Active Participation in the Sacred Liturgy

Cardinal Francis Arinze

In issuing its first document, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (henceforth: SC) over 40 years ago, one of the major concerns expressed by the Second Vatican Council was that all the faithful take as full a part as possible in liturgical celebrations. It is therefore right that the 2004 annual conference of the Society for Catholic Liturgy has taken as its major theme the revisiting of active participation in the sacred liturgy. I thank you for inviting me to propose some reflections to this august assembly on this important topic.¹

I shall begin by reviewing what the Council taught, then reflecting on the basis for this active participation, and finally considering how our earthly liturgy reflects the heavenly one. There have been exaggerations in the understanding and practice of active participation. It is worthwhile therefore to articulate its genuine aims, its manifestations and its grades. A consideration of the importance of interior participation, silence and contemplation will conclude these reflections.

**ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: THE COUNCIL’S DECREE**

A leitmotiv that runs through *Sacrosanctum concilium* is active participation in liturgical celebrations. “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” (SC 14).² The Council goes on to stress that this is the consideration to be given priority in the liturgical renewal. It states: “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, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (SC 14).

¹ This paper, the Keynote Address of the 2004 conference of the Society for Catholic Liturgy in Mundelein, IL, was delivered on 23 September 2004.
Sacrosanctum concilium continues to recall the importance of such participation, for example, in articles 19, 26, 27, 30, 31, 50 and 55.

Active participation is necessary because every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body the Church. The importance of the liturgical involvement of all the faithful in many sections of Sacrosanctum concilium, particularly where this document treats the liturgical formation of clergy and laity, adaptation and inculturation, communitarian celebrations, language, more abundant readings from Holy Scripture, the Mass, the sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, the liturgical year, and sacred music and art. All is presented in the light of a more conscious and devoted participation, and therefore of the need for the proper liturgical formation of priests and of due catechesis of the lay faithful.

“Liturgical services,” states the Council, “are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church which is the ‘sacrament of unity,’ namely, ‘the holy people united and arranged under their Bishops’” (SC 26). For this reason, the Council decrees that communal celebrations which involve the active participation of the faithful are to be preferred to celebrations that are individual and quasi-private (SC 27). Moreover, due observance of roles is to be the norm: “In liturgical celebrations each person, minister, or layman who has an office to perform, should carry out all and only those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy.” (SC 28).

The Council does not want the people of God to be deprived of this participation, which is variously described as full, active, conscious, interior, exterior and sacramental (see SC 19, 30).

Basis for Active Participation

Baptism is the basis for the active participation of all the faithful of Christ in liturgical celebrations. By this fundamental sacrament of Christian initiation, the Christian people are made “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (1 Pet 2:9, cf. 2:4-5). By their share in the common priesthood, all the baptized are empowered to take part in Christian worship. At Holy Mass, for example, while the ordained priest, acting in the person of Christ, brings about the eucharistic Sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people, the faithful, for their part, join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood (see Lumen gentium [henceforth: LG], 10). Therefore active participation by all the faithful is not a concession but a right grounded in baptism.

3 See also 1983 Codex juris canonici (henceforth CIC) 899 § 2.
People take part in the liturgy in different ways. It is true that all liturgical celebrations pertain to the whole of the Church, manifest it and have effects on it. But the Council reminds us that these celebrations “also touch individual members of the Church in different ways, depending on their orders, their role in liturgical services, and their actual participation in them and degrees of participation” (SC 26).

At the general level of participation are all the baptized. The liturgical assembly is the community of the baptized, who, “by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. Thus, through all those works befitting Christian people, they can offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light” (see 1 Pt 2:4-10).4

But in the Church, “the members do not all have the same function” (Rom 12:4). Ordained priests are called by God, in and through the Church, to a special service of the Christian community. They are consecrated by the sacrament of holy orders by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the head, for the service of all the members of the Church. The ministerial priest is at the height of his service at the eucharistic celebration. The bishop is the chief priest in his diocese. Deacons are assigned special ministries close to the bishop and the priest.

There is another level of participation in the sacred liturgy which has to be mentioned. In order to assist the work of the common priesthood of the faithful other particular ministries also exist. These are not consecrated by the sacrament of holy orders. Rather their functions are determined by the bishops, in accord with liturgical traditions and pastoral needs. Examples are servers, lectors, commentators and members of the choir. These “also exercise a genuine liturgical function” (SC 29; see also CCC 1143).

When the needs of the Church require it and ordained ministers are lacking, lay members of Christ’s faithful can be appointed to supply for certain liturgical offices according to the norm of law. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are one example of this principle.5

When, therefore, the Church speaks of active participation in liturgical celebrations, this is a consequence of its sacramental basis

---


in baptism and holy orders and also liturgical traditions proven through time.

**The Earthly Liturgy reflects the Heavenly One**

A major consideration that underlines the importance of active participation in the sacred liturgy is the relationship between earth and heaven in the public worship of the Church.

The divine life is characterized by love, glory and freedom. The human being, created in God’s image, and redeemed by Christ, is given by God the possibility of participating in the divine life. This redemptive grace reaches people especially through the sacraments when celebrated, participated in, and faithfully lived out.

It is the sacred liturgy that, in a particular way, makes possible this participation in the divine life. Liturgical celebration postulates, makes possible, and increases the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in Christ’s faithful so that they can all the more give glory to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Liturgical participation here below on earth tends towards the future, towards heaven. As the Second Vatican Council puts it, “It is especially in the sacred liturgy that our union with the heavenly Church is best realized; in the liturgy, through the sacramental signs, the power of the Holy Spirit acts on us, and with community rejoicing we celebrate together the praise of the divine majesty, when all those of every tribe and tongue and people and nation . . . who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and gathered together into one Church glorify, in one common song of praise, the one and triune God. When, then, we celebrate the eucharistic sacrifice, we are most closely united to the worship of the heavenly Church; when in the fellowship of communion we honor and remember the glorious Mary ever virgin, St Joseph, the holy apostles and martyrs and all the saints” (LG 50).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states the same comforting truth: “By the eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all” (CCC, 1326).

Pope John Paul II returns to the same theme: “The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey.”

When, therefore, we discuss active participation in the sacred liturgy, it is a matter of the part that the baptized have in the celebra-

---

tion here on earth, which is related to the heavenly liturgy. Liturgical participation will find its eventual conclusion for each of us at the end of our earthly sojourn, and for the entire Church at the end of the world. Who does not appreciate the importance of such participation? Are we not thereby striving to contribute our part so that the will of God may be done on earth as it is done in heaven? “Where God’s will is done,” says Cardinal Ratzinger, “there is heaven, there earth becomes heaven. Surrendering ourselves to the action of God, so that we in our turn may cooperate with him – that is what begins in the liturgy and is meant to unfold further beyond it.”

**Exaggerations on Active Participation**

The Liturgical Movement did stalwart service for many decades in preparing the Church for that liturgical renewal which first appeared officially in the Easter Vigil as restored by Pope Pius XII in 1952. The greatest fruit of the Liturgical Movement of the twentieth century was the liturgical renewal decreed by the Second Vatican Council. One major theme consistently stressed by the leaders of the Liturgical Movement was the full, active, and conscious participation of the laity in liturgical worship. Consequently, the lay faithful became less passive at liturgical celebrations, especially at Holy Mass. Although the Church never expressed such an intention towards passivity, after the Council of Trent (1545-1563) liturgical celebrations nevertheless looked more and more like actions of the clergy at which the laity were present. The Second Vatican Council’s effort to redress that impression met with widespread success.

It came as no surprise when, soon after the Council, some people began to exaggerate active participation to the extreme of replacing it with activism in liturgical participation. They seemed to be advancing an unwritten agenda of active participation at all costs, in all sorts of ways, by everyone and in all parts of the liturgy if possible. Sometimes this led to noisy celebrations in which the roles of ordained priests became confused with those of the lay faithful, who enjoy the royal priesthood. Silence and times for meditative listening apparently were not taken into sufficient account. Activism, or the effort to get everyone to be doing something active all the time, was sponsored in some quarters as though it had been what the Second Vatican Council desired.

Sometimes such tendencies were evident in the dominance of choirs over celebrations, where they occupied positions that distracted

---

8 Cf. RS 40.
the congregation and relegated the priest celebrant to a role of secondary importance. At other times, activism resulted in endless commentaries where the speaker projected, probably unconsciously, an image of himself or herself, while doing his or her best to allow neither the priest nor the people to have a quiet moment. A recent craze for so-called active participation finds expression in the idea that there must be dance at a solemn Mass. I once witnessed a Mass where some misguided person arranged a series of dances to be performed at certain points as the eucharistic rite unfolded: the entrance, the Gloria, the Gospel, the presentation and preparation of the gifts, the Sanctus, the thanksgiving after Communion and, as a final exhibition, the recessional. This coordinator of dances may have been under the impression that people come to Sunday Mass in order to watch dances. Perhaps he was unaware of the parish hall as the appropriate venue for dances after Mass. He certainly was oblivious to the absence of any tradition of dances in the Latin Mass liturgy. Why, we may well ask, must the people of God be afflicted with so many distractions when they come to adore God on Sunday?

All this leads me to state that while the Second Vatican Council mandated fuller, more conscious, and active participation in the liturgy, it is of vital importance to understand that the liturgy is primarily something that Christ does, not something that we put together. It is something that we receive, not something that we invent. It is a celebration of the mysteries of Christ in which we are allowed to take part as members of the Church. “True liturgical education cannot consist in learning and experimenting with external activities. Instead one must be led toward the essential actio that makes the liturgy what it is, toward the transforming power of God, who wants, through what happens in the liturgy, to transform us and the world.”

I shall now go into greater detail by examining the aims of active participation and mentioning some of its manifestations, both exterior and interior.

The Aim of Liturgical Participation

It is important to keep before our eyes the aim of participation in the sacred liturgy.

The sacred liturgy is celebrated in order to give praise to God and to bring about the sanctification of the people. It is a celebration of the mysteries of Christ the Redeemer. The Son of God, by his suffering, death and resurrection, has freed us from the power of Satan (cf. Acts 26:18) and from death and brought us into the kingdom of his

Father. The highest point of the liturgy is the eucharistic celebration. “As often as the sacrifice of the cross by which ‘Christ, our Pasch is sacrificed’ (1 Cor 5:7) is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out” (LG 3).

It is important that all the faithful share in the celebration of these saving mysteries of Christ. Baptism opens the door. By it people “are grafted into the paschal mystery of Christ” (SC 6). In Confirmation, they are strengthened by a more abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the other sacraments, they are restored to God’s grace, strengthened for their last journey, or given graces of state for the priesthood or the married life. In the Holy Eucharist, they take part in a sacramental re-presentation of the sacrifice of Calvary and are fed with the Body and Blood of the Lord. In other liturgical celebrations, they are sanctified and enabled to be the voice of the Church at prayer.

The sacred liturgy therefore is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows . . . . From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain, and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed, as toward their end, are achieved with maximum effectiveness” (SC 10). We could not think of the Church without the liturgy.

Full, active and conscious participation enables the faithful of Christ to reap more abundant fruit from liturgical celebrations. It enables the salvific event of the celebration of the mysteries of Christ to exert more influence in them. It makes possible for them a deeper share in the divine life which Christ the Savior brought all humanity.

All this means that the better and deeper is the participation on the part of a person, the greater fruit will that person derive from the liturgy. Let us examine several grades or possibilities.

**Grades of Participation**

The participation, state, and involvement of a participant in a liturgical action do influence how much grace that person can receive.

Let us consider, for example, the following people taking part at a eucharistic celebration: an atheist, a malefactor, a person of a religion other than Christian, a Christian in mortal sin, a Christian with attachment to venial sins, a fervent Christian, a saintly Christian, and a Christian mystic well advanced in a life of union with God.

Let us imagine that the fictitious persons just mentioned all come to Mass. And they mean sincerely to take part in the celebration. They strive, according to their various states and capacities, to listen,
to share with the assembly common postures like standing, sitting, or kneeling, and they try to understand and share what is going on. Only the four last mentioned know that they can receive Holy Communion.

What is likely to be the result of their participation? In the final analysis, only God knows. But we can hazard the following possibilities. The defiant and unbelieving may show no visible change, but grace working secretly in them could arouse healthy curiosity, which can lead we know not where and how far. The Christian sinner might obtain at least the beginnings of the actual grace of repentance. The mediocre Christian could be led to more fervent commitment to the faith. The saintly Christian and the mystic would grow in their lives of union with God in ways beyond our observation.

None of this is automatic. Spiritual life and growth are primarily God’s work. He it is who takes the initiative. But God who created us without our cooperation will not sanctify and save us without our cooperation. This is another way of saying that our commitment and degree of conscious and active participation in the sacred liturgy do influence the effects of these celebrations in us. Let us now examine some ways in which this participation can manifest itself.

**SOME EXTERNAL MANIFESTATIONS OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION**

*Sacrosanctum concilium* itself lists some of the external manifestations of active participation: acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons and songs, as well as actions, gestures and bodily attitudes (SC 30). The Council further states that “in the revision of liturgical books, it should be carefully provided that the rubrics take the role of the people into account” (SC 31). This has been done in the rites revised over the past forty years.

All this is very healthy. No one should downplay the importance of these external manifestations. The human being is composed of both body and soul. Although interior dispositions are obviously more important, they do not undermine the importance of exterior manifestations, because these latter make visible, intensify and feed the interior requirements. It would be bad psychology and false angelism to ignore the importance of exterior manifestations.

Implied in all this is that liturgical celebrations should be devoted, faith-filled and artistically of high quality. Sacred music, quality of reading performance, altar accoutrements, vestments, and seating and kneeling provision for the congregation – each has its importance.

On the other hand, over-regimentation of the congregation by way, for instance, of unconditional and severe demanding of kneel-
ing or standing when the approved rubrics do not so indicate, should be altogether avoided. Unity in postures assumed by the congregation is a good thing. All things being equal, it should take precedence over private inclination or arbitrary choice. But it is quite another matter when various parish or diocesan officials become so rigid or dictatorial that they make no concession whatsoever to such personal acts of piety as receiving Holy Communion on one’s knees or kneeling at one’s seat after Communion.

**INTERIOR DISPOSITIONS, SILENCE AND CONTEMPLATION**

No matter how perfect the exterior manifestations of active participation may be, the interior dispositions are even more important. *Sacrosanctum concilium* recognizes this: “In order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain (cf. 2 Cor 6:1)” (SC 11).

Of fundamental importance here are the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Whoever is making progress in these basic attitudes of openness to God is making a better inner preparation for liturgical participation. And to these virtues should be added the virtue of religion and its consequent piety, which makes us devoted to God, who is not only our Father, but also our Creator and Judge.

Listening is not a passive affair. It involves active openness to God’s action in us. It makes us ready to receive the Word of God proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. It leads us to understand the homily as it applies the sacred readings to the realities and challenges of life on earth today. Listening also includes reverent attention as the priest says or sings the prayers and the preface at Mass, and recites the eucharistic prayer. Listening, moreover, includes obedience to the directives given by the deacon or other authorized person in the worshipping assembly.

Silence has its place and importance as a help towards the promotion of the required interior dispositions. “... [A]t the proper time a reverent silence should be observed” (SC 30). “For in the liturgy God speaks to his people, and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel” (SC 33). The purpose of silence depends on the time it occurs in each part of a celebration.

Within the Act of Penitence or Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass, and again after the invitation to prayer at Mass and other

---

liturgical celebrations, a period of silence serves as a call to recollection. After the readings and the homily, a suitable pause can help people to meditate and interiorize what they have heard. After Holy Communion, silence serves to allow people to praise God and pray to him in their hearts.\footnote{Cf. GIRM 45.}

A period of silence before liturgical celebrations is a help to recollection. It has been traditional in the Roman Missal, for example, to include in the appendix some prayers recommended to the priest before and after Mass. We humans are often rather distracted by many things in life. We need a space between our daily activities and our celebration of the sacred rites in order to help us eliminate, or at least reduce, the noise of the world without.

It goes without saying that careful preparation for a liturgical celebration will spare the assembly any distraction that may be caused by nervous gestures or movements of the celebrant and other ministers. Organizers of theatrical exhibitions pay attention to such details; how much more is expected of all those who contribute to the celebration of the mysteries of Christ.

We live in an age of high technology and a quick-fix mentality. And there are many benefits that accrue from this. But this propensity should not be allowed to undermine or damage a contemplative attitude in the liturgy. Every liturgical celebration should provide moments of silence, personal prayer and contemplative openness to God.

Respected officers and members of The Society for Catholic Liturgy, the Second Vatican Council was right in asking for participation by all the faithful in the liturgy in a way that is full, conscious and active. The challenge for the whole Church remains how this is to be promoted so that maximum spiritual fruit may be reaped.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus our Savior and Mother of the Church, obtain for us the grace to do our part.

Cardinal Francis Arinze is Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.