

“A clear, helpful, and pastoral guide to one of Pope Francis’s most important documents, by one of the world’s leading experts in the liturgy—and, as an added benefit, a great writer!”

—James Martin, SJ, author of *In All Seasons for All Reasons*

“This pastoral guide to the apostolic letter *Desiderio desideravi* is designed at three levels: it is a theological and pastoral commentary that follows the text point by point; it is a glossary for technical terms that appear in the letter; and it is a suggestion for questions at the personal level and for group discussion. It offers a limpid and empathetic reading of the text, providing the reader with an introduction to the theological meaning of the liturgy as the language and experience of every baptized person. A valuable tool for that ‘liturgical formation’ that *Desiderio desideravi* poses as an urgent pastoral task for the whole Church.”

— Andrea Grillo, professor of sacramental theology
at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselm in Rome

“*Desiderio desideravi* marks a significant milestone in the modern Catholic liturgical reform, and Rita Ferrone is one of the best commentators on the liturgy today. This guide will be very helpful in assisting individuals and groups in unpacking the richness of Pope Francis’s liturgical vision.”

— John F. Baldovin, SJ, Boston College School of Theology
and Ministry

“Pope Francis’s *Desiderio desideravi*, with Rita Ferrone’s lucid commentary, should be required reading for every presider—and everyone who wants to deepen their grasp of what we do at Mass, and why we do it. Ferrone deftly takes us to the heart of Pope Francis’s teaching: the astonishment, wonder, and awe we should experience before the paschal mystery.”

—Father Michael G. Ryan, St. James Cathedral, Seattle

“This book is essential not just to understand *Desiderio desideravi* but also Pope Francis’s pontificate as a whole, because it presents his understanding of the Second Vatican Council and its legacy, and shows the importance of the liturgical constitution in the overarching architecture of the documents of Vatican II. It’s not a question of purely academic interest, but with deep pastoral consequences, as Rita Ferrone explains masterfully.”

— Massimo Faggioli, professor of historical theology,
Villanova University

“Pope Francis in his recent apostolic letter *Desiderio desideravi* has invited us all to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Eucharist, to drink more fully from the wellspring of Christian spirituality which is the liturgy. Rita Ferrone, writing in a clear and crisp way, has provided us with a marvelous tool to do just that. She urges us to see our coming to the liturgy as a response to the Spirit moving within us. Most importantly, her *Pastoral Guide to Pope Francis’s Desiderio desideravi* is a faithful reflection of the baptismal ecclesiology of Vatican Council II.”

— Gerard Austin, OP, Dominican scholar in residence;
Barry University

Pastoral Guide to
Pope Francis's
Desiderio Desideravi

Rita Ferrone



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INTRODUCTION

This book is a guide to Pope Francis's letter *Desiderio desideravi*, "On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God." Its purpose is to accompany the reader on a journey of discovery—from Pope Francis's letter to the heart of the mystery we celebrate in the liturgy.

From the very beginning of the letter, Pope Francis strikes a warm, personal tone. The letter is written to the whole people of God, the Church. This includes everyone—not only bishops and priests but also religious and lay Catholics all over the world. It is written for you.

Why? The liturgy is important to the life of faith, not as something to admire from afar, but as a mystery that we enter and from which we continually draw life. As we shall see in the letter, the pope affirms that all the baptized are "celebrants" of the liturgy. It is therefore our privilege and calling to continually deepen our understanding of the mystery we celebrate and allow it to lead us into wonder and joy. The liturgy forms us for faithful living.

Pope Francis does not set out to treat the vast subject of liturgy exhaustively. He invites us instead to enter into a personal and prayerful dialogue, offering us "prompts or cues" for our own reflections on the beauty and truth of the liturgy (1). The letter is therefore more like a spiritual retreat, with Pope Francis as our director, than it is like a lecture or classroom experience.

Over the course of a retreat, the director or facilitator gives the retreatants several talks to orient them to the central themes of the retreat. It is the task of the retreatants

themselves, however, to pray with the “prompts or cues” they have been given. By opening their hearts to the Holy Spirit, who is always present to guide them, they arrive at new insights and form firm intentions concerning how to act in the future. The Spirit is the unspoken third party in a retreat, and indeed its true director.

As you read the letter, therefore, be aware that you are being invited to do something in response to Pope Francis’s “prompts or cues.” Take these insights into your prayer. Let them color your liturgical experience and engage your imagination. Exercise your intellect and will with respect to the liturgy, avoiding pitfalls and focusing on the right things. Most of all, open your heart to the Holy Spirit so that your reflections will bear good fruit.

The liturgy has been celebrated for many centuries and therefore, naturally, a specialized vocabulary has grown up around it. The liturgy has also been the subject of reflection by many theologians, church leaders, and saints throughout Christian history and up to the present day. Pope Francis draws on this vocabulary and takes part in this rich ongoing conversation. He has a knack for the memorable phrase, and for putting things clearly so that ordinary people can understand what he means. Much of the letter will therefore appear to be self-explanatory. Nevertheless, the reader will gain a richer understanding of what Pope Francis is saying by knowing the vocabulary and context out of which he speaks. The purpose of this guide is to draw attention to things in the letter that the reader might otherwise miss, and to provide explanatory context for some of the expressions and affirmations contained within it.

The entire text of Pope Francis’s letter is included here, with commentary following each unit of the text. Specialized language (“terms to understand”) will be noted and explained at the end of each section. You may be using

this book for your private reflection or as a resource for discussion and sharing. To help you engage with the letter, questions for personal reflection and for group discussion follow each section of the commentary. Their goal is to help readers explore connections between what the pope is saying and their own experience.



APOSTOLIC LETTER

DESIDERIO DESIDERAVI

OF THE HOLY FATHER

FRANCIS

TO THE BISHOPS, PRIESTS AND DEACONS,
TO CONSECRATED MEN AND WOMEN
AND TO THE LAY FAITHFUL

ON THE LITURGICAL FORMATION
OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

*Desiderio desideravi
hoc Pascha manducare vobiscum,
antequam patiar* (Lk 22:15)

1. My dearest brothers and sisters,

with this letter I desire to reach you all—after having written already only to the bishops after the publication of the *Motu Proprio Traditionis custodes*—and I write to share with you some reflections on the liturgy, a dimension fundamental for the life of the Church. The theme is vast and always deserves an attentive consideration in every one of its aspects. 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.

The Liturgy: the “today” of salvation history

2. “*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.*” (Lk 22:15) These words of Jesus, 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.

3. Peter and John were sent to make preparations to eat that Passover, but in actual fact, all of creation, all of history—which at last was on the verge of revealing itself as the history of salvation—was a huge preparation for that Supper. Peter and the others are present at that table, unaware and yet necessary. Necessary because every gift, to be gift, must have someone disposed to receive it. In this case, the disproportion between the immensity of the gift and the smallness of the one who receives it is infinite, and it cannot fail to surprise us. Nonetheless, through the mercy of the Lord, the gift is entrusted to the Apostles so that it might be carried to every man and woman.

4. No one had earned a place at that 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 absolute originality, of that Supper, the only truly new thing in history, which renders that Supper unique and for this reason “the Last Supper,” unrepeatabe. Nonetheless, his infinite desire to re-establish that communion with us that was and remains his original design, will not be satisfied until every man and woman, *from every tribe, tongue, people and nation* (Re 5:9), shall have eaten his Body and drunk his Blood. And for this

reason that same Supper will be made present in the celebration of the Eucharist until he returns again.

5. The world still does not know it, but everyone is *invited to the supper of the wedding of the Lamb* (Re 19:9). To be admitted to the feast all that is required is the wedding garment of faith which comes from the hearing of his Word (cf. Ro 10:17). The Church tailors such a garment to fit each one with the whiteness of a garment *bathed in the blood of the Lamb*. (Re 7:14). We must not allow ourselves even a moment of rest, knowing that still not everyone has received an invitation to this Supper or knowing that others have forgotten it or have got lost along the way in the twists and turns of human living. This is what I spoke of when I said, “I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” (*Evangelii gaudium*, n. 27). I want this so that all can be seated at the Supper of the sacrifice of the Lamb and live from Him.

6. Before our response to his invitation—well before!—there is his desire for us. We may not even be aware of it, but 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.

7. The content of the bread broken is the cross of Jesus, his sacrifice of obedience out of love for the Father. If we

had not had the Last Supper, that is to say, if we had not had the ritual anticipation of his death, we would have never been able to grasp how the carrying out of his being condemned to death could have been in fact *the* act of perfect worship, pleasing to the Father, the only true act of worship, the only true liturgy. Only a few hours after the Supper, the apostles could have seen in the cross of Jesus, if they could have borne the weight of it, what it meant for Jesus to say, “body offered,” “blood poured out.” It is this of which we make memorial in every Eucharist. When the Risen One returns from the dead to break the bread for the disciples at Emmaus, and for his disciples who had gone back to fishing for fish and not for people on the Sea of Galilee, that gesture of breaking the bread opens their eyes. It heals them from the blindness inflicted by the horror of the cross, and it renders them capable of “seeing” the Risen One, of believing in the Resurrection.

8. If we had somehow arrived in Jerusalem after Pentecost and had felt the desire not only to have information about Jesus of Nazareth but rather the desire still to be able to meet him, we would have had no other possibility than that of searching out his disciples so that we could hear his words and see his gestures, more alive than ever. We would have had no other possibility of a true encounter with him other than that of the community that celebrates. For this reason the Church has always protected as its most precious treasure the command of the Lord, “Do this in memory of me.”

9. From the very beginning the Church was aware that this was not a question of a representation, however sacred it be, of the Supper of the Lord. It would have made no sense, and no one would have been able to think of “staging”—especially before the eyes of Mary, the Mother

of the Lord—that highest moment of the life of the Master. From the very beginning the Church had grasped, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that that which was visible in Jesus, that which could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, his words and his gestures, the concreteness of the incarnate Word—everything of Him had passed into the celebration of the sacraments. [1]



The brief Latin quotation from the Gospel of Luke with which the letter begins (and from which its name, *Desiderio desideravi*, is taken) introduces a theme of central importance to the letter. The desire of Jesus—the earnest desire of Jesus to eat the Passover meal with his disciples—is described as the crevice or crack, *spiraglio* in Italian, through which we can glimpse the profound love of the Trinity for us. *Spiraglio* can also mean a skylight, something that lets in the light.

By beginning not with our desire but with the desire of Jesus, Pope Francis highlights a fundamental truth: We gather at God's initiative. How many of us would spontaneously say to ourselves, "I am going to Mass because Jesus himself wants to share this meal with me"? Yet this is precisely what the Holy Father is asking us to meditate upon. The whole of Jesus' life and ministry, indeed the whole of salvation history, is coming to its culmination, and what is the one thing that Jesus earnestly desires? To share this meal with his disciples, and by extension to share it with all of us.

Make no mistake—this insight can change the way that we experience the liturgy. Coming to the liturgy becomes a response, rather than something we do on our own. It is an encounter with the risen Lord, who waits for us.

By placing the desire of Jesus in first place, this theme of the letter bears a striking resemblance to the passage on prayer found at the outset of the fourth section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see paragraphs 2560–61). There, the image of the woman at the well is used to make the point that prayer begins not with our thirst for God, but with God's thirst for us. The section on prayer, considered by many as the most poetic and beautiful portion of the *Catechism*, was written by Jean Corbon (1924–2001), a Catholic liturgical theologian who was also the author of the influential book *The Wellspring of Worship*. Although Francis does not mention him explicitly, Corbon's influence can be felt in this section.

According to Francis's presentation, the "burning desire" of Jesus draws us in, yet it also sends us out. In paragraph 5, he speaks of the missionary option, referencing his 2013 encyclical letter *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii gaudium*) in which he proposed that we all should regard ourselves as missionary disciples (EG 120). We not only receive a grace-filled invitation to meet Jesus in the liturgy. We also are called to become his ambassadors, extending that same invitation to others, until all people know that they are truly and personally invited to share in this paschal meal with Jesus.

Although Francis invites a vivid awareness of the meal as it was shared on the night before Christ suffered, he hastens to add that the liturgy is not, and has never been, a dramatic reenactment or "staging" of the story of the Last Supper (9). It is, rather, a sacramental celebration by means of which the whole saving mystery of Christ becomes present to us.

The liturgy makes present the mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. But it does more than this. It also enables us to grasp the meaning and significance of these things. The shared meal interprets Christ's total self-gift on Calvary in obedience to the Father (which Francis calls "the act of perfect

worship”), as well as his resurrection. The Eucharist “opens [our] eyes” to see the Risen One (7). The Church therefore must continue to be faithful to the command of Jesus to “Do this in memory of me”—a command Francis describes as the Church’s “most precious treasure” (8).

Terms to Understand

Traditionis custodes—This is Pope Francis’s 2021 Motu Proprio (a statement from the pope bearing his personal decision) addressed to the bishops of the world. It strictly limited the use of the Tridentine liturgy, sometimes called “the Old Latin Mass.” In *Traditionis custodes*, Francis abrogated the 2007 decision of Pope Benedict XVI to allow the older rites and the reformed rites to exist on equal footing as two forms of the same Roman Rite (the so-called “extraordinary form” and “ordinary form”). The Motu Proprio establishes the post-Vatican II liturgy as the sole expression of the *lex orandi* (the law of worship), and calls on all the bishops, as “guardians of the tradition” (which is what the Latin title, *Traditionis custodes*, means), to guide their people to embrace it. After consulting with the bishops of the world, Pope Francis determined that a broader use of the pre-Vatican II rites was, contrary to Pope Benedict’s expectation, fostering division and promoting hostility toward the Council itself. Francis therefore felt obliged to intervene.

His apostolic letter on liturgical formation, *Desiderio desideravi*, is the sequel to *Traditionis custodes*. In it he turns from questions of church discipline to theological and pastoral themes. The two documents together form a single initiative aimed at reestablishing a coherent

liturgical practice and enhancing the Church's appreciation of the richness that awaits us in the celebration of it.

The "today" of salvation history—Liturgy makes the saving work of Jesus Christ present to us today. Although the Christ event took place in history, some two thousand years ago, that work of God does not remain only in the past, but is made real for us right now, in the present, through the liturgy. The Christmas liturgy, for example, proclaims that "*hodie Christus natus est*" (Christ is born today). The Easter liturgy declares that Christ is risen today. These are not merely anniversaries or memorials to the past; they are moments of encounter through which the faithful gain access to the reality of God's saving work in the present. The "pascha," or Passover of Christ, occurred in history but it transcends all time and space. The crucifixion, and indeed the entire mystery of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, becomes available to us through the liturgy. We touch the mystery here.

Bread broken—This expression is a shorthand way of referring to the Eucharist. It has a venerable place in liturgical history, as it can be traced all the way back to the first-century document the *Didache*. Pope Francis uses the expression several times in the letter. His ease in doing so demonstrates the success of the Liturgical Movement of the twentieth century, which fostered a "return to the sources" of liturgical history (*ressourcement*). The expression is important in itself too, because it draws attention to an essential aspect of the Eucharist. "Bread broken" points to the Eucharist's communal nature. Bread broken is bread shared. As the liturgical theologian Goffredo Boselli observed in his book, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy: School of Prayer, Source*

of Life, it is precisely in its being broken and shared that the sign of bread achieves its fullness in the Eucharist. Later in the letter, Francis joyfully points out: "From Sunday to Sunday the energy of the Bread broken sustains us in announcing the Gospel" (65).

Questions for Personal Reflection

- Imagine what it might feel like to be personally invited by Jesus to share in the Eucharist. What comes to mind, and what feelings arise in your heart, when you think of this?
- Are you ready to say yes to that invitation? What factors might hold you back?

Questions for Group Discussion

- "No one had earned a place at that Supper," Pope Francis reminds us in paragraph 4. Our invitation to the Eucharist is pure gift. Why is this insight important?
- In paragraph 7, Francis says that the first disciples could never have comprehended the meaning of the cross if it were not for the meal they shared with Jesus. What do you think this means? How does Eucharist help us to understand the cross and resurrection of Jesus?
- In paragraph 5, Francis expresses great urgency about inviting all people to share in the Supper of the Lamb: "We must not allow ourselves even a moment of rest, knowing that still not everyone has received an invitation to this Supper or knowing that others have forgotten it or have got lost along the way in the twists and turns of human living." Does this concern resonate with your own experience? What are some effective ways we can reach