

Pope Francis' 2022 Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the [Roman Catholic] People of God, Desiderio Desideravi

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Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097597ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097597ar>

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Publisher(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Farrell, T. (2023). Review of [Pope Francis' 2022 Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the [Roman Catholic] People of God, Desiderio Desideravi]. *New Explorations*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1097597ar>

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Review: Pope Francis' 2022 Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the [Roman Catholic] People of God, *Desiderio Desideravi* (available in English and other languages at the Vatican's website).

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On June 29, 2022, Pope Francis issued his new apostolic letter on the liturgical formation of the Roman Catholic people of God, titled in Latin *Desiderio Desideravi* (from the Latin version of Luke 22:15: "He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'" [NRSV]). An English translation of the pope's new 2022 apostolic letter is available at the Vatican's website (see the References for the URL).

In addition to highlighting the pope's thought in his new 2022 apostolic letter in the present review, I will, at certain junctures, point out connections between certain conceptualizations of the first Jesuit pope in his new 2022 apostolic letter and the thought of the American Jesuit cultural historian and media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955). However, even though some of Ong's publications have been translated into Spanish and Italian, languages that Pope Francis is fluent in, I have no reason to suspect that the pope is familiar with Ong's work.¹

Disclosure: I do not have the expertise that would be needed to point out how the pope's thought about Roman Catholic liturgical formation could be connected with liturgical practices in the other monotheistic religious traditions. For this reason, I will maintain silence about the other monotheistic religious traditions.

Now, in the numbered paragraph 1 of Pope Francis' new 2022 apostolic letter, he says that he wrote this new apostolic letter to his fellow Roman Catholics "to share with you some reflections on the liturgy." He also says, "Even so, with this letter, I do not intend to treat the question in an exhaustive way. I simply desire to offer some prompts or cues for reflections

that can aid in the contemplation of the beauty and truth of Christian celebration.”

After paragraph 1, we find the first subheading: “The Liturgy: the ‘today’ of salvation history”

[Questions: How is the Roman Catholic liturgy the ‘Today’ of salvation history? What is salvation history?].

In paragraph 2, Pope Francis says, “These words of Jesus [in Luke 22:15], with which the account of the Last Supper opens, are the crevice through which we are given the surprising possibility of intuiting the depth of the love of the persons of the Most Holy Trinity for us.”

In paragraph 3, Pope Francis says that “every gift, to be gift, must have someone disposed to receive it.” He also says that “the gift is entrusted to the Apostles so that it might be carried to every man and woman.”

In paragraph 4, Pope Francis says, “No one had earned a place as that [Passover] Supper. All had been invited. Or better said: all had been drawn there by the burning desire that Jesus had to eat that Passover with them. He knows that he is the Lamb of that Passover meal; he knows that he *is* the Passover. This is the absolute newness, the originality of that Supper, the only truly new thing in history, which renders that Supper unique and for this reason, ‘the Last Supper,’ unrepeatable.”

In paragraph 6, Pope Francis says that “every time we go to Mass, the first reason is that we are drawn there by his desire for us. For our part, the possible response – which is also the most demanding asceticism – is, as always, that surrender to this love, that letting ourselves be drawn by him. Indeed, every reception of communion of the Body and Blood of Christ was already desired by him in the Last Supper.”

After paragraph 9, we find the subheading “*The Liturgy: place of encounter with Christ.*”

In paragraph 10, Pope Francis says that “the Incarnation, in addition to being the only always new event that history knows, is also the very method that the Holy Trinity has chosen to open

to us the way of communion. Christian faith is either an encounter with Him [the Risen Jesus Christ] alive, or it does not exist.”

The pope’s use of the term event here in the expression “the only always new event that history knows” (and elsewhere repeatedly through his new 2022 apostolic letter) can be aligned with what Ong refers to as the world-as-event sense of life in his article “World as View and World as Event” in the *American Anthropologist* (August 1969).²

Conversely, Pope Francis refers, for example in paragraph 10 (but also see paragraphs 26, 41, 42, and 45), to “a concept, an idea, a thought”; he, in effect, is referring to what Ong characterizes as the world-as-view sense of life.

Now, in paragraph 11, Pope Francis says, “The Liturgy guarantees for us the possibility of such an encounter. . . . We need to be present at that [Last] Supper, to be able to hear his voice, to eat his Body and to drink his Blood. We need Him. In the Eucharist and in all the sacraments we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and of having the power of his Paschal Mystery reach us. The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, his every word, his every gesture, and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments.”

In paragraph 11, Pope Francis also explains the creative way in which he reads and interprets the New Testament scriptures. “The salvific power of Jesus, his every word, his every gesture, glance, and feeling reaches us through the celebrations of the sacraments. I am Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man possessed by demons at Capernaum, the paralytic in the house of Peter, the sinful woman pardoned, the woman afflicted by hemorrhages, the daughter of Jairus, the blind man of Jericho, Zacchaeus, Lazarus, the thief and Peter both pardoned. The Lord Jesus who dies no more, who lives forever with the signs of his Passion continues to pardon us, to heal us, to save us with the power of the sacraments. It is the concrete way, by means of his incarnation, that he loves us.”

It strikes me that the pope's creative way of interpreting key passages in the four canonical gospels is especially well-suited for meditation of certain key passages in the gospels. His way of proceeding to interpret certain gospel passages is subject-oriented, stressing the human person of both the gospel character and of the interpreter himself or herself, but without necessarily slipping into the kind of subjectivism that Pope Francis repeatedly rejects in his new 2022 apostolic letter. I am here drawing on the apt distinction between being "subject-oriented (not simply subjective)" that Ong makes in his book *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (1986, p. 95; but also see pp. 83 and 195), the published version of Ong's 1981 Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

Now, in paragraph 14, Pope Francis refers to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church and its famous document known in church parlance as *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (1963). He refers to this crucial Vatican II document repeatedly in the remainder of his apostolic letter.³

Now, in paragraph 15, Pope Francis says of "the obedience of the Son" that the "measure of which is his death on the cross."

In paragraph 26, Pope Francis says, "Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act [i.e., the world-as-event sense of life] because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things. It is the marveling of those who experience the power of symbol, which does not consist in referring to some abstract concept but rather in containing and expressing in its very concreteness what it signifies."

In paragraph 27, Pope Francis makes his most astute observations: "Therefore, the fundamental question is this: how do we [practicing Catholics] recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action [i.e., the world-as-event sense of life]? This was the objective of the Council's reform. The challenge [for practicing Catholics] is extremely demanding because

modern people [in Western culture] – not in all [e.g., non-Western] cultures to the same degree – have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act [i.e., the world-as-event sense of life].”

Now, what Pope Francis here refers to as certain “modern people” in Western culture (also see paragraphs 29 and 44) have perceptively described by Ong in his pioneering study of the print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958).⁴ What Ong refers to as the Art of Reason involves the Age of Reason (also known as the Enlightenment, including the American Enlightenment and the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776).

Note 4

Concerning people in non-Western cultures, see, for example, Ong’s article “Mass in Ewondo” in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America* (September 28, 1974).⁵

Now, in paragraph 44, Pope Francis notes that the Catholic theologian Romano Guardini claimed that modern people in Western print culture are “no longer able to read symbols; it is almost as if their existence is not even suspected. This happens also with the symbol of our body. Our body is a symbol because it is an intimate union of soul and body; it is the visibility of the spiritual soul in the corporeal order; and in this consists human uniqueness, the specificity of the person irreducible to any other form of living being. Our openness to the transcendent, to God, is constitutive of us. Not to recognize this leads us inevitably not only to a not knowing of God but also to not knowing ourselves.”⁶

In paragraph 45, Pope Francis says, “So, the question I want to pose is how can we [practicing Catholics] become once again capable of symbols? How can we again know how to read them and be able to live them? We know well that the celebration of the sacraments, by the grace of God, is efficacious in itself (*ex opera operato*), but this does not guarantee the full engagement

of [modern] people without an adequate way of their placing themselves in relation to the language of the celebration. A symbolic 'reading' is not a mental knowledge [i.e., not the world-as-view sense of life], not the acquisition of concepts, but rather a living experience [i.e., the world-as-event sense of life]."⁷

The overall thrust of Pope Francis' new 2022 apostolic letter to his co-religionists is to urge them to cultivate "a living experience" in their spiritual lives through their participation in the Roman Catholic liturgy.

In conclusion, even though I have no reason to suspect that Pope Francis is familiar with Ong's work, certain conceptualizations that the pope works with in his new 2022 apostolic letter to his co-religionists are strikingly compatible with certain conceptualizations that Ong works with in his various publications.

Notes

¹ For a bibliography of Ong's 400 or so distinct publications (not counting translations and reprints as distinct publications), see Thomas M. Walsh's "Walter J. Ong, S.J.: A Bibliography 1929-2006" in the anthology *Language, Culture, and Identity: The Legacy of Walter J. Ong, S.J.*, edited by Sara van den Berg and Thomas M. Walsh (2011).

² It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 69-90). I discuss Ong's 1969 article "World as View and World as Event" in connection with Ong's subsequent characterizations of orally based thought and expression in his widely read and widely translated 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (esp. pp. 36-57) in my article "Walter Ong and Harold Bloom Can Help Us Understand the Hebrew Bible" in *Explorations in Media Ecology* (2012).

³ For a recent English translation of the document, also known as the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, see the book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S.J.; translated by Philip Endean, S.J. (2012, pp. 29-78).

⁴ For further discussion of Ong's perceptive thought in his 1958 pioneering study of print culture, see my lengthy *OEN* article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020). In addition to Ong's 1958 pioneering study of modern print culture in Western culture, other pioneering studies of modern print culture in Western culture include the following four books: (1) Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957); (2) Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, translated by David Gerard; edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (1976; orig. French ed., 1958); (3) Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962); (4) Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (1989; orig. German ed., 1962).

⁵ It is reprinted in volume four of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 103-110). More broadly, Ong perceptively discusses people in Western and non-Western cultures in his seminal book *The Presence of the Word: some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967), the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

⁶ For further reading about Pope Francis and Romano Guardini, see Massimo Borghesi's book *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, translated by Barry

Hudock (2018; for specific page references to Guardini, see the “Index” [p. 306]).

⁷ For a relevant discussion of what Pope Francis refers to here as “becom[ing] once again capable of symbols,” see the French Franciscan Eloi Leclerc’s book *The Canticle of Creatures: Symbols of Union: An Analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (Franciscan Herald Press, 1976; orig. French ed., 1970). For my profile of the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis, see my *OEN* article “Pope Francis on Evil and Satan” (dated March 24, 2019).

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