

Active participation in the Holy Mass

Introduction: On Dec. 4, 1963, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* was promulgated by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. The first chapter of this document explains the meaning of active participation by the faithful in the sacred liturgy. The Council Fathers wrote these important words: “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully 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 redeemed people’ (1 Pt 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. ... for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (14).

Communal celebration: In the Catholic liturgy, divine worship is a communal celebration. The priest acts “in the person of Jesus Christ” and takes the place of the Head of the Body of Christ. The rest of the Body—the baptized faithful—are present as conscious and active participants, rather than as mere observers. The faithful are encouraged to participate so that: “*when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive his grace*” (33). The assembled faithful, then, should not just be at Mass ... as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration” (33). The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), published in 2002, states that the assembled faithful should be made “ever more holy by conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the mystery of the Eucharist” (5).

Active participation in the Mass: Though many of us simply assume that “active participation” is the equivalent of “doing something,” it is not. The saintly Pope who conceived the phrase “active participation in the Mass” and used it first was Pope Saint Pius X. This is how he explained it: “If you wish to participate in the Mass actively, you must follow with your eye, heart and mouth all that happens on the altar. Further, you must pray with the Priest the holy words said by him in the Name of Christ and which Christ says by him. You have to associate your heart with the holy feelings which are contained in these words and in this manner you ought to follow all that happens at the altar. When acting in this way you have prayed Holy Mass.” In a very moving reflection, quoted forcefully by Vatican II, Pope Pius XII portrayed the dispositions with which one should take part in the Holy Mass; that is, it should be with “the dispositions that the Divine Redeemer had when He sacrificed Himself — the same humble spirit of submission — that is, of adoration, love, praise and thanksgiving to the great majesty of God ... so that we reproduce in ourselves the condition of victimhood, the self-denial that follows the Gospel's teaching, whereby of our own accord we make the willing sacrifice of penance, sorrow and expiation for our sins.”

First, active participation means the interior participation of all the powers of the soul in the mystery of Christ's Sacrificial Love. It also means, that the mind and heart are awake, alert and engaged during the Eucharistic celebration. Secondly, Participation involves exterior action: saying things and doing things. We are talking about the bodily gestures and sacred signs we use during the course of the Mass, that is, the relationship between soul and body in liturgical prayer. In other words, it must be the whole person who carries out the liturgical activity. Full, active participation at the Eucharistic liturgy involves conscious presence, praying, singing, acting in union with the whole assembly. This presence includes communal silence, and an openness to receive the grace of God. In a particular way, conscious presence also means listening with attention and reverence to the proclamation of the sacred Scripture, “for they make up an element of great importance in the liturgy” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 29). In his 2007 apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI said: “It should be

made clear that the word 'participation' does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. It also means 'a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life.' Fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated." This means we should be internally disposed as well externally active.

Active participation in liturgical signs and gestures: The *Baltimore Catechism* defines sacrament as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." Hence, the Second Vatican Council said, "Because they are signs they instruct" (cf SC 59). Everything we encounter in Holy Mass -- every word spoken or sung, every posture and gesture, every sign and symbol, every furnishing and vessel -- *all of it* should serve the singular purpose of drawing the faithful ever more deeply into the mystical work of Christ who is truly present and active in the sacred liturgy. As soon as we enter church, we dip our fingers in the holy Water and make the sign of the cross. The holy water reminds us of our baptism and our need for repentance as we enter into the house of God. We bless ourselves with the sign of the cross in honor of the Holy Trinity, mentioning their names and accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior who saved us by his cross. Then we genuflect, (kneel down on the right knee), and bow our heads, or, if we are unable to kneel and rise again, to remain standing and bow deeply, adoring the real presence of Jesus in the tabernacle, before moving into the pew. Once in the pew, we close our eyes for a few seconds and thank God for bringing us to His temple to participate in the Eucharistic celebration. Only then do we acknowledge and greet others seated in the same pew. During the Mass we take different postures like standing, sitting and kneeling down. We also bless ourselves with the sign of the cross when the priest begins the Mass with the sign of the cross. When the priest extends his hands to wish "The Lord be with you" we respond, "And with your Spirit," with extended hands. There are two ways of folding one's hands during prayers: with fingers interlocked, or with fingers straight, palm to palm. When the liturgy instructs us to pray "with hands folded," we understand it in this way: palms extended and joined together in front of the breast, with the right thumb over the left in the form of a Cross. We are expected, if we are physically able to do so, to kneel down throughout the Canon of the Mass, especially during the words of consecration. The meaning of the gesture of kneeling is manifold: a) humble submission before the majesty of God, b) penance and a spirit of repentance, and c) adoration and reverence in prayer. Walking to the front to receive Holy Communion and walking back to the pews we should reflect in our demeanor our conviction that we are carrying Jesus in our hearts, accepting him as our Lord and Savior and surrendering our lives to him.

Active participation in prayers and singing: Prompt, loud and clear responses to the priest's prayers by every member of the congregation is the most important external sign of a well-participated Holy Mass. This will create an atmosphere of prayer in the church. But in order to make these responses confidently, we must know, not only the words, but also the meaning and significance of each of our responses. That is why the Holy Father insisted on proper catechesis of the faithful in all parishes when the revised English Mass was introduced in the first week of Advent, 2011. Proper understanding of the scriptural and liturgical meanings of the prayers will enable the participants in the Eucharistic celebration to appreciate what is going on at the altar. Everyone knows the importance of singing during the Holy Mass. When the entire congregation sings harmoniously with the choir and/or the accompanist, a heavenly atmosphere is created in the church. It goes without saying that such a harmony of voices requires sufficient preparation and rehearsal on the part of the choir and/or congregation, as well as songs and hymns well-suited to the theme of the Mass, their suitability for the singers and the availability of hymnals in the pews.

Active participation of the various lay ministers assisting the priest at the Holy Mass: **Altar servers** (altar boys and altar girls), who help the priests at the altar, the **Lectors** who read the First and Second readings and intercessory prayers, the **Eucharistic ministers** who help the priests in distributing Holy Communion, the **choir members** and/or the **leaders of song**, who lead the congregation in the singing, before, during and after the Mass, **the ushers** who greet and welcome people at the entrance of the church and who collect the love offering given by the people and, most important, **the sacristan** who sets everything in readiness for the Eucharistic celebration, are all very active participants in it. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* demands that such prominent participants in the liturgy should be given adequate liturgical training, so that they can give good example to the people by behaving well in the church and in the sanctuary and by doing well what they are supposed to do: "It is fitting that such a one should have received a liturgical formation in accordance with his or her age, condition, state of life, and religious culture. No one should be selected whose designation could cause consternation for the faithful"(46). "It is altogether laudable to maintain the noble custom by which boys or youths, customarily termed servers, provide service of the altar after the manner of acolytes, and receive catechesis regarding their function in accordance with their power of comprehension. Nor should it be forgotten that a great number of sacred ministers over the course of the centuries have come from among boys such as these. Associations for them, including also the participation and assistance of their parents, should be established or promoted, and in such a way greater pastoral care will be provided for the ministers. Girls or women may also be admitted to this service of the altar, at the discretion of the diocesan Bishop and in observance of the established norms" (47).

The promotion of liturgical instruction and active participation: A person might be a perfectly wonderful cantor, or clear and articulate lector, or a diligent and dignified usher, or other minister. But in order to participate in Holy Mass in a meaningful way, everything we do must be carried out in harmony with the interior disposition necessary to remain ever aware that we are taking part in nothing less than God's saving action, mysteriously made present in our midst. Without this disposition, our activities at Holy Mass are utterly meaningless. Hence, Vatican II, through the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, instructs that all those who actively assist at the Holy Mass and other liturgical celebrations should be properly taught the meaning and importance of their roles and how to perform their roles properly. It is for this reason that the Council Fathers vigorously stressed the necessity of catechesis, saying, "Pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve active participation by means of the necessary instruction of the faithful" (SC 14). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that catechesis, in fact, is the vehicle that moves us in the liturgy "from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the sacraments to the mysteries" (cf CCC 1075). In his *ad limina* address to the bishops of the United States in 1998, Pope John Paul II said. "The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical and polyphonic, respecting the different roles assigned by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise." (L-12)

Additional resources: 1) <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Liturgy/SIGNS.HTM>

2) <http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/6856> 3)

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html

4) <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=1366>