

Liturgical Participation of God's People

The Origins of "Active Participation"

The Mass as we celebrate it today was carefully crafted in the 1960s following principles outlined at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). However, the impetus to begin this transformation started much earlier. More than 50 years before the Council there was a movement in Europe and the United States to renew the liturgy of the church. This movement reached its culmination with the proclamation of the first document of this Council entitled the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*.

If the goals of the liturgical movement and the message of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* could be summed up in two words, it would be these: "active participation." Chapter 14 says, "In the reform and promotion of the liturgy ... full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else." This very strong statement is as true today as it was 40 years ago. The phrase "active participation" was not something chosen at random in 1963, nor was it the first time it had been used in official Vatican documents. In 1903, this phrase was coined by Pope Pius X in a document he wrote, *Tra le Sollecitudini (Among the Concerns)*, about the importance of music in the liturgy.

Why was this concept of active participation so important to these liturgical reformers? The format for the celebration of the Mass before the reform movement came from the Council of Trent (1545- 1563). The "Tridentine Rite" of the Mass was created during a difficult time in the church when the church was more concerned with the valid celebration of the Mass than with the participation of the people.

Lay participation at Mass was not considered important in order to show that the Mass was

valid even when celebrated by the priest alone. Because of the focus on the priestly role at Mass, the Mass was celebrated in Latin even though no one spoke the language. Translations of the Mass into modern languages were not permitted until the late 1800s under Pope Leo XIII.

In 1947, Pope Pius XII responded to the liturgical movement with a visionary encyclical (letter) on the liturgy entitled *Mediator Dei*. The pope spoke eloquently of the liturgy as an act of public worship, including all of its members. He stressed the importance of both interior and exterior participation by everyone at Mass.

Pope Pius XII understood both the physical and spiritual elements of human nature. He recognized the need for external – that is bodily – participation in the liturgies of the church, and stressed the interior – that is spiritual – participation so that the worshipers can be transformed to be Christ-like.

In 1951, Pope Pius XII reformed the liturgies of Holy Week, restoring their ancient meanings and settings. He also allowed for the "dialogue Mass" in which the priest would pray the prayers in an audible voice and the people would respond with the altar servers.

Pius XII's letter represented a great step forward in the liturgical movement. Many of the ideas of the movement, especially active participation, were becoming church policy. But while the letter encouraged the people in the pews to follow along at Mass, it did not propose any concrete changes to allow people to understand the Mass and participate in it more fully. However, Pius X and Pius XII did pave the way for something greater to occur in the area of active participation: the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which called for the full, conscious, and active participation of all the people at Mass.

What does the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* say about Active Participation of the People?

This first of all the Council documents states that the "... full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations [is] called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Peter 2:9) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism." (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* [CSL] 14)

What does the *Constitution* mean when it says that participation is called for "by the very nature of liturgy"? It means that the liturgy by its nature is a communal action. Communal liturgical celebrations are always preferred to "private" ones. Liturgy is at its best when the people are gathered together with their bishop, and all those present are fully participating in the celebration (CSL 26, 29, 41).

In order to participate, the liturgy needs to be understood, and so the CSL allowed for liturgy to be celebrated in the vernacular, or local languages of the people. Pope Paul VI gave a speech in Saint Peter's Square in March of 1965 in which he remarked that the use of local languages had been judged by the church "to be necessary to make its prayer understandable and grasped by all. The good of the faithful calls for this kind of action, making possible their active share in the church's worship." The pope went on to say that the use of common languages "means that you, the faithful ... may be able to unite yourselves more closely to the church's prayer, pass over from being simple spectators to becoming active participants." (Paul VI, "Remarks at the Angelus ..." 7 March, 1965. DOL, n.399)

In order to make sure that people could better participate in the liturgy, the *Constitution* called for an updating of the church's liturgical celebrations: "In this reform both texts and rites should be so drawn up that they express more clearly the holy things they signify and that the Christian people, as far as possible, are able to understand them with ease and to take part in the rites fully, actively, and as befits a community." (CSL 21)

But how did the *Constitution* envision the people's active participation? "To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons and songs, as well as by actions, gestures and bearing. And at proper times all should observe a reverent silence." (CSL 30) Appropriate moments of silence for prayer during the liturgy were also mentioned as a form of active participation.

Each Sunday, millions of people around the world participate in the Mass. They listen to God's word, sing psalms and acclamations, take part in the offering, and process forward to receive Communion. All of these actions and rites were reformed in the years after the promulgation of the *Constitution* so that all present can better participate in the liturgies of the church.

Paths to Participation

Language – Keep it Simple: Language is very important to the liturgy, but it must be remembered that we come into the presence of God with our bodies as well as our minds. Participation involved *body* language as well as *spoken* language.

All celebrations of the church involve spoken words, but sometimes unnecessary words are added to the liturgy. The prayers of the Roman Rite are meant to be noble, simple and succinct. Therefore, the words of the liturgy

should be used to enhance, not obscure, the Divine Presence.

Signs and the Senses: The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* affirms that, “In the liturgy, by means of signs perceptible to the senses, human sanctification is signified and brought about in ways proper to each of these signs ...” (CSL 7) In liturgy, tasting, touching, smelling, listening, walking and standing are just some of the examples of liturgical body language that are required to insure full participation.

The entire body needs to be engaged at liturgy. Whether we are kneeling in a penitential mode, sitting up attentively to listen to the readings, or standing in honor of the proclamation of the Gospel, our body posture should reflect that we are engaged members of the worshipping community and not mere spectators. When we process up the aisle preparing to “taste and see” the risen Lord of the Eucharist our senses become profoundly aware that we are taking to ourselves that which is our great Mystery of Faith.

Symbols and Sacraments: Symbolic language is used at liturgy, too. Symbols have a language all their own which does not involve words. The same symbol can mean different things simultaneously to different members of the same community. When we enter into the language of symbols, we enter into communion with Christ himself and the entire church.

Through signs and symbols and especially the Sacraments, we meet Jesus whenever we celebrate a Sacrament or a liturgy of the church. It is important to reflect on that meeting with Christ afterwards. This process of reflecting on what we experience in the liturgy, which we call mystagogy, has been practiced by the church since its beginning. It is most effective when we reflect with others because then we can learn from others and discern God’s will in our lives.

Culture: An important aspect of the active participation of God’s people in the liturgy is attending to the cultural context in which the celebration takes place. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his 2007 Exhortation on the Eucharist (*Sacramentum Caritatis*), the participants at the 2005 Bishops Synod on the Eucharist “frequently stressed the importance of the active participation of the faithful in the Eucharistic sacrifice. In order to foster this participation, provisions may be made for a number of adaptations appropriate to different contexts and cultures.” Whether those adaptations are made in preaching, in catechesis, or in liturgy preparation, awareness of the cultural, economic and social diversity of the assembly is a crucial factor in fostering participation of all in both the liturgy and the life of the local community.

Liturgical Environment: In 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published a document about the environment of our church buildings entitled *Built of Living Stones*. In chapter 31, it states: “The church building fosters participation in the liturgy. Because liturgical actions, by their nature, are communal celebrations, they are celebrated with the presence and active participation of the Christian faithful whenever possible. ... The building itself can promote or hinder the ‘full, conscious and active participation’ of the faithful.” The shape and design, lighting and color, furnishings and freedom to move will have a definite impact on the ability of the community to actively participate in the liturgy. A church building needs to be constructed with both appearance and liturgical usage in mind.

Music: The recent statement on liturgical music of the U.S. Bishops, *Sing to the Lord*, underscores the important role played by musical participation at worship. “Christ, whose praises we have sung, remains with us and leads us through the church doors to the whole world ... Inspired by sung participation,

the body of the Word Incarnate goes forth to spread the Gospel.” (STL 8,9). When people sing at Mass, they are not just making music, they are participating in the prayer of the liturgy.

Sing to the Lord addresses both internal and external participation. Listening to prayers voiced by the priest celebrant or music sung by the choir is a form of internal celebration (STL 12). At other times “our participation must also be external, so that internal participation can be expressed and reinforced by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes, and by the acclamations, responses and singing.” (STL 13)

Conclusion

The better the celebration of the liturgy, the more there is on which to reflect. A liturgy is better celebrated not only when the ministers do their roles well, but especially when the people participate fully through all the various liturgical languages. That is why a liturgy needs not only to be done correctly, but also needs to be rich and expressive in order to touch our hearts and minds. This is the challenge and opportunity the liturgy presents to each of us every time we come to the Mass. The language of the liturgy is more than just words. Poetic and symbolic, liturgical language is something we need to *enter into* more than *understand*. It speaks through mind and body, through sacrament and symbol, through all of the senses. To be a fully conscious and active member of the assembly, one needs to be able to speak the language of the liturgy in its many forms.

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