

The Presence of Christ in the Assembly



The primary concern of active participation is to cultivate an interior disposition of praise and thanksgiving to God.

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The liturgical reform movement of the twentieth century restored the significance of the baptismal anointing of the faithful as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own” (1 Peter 2:9). Through the sacrament of Baptism all Christians share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. In the decades following the Second Vatican Council, two notions from the

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), “active participation” and the “priesthood of the laity,” have brought greater clarity to the purpose of Christian worship and to the role of the laity in the Church today. But they have also carried a fair amount of confusion. “Active participation” has been understood by some to mean physical activity, or activism, suggesting a need for more movement and song. However, more activity does not always lead to better liturgy. The “priesthood of the laity” has been translated by some to mean the duplication of the role of



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In evaluating our liturgies, we may ask whether the faithful are growing in their call to Christian living.

the ordained minister by a lay minister. It begs the question of the proper role of the lay minister within Catholic worship and within the greater mission of the Church. I hope to present in these pages a somewhat nuanced position for the purpose of furthering the discussion.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION VERSUS ACTIVISM

The goal of the Second Vatican Council was to intensify the daily growth of Catholics in Christian living. The Council explained, “In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. [Thus] . . . when the liturgy is celebrated, more is required than the mere observance of the [liturgical] laws . . . [but] that the faithful take part knowingly, actively and fruitfully” (CSL, 11).

The Council emphasized that while the liturgical laws and rubrics are to be respected, more importantly, the dispositions of the faithful gathering for worship are to be nurtured. In their words, “This full, conscious, and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else” (CSL, 14). We might think of the rubrics as the stage directions for the sacred drama. They provide the format by which we speak, move and act, freeing the assembly to worship God in unison. But the directions are no substitute for dispositions, the way the worshippers present themselves, individually and collectively, to the Lord. The purpose of active participation, then, is to foster these dispositions and to focus on our purpose: offering praise and thanksgiving to God. More recently, the *General Instruction of*

the Roman Missal (GIRM) echoed the Council as it directed the planning of the liturgy such that “it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and mind, a participation burning with faith, hope and charity . . . to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism” (GIRM, 18).

Clearly, we have moved far from the so-called “priest’s Mass” of the Middle Ages with the focus on the presider’s prayers and gestures. A glance at the *praenotanda* (the Instruction) from the Missal of Pope Pius V in 1570, illustrates the point. Here you will find three sets of instructions: first, general rubrics concerning the order of Mass with instructions for feast days, the choice of prayers, the color of vestments, and so on; second, instructions for priest and servers in celebrating the Mass; third, instructions concerning defects in the celebration of the Mass, for example, what to do if a consecrated host falls on the floor. However, you would find no instructions for the congregation: neither responses from the people, nor gestures or posture. Hence, this was known as the “priest’s Mass” because the priest “said” (or “read”) the Mass, and the people followed along as best they could, or they may have engaged in acts of personal piety, prayers, or devotions.

Four hundred years later, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy sought to carefully provide rubrics for the role of the people (CSL, 31). Moreover, it encouraged the faithful to participate in worship through prayer, that is, to either speak or sing the acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and hymns. The faithful are also encouraged to pray through bodily gesture and posture, as well as through observing a reverent silence (CSL, 30). Active participation promotes embodied prayer. We

pray with our whole bodies, not just with our minds and hearts. This is similar to the way we greet one another, not simply with words, but with eye contact, perhaps a smile, along with a handshake or an embrace. The language of the body conveys one's intentions. The same holds true for the way we greet the Lord and one another in the Lord's name and in the Lord's house. We must first get the body in place.

Congregational singing is one way we convey these intentions. Individually, singing engages more of the body than does speaking. Perhaps this is the reason Saint Augustine opined that those who sing pray twice. Collectively, singing is a sign of our unity, many voices blended in harmony. Gone are the days (or at least they should be) when the Mass began with the instruction for the assembly to stand and sing an entrance hymn to greet the presider. (The fallacy of this became clear to me when, on a Sunday morning in May, in a small church in which I was presiding, the congregation was summoned to "stand and greet the priest celebrant with the hymn "Hail Holy Queen.") The purpose of the entrance hymn is to gather the community, not to greet the presider.

Besides music, the development of the various liturgical ministries, such as lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and greeters, provide particular opportunities for promoting active participation. More broadly, it would help to think of the entire assembly in terms of liturgical ministry in that each member is called to manifest the Lord's presence (SC, 28). This is the way the Council imagines the gathering of the faithful on Sunday when it explains that we know the presence of Christ through the elements of bread and wine becoming the body and blood of the Lord, through the scripture proclaimed and preached, through the ordained minister, and through the assembly (CSL, 7). Here we are Christ for one another.

One problem that has emerged over time in implementing the full, conscious, and active participation of the assembly, stems from an interpretation of the word "active" to mean activism. This has led some to focus upon movement and music, speech and song, while ignoring the need for silence. Some worship communities have interpreted this activity to mean that more singing, clapping, holding hands, and movement throughout the nave and sanctuary are required. To be sure, physical activity is good if it fosters a greater awareness of our purpose rather than to focus on us alone. However, when this activity reduces sacred worship to a social meeting, something is wrong. Silence affords the opportunity to savor what we have heard, to take to heart our vocation as disciples. While active participation is usually expressed outwardly, its primary concern is to cultivate an interior disposition of praise and thanksgiving to God. The goal of active participation is to promote a greater awareness of ourselves as the living body of Christ.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE LAITY

The emphasis on active participation by the whole Church indicates that the liturgy is not reserved to the clergy but that the whole people of God has a priestly function which needs to be recognized and expressed (CSL, 14; GIRM, 91). Since Vatican II



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the Church has seen an increase in lay ministries in worship. Some consider this extended participation to be a sign of the future Church, with laypeople assuming a greater role in the faith life of the body of Christ. Others think of it as a temporary adjustment until vocations to the priesthood rise.

Nevertheless, the rise of lay ministry begs the question, how is the priesthood of the laity exercised? What does it look like? As mentioned earlier, a problem arises when lay ministry is thought to duplicate ordained ministry. Cardinal Francis Arinze, the former Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, in his instruction, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (RS), states the problem: "To be avoided is the danger of obscuring the complementary relationship between the action of clerics and that of laypersons, in such a way that the ministry of laypersons undergoes what might be called certain 'clericalization,' while the sacred ministers inappropriately assume those things that are proper to the life and activity of the faithful" (RS, 45). Likewise, the bishops of the United States, in their document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* (CVL), warn that the call to lay ecclesial ministry "should not foster an elitism that places lay ecclesial ministers above or outside the laity" (CVL, p. 26). Also, "lay collaboration with ordained ministers cannot mean substitution for ordained ministry"; rather, lay ministers should see their roles as complementary (CVL, pp. 14, 15).

What is unique to the laity, according to the bishops, is the secular character of their vocation. As the laity dwell in the ordinary circumstances of family, society, and their professions, they are called to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven (CVL, p. 8). They serve to bring the Church into the world and the world into conformity with God's plan (CVL, pp. 12, 26).



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In contrast to the role of the laity, the ordained ministers bear the responsibility of proclaiming the word of God and of rendering Christ present through sacramental worship (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4). However, while the ordained and laity serve in different ways, they serve the same purpose, namely, establishing the presence of God (Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* [New York: Continuum, 2003], p. 157). Note that describing the relationship of the two orders as complementary needs to be examined more closely. It would help to avoid the clichéd image of the bridegroom and bride, often used when discussing complementarity. This image does not work anymore. Within modern understanding, marriage entails a reciprocal relationship in which love and leadership are shared. Perhaps a better image for the Church is that of the people of God as one human family (Lakeland, p. 172).

Moreover, as we see the sacred permeating the secular, and recognize the complementary roles of ordained and laity, we realize that the lay minister's role should not be defined relative to that of the priest. Likewise, Christian worship is instrumental to the ministry of the entire work of the Church in the secular world.

LAY LITURGICAL MINISTRIES

According to the U.S. bishops, "Lay women and men . . . cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community" (CVL, p. 9). Also, in an earlier document, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (1978), the bishops note that the different ministries within the liturgy recognize the gifts and talents required for worship. All of these ministers are servants of the assembly. Furthermore, returning to the Second Vatican Council, we find in *Lumen Gentium* (LG) a reminder to pastors that they are not expected to shoulder alone the mission of the Church. Rather, they are to shepherd the faithful and recognize their gifts so that all may cooperate in the mission of the Church

(LG, 30). So, the sacred subsists within the secular; the ordained and lay ministers cooperate in service to the human family.

Finally, we should end with a note of humility for, according to the bishops, "The Church's experience of lay participation in Christ's ministry is still maturing" (CVL, 15). Perhaps this is another instance of the axiom *semper reformanda*: the liturgy is always reforming. And while we follow the rubrics we also focus on nurturing the dispositions that promote the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful in worship. We may need to embrace ambiguity, a middle ground between chaos and order. Ruth Page, in her book *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1985) comments that "the world we experience is not so much ordered as . . . capable of being ordered Ambiguity encompasses both the necessity for order . . . and the actual existence of diverse and fluid orders which may be variously understood" (Page, p. 11). So, in the evaluation of our liturgies we might ask the question "Does it work?" Are the faithful offering praise and thanksgiving to God? Are they growing in their call to Christian living? Do they perceive themselves as one human family with distinct roles in service to God and to one another? Are they able to receive the living word of God and respond first, by gathering around the table in true communion, and then, after being dismissed, to reveal the sacred in the secular? If these proper dispositions are present, then we can say that our worship works, and that we are "a royal priesthood, a people of God's own."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Is the principle of active participation practiced well in my community of worship? Does it foster the proper interior disposition, or does it merely promote activism?
2. Does the liturgical celebration allow for appropriate periods of silence?
3. How do we encourage the congregation to sing?
4. Does the community have the means to call forth charisms from its members, recognizing their gifts as teachers, readers, or preachers for the benefit of the assembly?
5. Does the community take the time to evaluate its liturgy, assessing its strengths and weaknesses in order to improve the experience of worship? ♦

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