



WELCOMING THE ROMAN MISSAL 3RD EDITION

Part X -- Overview of the Mass

Full, Conscious and Active Participation

Third Edition of the Roman Missal

In several instances throughout the celebration of the Eucharist, times of silence are prescribed. These moments of silence are meant to help us enter into what is happening at that moment. Some silences will be rather brief, others might be significantly longer. Brief silences are appropriate as part of the penitential rite, after the presider says “Let us pray” before the opening prayer, and at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word. These allow time for each person to recall personal needs to include in the prayer and for silence to envelop the assembly before the first reading begins.

Longer silences are recommended after the first reading before the responsorial psalm and after the second reading before the gospel acclamation. These are designed to allow the word of God to begin to take root in our minds and hearts so that we can begin to respond to God’s call. Even longer silences might be appropriate after the homily and after all have received communion. These times give us the opportunity to dwell a bit on the word we have heard in the whole Liturgy of the Word and on the meaning of the communion we have just shared.

The enemy of such an atmosphere of prayer and reflection is our penchant for speed. People tend to prefer “efficiency” and a Mass that is concluded within a one-hour time frame. If we want to worship well, however, we must be willing to slow down a bit and allow God time to work in us.

On November 27, 2011, English-speaking Catholics in the United States will begin using a new translation of the Roman Missal (the book containing the prescribed prayers, chants, and instructions for the celebration of Mass in the Roman Catholic Church).

“The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pt 2:9; see 2:4-5) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the reform and promotion of the 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 and therefore pastors must zealously strive in all their pastoral work to achieve such participation by means of the necessary instruction.” (CSL, # 14)

This passage from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council sets forth the most basic principle of the liturgical renewal mandated by that council. It placed before the church a huge challenge, one that we are still struggling to meet today.

The mandate of the Second Vatican Council was preceded by efforts of several popes in the twentieth century, beginning with Pope St. Pius X in the first decade of that century. He and several of his successors urged the faithful to take part in the Mass and to draw from it the true Christian spirit.

Getting all the members of the assembly to embrace full participation has not been a simple task, however. Many people were accustomed to saying their own prayers during Mass — the rosary, favorite prayers in prayer books or just silent conversations with the Lord. To many it seemed as though the changes in the liturgy were intrusions on their piety.

All of us need personal and individual prayer time, of course. No healthy Christian spirituality can long survive without it. When we gather for the liturgy, though, we are not gathering for individual prayer but for communal prayer. Liturgy is an act we do together, bringing the fruits of our personal prayer life during the week to the assembly’s worship.

External and Internal Participation

In the early years of the liturgical renewal, much effort was devoted to teaching people how to take part more fully in the action of the liturgy itself. We needed to learn hymns and other musical selections so we could sing together. We needed to learn new texts and new responses to recite together. We needed to get accustomed to new rituals like the procession with the gifts and the sign of peace.

All these external forms of participation are essential for celebrating the liturgy with enthusiasm and beauty and richness. If any members of the assembly do not do their part, then the power and the beauty of our worship is diminished. It is not enough to have the right interior attitudes if we keep them hidden. They must be expressed externally because the liturgy is a communal activity and all the participants are affected by the words and actions of those around them.

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On the other hand, there is little real spiritual benefit if our external actions are not matched by interior attitudes and acts of the will. One of the challenges of growing into this more active form of worship is to learn to infuse our external words and actions with internal meaning. In any activity of life, we are capable of just “going through the motions,” and that can be a danger in worship as well. It takes consistent effort on the part of every worshipper to make sure the external and the internal connect.

How to Become Full, Conscious and Active Participants in the Eucharist

Cardinal Roger Mahoney wrote a pastoral for his Archdiocese of Los Angeles and included in it suggestions for habits we can all form to help us in our efforts to become full, conscious and active participants in the liturgy:

1. Become people who worship in the midst of the Sunday liturgy. Know which Gospel and New Testament letters we are currently reading on Sundays, and use these for daily reading. Bring to the prayer of intercession on Sunday all that you pray for; take from it persons to be remembered daily by you; when you hear the news of the community and the world, hear it as a Christian who must in prayer lift up the world’s needs.

2. Become people who prepare themselves for Sunday liturgy and people for whom Sunday liturgy is preparation for the week. Seek little ways that can help you make the Lord’s Day as much as possible a day when liturgy has room. Find just one steady practice that makes you stretch toward the Reign of God we glimpse at Mass: It might be a way to make more real the collection that happens on Sunday for the Church and the poor; extending the peace of Christ that you receive each Sunday to others in need of that peace; or fasting from food or distractions and so becoming thoroughly hungry for God’s word and the eucharistic banquet.

3. At the liturgy, be the Church. Know the awesome responsibility you share for making this liturgy! Welcome one another, be at peace with one another. Sit together. Sing songs from your heart. Do not be afraid to show in your eager attention that you are hungry for God’s word when the readers read, hungry for Christ’s Body and Blood when you come forward in holy Communion. Give thanks and praise to God by your great attention in the eucharistic prayer. Keep your eyes open to one another and do everything you can to build up the Church, the Body of Christ.

4. Apart from the liturgy, be the Church. Remember we are always the Body of Christ, always in communion with one another. Know that you can ask for help from one another. Let others know that. In the simplest deeds of daily life at work or at home, be conscious of this life we share in Christ, of its joy and its hope. Do not set yourself as separate from others, but understand that we who are the Church are one with others. In us, God is calling and blessing and sanctifying the world God loves. Look at the liturgy as a remote preparation for your week. Listening to God’s word on Sunday morning is preparation for the listening we do for God’s word in our lives all week. The thanks we proclaim at the eucharistic prayer is a preparation for thanks over all tables and all meals, and also over all. The common table of holy Communion is a preparation for looking at the whole world.

5. Give thanks always. Pray grace at meals even when you are alone in the traditional prayer of “Bless us, O Lord,” or a phrase as simple as “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God; it is right to give thanks and praise!” Cultivate moments of contemplation even during the busiest day, when gratitude can flow from the goodness of a person, any element of creation or any good work of human making.

In our next installment, we’ll be taking a look at what it means to be “one body in the Lord.”

Discussion Questions

1. Reread the first two paragraphs at the top of this article from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. What do they mean to you?
2. Cardinal Roger Mahoney provides some suggestions for fostering full, conscious and active participation. Can you think of additional suggestions that might help you to participate more fully in the celebration of the Eucharist?