

Full, Conscious, Active Participation



“Not me, I don’t sing at Mass.” “If you heard my voice, you’d be glad I keep my mouth shut!” “Why are all those people up there on the altar? I liked it better when it was just Father.” “Participation from our teens? The fact that they come at all is a miracle.”

Ever hear comments like these? Among the people in the pews a variety of opinions may exist about the value or even the possibility of active participation in the liturgy. Sad to say, not everybody is convinced that their own full and active participation—or that of others—is ever going to happen.

Yet full, conscious, active participation is the Church’s vision—for everybody. Not only for the most devout, or those with the best singing voices, or adults, or some select group of insiders. Participation is for everybody.

SPECTATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

Imagine you’re at a ball game, and your favorite team is playing. Could you possibly sit still and not make a sound when they score? Even spectators can be active—by cheering (which is like an acclamation or song), by paying attention to what is happening (as we do when we listen to the readings or follow the actions of the Mass), and by feeling invested in the outcome (as we do when we remember the Mass is for our good and for the salvation of the world).

Hold on, however! Being a spectator, even an enthusiastic spectator, is not the best analogy for what we do at Eucharist. Participation in the liturgy is less like being in the viewing stands, and more like being on the team. It’s true. Every single person in the liturgy is a “player” in one way or another.

- The assembly prays, sings, listens, and joins in the actions and gestures that are theirs.

- The ministers, such as ushers, lectors, servers, musicians, cantors, and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, have special roles to play as they serve the assembly.

- The priest and the deacon have specific liturgical functions, too, such as leading, proclaiming the Gospel, preaching, praying, and so on.

All these roles interact. Though different, they form one ordered and organic whole. This contributes to the beauty and richness of the liturgy. When the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” he is “throwing the ball” to the congregation. They cannot drop the ball! Their response matters.

A VISION OF CHURCH

We show forth the true nature of the Church through our active participation in the liturgy. When we all do our part, in concert with one another, we support others at the same time as we strengthen our own experience. Like a good team, we perform the liturgical action together, each of us taking care to do our own part in its proper way. As St. Paul said, “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:4-5). Participation in different roles is a unified effort.

Also, like a good team, we can’t just run out onto the field willy-nilly. We need to train. Catechesis is one form of training. Having a prayer life outside of Mass is another. The active living of our faith in daily life is a third. Some

people are helped by previewing the Sunday readings, or getting to church a few minutes early, or some other modest discipline. Some need rest and leisure. Whatever is needed, it is worthwhile to consider how we prepare.

FORMED BY PARTICIPATION

When we actively participate in the liturgy, we are formed by what we do. We make the sign of the cross; we stand, sit, or kneel; we say the responses, sing the songs, hymns, and acclamations. We give to the collection; we receive Holy Communion; we join in the listening, in the silences, in the prayers. These actions, performed faithfully, are etched into our minds and hearts. They become part of who we are.

They also return to us in moments when we need them. A snippet of music, a prayer, a posture or gesture can help us to find our way and remember God's presence, long after the liturgy is over. It's a common experience, for instance, to find that a snatch of song from the liturgy comes to mind during a "dark night" of grief or loss. It is like the breath of the Spirit sent to revive us. But what if we never sang that song? We must participate in the first place, so the experience can continue to echo in our lives.

Beneath the outward expressions of the liturgy lies another layer of participation. This might be called inner or spiritual participation. Heartfelt desire and assent—saying "Yes" to God—is participation. So is the Spirit striving within us to bring about ongoing conversion. Participation includes the willingness to experience life shared—with all its joys and struggles—in communion with one another. These are the inward movements of faith, the dispositions of the heart.

Both outward and inward participation is important. We need the outward signs of the liturgy, which engage us through our senses. But it's the dispositions of the heart that allow the liturgy to bear fruit over the long run.

REFLECT

Recall an instance when you participated fully, actively, and consciously in the liturgy. What helped you to participate? What hinders your participation? How might you prepare over the coming week to experience Eucharist more fully next Sunday?

ACT

Invite a friend, neighbor, or co-worker to Mass with you. Be attentive to their needs, especially if they are unfamiliar with your community. Or you might offer transportation for someone who has a hard time getting to church. Participation begins by being there.

PRAY

Loving God, you invite us to share in the life of Jesus your Son through the Holy Eucharist. Help us to participate, fully, consciously, and actively in this wonderful sacrament of your Church. Bless our efforts together and make them fruitful!

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