

LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION

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The most solemn assembly of the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him in our times, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), strongly desires that the participation of the followers of Christ in liturgical celebrations should be full, conscious and active. What is meant by such participation? How does it show itself in liturgical gestures, singing and the observance of silence? In particular, what place is to be given to the reception of the sacraments, especially Penance and the Holy Eucharist? And what of the veneration of the Holy Eucharist outside Mass? We shall conclude with a brief listing of some helps to liturgical participation especially in terms of written texts.

1. Active Participation

It is very important that there be a proper understanding of what the Church means by active participation. The Second Vatican Council highlights this consideration: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people’ (1 Pet 2:9; cf 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14).

Such active participation shows itself in ever deeper understanding of what is being celebrated, in movements of the soul to share ever more and more that mind “which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), in desire and efforts to share with the Church in the celebration in question by joining in common gestures, in inner conversion of soul and in fervent reception of the sacraments.

Active participation does not therefore refer primarily to something external. It does not mean that as many people as possible should be visibly engaged in some action. It is not frenetic activism. “The real ‘action’ in the liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate”, says Cardinal Ratzinger, “is the action of God himself. This is what is new and distinctive about the Christian liturgy: God himself acts and

does what is essential...The uniqueness of the Eucharistic liturgy lies precisely in the fact that God himself is acting and that we are drawn into that action of God. Everything else is, therefore, secondary” (J. Ratzinger: *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, pp. 173,174).

Since the celebration of the mysteries of Christ is “the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (SC, 14), the active participation of the people in the sacred liturgy is given high priority by the Council. That great assembly goes into considerable detail to map out how priests, and therefore candidates to the priesthood, are to be properly prepared to give good leadership in matters liturgical (cf SC, 14-19).

2. Gestures and Common Action

Liturgical celebrations include gestures and common action such as moving, standing, sitting, kneeling, listening, singing, exchanging signs of peace, and moments of meaningful silence. The liturgy knows the sharing of roles such as those of the priest celebrant, the deacon, minor ministers, leaders of song, lectors and church wardens. The people of God gathered together are a praying community. It is, therefore, expected of each member to share in common gestures and to do what is expected of him or her in the various parts of the celebration.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal extols the importance of these common gestures: “The gestures and body posture of both the priest, the deacon and the ministers, and also of the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, and to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all” (GIRM, 42).

3. Singing in the Liturgy

Because of its special importance, liturgical singing deserves particular attention. When we sing together with other people, emotions are released and connections are deepened. When we sing together in the service of God, we manifest and promote our common calling in Baptism as the people of God, as members of Christ, as God’s family. Singing together in the praise of God promotes our unity in the Church, our worship of God. When the priest chants and the people reply,

and especially when they all sing together the *Our Father*, they manifest their unity as God's people.

This is different from people singing in a bar or in an auditorium, where they are right to sing to enjoy themselves or to entertain others. In a liturgical celebration, people sing to adore God, to beg his pardon for their offences, to thank him and to present to him their many requests for things material and spiritual. For this reason, it is important that the Church choir should not monopolize the singing, but should make room for the people to join, while admittedly leading them on.

Liturgical singing also manifests our joyful union and connection with our fellow Christians in another parish, diocese, country or even continent. We also show our union with the Church triumphant in heaven as well as with the suffering Church in purgatory.

4. Silence in the Sacred Liturgy

In liturgical celebrations, we sing, we read, we respond and we move in processions. But we also observe silence. Silence is part of the liturgy, not just as the absence of speech and action, but especially as silence with a content. The human being needs some periods of quiet in order to favour recollection, inward peace and fuller appreciation of what is taking place. The missal and other liturgical books, therefore, make room for moments of silence and sometimes expressly ask for them. The Second Vatican Council underlines the place of "a reverent silence" (SC, 30). The General Instruction of the Roman Missal directs that "sacred silence, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times" (GIRM, 45).

The reason for silence can differ according to the moment when it is indicated in the different parts of a celebration. In the Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass, and also at the invitation to pray, the reason is to allow people moments to recollect themselves. After the readings and after the homily, the moments of silence are meant to give people time to meditate on what they have heard. After people have received Holy Communion, a period of silence allows them to adore, thank and pray the Lord Jesus in their hearts.

The missal sees the role of recollection even before Mass begins: "Even before the celebration itself, it is a praiseworthy practice for silence to be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred celebration in a devout and fitting

manner” (GIRM, 45). Priests and other ministers will do well to attend to this directive. Also congregations should engage in social greetings after Mass outside the church building rather than inside the sacred place, especially when the Most Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the church.

Pope Francis made these and similar points in his address at the Wednesday General Audience of 10 January, 2018. “Silence”, he said, “is not confined to the absence of words but rather to preparing oneself to listen to other voices: the one in our heart and, above all, the voice of the Holy Spirit” (Address in *L’Osservatore Romano*, weekly English ed., 12 Jan., 2018,p.3)

5. Sacramental Participation

The seven sacraments are major liturgical celebrations which channel to us the graces of redemption won for us by our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Since Penance and the Holy Eucharist are the two sacraments which we receive often in the Christian life, they will be given longer reflection.

Penance is the Sacrament of God’s Mercy. In it we receive God’s pardon and assurance of restoration of grace to a person who has had the misfortune of falling into a mortal sin. “Those who approach the Sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labours for their conversion” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). The Christian who has offended God goes and kneels before the priest who, in the name of Christ and the Church, grants the repentant sinner pardon. The Church exercises this tremendous ministry through the priest because it is Jesus himself who gave his Church the power to forgive sins in his name. He said to his Apostles after his resurrection: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:22-23). The priest confessor is bound by the highest form of secrecy with regard to what he has heard in the confessional.

It is normal in the Christian life that a Catholic would go to receive this sacrament every month, not because he has any mortal sin, but because this sacrament gives forgiveness also of venial sins and furnishes the penitent with the graces needed to make steady progress in the spiritual life, since even the best of us has defects. In any case, any Catholic who has had the terrible misfortune to fall

into mortal sin, should approach this Sacrament of Reconciliation and Peace as soon as possible. Moreover, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “anyone who desires to receive Christ in the Eucharistic communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the Sacrament of Penance” (CCC, 1415).

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the greatest of the sacraments, “the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend” (St Thomas Aquinas, S.Th. III, 73, 3c). In this Most Blessed Sacrament. “the Body and Blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained” (Council of Trent [1551]; DS 1651). “The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist; by him she is fed” (John Paul II: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6). Jesus himself teaches us: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53).

A Catholic who wants to grow in the life of union with God has to take Jesus seriously and strive to receive him in Holy Communion often. As said above, a person in the state of mortal sin has first to approach the Sacrament of Penance and only after that dare to approach the communion rail. Saint Paul warned the Corinthians about the necessity of personal discernment before receiving the Lord in this venerable sacrament: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor 11:27-29).

In the reception of Holy Communion, Catholics are to be at their best in their manifestation of faith. It is Jesus that is being received. Around the world in the Latin Rite of the Church, the usual way is to receive Jesus on the tongue while kneeling. This helps to show our adoration, humility and faith. In countries where Eucharistic reception in the hand while standing is allowed, care is to be taken not to let any particles of the Sacred Host to fall on the ground. The correct theology is that Jesus is truly, really and completely present even in the tiniest particle. Carelessness, nonchalance and anything-goes way of dressing must not be allowed to creep in, because they would do damage to our Eucharistic faith.

Because of our firm faith in the Real Presence which remains also after Mass, the Latin Church had developed many forms of Eucharistic adoration and devotion

outside the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Prominent are visits to our Eucharistic Lord waiting for us in the tabernacle to adore him, to thank him, to make reparation for our offences, and to ask for what we need. Eucharistic Benediction, Holy Hour of Adoration, Processions and Congresses are also manifestations of faith and piety. "Adoration is not opposed to Communion", says Cardinal Ratzinger, "nor is it merely added to it. No. Communion only reaches its true depths when it is supported and surrounded by adoration. The Eucharistic Presence in the tabernacle does not set another view of the Eucharist alongside or against the Eucharistic celebration, but simply signifies its complete fulfilment" (J. Ratzinger: *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 90).

Reception of the other sacraments is of course also an important form of participation in the sacred liturgy. Christian parents should get their babies baptized soon after their entry into this world. As to Confirmation, diocesan arrangements should be respected regarding the timing. The Anointing of the Sick is due when an illness is grave, even if there is no immediate danger of death. Preparation for marriage and the actual celebration of the sacrament merit great attention from the young people and their parents. As for the Sacrament of Holy Orders, parents, please train your children well as generous and committed Catholics, so that some of your sons may enter the seminary; then leave the liturgical details to the bishop, his priests and the seminarians!

6. Practical Helps to Active Participation

As we come towards the end of these reflections, it is not superfluous to mention some practical helps to active participation in the sacred liturgy.

Knowledge of Holy Scripture is needed for a proper understanding of the liturgy. Exodus, manna in the desert, bread from heaven, serpent lifted up, covenant with God, people of God, passover, sacrificial lamb and even 40 days, are all concepts from the Old Testament which are essential in order to understand the work of our redemption in the New Testament. And how would a person hope to know the Lord Jesus, if he is ignorant of the Gospel? Rightly has Saint Jerome told us that "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*Commentary on Isaiah, Prol.:* PL 24, 17). It follows that to reap rich fruits from our liturgical celebrations, we should know the Bible. A fifteen-minute meditative reading of the Holy Scripture each day is advisable. Parents, why not donate the New Testament, or at least the Gospels, to your children on their birthday?

To follow the texts read at Holy Mass, a hand-missal is most helpful. With such, a person can prepare for the Mass of the day by reading the texts even at home, or on arrival in church before the priest and servers process in. One can also read the texts at home after Mass. A similar remark can be made regarding the other sacraments when one takes part at a celebration.

Is it not obvious that punctuality promotes participation. The person who gets seated ten minutes before the Mass begins has a better chance of following the celebration than another who arrives five minutes after the start of the sacred rite.

Suitable accommodation in church has its importance. Provision for the people to sit or kneel without too much inconvenience should be taken into account by the parish.

Respected brothers and sisters, it is a great honour for us to be able to take part in the celebration of the mysteries of Christ in his Church and by his Church. May the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Saviour, obtain for us the grace to do our part in order to participate in a way that is full, conscious and active, and in this way be blessed with the abundant graces of our redemption.

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