

## What is meant by Active Participation?

Who would you say is participating more actively in your Sunday liturgy: the reader who carries the Book of the Gospels in the entrance procession, proclaims the readings from Scripture, and leads the General Intercessions; or the person in the pew who does what all others in the assembly do, such as sing, listen to the readings, and receives communion? The question is an important one, for it centers on our understanding of the one liturgical principle “to be considered before all else” in the celebration of the sacred liturgy: active participation.

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, active, and conscious participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.... In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 14)” The history of the term “active participation” begins just over 100 years ago. It was Pope St. Pius X who, in a 1903 letter on sacred music (*Tra le sollecitudini*), first called for “the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” by the faithful. What he means by active participation in this letter specifically is the people’s participation in singing their parts at the Mass (n. 3). We can identify another way by which Pius X sought to further the goal of active participation by the people and for which he is better remembered, namely, by allowing for more frequent reception of communion by the laity in 1905 and lowering the age for first communion in 1910.

By looking at the origins of active participation, the Second Vatican Council’s meaning of the term will be better understood (as a side note, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was voted upon and approved by the council fathers on November 22, 1963, 70 years to the day that Pius X spoke of active participation in his letter on sacred music). The *purpose* of active participation is to “impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful” (n.1), and its *foundation* is the common priesthood of the baptized about which St. Peter speaks, calling the faithful “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own” (n. 14). The *place* of active participation is both internal and external (n. 19), soul and body, and the ways in which people are to actively participate are “by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence” (n. 30). Finally, the most “perfect form of participation in the Mass” is by receiving holy communion, “the Lord’s body from the same sacrifice” (n. 55).

The active participation described here is not necessarily that type of participation carried out by a liturgical minister. In fact, ministerial participation in the liturgy may distract from the type of participation described by the Council. There have been times when I was to sing the responsorial psalm, for example, and I was so nervous that all I could think about was the psalm I was to sing—rather than the introductory rites or the first reading. So, even if we are not serving as a liturgical minister, we are still able, even required, to participate actively by singing to the best of our ability, praying well, listening to the prayers and readings, being conscious of the meaning of the acclamations which we acclaim, and by receiving the sacraments in the best disposition possible. The only spectator, in fact, at the sacred liturgy, is God the Father. All others—God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, all the angels and archangels, the Blessed Virgin Mary, all the saints, and all of us in the earthly Church—have work to do, actively participating in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. This type of participation is not easy, but it is the best way to “derive the true Christian spirit” (n.14).

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