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THE
SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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One of the most significant events that have occurred within the Roman Catholic Church since the Reformation took place in Australia last Sunday when the service of the mass was said almost entirely in English. For over 1,000 years the Roman Catholic mass has been said in a language which the congregation could not make head or tail of, and for quite a considerable part of that time the priests did not know much about it either. But from now on, the greater part of the service is no longer to be in Latin but in English. This decision follows a very important Constitution of the second session of the Second Vatican Council. On December 4th last the Vatican Council decided that the Roman Catholic mass was to be reformed in three directions, and it is interesting to note that all three were advocated by the Reformers and were adopted at the time of the Reformation by the Protestant churches.

The first principle is the most important, namely, that Holy Scripture is to be given a prominent place in the service. Thus Article 24 of the Constitution on the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council reads "Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of divine service. ...To achieve the restoration, progress and adaption of the service it is essential to promote that warm and living love for Scripture". With a view to this the Council lays down in Article 35 "Bible services are to be encouraged" especially on Sundays and some week days in Lent and Advent and on the evenings before the more important feasts. That is to say Roman Catholics are to be encouraged to come together regularly to study their Bibles in what we could call Bible classes. This is a most significant recommendation of the Council. Moreover a wider and fuller reading from Scripture is to be adopted in the service itself. Thus Article 51 states "The treas-

ures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's Word". Not only is the Bible to be read more fully and regularly, and to be studied in Bible services, but during the service of the mass itself the sermon is to be a permanent element. In Section 35 the Council declares "The ministry of preaching is to be fulfilled with exactitude and fidelity. The sermon should draw its content mainly from Scripture and liturgical sources and its character should be that of a proclamation of God's wonderful works in the history of salvation..."

The second feature of this Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy is the emphasis that the Council places on the need for building up the congregation in their knowledge of God and in their faith. This is the underlying reason for changing from Latin to English, as Article 35 puts

it so that "the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God so they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive His grace". This was of course one of the points insisted upon by the Reformers, that the service is not so much directed to God as that God speaks to us through the service. This point is brought out in Article 33 in which the Vatican Council states "In the church service God speaks to His people and Christ proclaims His Gospel". In order to assist this building up of the congregation in their knowledge of God and in their faith some important changes are insisted on. Thus Article 34: "The service is to be distinguished by a noble simplicity ... unencumbered by useless repetitions". This latter is a strong phrase for the Council to use, in view of the fact that so much Roman Catholic devotion in the past has consisted in frequent repetitions, such as in the Rosary when the Hail Mary is

repeated 150 times and the Lord's Prayer 15 times. Such forms of prayer would seem to come under the Council's condemnation of "useless repetitions". Similar sentiments are reiterated in Article 50 which states that the service is to be simplified and elements which are duplicated are to be discarded.

A third feature in the revision of the Roman Mass is the Council's insistence that the congregation should take an active part in the service and not remain passive on-lookers. Thus Article 48 states that the congregation "should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary... they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing... They should be instructed by God's Word and nourished at the table of the Lord's body. They should give thanks to God... They should also learn to offer themselves." In this connection the Council urges in Article

Christians as a whole should be so ignorant of their faith and theology. For after all, theology is nothing else than the coherent formulation of what the Scriptures teach about the work of God for us, in us and through us. Thus we should all be expert in theology. We should bestir ourselves to learn and stir up our ministers to teach, not being content that they should merely give their own ideas from the pulpit which have no power to change our lives; but we should expect them to expound passages from the Bible from the pulpit; for the Bible is the source of our knowledge of God and in itself is living and powerful. We should get to know its teaching better for in this way God Himself through His Spirit will be our teacher, giving us a right outlook on life and shaping our character and dispositions to conform to Christ. And those of us who are heads of homes have a duty which we cannot shrug off of instructing the members of our family from

55 that at the time of the Communion the faithful should not sit in their seats as has been customary in the past, but themselves come forward to receive; that is to say, non communicating attendance at the Lord's Supper is discouraged. You will remember that this was an important element in the teaching of the Reformers, who said that to take part in the service as a mere spectator was no real worship of God - a point which some of our protestant churches have forgotten.

Another complaint of the Reformers was that the numerous ceremonies of their day were for the most part meaningless and not understood by the people and therefore these ceremonies hindered true faith. The Reformers called them "dumb ceremonies" because since their meaning was not clear, they conveyed no message or teaching. However, at that time the Reformers' attempt to remove them from the Church of Rome failed. It is therefore,

highly significant that the Second Vatican Council declares in Articles 59 and 62 "It is of the highest importance that the faithful should easily understand the sacramental signs" and "with the passage of time there have crept into the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals certain features which have rendered their purpose far from clear to the people". In accordance with these sentiments the Council has decreed that the rites and ceremonies are to be revised with a view to making them simpler and clearer in their meaning. Moreover, receiving Communion in both kinds, that is receiving the wine as well as the bread in the Lord's Supper, restored in Protestant churches in the Reformation, is once more to be permitted in Article 55.

I think you will agree with me that this document, the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, put out by the Second Vatican Council last December is a most significant one.

Many of the points advocated by the Reformers are here adopted for the first time after 400 years. In some respects the Roman Catholic Church has gone on ahead of the churches of the Reformation. Thus the new English mass if viewed simply in its character as a translation is very fine, using modern English excellently, especially in the Creed. Moreover the participation of the people in the service is raised to a degree higher than customary in Protestant churches; and the Gospel is read facing the people, which is not always to be found in churches which stem from the Reformation.

On the other hand it must of course be readily recognised that these reforms are all reforms of practice and not of doctrine. The Roman doctrines still remain as they were and in particular the doctrine of justification through forgiveness which is so clearly taught in the Bible and which was the mainspring

of the Reformation is still not to be found in Roman official documents. On the other hand we may thank God for the wind of change which is blowing in the Church of Rome, for it is blowing in the direction of the truth as revealed in Scripture, though we may think that it has still some way to go.

The most significant of all the changes is the pre-eminence given to the Bible - to its reading and its preaching and its study. For although this is only a change of practice, it is pregnant with future reformation of doctrine, for God's Word contains within itself its own power. It is not possible to read His Word humbly and in an inquiring manner without its truths being fed into the mind by the Holy Spirit Himself. You will remember that it was the reading of Scripture which was the means of Luther's rediscovery of the Christian Gospel; and we should pray that what God did for our own nation 400 years ago through

the reading of Scripture He will also do now for Roman Catholic countries as they begin to give Scripture a greater prominence and read and study it regularly in their own language. Indeed, we should put our own house in order. In too many Protestant churches nowadays the Word of God is not given that supreme respect which its very name "God's Word" demands. Too frequently it is subjected to man's criticism and rejected in favour of our own ideas. No wonder our modern church life is weak and wishy washy. Our congregations should follow the advice of the Vatican Council and study the Bible together. Moreover in our own homes we should enthrone God's Word as the Master. Individually we should each of us read it and meditate on it. We should seek to understand its meaning by attending Bible studies and by reading Christian literature. It is a disgrace that in this day of widespread and increasing education in every field,

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