

The Catholic Definition of Liturgy

1. Official Catholic Definition

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1069) states:

“The word ‘liturgy’ originally meant a ‘public work’ or a ‘service in the name of/on behalf of the people.’ In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in the ‘work of God.’ Through the liturgy, Christ, our Redeemer and High Priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church.”

2. Explanation for Lay Catholics

The liturgy is the official prayer and worship of the Church. It is more than just 'going to church'—it is the place where heaven and earth meet, and Christ Himself is present and at work.

Key Points to Remember:

- Christ is the true leader of the liturgy. The priest and people join in His prayer to the Father.
- The liturgy is communal: the prayer of the whole Church, not just private devotion.
- The goal of the liturgy is transformation: it sanctifies us, builds up the Church, and glorifies God.
- The liturgy includes the Mass, the sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, and official rites of the Church.
- Lay participation matters: Vatican II emphasized full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful.

In Simple Terms

Liturgy is the official prayer of the Church, where we don't just remember what Jesus did, but actually enter into His saving work today. It is where Christ prays with us, through us, and for us—and where we join in the worship of heaven.

Catholic Mass Before & After Vatican II

Aspect of the Mass	Before Vatican II (Tridentine Mass)	After Vatican II (Novus Ordo Mass)
Language	Latin only, regardless of country	Vernacular (local languages), though Latin is still permitted
Role of the Faithful	Mostly silent; altar servers made responses	Full, conscious, active participation: responses, singing, prayers
Scripture Readings	One-year cycle, limited selections, mostly New Testament	Three-year Sunday cycle & two-year weekday cycle, broader Old & New Testament
Priest's Position	Faced the altar (<i>ad orientem</i>), back to people	Often faces the congregation (<i>versus populum</i>)
Altar	Attached to wall, ornate, often distant from people	Freestanding, closer to the people
Homily	Short sermon, sometimes optional	Homily required at Sunday Masses and holy days
Communion	Laity received only the Host, kneeling, on tongue	Communion under both species (bread & wine) often permitted; may receive standing or kneeling, on tongue or hand
Lay Ministries	Limited to altar boys; no lay readers or ministers	Lay readers, cantors, extraordinary ministers of Communion, altar servers (male & female)
Music	Gregorian chant & Latin hymns; congregation often silent	Wider variety of sacred music, including hymns in local languages; active singing by congregation
Prayers of the Faithful	Omitted	Restored, with intercessions by community
Sign of Peace	Not included	Restored as a communal gesture before Communion
Emphasis	Priest offers sacrifice on behalf of people; less congregational involvement	The whole assembly actively participates in the Eucharistic celebration

How Vatican II Changed the Sacraments of the Catholic Church

Sacrament	Before Vatican II	After Vatican II
Baptism	Focus on washing away original sin. Rites often private, minimal role for community. No unified process for adult converts.	Emphasized incorporation into the People of God. Restored RCIA for adults. Greater role for parents, godparents, and parish community.
Confirmation	Often celebrated apart from Baptism and Eucharist. Prayers stressed strengthening in faith, but little connection to initiation.	Reconnected with baptismal initiation. Renewed prayers highlighting the Holy Spirit. Seen as completing initiation.
Eucharist	Mass in Latin. Priest faced altar with back to people. Limited Scripture readings. Communion usually under one kind (bread only). Passive participation of laity.	Mass allowed in vernacular languages. Priest faced the people. Expanded 3-year Sunday and 2-year weekday lectionary. Communion under both kinds possible. Lay ministers and active participation encouraged.
Penance	Primarily individual confession in the confessional. Focus on private absolution of sins.	Emphasized reconciliation with God and community. Introduction of communal penitential services with individual absolution.
Anointing of the Sick	Known as 'Extreme Unction.' Given only to the dying. Seen mainly as preparation for death.	Renamed 'Anointing of the Sick.' For anyone seriously ill or elderly. Can be received more than once. Stresses healing and comfort, not only last rites.
Holy Orders	Focus on priests as sacrificers of the Mass. Deacons transitional only (step toward priesthood). Bishops seen mainly as administrators.	Renewed view of bishop as shepherd of local Church. Restoration of permanent diaconate (including married men). Priests seen as servants of Word and community.
Matrimony	Emphasized procreation as main purpose. Couple's role in liturgy minimized.	Emphasized covenant of love and mutual sanctification. Procreation and unity both central. Greater liturgical role for the couple. Marriage linked to Church's mission.

How Vatican II Changed the Divine Office

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Before Vatican II</u>	<u>After Vatican II</u>
Language	Primarily Latin	Permission for vernacular languages
Structure	Longer and more rigid, all 8 canonical hours	Simplified; emphasis on major hours (Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer)
Participation	Mainly clergy and religious	Encouraged wider participation of laity
Psalms	One-week Psalter cycle, more repetitions	Four-week Psalter cycle, greater variety
Readings	Limited Scripture readings	Expanded lectionary with broader use of Scripture
Flexibility	Fixed, with little adaptation allowed	Greater pastoral adaptation possible
Focus	Obligation and ritual duty	Prayer of the Church for sanctification of the day

How Vatican II Changed the Liturgical Year

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Before Vatican II</u>	<u>After Vatican II (Reforms)</u>
Overall Structure	Complex calendar with many feasts; sometimes overshadowed central mysteries	Simplified calendar; focus on Christ's Paschal Mystery
Paschal Mystery	Not always emphasized as central	Easter Triduum highlighted as the heart of the year; Sundays reaffirmed as 'little Easters'
Advent	Primarily seen as preparation for Christmas	Clarified dual focus: preparing for Christmas and Christ's second coming
Christmas	Surrounded by many saints' feasts that sometimes distracted from the season	Streamlined so focus remains on the Incarnation
Lent & Holy Week	Focus on penance but with less active participation in Holy Week	Renewed as preparation for Easter; Easter Vigil restored; Holy Week liturgies emphasized
Ordinary Time	Post-Pentecost period called 'Time after Pentecost'	Reorganized as 'Ordinary Time' focusing on Christ's life and teachings
Saints' Feasts	Numerous saints' days often overshadowed liturgical seasons	Reduced in number; universal saints emphasized, local feasts encouraged
Participation	Faithful often passive observers; services in Latin	Vernacular introduced; active participation in the rhythm of the seasons

How Vatican II Changed Catholic Music at Mass

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Before Vatican II</u>	<u>After Vatican II (Reforms)</u>
Participation	Music performed mainly by choirs; congregation mostly silent observers	Faithful encouraged to actively participate in singing hymns, responses, psalms, and acclamations
Language	Music almost exclusively in Latin	Introduction of the vernacular; local languages allowed in hymns and chants
Gregorian Chant	Held central place but often replaced by polyphony or other styles	Reaffirmed as having 'pride of place,' while allowing other styles that foster participation
Musical Styles	Focused on Gregorian chant, organ, and polyphony	Broader acceptance of hymns, folk styles, and diverse musical expressions, if reverent
Scripture in Music	Limited use; psalms not widely sung by assembly	Responsorial psalm introduced; greater use of Scripture-based hymns and antiphons
Role of Choir	Choir often dominated the liturgy and replaced assembly's singing	Choir supports assembly; special role retained for polyphony and chant
Cultural Adaptation	Uniform Roman style, little room for local traditions	Encouragement of inculturation: use of local instruments and melodies when appropriate

How Vatican II Changed Catholic Sacred Art and Church Design

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Before Vatican II</u>	<u>After Vatican II (Reforms)</u>
Theological Focus	Art and design often ornamental, with less emphasis on liturgical participation	Sacred art and architecture serve the liturgy, fostering devotion and active participation
Church Layout	Long nave, altar at back wall, communion rails separating clergy/laity	Freestanding altar facing the people; seating arranged to emphasize community around the altar
The Sanctuary	High altar set apart; priest's role emphasized by distance	Altar, ambo, and presider's chair emphasized as focal points of Eucharist, Word, and presiding
Sacred Art	Multiple statues, ornate side altars, heavy decoration	Noble simplicity; images retained but reduced in duplication; art authentic to culture
Liturgical Furnishings	Tabernacle on high altar; baptismal font often in back; communion rails common	Tabernacle often in chapel or distinct place; baptismal font placed prominently; rails removed
Light & Space	Heavy, enclosed spaces emphasizing mystery and hierarchy	Open spaces with natural light, fostering communal prayer and transcendence
Cultural Adaptation	Uniform Roman artistic style, little adaptation	Encouragement of inculturation: local art and symbols used if reverent and fitting