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What Benedict means by 'new liturgical movement'

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Sometime soon, the Vatican is expected to release a *motu proprio*, meaning a legal document under the pope's authority, which will transfer responsibility for an aspect of marriage law from one Vatican office to another. Though it will probably fly below the public radar, the document provides a glimpse into Pope Benedict XVI's approach to liturgy, meaning how the church celebrates the Mass and its other rituals.

Specifically, Benedict is expected to encourage the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Vatican's office for liturgical policy, to focus on promoting what he describes as a "new liturgical movement." The obvious question, of course, is what exactly he means by that.

In a narrowly tailored legal document, the pope can't unpack the idea, but Vatican observers say that Benedict's broad liturgical approach can be described in terms of "continuity," i.e., recovering elements of the liturgical tradition which he believes were too hastily set aside or downplayed in the immediate period after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). His own style when he celebrates Mass reflects this thrust, including distributing communion on the tongue, rather than in the hand, and placing a crucifix on the altar to remind people that the focus is on God rather than the celebrant.

The "new liturgical movement," then, is one which attempts to restore what Benedict XVI and like-minded observers believe was lost in the post-Vatican II period, perhaps principally, in the pope's mind, a strong sense of transcendence.

The phrase "new liturgical movement" was first used by the pope back in 1997, when as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger he published a set of memoirs about his life up to 1977 under the title *Milestones*.

Here is the relevant section, which I'll quote at length:

There is no doubt that this new missal [after Vatican II] in many respects brought with it a real improvement and enrichment; but setting it as a new construction over against what had grown historically, forbidding the results of this historical growth, thereby makes the liturgy appear to be no longer a living development but the product of erudite work and juridical authority; this has caused us enormous harm. For then the impression had to emerge that liturgy is something "made", not something given in advance but something lying within our own power of decision. From this it also follows that we are not to recognize the scholars and the central authority alone as decision makers, but that in the end each and every "community" must provide itself with its own liturgy. When 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 our own 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 the 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*, 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. And because the ecclesial community cannot have its origin from itself but emerges as a unity only from the Lord, through faith, such circumstances will inexorably result in a disintegration into sectarian parties of all kinds - partisan opposition within a Church tearing herself apart."

"This is why we need a new Liturgical Movement, which will call to life the real heritage of the Second Vatican Council."

That extract provides the context in which the phrase from the forthcoming *motu proprio* should be understood (assuming it appears as expected), which otherwise may seem a bit out of the blue.

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