

Encouraging the Assembly to Full Participation



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Recently I sat down to lunch with several priests, all pastors. I mentioned that I was working on this article concerning the full participation of the assembly in the liturgy and asked if they had some thoughts on the subject. They chimed in straightaway with the difficulty in getting their parishioners to take a greater role in worship—in singing, in reading the Scriptures, in greeting one another. One commented that it seems people come together to pray individually. Through the meal the conversation presented such problems and attempts at solutions. But by the time the coffee arrived, the conversation

shifted to a concern with the clergy. One priest noted that parish priests need to work on their skills and understanding of the liturgy. He suggested hosting a day for priests and deacons to discuss the liturgy, both in theory and practice. Perhaps some of them could demonstrate their presiding and preaching, have it recorded on camera, and follow up with a group evaluation. And so we paid the bill and made tentative plans for a future meeting.

Later, it occurred to me that most of the conversations I hear around the topic of “active participation” begin with a concern for the laity’s level of participation: how to animate them, involve them more, get them to do more. However, in rereading *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), it becomes clear that the discussion of active participation begins not with the laity but with the clergy. The Second Vatican Council strongly recommends the proper training of seminarians and the ongoing formation of priests in the practice of the liturgy. In this essay, as we discuss ways to encourage the assembly to full participation, it will help to structure the discussion in three parts. First, we will review the meaning and significance of this commonly used phrase, “active participation.” Second, we will look at the role of the clergy in encouraging full participation. Third, we will suggest some steps to encourage full participation throughout the assembly. This discussion will focus upon the Sunday Liturgy of the Eucharist. Along the way, I will recommend a few books for further reference. I hope that this article revives an ongoing interest in our rich liturgical tradition and excites our hunger for the Lord.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “FULL, CONSCIOUS, AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION”

As readers of this magazine well know, the Second Vatican Council in its first document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, proclaimed a renewed understanding of Roman Catholic worship with the following statement:

The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations 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 Pt 2:9; see 2:4–5] is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. (SC, 14)

The reference to “participation” has been called the refrain of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, occurring at least fifteen times throughout the document.

Theologian Massimo Faggioli renews the discussion of “active participation” in his book, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium* (2012). He explains that the Eucharist is central to the Church because it creates union with God and communion among the faithful. Within this communion, the faithful should recognize their role as an integral part of the liturgical celebration. To be sure, the reform of the liturgy was not intended to be an accommodation to modern times, but a viable means for the faithful to experience the effects of the liturgy within the modern world. Faggioli explains that the liturgical reform was not concerned primarily with a



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Active participation in the liturgy is the way we express ourselves as the Body of Christ.

reform of the rites and rubrics but with reforming the place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. The Church is reformed by its worship.

Consequently, one image that emerged from this reform is that of the priesthood of the people. Archbishop Piero Marini writes, “The faithful do not receive permission from priests to participate in the Mass. They are members of a priestly people, which means they have a right to participate in offering the sacrifice of the Mass.” (See his book, *A Challenging Reform: Realizing the Vision of the Liturgical Renewal, 1963–1975*.) The purpose of “full, conscious, and active participation” is to enable the assembly to fulfill their role as a priestly people.

We participate in liturgy because we are “liturgical animals.” I take this idea from James K. A. Smith. (See his book, *Desiring the Kingdom of God: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*.) Smith writes, “Before we think, we pray. That’s the kind of animals we are, first and foremost: loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals who, for the most part, do not inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines. . . . we pray before we believe, we worship before we know—or rather, we worship in order to know.” Worship is a way of knowing, a way of learning about our faith, of who God is and how we respond to the One who gave us life and who sustains our lives. We worship in order to stand in relationship with God. This is why participation is important. Active participation is not something added on to the Mass simply to enliven the liturgy; it is fundamental to how we express ourselves as members of the Body of Christ.

Furthermore, the celebration of the liturgy is countercultural. It rubs against the grain of expressive individualism, which emphasizes the individual over the community. This attitude is prevalent in Western culture. In contrast, genuine Christian worship focuses upon our corporate identity and forms us as the Body of Christ. We are one, for example, as we dare to say “Our Father . . .” Liturgy is also countercultural in that it defies the efficient use of time. Here we are not trying to control time. Rather than squeezing as much as we can in the shortest amount of time possible, we take our time, attending to our words and actions. Unfortunately, we will still hear praise



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Communal singing allows us to express the appropriate emotion for the season, for example, longing during Advent, and joy during Easter Time.

for a certain priest because “he gets us out of church in thirty-five minutes!” This attitude follows a fast-food model: our obligation for sustenance has been filled cheaply and quickly. However, for those of us who treat liturgy more as a celebration than an obligation, we are willing to take our time. We welcome brief intervals of silence to savor the Scripture. We do not simply “say” the prayers and responses from rote memory, but “pray” them, pronouncing the words as we address the Lord and express our faith. We participate in the sacrament.

In a way, prayer is like food: it takes on new meaning when it is shared slowly. There is a time and place for eating—as well as for praying—alone. However, when we come together, either for a meal or for worship, each takes on a new meaning. The activity of eating or praying together helps to forge a bond among the participants. When shared this way, we are concerned not only with the food or the prayer itself, but with the participation in the activity as well: “take . . . and eat.” Liturgy is countercultural as we try, for just one hour, to leave our worldly ways of individualism and stand together in the presence of God as the Body of Christ. It is not enough to *think* about our unity; we must *act* upon it, expressing our faith through active participation.

THE PRIEST’S PART IN FULL PARTICIPATION

But before we turn to the full assembly, let us look at the role of the clergy in fostering full participation. I can recall a meeting of

clergy within a certain diocese, the purpose of which was to prepare the priests and deacons for the implementation of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*. During the discussion, a priest who was bothered by so much attention to detail, spoke up, hoping to offer a solution to this clerical morass. He announced, “Good liturgy is simple: you read the black and do the red.” He thus reduced Christian worship to a simple matter of reciting a text and following the stage directions. Is that the reason a seminarian spends so much time in study and prayer—to read from a script?

On the contrary, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* makes clear that there is more to good worship than following the black and the red. “Pastors must therefore realize that when the liturgy is celebrated something more is required than the mere observance of the laws governing valid and lawful celebration; it is also their duty to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects” (SC, 11). This is not to suggest that the pastor should ignore the black and red; of course, he should adhere to the text. But I prefer the advice of a bishop addressing a group of young men whom he was about to ordain to the diaconate. He wished for them that some day they would come to “*pray*, not just *say*, the Mass.” Learning to pray the Mass is a matter of cultivation; it does not happen automatically upon ordination, but emerges from the priest’s experience and reflection.

Following the Council, then, we could say that one starting point for the encouragement of the assembly to full participation is found in the seminary with the proper formation of the clergy. This formation should not be taken lightly. The Constitution makes clear that the study of liturgy should be compulsory and that it should constitute one of the principal courses of the priest’s theological foundation. It stands to reason, then, that the instructors who are appointed to teach these courses must be properly trained in institutes that are specifically designed for this purpose (SC, 15–16).

Moreover, this training should continue throughout the lives of the ordained: “Priests . . . are to be helped by every suitable means to understand ever more fully what it is they are doing in their liturgical functions; they are to be aided to live the liturgical life and to share it with the faithful entrusted to their care” (SC, 18). Generally speaking, many licensed professionals are required to undergo a regular updating within their fields, and many of them are evaluated for their work. Should not all priests have the same opportunity? Since the reform of the liturgy, as mentioned earlier, is not about simply revising the black and red, but renewing the assembly, likewise, the ongoing formation described here has more to do with the reform of the pastor in his ongoing vocation as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is this life of discipleship that he shares with the faithful.

From this deepened appreciation of the sacred rites, the pastor shares his vocation with the faithful. Accordingly, he “must promote the liturgical instruction of the faithful and also their active participation” (SC, 19). Moreover, pastors have a responsibility to respect the structure of the liturgy. They lead the prayer of the Church. We should beware of personal innovation. As the Council advises, “There must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires

them; care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing” (SC, 23). Sometimes an innovation is introduced for the sake of encouraging greater participation. But this may pose a distraction from prayer, leaving some to wonder why we are doing this today. The question to ask is, “What does this mean?”; that is, what is the reason for deviating from the rite and doing it this way?

For example, not too long ago, as a fairly common practice, the congregation joined the priest in praying the Doxology aloud. Sometimes this sounded a trifle messy as some strong proponents of inclusive language refused to speak the male pronoun, leaving us with the awkward statement, “Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ . . .” This linguistic lesion aside, we could see one benefit of praying this together in that it creates a sense of inclusiveness and a vocal affirmation that the faithful offer the Mass with the priest. This may seem to be a good idea; however, it is not the purpose of the prayer. The Doxology concludes the Eucharistic Prayer with a Trinitarian structure, acknowledging that the assembly, with the priest, offers this prayer to the Father, through the Son, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The people, then, give their assent by announcing “Amen”; that is, the “Great Amen.” The people affirm what has just been prayed. In my experience, it seems that when the assembly joined in the Doxology, the “Amen” sounded rather weak. So, before considering an innovation, it would be helpful to ask “What does it mean?” The Eucharistic Prayer, including the Doxology, is a presidential prayer that is only celebrated by the priest, never by the people.

ENCOURAGING FULL PARTICIPATION OF THE ASSEMBLY

Here, now, are some practical suggestions to encourage full participation of the assembly. First, and perhaps foremost, singing is essential to our celebration. To be clear, the purpose of congregational singing is to unite the assembly. So, for example, the Entrance hymn serves to gather the people for prayer rather than to greet the priest. Many of us have heard of instances of the assembly hearing an instruction such as, “Please stand to greet our priest celebrant, Father Scirghi, with the hymn, ‘Hail Holy Queen.’” The purpose of the Entrance hymn is not to greet



All should be aware of the proper purpose of their role with an awareness of whom they serve.



The Communion procession should be viewed as a communal event.

the priest but to gather the people. Singing together is an embodied sign of our unity.

Moreover, music heightens our emotional awareness; communal singing allows us to express the appropriate emotions for our celebration. For example, in Advent, the song “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” expresses the longing of anticipation for the light of the world. Later in Lent, in sympathy with Jesus’s Death we sing, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” In contrast, to express the joy of Easter Time, we sing “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” With a common expression of emotion, singing in union will accomplish more than speech.

Second, we need to get our bodies into praying. John Baldovin explains, “our posture and gestures tell us as much about what we are doing as our words.” (See Baldovin’s book, *Bread of Life, Cup of Salvation: Understanding the Mass*, for a good discussion of the liturgy as an embodied exercise.) Can you imagine offering someone a personal welcome without a handshake or an embrace? Or imagine offering an expression of grief without a sad look or a soft tone of voice.

Our posture and gestures help to express the meaning of our prayer. During the recitation of the Creed, the congregation is to bow at the reference to the Incarnation. (This is true for both the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds.) What difference does such a posture make? Well, notice that sometimes we rush through those prayers that we say regularly, leaving us to wonder later if we prayed them at all. Using a gesture may help to slow us down a little and create more awareness of what we pray.

Third, to participate as one body we can make more use of the processions. Processions are symbolic in that they say something about us and what we are doing together. Three points in the Mass call for a procession: the Entrance, the Preparation of the Altar and Gifts, and Communion. The Entrance procession

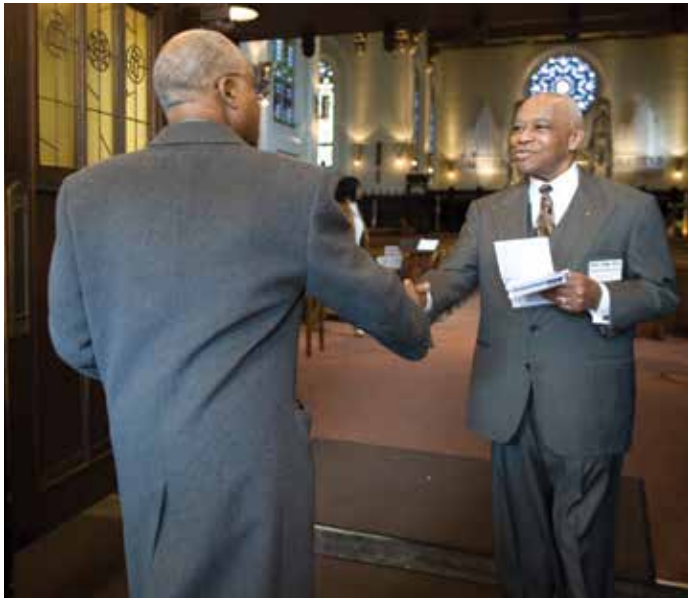


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The greeter's role is especially important, since the greeter is often the first member of the assembly that a visitor meets.

should show that we are gathering for a beautiful and joyful event. A procession filled with servers (including thurifer, cross, and candle bearers), readers, the choir, a deacon, and the presider, surrounded by a congregation in full voice, reflects this beauty. But in some parishes, the priest celebrant walks down the aisle alone. What message is given here?

The procession at the Preparation of the Altar and the Gifts should be planned. At the very least, the people who are to carry up the gifts should know of their assignment before the start of the liturgy. The last-minute drafting of members may reduce the presentation to a mere function. Also, at this point, some parishes have turned the collection into a procession. Instead of ushers passing around baskets in the pews, the members process to the sanctuary where large baskets are placed along the front step. Families and individuals come forward to deposit their collection envelopes in the basket. Music accompanies the procession.

The Communion procession should be seen as more of a communal event rather than a long line of individuals. Having received the Word of God, we respond by coming together to the table. That we sing during the procession helps to move us along together. Perhaps we can add to this sign of unity. At some parishes, the congregation will stand while people receive Communion. For large congregations, though, it may be cumbersome to stand for so long a time. In this circumstance, the people will continue to sing as they return to their seats after receiving Communion. Then, when people have received and returned to their places, the musicians raise the volume of the music and the congregation stands to sing the final verse of the song, marking the end of the Communion Rite. This move can smooth transition into the Prayer after Communion. With these examples, our gestures and posture may serve to enhance our prayer.

Fourth, we participate as active listeners. The assembly practices active listening with an attentiveness to the Word of

God proclaimed and preached. Reading the Scripture passages of the day before the liturgy will help the listeners to attend to the proclamation, as well as to the preaching. In one's reading of the Scriptures, certain words, phrases, or images may rise to the surface. Perhaps an insight is gleaned or a question posed. All this will help to focus the attention of the listener, allowing for greater participation. Many parishes publish the readings for the following Sunday in the bulletin. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' website, which posts readings for the following Sunday, is another good site. (See, www.usccb.org/bible/readings.)

A final word in general for the liturgical ministers: readers, servers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, greeters, choir, and musicians. Having the proper intention for these ministries is paramount. They provide a service for the faithful in praise of almighty God. The readers proclaim an ancient, inspired lesson to believers who need to remember their story; readers do not simply report the news; they proclaim good news. The servers should show reverence for the liturgy through their appearance and diligence. They act like good waiters with attention to detail and to those they serve, rather than like stage hands who need to work quickly between sets. The extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion present the Lord's Body and Blood. They hold the food of eternal life that should be served graciously. Finally, the greeters play an important role in that, usually, they are the first members of the congregation a visitor meets. Will they make all feel welcome, like a maitre d' of a fine restaurant, or do they simply hand out the bulletin? And if one is to greet the congregation from the sanctuary before the procession begins, it is best to start with something more welcoming than "Please turn off your cellphones." Rather, a cheerful "Good morning" and a brief reminder of why we come here today will be more effective. We should keep in mind that most people are not used to public speaking, which consists of more than reading words from a page written by another. To be sure, for all liturgical ministries, it is not a matter of performing these ministries in a way that we call attention to ourselves but is a matter of possessing the proper intention of our role with an awareness of whom we serve. In short, it should not be left to the priest celebrant alone to welcome the people and promote participation in our worship. The priesthood of the laity plays an important part as well.

In conclusion, we are familiar with the principle *semper reformanda*: the liturgy is "always reforming." And, as mentioned earlier, the reform of the liturgy has more to do with the ongoing formation of the assembly rather than a change to the translation or to the rubrics. Through our full participation in the sacred liturgy, we assume the role of a pilgrim Church ready to greet the Lord. ♦

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