they unequivocally condemned the rising cases of liturgical abuses in some of our churches. In the said statement, they used strong words to address the priests who celebrate these most sacred mysteries, reminding them that they are

...entrusted with the most sacred responsibility of celebrating the mysteries of our faith. This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly, nor is it one that allows for personal interpretation.... Abuses and deviations from the prescribed form are not only unacceptable but are a grave disservice to the faithful in the Church.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the bishops also had some words for themselves:

To our bishops, the chief liturgists of their dioceses, we issue a solemn charge: Take immediate and decisive action to correct these abuses. The

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<sup>2</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), Statement, 'On Abuses during Liturgical Celebrations,' 15 August 2024, no. 5. On-the-Abuse-of-the-Sacred-Liturgy.pdf (nigeriacatholicnetwork.com). Retrieved 10/01/2025.

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faithful look to you for leadership, and it is your sacred duty to ensure that the liturgy in your diocese is conducted with the dignity and reverence it demands.<sup>3</sup>

In response to this plea by the CBCN, a few dioceses in the country have organized seminars, refresher courses, conferences and/or workshops on the liturgy for their priests. However, the number of dioceses that have not done so outnumber those that have taken these initiatives by a yawning margin. While this is something that calls for serious attention, I do not want to be drawn into it at the moment.

When one reads the words from our bishops, one is immediately struck with a thought: The celebrations of the liturgy in our dioceses have entered into a crisis phase and our leaders have recognized it in time to declare ‘a state of emergency’ on liturgical celebrations in order to restore the dignity and sanctity of worship. Their words not only re-echo what every priest had learned at the very early stages of his theological formation about how the Church’s life revolves around the Eucharist, ‘the Font and Summit of Christian life’,<sup>4</sup> but also manifest their deep concern for the sanctity and reverence due to the most important gift that Christ left his Church – the gift of himself in the Holy Eucharist.

At the basic level, our faith and all that it means to be Christian revolves around the sacred mysteries of Christ made present and effective in the Holy Eucharist and celebrated for all ages by his Church. In fact, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls the words of the second-century saintly Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus (c.120/140–c.200/203) in which he expressed that the Eucharist is the summary of what the Church believes and teaches: ‘Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking.’<sup>5</sup> What this means is that once the liturgical celebration enters into crisis, the Church itself is headed for crisis since the vivifying force of her existence has become threatened. This seems to me the summary of what the bishops mean. Is this affirmation novel? By no means. The relationship between liturgical crisis and ecclesial crisis had already been recognized by no less a figure than one of the best Church theologians of the last two centuries and possibly the greatest theologian to ever become pope, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI (1927-2022).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> CBCN, Statement, ‘On Abuses during Liturgical Celebrations,’ 4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324; hereafter, CCC. All quotations from the CCC used in this work are from the official version found in the Vatican website: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P3X.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P3X.HTM). Retrieved 11/01/2025.

<sup>5</sup> CCC, 1327; see IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adversus haereses*, Book 4, Chapter 18, no. 5: *Patrologia Graeca* 7/1, 1028.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, trans. E. LEIVA-MERIKAKIS (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998) 20.

Therefore, our task in this essay is to explore how Ratzinger's vision can be applied to the present context. Our reflection on the liturgical theology of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI will lead us to see the strong point in the affirmation of the Nigerian bishops that the liturgy is neither 'a private ground for personal innovation' nor 'a platform for the self-expression of the celebrant'<sup>7</sup> – an idea that Ratzinger had expressed years ago in his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: 'But real liturgy implies that God responds and reveals how we can worship him. In any form, liturgy includes some kind of 'institution'. It cannot spring from our imagination, our own creativity – then it would remain just a cry in the dark or mere self-affirmation.'<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's Liturgical Theology: The Christocentric Approach**

### **Ratzinger's Early Love for the Liturgy**

Joseph Ratzinger was born in Markl am Inn in the Bavarian suburbs of Germany, on Holy Saturday, 16 April 1927, and was baptized on the same day. He manifested from the very beginning an attachment of the liturgy that endured all through his life. His fascination with the liturgical celebration as well as the immersion of his closely-knit family life in the liturgical life of the local parish only served to deepen this love. In fact, Ratzinger would later credit this early influence for his theological development and general vision of life:

Naturally, the child I then was did not grasp every aspect of this, but I started down the road of the liturgy, and this became a continuous process of growth into the grand reality transcending all particular individuals and generations, a reality that became an occasion for me of ever-new amazement and discovery. The inexhaustible reality of the Catholic liturgy has accompanied me through all the phases of life, and so I shall have to speak of it time and again.<sup>9</sup>

This pattern is found frequently in his other book-length interviews in which he responds to questions about his early childhood and influences. For instance, in *Last Testament*, when asked about what drew him the most to the priesthood, he responds unequivocally: 'I would say it was my entering ever more deeply into the

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<sup>7</sup> CBCN, Statement, 'On Abuses during Liturgical Celebrations,' 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) 22. See also p. 168 where he reiterates that 'creativity' is not the authentic principle for the liturgy, and that no liturgical 'rite' that is 'manufactured' by the celebrants or participating communities is capable of allowing us penetrate the deep mysteries that are being celebrated.

<sup>9</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Milestones*, 20.

liturgy. Genuinely to recognize liturgy as the central point and seeking to understand it, together with the whole historical tapestry standing behind it.<sup>10</sup>

Convinced of this truth, Ratzinger published his *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in 2000. In it, he notes that his idea of the book was based on Romano Guardini's own book with the same title. Guardini's 1918 *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, for Ratzinger, was 'a source book' and 'decisive text' that 'helped us to rediscover the liturgy in all its beauty, hidden wealth, and time-transcending grandeur, to see it as the animating center [sic] of the Church, the very center [sic] of Christian life.'<sup>11</sup> His love for the liturgy and his preoccupation with the banalization of the liturgy by some celebrants and supposed experts of the liturgy would lead the theologian to insist that ecclesial ruptures and misadventures we notice in our time are undoubtedly caused by the disintegration of the liturgy and the poor celebration of the mystery of Christ. In his autobiography published in 1997 as *Aus meinem Leben Erinnerungen 1927-1977* (later translated into English and published in 1998 by the Ignatius Press as *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*), Ratzinger notes:

When the liturgy is self-made, however, then it can no longer give us what its proper gift should be: the encounter with the mystery that is not a product but rather our origin and the source of our life. A renewal of liturgical awareness, a liturgical reconciliation that again recognizes the unity of the history of the liturgy and that understands Vatican II, not as a breach, but as a stage of development: these things are urgently needed for the life of Church. *I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy*, which at times has even come to be conceived of *etsi Deus non daretur* [as if God does not exist], in that it is a matter of indifference whether or not God exists and whether or not he speaks to us and hears us. But when the community of faith, the worldwide unity of the Church and her history, and the mystery of the living Christ are no longer visible in the liturgy, where else, then, is the Church to become visible in her spiritual essence? Then the community is celebrating only itself, an activity that is utterly fruitless.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> BENEDICT XVI (With P. SEEWALD), *Last Testament: In his own Words*, trans. J. PHILIPS (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 55.

<sup>11</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 148-149. Words in italics are for emphasis.

These words by Ratzinger can serve as a fitting preface to our discussion, not only because they offer us the needed perspectives to understand the nature of the crisis that the Nigerian bishops have on their hands and which they will have to confront headlong, but even more because they are a prophetic reminder of how the Church is intrinsically linked with, and driven by, the Eucharist. They help us to see how each of them – the Church and the Eucharist – acts as a form of reciprocal guarantee for the other so much so that an affront on one has its ripple effects on the other. Ratzinger had understood from the early days of his theological scholarship that to understand the nature of the Church best, one had to first understand what the liturgy is and live its mystery. Without attention to the liturgy and proper care for its correct celebration, it is impossible for one to come to appreciate the very mystery of the Church, the mystery that is the Church. There was no doubt in Ratzinger's mind that the question of right worship was at the centre of ecclesial renewal and stability. Paying attention to the liturgy – both in its exterior and interior dimensions – was, for him, the primal context for understanding the crisis that the Church faced in the world.

### **Christ is at the Centre**

As with his theology as a whole, Ratzinger offers a liturgical theology deeply rooted in the centrality of Christ. His theological trajectory always begins from Christocentrism in which he presents Christ as God acting in history and as the end toward which all of humankind's history moves. The highpoint of Ratzinger's theology – whether it is anthropology or liturgy, and everything in between both poles – points to the awareness that Jesus Christ is central to everything and is the yardstick for measuring what is authentically human as well as the window to divinity. This point is especially true of his theology of the liturgy.

With impetus from the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council and their Christocentric approach to the liturgy in which they taught that the liturgy is related to Christ and finds meaning in him,<sup>13</sup> Ratzinger insists that communion with God is the primary reason for human existence. However, this communion begins, and is most manifest, in the celebration of the liturgy which unites us with Christ and the mystery of his Passion/Death, Resurrection and Second Coming, which together form the trilogy of the mystery of our faith, our creedal formula and the framework for, as well as the essential content of, the Christian faith. It is this primacy of the liturgy that roots theology, and indeed every aspect of human existence, in their proper perspective. Ratzinger says this much in the 'Preface' to the volume of his *Collected Works* devoted to the liturgy, where he reflects on the centrality of the *Logos* made flesh, Jesus Christ, who is encountered most concretely in the liturgical celebration. It was already clear in his mind that the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7; hereafter SC.

liturgy had to be anchored 'in the foundational act of our faith' and its significance 'in the whole of human existence.'<sup>14</sup> Explaining why this is his reason for requesting that his works on the liturgy be published first and how this was also decisive in the decision of the Vatican Council II Fathers to publish their work on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), first before all others, Ratzinger insists that:

What may superficially appear to be an accident proved, in view of the hierarchy of the themes and duties of the Church, to be intrinsically the right thing also. By starting with the theme of liturgy, God's primacy, the absolute precedence of the theme of God, was unmistakably highlighted. Beginning with the liturgy tells us: 'God first.' When the focus of God is not decisive, everything else loses its orientation.<sup>15</sup>

Many years earlier, in January 1963, at a lecture he gave in Bonn, the young theologian Ratzinger expressed his satisfaction with how the Second Vatican Council discussed liturgical reform. For him, all that the Council did with the liturgy was in recognition of its centrality in the life of the Church. In his mind, the decision of the Council to give precedence to the topic of the liturgy and its ultimate vote to promulgate the document as the first of the sixteen documents that emanated from the Council was not only fitting but also symbolic. It showed that even the Fathers of the Council – in spite of some of the divisiveness that characterized the sessions and discussions on the other schemas – recognized one thing: That the true nature of the Church can only be understood in the light of the liturgy, in the light of the celebration of the mystery of her Founder, Jesus the Lord. According to Ratzinger:

It was a public avowal of where the true centre of the Church lies – in her espousal, ever young, to her Lord, which finds its completion in the mystery of the Eucharist and in which by partaking in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ she fulfils her most intimate mission – the adoration of the triune God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> BENEDICT XVI, 'Preface,' in J. RATZINGER, *Theology of the Liturgy: The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence*, ed. Michael J. MILLER, trans. John SAWARD, Kenneth BAKER, S.J., Henry TAYLOR, et al., 'Collected Works 11' (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), xvi. Going forward, any further reference to this volume of Ratzinger's *Collected Works* will be referenced thus: *JRCW XI*, with the corresponding page number being cited.

<sup>15</sup> BENEDICT XVI, 'Preface,' in J. RATZINGER, *Theology of the Liturgy*, *JRCW XI*, xv.

<sup>16</sup> J. RATZINGER, 'The First Session,' *Worship* 37/8 (August-September 1963) 529-35, at 531.

Never mind that a few years later, Ratzinger would react differently to what happened at the Council, signalling that the liturgical reforms that the Council urged became quickly hijacked and misunderstood. In the end, according to him, what was conceived as a genuine call for a true liturgical reform based on a hermeneutic continuity and reform became one pursued based on a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture. While the former understands the Council as pursuing reforms and developments in keeping with Catholic Tradition and teaching, the latter – which Ratzinger/Benedict XVI rejects – approaches the reforms called for by the Council as a clean break with the past and the traditional doctrine and practice of the Church. This, to say the very least, was a primary cause of preoccupation for Benedict throughout his pontificate. As a theologian, he had explained that though the liturgy ought to bring about conversion and, in the end, bring about a new wellspring in the Church in which the Church grows, ‘liturgical reform cannot be measured by whether it has increased the numbers of churchgoers but simply and solely by whether it conforms to the essential nature of Christian worship as such.’<sup>17</sup>

In 1975, Ratzinger - who, two years later, would be appointed Archbishop of Munich - wrote a very strong-worded article in which he condemned what he described as ‘rationalistic relativism’, ‘confusing claptrap’ and ‘pastoral infantilism’, explaining that these phenomena ‘degrade the liturgy to the level of a parish tea party and the intelligibility of a popular newspaper.’<sup>18</sup> And, in 1981, in a book written as a collection of some of his papers on the liturgy, he would insist: ‘Only if man, every man, stands before the face of God and is answerable to him, can man be sure of his dignity as a human being. Concern for the proper form of worship, therefore, is not peripheral but central to our concern for man himself.’<sup>19</sup>

What we have said so far proves two major points. The first is that Christ – through who God has revealed himself to humanity - has to be at the centre of a true and authentic liturgical theology and celebration; and, second, the liturgy has to maintain its primacy, not only in the life of the Church, but also in the individual lives of all believers. As Ratzinger himself highlights: ‘The liturgy is not about us, but about God. Forgetting about God is the most imminent danger of our age. As against this, the liturgy should be setting up a sign of God’s presence.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J. RATZINGER, ‘Catholicism after the Council,’ *The Furrow* 18/1 (January 1967) 2-23, at 6.

<sup>18</sup> J. RATZINGER, ‘Thesen zum Thema ‘Zehn Jahre Vaticanum II’’ in J. RATZINGER, *Gesammelte Schriften VII/2: Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012) 1060-1063.

<sup>19</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 7.

<sup>20</sup> J. RATZINGER, ‘The Organic Development of the Liturgy,’ *JRCW* XI, 593.

While *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* – as we had already noted at the beginning – unequivocally states that, ‘the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life,’ Ratzinger’s interpretation of this truth is that the Church is what she is because she is inextricably tied to Christ’s dual role as Priest and Victim. The Eucharist, therefore, is not merely a commemorative meal but the sacramental re-presentation of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice on Calvary. He identifies the liturgy as the presence of the Paschal Mystery in our midst, one in which because ‘the body of Christ is sacrificed and precisely sacrificed as living,’ the Mass is the vantage point in which ‘Christ communicates himself to us and thus brings us into a real bond with God.’<sup>21</sup>

### **The Liturgy is a Sacrifice of Christ and with Christ**

Another important aspect of Ratzinger’s liturgical Christocentrism is the Eucharist’s sacrificial nature. In his *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Benedict emphasizes that Christ’s priesthood and his self-offering are definitive and eternal. As the ‘true paschal lamb’ that gave himself as a sacrifice for humanity, Christ ‘brought about the new and eternal covenant’ in such a way that each time the Holy Mass is celebrated there is a radical newness of this same sacrifice that does not make less effective the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, but makes it present and contemporary to us.<sup>22</sup> His sacrifice on the Cross, present in the Eucharist and in the celebration with Christ as Priest, does not repeat but rather participates in the eternal reality that it presents. This theological perspective – which has always been at the heart of the Church’s understanding of the Eucharist as well as the framework for her sacramental life – underscores the timeless dimension of the Eucharistic sacrifice, in which the Church enters into the very act of Christ’s self-giving. In this way, because it is a sacrifice in which Christ is at the centre and also actualizes, the Eucharist’s sacramental dimension fosters an intimate communion with Christ and his body, the Church. Ratzinger articulates this as a participation in the divine life: The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving.<sup>23</sup>

This transformative encounter challenges modern tendencies to reduce the Eucharist to mere symbolism or communal fellowship. The Eucharist and its celebration cannot be conceived in terms of communitarianism nor can it be viewed only in the context of a meal between friends or people convened and bound by similar interests. Instead, because ‘it has cost a death to provide it, and the majesty

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<sup>21</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 70.



of death is present in it', it is a mystery that cannot be subjected to the caprices of individual wants or the whims of private desires.<sup>24</sup> If this were to be the case, what we would be left with would not be the same Eucharist that Christ left behind for his Church, but a feast that remains at the superficial level, 'a mere entertainment to anaesthetize oneself.'<sup>25</sup> Ratzinger insists on its divine initiative: The Eucharist is a sacrifice, the presentation of Jesus' Christ sacrifice on the Cross. In 2006, during his homily at the Mass with the members of the Bishops' Conference of Switzerland in the Redemptoris Mater chapel, Benedict XVI would again highlight the centrality of the Cross as the font of the Eucharist, for which reason it is sufficient and capable of satisfying all our needs: 'It is the universal Eucharist that derives from the Cross. God now satisfies man throughout the world, the poor who are in need of him. He gives them the satiety they need: he gives God, he gives himself.'<sup>26</sup> For Benedict, it is the act of God's self-giving love in Christ that incorporates the faithful into the Trinitarian life. This divine initiative is indispensable for understanding the Eucharist as both sacrifice and sacrament.

### **3. The Liturgy as Mystery vis-à-vis its Character as an Organic Reality**

In 2004, Joseph Ratzinger contributed a 'Preface' to a book written by the Australian liturgist, Alcuin Reid.<sup>27</sup> In it, Ratzinger insists that the liturgy is an organic and living entity that evolves over time. The liturgy is never static, but remains a dynamic expression of the Church's faith. Yet this dynamism and organic development does not mean that the liturgy is essentially fluid. For Ratzinger, Tradition is significant in shaping the liturgy just as the liturgy is also a significant element of Tradition.<sup>28</sup> Hence, approaches that seek a radical discontinuity or rupture with the past as well as reform efforts that proceed on a distorted notion that 'everything is else [besides the sacrament's matter and form]

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<sup>24</sup> J. RATZINGER, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, trans. H. TAYLOR (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003) 44.

<sup>25</sup> J. RATZINGER, *God is Near Us*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily, Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Holy Mass with the members of the Bishops' Conference of Switzerland, Tuesday, 7 November 2006. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20061107\\_swiss-bishops.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061107_swiss-bishops.html). Retrieved 10 Jan. 2025.

<sup>27</sup> This work was published as REID, A., *The Organic Development of the Liturgy: The Principles of Liturgical Reform and Their Relation to the Twentieth-Century Liturgical Movement Prior to the Second Vatican Council*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005). See RATZINGER, 'The Organic Development of the Liturgy,' in *JRCW XI*, 589-594. For easy accessibility, we shall quote from this source rather than from Reid's work itself.

<sup>28</sup> Yves Congar also makes this point in *La Tradition et la vie de l'Église* (Paris: Fayard, 1963) 97-115; also, in *La Traditions en les traditions*, II: *Essai théologique* (Paris: Fayard, 1963) 117-123, 183-191. For a synthetic study on this, see J. TE VELDE, 'Congar on Liturgy as a Monument of Tradition,' *Questions liturgiques* 95 (2014) 194-215.

is freely disposable' in the liturgy are false interpretations of the Liturgical Movement and Vatican II's reform.<sup>29</sup> Ratzinger's argument is that the proper hermeneutic for interpreting Vatican II is one of 'continuity and reform' – rather than a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture' – which recognizes the continuity between the Church's past and present liturgical practices. This interpretation includes the 'awareness of an objective liturgical tradition and therefore take care to ensure a substantial continuity.'<sup>30</sup> This 'substantial unity' is one that is hinged on Christocentrism rather than on 'the anthropocentric turn of modern times': The leaning towards an anthropocentrism that replaces the liturgy's proper Christocentric (and, invariably, Theocentric) orientation.<sup>31</sup> Ratzinger's point is that if we make the liturgy 'the workshop for our activity then what is essential has been forgotten: God.'<sup>32</sup> His views on the centrality of Christ in the liturgy are derived from his conviction that the sacrificial character of the liturgy is more essential than its liturgical and sacramental character which has often been the more emphasized aspect, especially after the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Based on this, he insists that any meaningful liturgical reform has to proceed, not on the anthropocentric considerations in which the sensibilities and 'worship experience' of the participants take precedence, but on the awareness that the essence of the liturgy is to be found in the focus on Christ, the One who died and rose again from the dead for our salvation, and what this singular truth means for Christian worship, a worship that is consistent with the *Logos*. Ratzinger's critique of anthropocentric trends in modern liturgy derives from the risk of diminishing the divine mystery when human creativity is prioritized over the Mystery of Christ being celebrated.

For the German theologian, the liturgy is a living, organic reality; as such, it always carries within it the possibility of development and growth. yet this is not to say that such growth and development must tear apart the very foundation upon which it is built nor does it imply a disregard for the historical roots from which it came. Organic development means quite the opposite: Enhancing its deeper meaning and nature through an organized and systematic reform of its structures while retaining its essential elements. Development in the liturgy means that though the human elements in the liturgy have the possibility to evolve over time – as indeed they

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<sup>29</sup> J. RATZINGER, 'The Organic Development of the Liturgy,' 591-592. For some analysis of Ratzinger's liturgical vision, see N. BUX, *Benedict XVI's Reform: The Liturgy Between Innovation and Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012); M. BILINIEWICZ, *The Liturgical Vision of Pope Benedict XVI. A Theological Inquiry* (Bern: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2013); M. BILINIEWICZ, 'Inner Dynamics of Divine Worship: Joseph Ratzinger on Liturgical Development,' *Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny* 22/1 (2014) 21-36.

<sup>30</sup> J. RATZINGER, 'The Organic Development of the Liturgy,' 590.

<sup>31</sup> J. RATZINGER, 'The Organic Development of the Liturgy,' 593.

<sup>32</sup> J. RATZINGER, 'The Organic Development of the Liturgy,' 593-594.

should, in keeping with new realities and the needs of the Church – while keeping in mind the limits of such evolution, no matter how appealing innovations may sometimes be. In any case, legitimate authority is required for such, and Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical *Mediator Dei*, tells who the competent authority in liturgical matters is:

It follows from this that the Sovereign Pontiff alone enjoys the right to recognize and establish any practice touching the worship of God, to introduce and approve new rites, as also to modify those he judges to require modification. Bishops, for their part, have the right and duty carefully to watch over the exact observance of the prescriptions of the sacred canons respecting divine worship.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the same magisterial teaching outlines precisely those who do not constitute this body of ‘competent authority’ in liturgical matters and thus neither enjoy the right to make any alterations nor to introduce novelties into the liturgical celebration:

*Private individuals, therefore, even though they be clerics, may not be left to decide for themselves in these holy and venerable matters, involving as they do the religious life of Christian society along with the exercise of the priesthood of Jesus Christ and worship of God; concerned as they are with the honor due to the Blessed Trinity, the Word Incarnate and His august mother and the other saints, and with the salvation of souls as well. For the same reason no private person has any authority to regulate external practices of this kind, which are intimately bound up with Church discipline and with the order, unity and concord of the Mystical Body and frequently even with the integrity of Catholic faith itself.*<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, while legitimate authority is needed for all evolutionary changes in the liturgy, we must not ignore the point that authority by itself, even if it be legitimate, does not immediately translate into legitimacy in liturgical changes. Reforms that proceed purely on the basis of preferences, ideologies or personal opinions cannot be legitimate even if they come from legitimate authority, except they are in keeping with the Church’s living Tradition. This is why it is important that those who exercise such authority in the Church be weary of introducing innovations solely based on the authority that they possess. Even worse would be

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<sup>33</sup> Pius XII, Encyclical Letter, On the Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei* (20 November 1947), 58: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 39 (1947) 521-600. See also, *The Code of Canon Law*, cann. 1257 and 1261.

<sup>34</sup> Pius XII, Encyclical Letter, On the Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, 58. Words in italics for emphasis.

the case of those who attempt such innovations while lacking the competence to do so. Pius XII, while acknowledging the organic development of the liturgy, does not fail to draw attention to the great harm that is done to the Church when strange practices are introduced into the liturgy in the name of creativity and modernity:

The Church is without question a living organism, and as an organism, in respect of the sacred liturgy also, she grows, matures, develops, adapts and accommodates herself to temporal needs and circumstances, provided only that the integrity of her doctrine be safeguarded. This notwithstanding, the temerity and daring of those who introduce novel liturgical practices, or call for the revival of obsolete rites out of harmony with prevailing laws and rubrics, deserve severe reproof. It has pained Us grievously to note, Venerable Brethren, that such innovations are actually being introduced, not merely in minor details but in matters of major importance as well.<sup>35</sup>

Ratzinger himself would take up this burning issue in his *The Spirit of the Liturgy* in which, citing the great Austrian Jesuit liturgist Josef Andreas Jungman, he explains that the liturgy in the West, far from being ‘a specially contrived production’, experiences an ‘organic growth’, and that its ‘laws of growth determine the possibilities of further development.’<sup>36</sup> Yet this ‘further development’ cannot be an arbitrary act of anyone, not even the pope – whom Ratzinger writes that not even Vatican I (with its promulgation of papal infallibility and primacy) had ‘defined the pope as an absolute monarch.’<sup>37</sup> ‘On the contrary,’ Ratzinger continues, ‘it [Vatican I Council] presented him as the guarantor of obedience to the revealed Word. The pope’s authority is bound to the Tradition of faith, and that also applies to the liturgy.’<sup>38</sup> The question of the liturgy, being at the core of what the Church is and what she is called to teach, ought to be a product of ‘lawful development and abiding integrity and identity.’ For this reason, the Bavarian theologian – who later, as pope, would work to demonstrate the centrality of the liturgy and the real meaning of liturgical reform – explains that ‘the authority of the pope [even on liturgical matters] is not unlimited.’<sup>39</sup> If, as Ratzinger rightly claims, not even the pope has unlimited authority over liturgical matters, but may only engage in liturgical changes in line with Tradition, it becomes clear then that no form of liturgical novelty may be introduced in the guise of development insofar as these practices are not in line with the undiluted teaching and liturgical heritage

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<sup>35</sup> PIUS XII, *Mediator Dei*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 165.

<sup>37</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 165.

<sup>38</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 166.

of the Church. In fact, Ratzinger writes: ‘Still less is any kind of general ‘freedom’ of manufacture, degenerating into spontaneous improvisation, compatible with the essence of faith and liturgy. The greatness of the liturgy depends – we shall have to repeat this frequently – on its spontaneity.’<sup>40</sup>

In the end, the liturgy cannot be a product of what we like or what our personal preferences are. It cannot be a question of subjectivist opinions or merely cultural inclinations. It has to be hinged on an objectivity that recognizes that what is being celebrated is a given, and that it is simultaneously a mystery that we cannot be dissected in the laboratories of our minds or the whims of our desires. The liturgy ‘is built on an intermingling of the ‘I’ and the ‘ye’, which are then continually being united in the ‘we’ of the whole Church speaking to God through Christ.’<sup>41</sup> In this communion with the Church, which overcomes the tendency to retreat into our little zones of piety and ‘island of prayer,’ all of us are led ‘into the single ‘we’ of the children of God, who say all together: Our Father.’<sup>42</sup>

In the new liturgy, the external actions, symbols and animal offerings give way to the human person who himself becomes – through his sacrifice of praise – the sacrifice that pleases God.<sup>43</sup> This is a fundamental point at the core of Ratzinger’s theology of the liturgy, and which is also the centre of our argument, namely that Christ remains at the centre of the liturgy, not our gestures, not our words, not our actions, not our thoughts, but Christ himself who acts through his own mystery and his person.<sup>44</sup> Thus, we can neither invent our own liturgy nor substitute the divine *actio* for our human ingenuity, else our worship ends up becoming ‘a feast that the community gives itself, a festival of self-affirmation.’<sup>45</sup>

We recall here Ratzinger’s reflection on the golden calf event narrated in Exodus 32:1-6 in which Israel creates worship that fits their own needs but ultimately leads to their ruin. For Ratzinger, the catastrophic outcome of the worship of the golden calf can only be interpreted in the light of the human tragedy of trying to create a new liturgy rather than worshipping Yahweh in the way he has commanded.

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<sup>40</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 166.

<sup>41</sup> RATZINGER, ‘Catholicism after the Council,’ *The Furrow* (1967) 3-23, at 8.

<sup>42</sup> RATZINGER, ‘Catholicism after the Council,’ 8. On this aspect, see J. J. SILVESTRE-VALOR, ‘Joseph Ratzinger e la liturgia,’ in *Storia e misterio. Una chiave di accesso alla teologia di Joseph Ratzinger e Danielou*, dirs. G. MASPERO and J. LYNCH (Roma: EDUSC, 2016) 297-315.

<sup>43</sup> For more on Ratzinger’s thought on this subject, see J. RATZINGER, J., ‘Is the Eucharist a Sacrifice?’ in *JRCW XI*, 207-217, at 213.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 20-23, 171-177, 80; Cf. A. F. Di CIÓ, ‘La Teología de la Liturgia según Joseph Ratzinger,’ 284-285.

<sup>45</sup> RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 23.

Ratzinger is convinced that the Exodus event had two goals that are distinct, each from the other: Entry into the Promised Land and the departure into the wilderness in order to worship of God, a point reiterated at least four times (Ex. 8:1; 9:1; 9:13; 10:3). Thus, worship was at the heart of the Exodus movement. It is based on this that Ratzinger concludes that, in interpreting these two goals of the Exodus, the incontestable point that emerges is that it was ‘ultimately about the nature of the liturgy.’<sup>46</sup> To this reflection of Ratzinger we may add the episode of the two sons of Aaron – Nadab and Abihu – who offered unlawful sacrifice to God and were punished for it (cf. Lev. 10:1-2).

These two episodes speak to the consequences of false worship masqueraded as innovation and creativity: ‘The narrative of the golden calf is a warning about any kind of self-initiated and self-seeking worship.’<sup>47</sup> The catastrophe of the Exodus event can only be interpreted in the light of the human tendency towards creating our own worship structures and fantasies rather than those which God gives through his Church. It is God who sets the criteria and sets the tempo for worship, since, ‘until we get there’ (i.e. into the very mystery of God in Christ), we will not know how to worship him (cf. Ex. 10:26). In liturgical worship, since Christ is the Priest and Victim, ‘only God [in Christ], and through his Church, determines with what materials and in what way he is to be worshipped. Even here in time, he determines the elements of worship.’<sup>48</sup> Only with him, and following his criteria, can we offer befitting sacrifice.

#### **4. Re-embracing Liturgical Christocentrism in the Nigerian Context**

In 1961, just after being appointed professor of fundamental theology at the University of Bonn, Ratzinger was called up by then Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Josef Frings (1887-1978), to ghostwrite a speech which the cardinal was to give in Genoa on the vision of the just announced Vatican II Council. In that paper, which Ratzinger’s biographer, Peter Seewald, several decades after, would authoritatively describe as ‘the most important and most influential speech Ratzinger ever wrote’,<sup>49</sup> the young professor Ratzinger signalled:

In the era of a Catholicism that is truly global and thus truly catholic; she [the Church] must ever more adjust to the fact that not all laws can be applied to each land in the same way, that, above all, the

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<sup>46</sup> For a general context for this idea, see J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 15-23. Cf. also J. DRISCOLL, ‘Joseph Ratzinger on *The Spirit of the Liturgy*,’ *PATH* 6 (2007) 183-198, at 185-186.

<sup>47</sup> J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> A. UDOH, *Retrieving the Spirit of the Liturgy* (Calabar: Ethereal Bliss, 2019) 22.

<sup>49</sup> P. SEEWALD, *Benedikt XVI: Ein Leben* (Munich: Droemer, 2020) 382.

liturgy must be like a mirror of the unity as also an appropriate expression of the respective spiritual particularity [of each nation].<sup>50</sup>

We use these words of Ratzinger – though pronounced by Cardinal Frings – as a preface to this part for two reasons. The first is that most of the abuses that we have witnessed in the liturgy as well as the resultant spectacle that they have caused have arisen from a lopsided interpretation of what authentic inculturation is and what it means for the liturgy to be ‘an appropriate expression of the respective particularity’ of each nation and cultural group that Ratzinger points out. The second reason for this is drawn from the first we have just mentioned: Because of the lack of catechesis on what true inculturation means with regard to the liturgy and the propagation of the faith in our part of the world, there is also a poor understanding of what authentic active participation in the liturgy means. There is, thus, a reductionism of active participation to mere activity to such an extent that what is considered a successful liturgical celebration is one in which so much activity has taken place by both the celebrant and the other participants in the liturgy. The consequence of this is that most attempts to correct some anomalies in the liturgical celebration is met with some form of resistance by those who, based on their understanding of what Vatican II said (or did not say) about enriching the liturgy through peculiar cultural expression, tend to think that insisting on a liturgical celebration based on the rubrics and the universal norms of worship set down by the Church is not only an effort to return to pre-Vatican II liturgy but even more a rejection of the very culture of the people and an imposition of a ‘foreign’ way of worship. Sadly, even some ordained ministers of the Church think this way.

While it is correct that the liturgy has a human dimension in that it is a human activity in which we express our yearning for the divine encounter, it is important that we do not lose sight of the important truth that it is first and foremost a supernatural reality in which Christ is the main Actor and we are all caught up in that action that he does. Everything about Christ provides the foundation for the liturgy, and the different modes of presences of Christ that Vatican II talks about in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no. 7, are not competitive forms; instead, they are ‘different manifestations of the way Christ reveals himself and acts in the liturgy.’<sup>51</sup> That being said, it is fundamental to draw attention to the fact that while cultural expressions are indeed a valid means of liturgical worship, such expressions cannot be hinged on something removed from the very essence of the liturgy itself who is

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<sup>50</sup> Cited in P. SEEWALD, *Benedikt XVI*, 384. The original German title of the speech is ‘Das Konzil und die modern Gedankenwelt.’ The full text is found in *Joseph Ratzinger Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII/1: *Zur Lehre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed. G. MULLER, (Freiburg: Herder, 2012) 73-91.

<sup>51</sup> A. UDOH, *Gift and Mystery*, 13.

## UDOH: *The Christocentric Orientation of the Liturgy in Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI*

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Christ. Theatrics and the excessive quest for monopoly of drama cannot be a measure of liturgical expression. Ratzinger's critique of modern liturgical trends in which the human factor outweighs the divine action puts this problem in perspective. He consistently argued that the liturgy is primarily an act of divine worship, not human self-expression, and critiqued what he termed a 'fabricated' liturgy that prioritizes communal participation, creativity, and entertainment over reverence, adoration, and fidelity to tradition. A fundamental concern for Ratzinger was the shift from a God-centred (Theocentric) worship to a man-centred (anthropocentric) practice, a shift he saw as rooted in secular influences. He lamented the tendency to adapt the liturgy to contemporary cultural trends at the expense of its sacred and universal character.

As we had noted earlier, when the liturgy becomes centred on human expressions rather than the divine encounter, the result is a form of worship that may be generous in its intentions yet without roots, and, thus, empty in value. As Ratzinger insists, the liturgy ought to be a cosmic event oriented toward God in Christ, not merely a social gathering structured around human preferences.<sup>52</sup> It is not a mere communal act but a participation in the divine drama that reconciles all of creation with its Creator, an act of worship with Christ at the centre. As Jungmann says, Christ's death has reconciled heaven and earth in such a way that, through the action of his transfigured body now in heaven, he also brings about this reconciliation on earth, 'in the sacrifice of the Mass, and here too Christ is high priest, not only in that he was its first celebrant but also because he is its founder and the one who is acting in the celebrant for all time.'<sup>53</sup>

For Ratzinger, to anchor the liturgy on the Paschal Mystery means to take into focus the liturgy's cosmic character.<sup>54</sup> This is why the orientation of liturgical prayer itself must be cosmic. The direction of the liturgy, Ratzinger insists, has to be turned toward the Cross. It has to be Cross-oriented, for it is through the Cross that 'the Lord gathers people together to form the new community of the worldwide Church. Through the suffering Son, they recognize the true God.'<sup>55</sup> In *A New Song for the Lord*, he would insist any liturgy which emphasis is placed on the group or individual rather than on Christ who is the centre cannot be cosmic, and so cannot

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 24-34.

<sup>53</sup> J. A. JUNGSMANN, *The Place of Christ in the Liturgical Prayer*, trans. A. PEELER, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Alba, House, 1965) 243.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, 'Fortieth Anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,' 581. See S. W., HAHN, *Covenant and Communion*, 163-185, U. M. LANG, 'Benedict XVI and Church Architecture,' in *Benedict XVI and Sacred Art and Architecture*, eds. D. V. TWOMEY and J. E. RUTHERFORD (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2011) 116-119.

<sup>55</sup> J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. II: *Holy Week. From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011) 254.



be authentic liturgy – one directed to the Paschal Mystery. Thus, the tendency towards reducing the liturgy to mere cultural expression or group manifestation cannot be the hallmark of true liturgy since it diminishes the place of mystery in worship:

The liturgy of the group is not cosmic; it thrives on the autonomy of the group. It does not have a history; precisely the emancipation from history and autonomous creativity are characteristic for group liturgy, even when it works with historical settings in the process. And it does not know mystery because in it everything is and must be explained. For these reasons development and participation are just as foreign to group liturgy as that obedience within which a meaning that is greater than the explicable is revealed.<sup>56</sup>

The point that then Cardinal Ratzinger tried to express is that participation in the liturgy must always be understood in terms of its connection to the cosmic liturgy in which the Cross and Resurrection of Christ take central stage, not what the community does. As participation in the mystery of Christ, the liturgy goes beyond space and time and embraces the whole Church into one in Christ. Cosmic liturgy has to be *Logos*-liturgy in which the essential character of worship is communion, not only with God but also with the other sons and daughters of God who, in Baptism and in living the same mysteries that we celebrate, are joined with us in communion with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. This point is at the core of a correct theology of the liturgy. In this way, the priest alone or the community by itself cannot be the celebrant of the liturgy in the context that he makes the liturgy. Instead, the priest and the people are celebrants to the extent that they are joined to Christ and his body, the Church, Head and members together. This explains why Ratzinger does think it reasonable to argue – as some have done – that before Vatican II, the priest alone was considered the celebrant of the liturgy without any reference to the community which only remained as passive spectators, and then after Vatican II, ‘the assembled congregation’ became the celebrant and not the priest alone as was the case before.<sup>57</sup> He thinks that this position is ‘absurd’ and ‘obstructs an understanding of the liturgy instead of promoting it, and creates that false rift between preconciliar and postconciliar which rends the overarching coherence of the living history of the faith.’<sup>58</sup> The reality is that, even before Vatican II, the priest was not given any permission to determine the course of the liturgy or to improvise in liturgical matters. ‘Liturgy was completely nonarbitrary

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<sup>56</sup> J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996) 119.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 132-133.

for him. It preceded him, as ‘rite’, that is, as an objective form of the corporate prayer of the Church.’<sup>59</sup>

In the liturgy, the primacy is always Christology. Playing roles in the liturgy, as we often see these days by some priests, do not only detract from the nature of the liturgy as a sacred action in which Christ is the focus, but also makes him a usurper of Christ’s place among his people. Vincent Twomey believes that a certain level of self-discipline is demanded of the priest who celebrates as well as an ‘acquisition of an authentic *ars celebrandi* so that his own personality does not impinge on his role as acting *in persona Christi*.’<sup>60</sup> That the priest represents Christ in the liturgical assembly is a theological truth at the core of sacramental theology. Yet this is not to say that the priest replaces Christ and takes up his place in the celebration. These are two separate things and they should never be confused. In the same way, that the priest represents the people in offering sacrifices on their behalf does not mean that he is their delegate and so has to offer the sacrifice according to their wishes or in keeping with what feeds their fantasies or fulfilment. The proper perspective with which to understand the nature of the liturgy as a celebration of the whole people of God is to view it in the context of the liturgy as the worship of the whole people of God constituted into the body of the Christ, the Church, in union with Christ who is the Priest and Victim. Anything other than this framework leads to just an empty show, and we – both priest and people – must not fall into the temptation of becoming too familiar with the liturgy to the extent that we gradually cease to perceive its grandeur and magnitude.<sup>61</sup>

Based on what we have said so far, it becomes clear that the liturgy must be understood as a sacred act that transcends cultural and social tendencies. Ratzinger’s emphasis on the true nature of the Eucharist as the ‘sacrament of unity’ and ‘the real presence of Christ’ offers a theological framework through which to critique the liturgical confusion and irreverence currently observed in some of our parishes in Nigeria. Cultural and social dynamics within the Nigerian society have had a significant impact on liturgical practices and attitudes toward the Eucharist. Ratzinger asserts that the Eucharist is not a cultural artifact or merely an expression of a community’s collective spirituality, but the real presence of Christ, an encounter with the divine. Yet, in some Nigerian contexts, the Eucharist is viewed through a cultural lens that diminishes its transcendent and sacramental reality.

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<sup>59</sup> J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 132.

<sup>60</sup> D. V. TWOMEY, *The Dynamics of the Liturgy: Joseph Ratzinger’s Theology of Liturgy. An Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022) 144.

<sup>61</sup> BENEDICT XVI warns against this in his *Homily for the Chrism Mass, Holy Thursday, 20 March 2008*, in St. Peter’s Basilica. See [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20080320\\_messa-crismale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080320_messa-crismale.html). Retrieved 30 Jan. 2025.

The process of inculturation in the Nigerian Church, following the Second Vatican Council's liturgical reforms, has often been marked by a tension between the preservation of liturgical integrity and the adaptation to local customs. While inculturation is a legitimate theological principle, it sometimes takes extreme forms in Nigeria, leading to the weakening of the sacred nature of the Mass. Though inculturation has allowed for a greater sense of ownership and participation in the liturgy among the faithful, it has also led to liturgical practices that sometimes stray from the prescribed norms. In some cases, the adaptation of local customs into the liturgical rites has led to confusion about the proper way to celebrate the Eucharist, and excessive informality has been introduced in ways that risk trivializing the sacrament, shifting focus from the Eucharistic sacrifice to mere cultural exhibitionism. While culture enriches liturgy, it must never overshadow its Christocentric essence. The Nigerian culture has rich expressive elements, but they must be integrated into the liturgy in ways that enhance rather than diminish its sacred nature. This requires careful discernment by ecclesiastical authorities. The challenge for the Church in Nigeria is to balance inculturation with fidelity to the liturgical norms that safeguard the Eucharist's nature as a mystery. This is why it is important for the Nigerian episcopal conference to set up a body of theological experts to study the dynamics at play here and come up with liturgical guidelines and norms – subject to the study and approval of the episcopal conference – on how to balance this tension in order to preserve our Catholicity.

Another challenge is the persistence of unbridled clericalism, which, as Ratzinger notes, can obscure the true role of the priest in the liturgy as one who serves as the servant and mediator of the sacrament and not as the centre of attention.<sup>62</sup> In many cases, we have seen priests who constitute themselves as the central figures of the liturgy rather than as facilitators of divine worship, and this often turns the liturgy into a comedy show or a festival of noise.

Another significant factor contributing to the Eucharistic confusion and irreverence we observe is inadequate attention to catechesis, particularly regarding the true nature of the Eucharist and the proper way to approach the sacrament. In many Nigerian parishes, there is a lack of sufficient catechesis, leading to a poor understanding of the liturgy. Many parishioners may participate in the liturgy without a full awareness of the reverence and awe it demands. Little wonder, Ratzinger thinks the crisis we have today is that of catechesis about Christ rather than a crisis of ecclesiology.<sup>63</sup> And this makes sense, for if people understood who Christ is and entered into his mystery through the liturgical celebration, it would

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 132-135.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 29.

be impossible for them to have an allergy for the Church since they would then realize that Christ and the Church are not separate entities, but two dimensions of the same reality: The Church is the manifestation and extension of Christ, and Christ is the Foundation of the Church.<sup>64</sup> A deeper catechetical engagement with the mystery of the Eucharist, one that emphasizes its true nature as a sacrament of Christ's self-offering, is needed to combat the confusion.

## **5. Conclusion**

At the heart of the Church's liturgical life is the Eucharist, the great mystery through which the self-giving love of Christ is made present, and through which the Church itself becomes a participation in his eternal offering to the Father. While active participation in the liturgy is fundamental, it cannot be confused with a mere human activity which ultimately leads to 'liturgical anthropocentrism'. To contemplate the mystery that unfolds before us is more important than re-fashioning the liturgy to fit our fancies. When we mistake active participation in the liturgy for a utilitarian or communitarian interpretation of the liturgy, we miss the whole point. Instead, the core of active participation is to be realized in the interior response to the invitation of the priest at the 'Dialogue' at the Preface of the Eucharistic Prayer: '*Sursum corda*' ('Lift up your hearts'). This 'lifting up' of the hearts is an acknowledgment that we are participants in the very action of Christ himself to whom we lift our hearts, and with whom – in the company of the angels and saints in heaven – we enter into the praise and worship of God. Thus, it should always be celebrated 'with reverence in the face of the mystery, with awe in the face of this mysterious death that becomes a present reality in our midst.'<sup>65</sup> As Pablo Blanco writes of Ratzinger's liturgical vision, the Eucharistic celebration – for the German theologian – is not something simply customary or usual in which we may substitute certain aspects for our own desires and wants. Instead, what happens in the Eucharist is something real that stands far above our aspirations and possibilities, and that is always constituted with the features of 'beauty, decorum and elegance.'<sup>66</sup> Ratzinger himself warns: 'It is increasingly clear that liturgy involves our understanding of God and the world and our relationship to Christ, the Church and ourselves. How we attend to liturgy determines the fate of the faith and the Church.'<sup>67</sup> Thus, in a time of growing secularization and liturgical confusion, both globally and within Nigeria, the need for a re-grounding in the profound mystery of the liturgy is ever more urgent. By returning to the theological foundations laid by Ratzinger, the Church can recover the deep sense of the sacred that lies at the heart of the Christian mystery, ensuring that Christ is at the centre of the liturgy and that the Eucharist remains the true centre of ecclesial life and daily living.

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<sup>64</sup> For more on Ratzinger's arguments on this point, see J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, 29-36.

<sup>65</sup> J. RATZINGER, *God is Near Us*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> P. BLANCO, 'El Rostro de la fe y de la Iglesia'. La teología de la liturgia en Joseph Ratzinger,' *Revista española de teología* 71 (2011) 47-75.

<sup>67</sup> J. RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, ix.