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Organic development and its place within the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: some Plenary reflections

Gerard Moore

There is a continuing debate around the implementation of the liturgical reforms instigated by the Bishops at the Second Vatican Council and established in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (4 December 1963). No doubt it will emerge at the Plenary Council. This paper is offered to bring a bit of clarity to a point that bubbles under the surface of the implementation and is particularly driven by proponents of the 'reform of the reform' movement.

This paper seeks to place the idea of organic development within its context in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC)¹ and then as seen in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM).² These are the most influential official documents of the liturgical reform.

The two guiding principles of the Constitution

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy summarised the deepest concerns of the Vatican Council in two succinct principles. The first is that the reformed rites are to be true to the mystery that they signify. The second is that they allow for active participation of the community. The Constitution reads:

In this restoration both texts and rites should be drawn up so as to express more clearly the holy things which they signify. The Christian people, as far as is possible, should be able to understand them with ease and take part in them fully, actively, and as a community (SC 21).

It cannot be stressed enough that this is the very core of the reform. Everything that follows in the document is designed to be of service to engagement with the mystery of God through participation in the rites. Engagement with the divine mystery is at the core of faith and moves beyond propositions about God to an experiential relationship with God, a relationship determined by God. Participation, full, active and communal, allows that the history, culture, language and living present of the people is essential. It could be said that this is the environment in which the Spirit is at work amidst the community in history. Theologically the reference to mystery

¹ The translation of the Sacred Constitution is taken from the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

² The text of the General Instruction is the 2002 translation approved for use in the United States of America and taken from the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20030317_ordinam_ento-messale_en.html#Decree_of_Confirmation

opens onto ongoing 'revelation', while participation opens onto continuous 'incarnation'. The divine mystery is present to the world and its cultures and languages as they express the meaning of the human community.

If the Plenary Council is to seek any guidance from the liturgical reform, it ought to be around these two seminal principles.

'Organic Development' in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal

In the Constitution, the statement of intent was followed by four sets of norms, established by the Bishops in Council to guide the reform. It is within this second level of norms that we find reference to 'organic development'. It is valuable but far from front and centre.

The first in the series of four norms is given the title of 'general norms' and covers the authority in liturgical regulation, the place of tradition and the role of scripture (SC 22-25).³ The dynamic of 'organic development' is found within the discussion of tradition. The germane paragraph sets out the need for a balance between sound tradition and legitimate progress (SC 23). Those aspects of the tradition that are sound are determined through careful theological, historical and pastoral investigation. There is to be a conjunction between study of the structure and form of the liturgy and the experience of the faithful regarding more recent reforms. Innovations are required to meet the criteria of the good of the Church, and also a relationship to former liturgical forms. Here the sense of the good of the Church is a reference to the earlier mentioned sense of mystery and ease of participation.

Within this, there is a working presumption that the reformed ritual and experience will be different, yet recognisable. Using the 'organic' metaphor, the Constitution balances the need for care that the new and the old are compatible with the need for freedom to make decisive changes if required for the good of the Church: 'Finally there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them, and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing'. This is not the final word however. The coherent yet diverse environment of Europe had long been the cultural milieu of the Church of Rome, but there was a recognition that the Church needed to think beyond these limits. The Constitution had a broader sense, not terribly well articulated but present nevertheless. The bishops did not discount the possibility of great difference between forms new and old, or forms in adjacent territories: 'As far as possible, notable differences between the rites used in adjacent regions should be avoided' (SC 23). Here is an understanding that liturgical rites could be very different.

³ The other sets are Norms Drawn from the Hierarchic and Communal Nature of the Liturgy (26-32), Norms Based in the Educative and Pastoral Nature of the Liturgy (33-35) and Norms for Adapting the Liturgy to the Temperament and Traditions of Peoples (37-40).

As can be seen, the dynamic of organic development is included in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* where it is placed within a larger framework of service to the mystery and active participation, and set in conjunction with theological, historical and pastoral study. There is a predisposition that the reformed rites may be different from those in the Tridentine liturgy and may even vary across regions. Interestingly, the reference to organic development is not included later in the Constitution when many of these norms are reiterated as part of the discussion of the revision of the rite of the Mass (SC 50). The dynamic of organic development, then, is an aspect of the revision of the liturgy, but not entirely at centre stage, and the Church leaders recognised it was important but not universally applicable.

Organic Development in the third edition of the Roman Missal

There is a second sense of 'organic' change introduced in the third edition of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, published as part of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* (2000). The incorporation into the Mass of the Roman Rite of customs and cultures from different peoples and Churches is described in part as an 'organic' process:

Throughout the ages, the Roman Rite has not only preserved the liturgical usages that arose in the city of Rome, but has also in a deep, organic, and harmonious way incorporated into itself certain other usages derived from the customs and culture of different peoples and of various particular Churches of both West and East ... (GIRM 397).

As applied here, the metaphor is one of incorporation rather than growth. The supposition appears to be that the Roman rite is able to ingest certain usages and become the richer for it to the benefit of the universal church. The context is not that of mystery and participation, as in the Constitution on the Liturgy, but rather of an anxious concern to maintain the integrity of the faith from error or contamination, and to preserve the riches of the Roman rite.⁴ This is not consistent with the Constitution and has little connection with the encounter with the divine mystery or the respect for Spirit at work in the culture and language of peoples. Interestingly, for a metaphor about 'organic' growth, this seems more like a 'graft'.

There is a further contrast between the paragraphs in the Sacred Constitution and the most recent General Instruction. While the General Instruction continues on to repeat the Council statement that new forms in some way ought to grow organically from already existing forms, it places this within a highly restrictive view of

⁴ The sense of anxiety, not found in the Sacred Constitution, is apparent in closely connected references to error, the integrity of the faith, the rule of belief and any serious harm consequent on the loss of the treasure and patrimony of the Roman church: 'These are to be maintained not only so that errors may be avoided, but also so that the faith may be passed on in its integrity, since the Church's rule of prayer (*lex orandi*) corresponds to her rule of belief (*lex credendi*). The Roman Rite constitutes a notable and precious part of the liturgical treasure and patrimony of the Catholic Church. Its riches are of benefit to the universal Church, so that were they to be lost, the Church would be seriously harmed' (GIRM2000 397).

inculturation. As set out in the GIRM, the needs of particular cultures are to be served only by adaptations that are not at variance with the distinctive character of the Roman rite (GIRM 398) and which do not impinge upon the integrity and unity of the Roman Rite (GIRM 399). This does not match the acknowledgement in the Sacred Constitution that in some places and circumstances radical adaptation of the liturgy may be required: 'In some places and circumstances, however, an even more radical adaptation of the liturgy is needed' (SC 40). For our purposes, it is clear that the interpretation of the dynamic of organic growth in the General Instruction is to restrict change and to circumscribe inculturation.

Organic Development in liturgical writings

With this level of confusion, it is worth asking how the dynamic is understood in liturgical writings, what is the range of meanings attributed to it, and indeed what are the origins of the term.

It is difficult to garner any precision or consensus amongst contemporary authors about what constitutes organic development. The term is not clearly defined in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and when used set in apposition with other norms. More recently a number of commentators have given organic development a degree of prominence as the key determinant in assessing liturgical change, yet it is difficult to find a clear definition in their works. Interestingly some of its keenest proponents have little time for the Missal of Paul VI but seem more intent on the re-emergence of the 1570 Roman Missal as the 'classic' formulation of the tradition and the best worship book for the celebration of the Eucharist.⁵

Australian liturgist Clare Johnson⁶ offers a close analysis and critique of current usages and provides a compelling approach for future application. Her exploration is set within the context of the continuing fraught nature of the discussion due to the unease the Council fathers had with the idea that it was possible that the liturgy could change. Johnson notes the three synonyms for change identified by O'Malley – *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, and development, where development was also linked to evolution and progress.⁷ Development appeared to be the term that caused the least concern, and enabled a comforting sense of continuity between past, present and future.

In this, two distinct approaches to continuity emerge in the post conciliar discussions. Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, is representative of the group that saw the

⁵ See works such as Alcuin Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy* and László Dobszay, *The Restoration and Organic Development of the Roman Rite*. Neither gives a comprehensive account of the strengths and weaknesses of the metaphor, nor a clear definition. Ultimately, any change which supports their liturgical preference is seen as 'organic' and hence affirming their understanding of the tradition, a usage more in line with the later additions to the General Instruction than the original Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

⁶ Clare Johnson, 'From Organic Growth to Liturgico-Plasticity: Reconceptualizing the Process of Liturgical Reform,' *Theological Studies* 76 (1: 2015) 87-111.

⁷ Here Johnson (96) quotes from John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Beknap of Harvard University, 2008) 299.

1969 *Missale Romanum* and its vernacular avatars as a rupture in the liturgical tradition. It was too great a change, and had ruptured the sense of a steady, slow and cautious development, which was organic in that it was simply and explicitly an extension of what had gone immediately before. This was in opposition to the body of Church leaders and scholars who were faithful to the revisions, and understood them as organic in that the grounds for the changes had been laid over a long period of time through scholarly exertion and judicious experimentation, and that these were now coming to fruition. Consequently, as radical as the change may have seemed, it had emerged from good stock.

Some considerations around terms

It is worth noting that a range of terms are in use but are often applied loosely and imprecisely. The descriptors 'growth', 'development', 'evolution' and 'progress' are each quite different understandings of change, and emerge from a variety of philosophical, cultural and scientific underpinnings. In parallel, the meaning of the word 'organic' is perhaps more unsettled when viewed through the lens of the processes of nature, such as natural life cycles where each part of the cycle is spectacularly different from the one before or after. Also described as organic are the responses in nature to evolutionary dynamisms which are imposed upon the organism and cause the organism to undergo modification or become extinct. As well 'organic', in terms of entropy, can denote the inevitable spiral of organisms from life to death.

Conclusion

Our study is a reminder that concepts such as organic development do not come to us without some baggage. Firstly, it has to be placed within its context in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and then examined in the later General Instruction of the Roman Missal. It is evident that the additions to the third edition of the GIRM show a different and at some points divergent use of organic development to the Constitution. What cannot be lost sight of in any Plenary Council deliberations is that the two principles of reform remain as pillars of theology and practice; engagement with God's unfolding of the Divine Mystery as the Spirit-led people in history, culture, language that we are.