

Truly Celebrating Sacred Liturgy as “People of God”

An examination of “Full, Active, Conscious” participation in the Sacred Liturgy
in the Spirit of the Second Vatican Council

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed.” (CCC 1074) Partaking in the celebration of the liturgy, particularly the Eucharist and the Sacraments is an essential part of the lives of every Catholic. In recent years, there had been much debate between traditionalists and modern Catholics about Vatican II and the reforms of the liturgy. Yet, I do not think the debate on the extraordinary form of the liturgy or ‘Novus ordo Liturgy’ are relevant in discussions on Post-Vatican II liturgy. Rather, there are more urgent messages that arise from liturgical reforms of Vatican II. In reading *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is evident that Mother Church desires that the faithful have “fully, conscious, and active participation” in the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963, 14). *Sacrosanctum Concilium* did not desire any debate on the liturgy, but merely a reverent, an accessible, laity-friendly liturgy that would encourage catechesis and inclusive participation of all baptized members of the people of God in each celebration. Through that, the people of God may be able to truly live their baptismal call to holiness, and to share in Christ’s threefold ministry as priest, prophet, and king.

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* “did not appear ex nihilo and without warning, for it was the result of some four decades of liturgical reflection in the Roman Catholic Church.” (Jasper 2014, 108) Thus, full, conscious, and active participation of the liturgy was not something thought of on the spot during Vatican II. Such terms were already used in the early 20th century (Schuler 1997, 6). Reference to an “active participation” by the lay faithful was raised about 20 years before the Council in *Mediator Dei* by Pope Pius XII, stating, that through “active and individual participation [in the Liturgy], the members of the Mystical Body not only become daily more like to their divine Head, but the life flowing from the Head is imparted to the members.” (*Mediator Dei* 1942, 78) Going further back in time, this concept

originated from Pope Pius X's motu proprio on the Instruction of Sacred Music, *Tra le sollecituclini* in 1903 (Glendinning 2010, 298; see *Tra le sollecituclini* 1903, introduction).

However, a full, conscious, and active participation of the laity in the liturgy was already alluded to back in the Middle Ages. The fruits of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* may be an *aggiornamento*, especially with the reforms of the liturgy in the latter half of Pope Paul VI's pontificate, but it may have also been a *ressourcement*, an opportunity for the Church to go back to the sources. A call for an active participation on the part of the laity was already alluded to in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. (Faggioli 2012, 49) Fr. Conrad Murphy asserts that, "one can find within his [Aquinas'] writings the principles of a rich theological understanding of the liturgical life, one that anticipates much of modern papal magisterium." (Murphy 2019, 146) While the exact terms from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "fully, conscious and active participation" do not appear in Aquinas' texts, Murphy goes on to say that, "[Aquinas'] discussion of devotion in the liturgy is foundational to understanding how the faithful participate fully in liturgical action," (ibid. 146) and that, "in the modern papal magisterium, just as in the work of St. Thomas, this external participation is meant to lead to a similar internal participation, one that sparks a conversion of heart." (ibid. 161) In other words, Aquinas had already pointed out the need for one to participate internally, with full heart, mind and soul in the liturgy, not just mere spectators of a liturgical celebration. It is not solely enough to be present (externally), but also to be present in the mindset, being aware of what is happening in the liturgy and so come to realization of what one is partaking in (internally). Thus, a full, conscious, and active participation of the laity on Catholic liturgy has Thomistic foundations despite its lack of explicit mention on external participation (ibid. 163).

Though a full, conscious, and active participation by the laity was already referenced prior to Vatican II, a question some might ask is, "What did the Council mean by 'full, conscious and

active' participation by the lay people?" In the context of Vatican II, the involvement in the faithful in various aspects of the life of the Church was one of its principal themes. The baptized are "people of God," and thus, "all men are called to belong to the new people of God." (*Lumen Gentium* 1964, 14) Yet, this is not merely a title, but deep down, this speaks to the fact that the baptized share in the threefold ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king (see *LG* 13). These three ministries, and in a special way, the universal priesthood is best exercised in "receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity." (ibid. 10) Thus, it was in this spirit of Vatican II with "the new concept of the Church as 'people of God' and of the laity in its full liturgical ability started with the recognition that the rites' revision was necessary to favor the 'devout and active participation by the faithful.' (*SC* 50)" (Faggioli 2012, 38)

In emphasizing the notion of the "people of God," sharing in the threefold ministry of Christ, there came the realization that there needed to be a liturgy that would accommodate [1] "full" participation in which the faithful would contribute, and be engaged in "mind, body and spirit through the various movements of the celebration," (Bellow 2017, 36); [2] "conscious" participation that allows one to be aware of the meaning and purpose of the liturgical celebration (ibid.); and [3] "active" participation a "willingness to move and be moved in worship." (ibid.) In other words, "fully, conscious and active participation" in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (indirectly) alluding to the Aquinas' theology of internal and external participation in the liturgy, desired that the faithful not be mere spectators of liturgy, but truly have a part in the liturgy, so to better emphasize their role as "people of God," as people exercising their universal priesthood, and thus living out their baptismal call to be priest, prophet, and king.

It is with these points in mind about what composes a “fully, conscious and active participation” in the liturgy by the faithful that reforms of the liturgy post-Vatican II desired to reflect.¹ There have been developments in the liturgy even prior to the Council, seemingly little steps towards active participation of the faithful. One of these notably was the *Missa dialogata*, or dialogue Mass, which began with the pontificate of Pope Pius IX in 1922 (Glendinning 2010, 312) in which the faithful were able to respond in unison to the priest in specific parts of the Mass, instead of just the acolyte. Yet, while licit, it was the Congregation of Sacred Rites that, “discouraged its use on the basis of potential distraction for the celebrating priests and others engaged in devotional exercises.” (ibid. 313) However, later, in a “rescript,” the same Congregation noted that “although the rescript indicated that a dialogue Mass is itself praiseworthy, care should be taken to ensure that its celebration promotes devotion rather than cause further disturbance.” (ibid. 313-314) In 1969, the dialogue Mass, in the form that we know it today was promulgated.

Other examples of liturgical reforms in the spirit of Vatican II were the reorientation of the Mass from *ad-orientem* to *versus populum*, with the altar allowed to be placed amid the people. Post-Vatican II, “the congregation was to be gathered around the altar. Orientation was to be towards the sacrifice at the altar, not the God of the universe, somehow “beyond”. The real God was at the altar in his real presence.” (Bayldon 2005, 450) Thus the re-orientation in some ways

¹ It is worth noting the following passage, “The rubrics of the 1570 *Missale Romanum* made no provision for the external active participation of the faithful. Members of the assembly were encouraged to occupy themselves during Mass through communal prayers, such as the rosary, or by singing hymns which were often unrelated to the action at the altar. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced choral and orchestral masterpieces following the order of Mass, in addition to churches of renowned architectural splendor and elaborate decor, yet liturgical involvement on the part of the faithful remained largely passive. The liturgical movement began within this context, and as a response to it, by promoting a general restoration of the liturgy, active participation of the faithful, and the renewal of genuine liturgical piety.” (Glendinning 2010, 296-297)

In other words, the participation in the Mass by the faithful was only gradually introduced in the life of the Church in recent centuries and brought to fruition in Vatican II.

built into the concept of a “full participation,” expressing an external sign of the universal priesthood, gathering around the altar to celebrate Mass.

Vatican II also included extensive use of the vernacular in the liturgy, which was interestingly used at various times in the life of the Church (Faggioli 2012, 40). This was a step forward to modernizing the liturgy as “it was clear that Latin had become a relic for the vast majority of Catholics.” (ibid.) Alongside that, after Vatican II saw a wider range of biblical and missal translations, a variety of hymns as well as an emphasis on gestures and even moments of silence in the liturgy leading to the faithful’s active part. (ibid. 140) However, alongside these changes, Faggioli pointed out that since the earliest times of the Church, the liturgy was a form of evangelization and Catechesis. (ibid. 39) Thus, the reformed liturgy of Vatican II aimed at this, to allow a fuller and conscious participation, making the liturgy more “accessible” to the lay people. Again, these moves towards a reformed liturgy did not come ex nihilo from Vatican II, but rather, “The revision of liturgical books, the restoration of liturgical rites, the promotion of sacred music [as noted in the origins of active participation liturgy embedded within *Tra le sollecituclini*] and the active participation of the faithful all served as important precursors to a more intentional and pervasive reform following the Second Vatican Council.” (Glendinning 2010, 337)

However, the efforts towards a “fully, conscious and active participation,” was not without its critiques. Just the change in orientation for the celebration of Mass *versus populum*, though it was “far-reaching,” in terms of reaching out to the faithful and their participation, has been “misunderstood” by some. (Bayldon 2005, 451) A simple search on social media or webpages

reveal debates between *ad orientem* and *versus populum*, while disregarding the theology and spirit of Vatican II.²

Disregarding the concerns of traditionalists or ultra-conservatives, embedded within the Church more than 50 years after the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* are problems in truly bringing about a “fully, conscious and active participation” by the faithful. Bellow points out in her article that there seems to be a disconnect between Sunday Liturgy and a person’s weekday, in which Sunday Mass becomes merely a routine. A participating factor, she said, is the culture that is embedded within the society that one lives in (particularly in America, which Bellow writes from): Sunday is over, it is business as usual by Monday morning. Thus, there is a lack of a “full” and “conscious” participation of Liturgy. Bellow admits that these disconnects in the liturgy are “the weak links in promoting authentic liturgical celebration that move the people of God to holiness, that build up faith in the goodness of God and one another, that blesses each worshiper so that they in turn can bless others.” (Bellow 2007, 37) In other words she speaks to the fact that the disconnect of the liturgy prevents the faithful from bearing fruit from the liturgy that Vatican II envisioned. The notion of the “people of God” and the faithful sharing in the threefold ministry of Christ as “priest, prophet of king” was aimed at assisting the people to serve God in “holiness,” (see *Lumen Gentium* 1964, 9) and the liturgy is such means. A full and conscious participation in the liturgy, for Bellow, should allow the liturgy to be part of daily life, and bear fruit outside of the physical Church which is seemingly what Vatican II envisioned in speaking of full and conscious liturgy. Therefore, this disconnect and possibly Catechesis on the liturgy have been barriers that prevents a full implementation of Vatican II’s spirit from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

² This article from the *New Liturgical Movement: Facing the People as Counter-Catechesis and Irreligion* <http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2018/08/mass-facing-people-as-counter.html#.YG9ZehKhyw>, though not an academic source, does point to the misconceptions people have in regarding to *versus populum* Mass.

Another scholar, Msgr. Richard Schuler recognized that, “active participation by the laity has been constantly spoken of and promoted by a variety of means, some even perhaps too energetic.” (Schuler 1997, 6) Sometimes, in the process of engaging the faithful in a fuller, conscious and active participation in the liturgy, some clergy have gone beyond the rubrics and guidelines of the Church. Even though in many instances they are done out good intentions, going too far may give wrong statements on the Catholic Church’s position on the nature of the liturgy and sacraments. Some acts may have an ecumenical aspect,³ yet going beyond the Canon Law and liturgical rubrics endangers the nature of the liturgy because, “lex orandi – lex credendi (the law of prayer is the law of faith).” Such abuses not only endanger the faith of the faithful, but they may also detract from the liturgy, the “fully, conscious and active participation” of the faithful.

A “fully, conscious, and active participation” in the liturgy is the liturgical spirit that Mother Church had envisioned for centuries and brought into fruition by virtue of Vatican II and the post-Conciliar reforms of the liturgy even to this day. The Church, embracing this spirit of an inclusive liturgy thus desired that the faithful be more involved in the liturgy, not as spectators, but making the liturgy in a sense, more “accessible” to them via dialogue, vernacular translations, gestures, moments of silence... These features have allowed people to actively participate in the liturgy, that in turn would (and should) affect their daily Christian lives. Through encouraged catechesis, the Church envisioned that the faithful would become more conscious of the acts being undertaken, and thus, via conscious and active participation, would be able to partake fully in the Sacred Mysteries. As history has shown (Schuler 1997, Bellow 2007, 37), one recognizes that there have and continues to be road bumps in carrying out this spirit of the liturgy. Therefore, even

³ In 2004, the Vatican spoke out against “liturgical abuses,” specifically that of concelebrating the celebration of the Eucharist with “ministers of Ecclesial Communities.” (Anglican Journal 2004, 26) Though, ecumenism is a good intention, priests of other concelebrations do not concelebrate the Eucharist with Catholic priests, thus constituting a liturgical abuse.

to this day, the Church is still finding ways to further reinforce this concept of a “fully, conscious, and active participation,” in accordance with the pastoral needs of the people of the universal and local Church. Through this, partakers of the liturgy come to live up to their baptismal vocation, sharing in the universal priesthood, truly being “people of God,” as Vatican II envisioned.

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