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## Active Participation in the Mass

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# Active Participation in the Mass

## – *How active?*

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The liturgical renewal that followed the Second Vatican Council took as its inspiration the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, approved by the council on 4 December 1963. This stated, among other things:<sup>1</sup>

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’ (1 Pet. 2:9) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else... To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes.

Let us take it for granted that the liturgists who composed the new rite of Mass, published in 1970, sought not perhaps inspiration but at least some points of orientation by casting an eye on the active participation in the Eucharist that is to be found in the rites of other Christian Churches.

What do we find if we turn to the most familiar of the eastern rites – the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom?<sup>2</sup> The liturgical sequence is essentially the same as in the Latin rite, but it is overlaid with many additional elements, where congregational participation is a

1 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14 and 30, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Dublin 1975) 7-8, 11.

2 I use the translation available on the website of St Luke the Evangelist Church. Palos Hills, Illinois: [stlukeorthodox.com/html/orthodoxy/liturgicaltexts/divineliturgy.cfm](http://stlukeorthodox.com/html/orthodoxy/liturgicaltexts/divineliturgy.cfm)

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notable feature. Striking are certain acclamations assigned to the congregation in the communion rite, such as ‘We have seen the true Light! We have received the heavenly spirit! We have found the true faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us’, and ‘Let our mouths be filled with Your praise, O Lord, that we may sing of Your glory; for You have counted us worthy to partake of Your holy, divine, immortal, and life-creating Mysteries. Keep us in Your holiness, that all the day we may meditate upon Your righteousness. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!’<sup>3</sup> To the people too is assigned the recitation of the Trisagion hymn. All these are examples of the people being given something significant to say or sing.

The rite contains the same dialogue between priest and people before the preface that is familiar to us all in the western rite. An equally effective dialogue occurs before the kiss of peace (itself placed before the Creed):

*Priest:* Peace be unto all.

*People:* And to your spirit.

*Priest:* Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess:

*People:* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! The Trinity, one in essence, and undivided!

*Priest:* I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my firm foundation, my refuge, and deliverer. Christ is with us.

*People:* He is and always will be!

Most of the rest of the congregational part consists of responses in the inserted litanies – normally of the words ‘Lord, have mercy!’ (sometimes repeated threefold) and ‘Grant it, O Lord!’ These are remarkably frequent. Early in the service we have the ‘Great Litany’ and the ‘Little Litany’, and then a further series after the homily. The Great Entrance, or offertory procession, is accompanied by a litany with the response ‘Amen’. There are further litanies before the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, and a final litany of thanksgiving after communion. These are akin, of course, to the Bidding Prayers in the new Roman rite, but their occurrence throughout the service sets up a rhythm of invitation and response between priest (or deacon) and people that continues throughout the service.

To many of us, however, the Orthodox liturgy is less familiar than the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. In traditional Anglican churches the main act of Sunday worship used to be not the Eucharist or ‘Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion’, as the

3 I shall have to check whether these are indeed uttered by the congregation, or reserved to the choir.

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Prayer Book calls it, but Mat(t)ins or Morning Prayer. The most striking feature of the congregational participation in this service is the extent of antiphonal recitation between priest and people. At one point there is a series of versicles and responses that most Anglicans used to love and know by heart, because of the richness of the content and the felicity of the language:

*Priest.* O Lord, shew thy mercy upon us.

*Answer.* And grant us thy salvation.

*Priest.* O Lord, save the Queen.

*Answer.* And mercifully hear us when we call upon thee.

*Priest.* Endue thy Ministers with righteousness.

*Answer.* And make thy chosen people joyful.

*Priest.* O Lord, save thy people.

*Answer.* And bless thine inheritance.

*Priest.* Give peace in our time, O Lord.

*Answer.* Because there is none other that fighteth for us, but only thou, O God.

*Priest.* O God, make clean our hearts within us.

*Answer.* And take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

This element of dialogue between priest and people is maintained through most of the service by the way in which (save in a choral service) the numerous psalms and canticles are recited antiphonally, verse by verse, by priest and people.

To sum up, the great lesson to be learnt from the Orthodox and Anglican liturgies is that effective congregational participation requires a *sustained rhythm* of invitation and response between priest and people.

Let us turn to the new Roman rite of Mass. What role does it give the congregation? The words assigned to it fall into the following main categories:

1. Recitation together with the priest of a number of major texts, including the Gloria, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.
2. The lessons preceding the Gospel are normally read out by laypeople, and the whole congregation joins in the refrain during the psalm.
3. The response (e.g. 'Lord, graciously hear us') to the Bidding Prayers.
4. Miscellaneous responses, varying from 'May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...' to 'Amen' and 'And with your spirit'.

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5. The Dialogue before the Preface, from ‘The Lord be with you’ to ‘It is right and just’ (‘just’ here is an ugly Latinism, but let that pass).

Let us consider these in turn, asking at each stage whether this element of participation brings out the dignity of the people of God, in the words of Scripture and Vatican II, as ‘a royal race, a chosen priesthood’.

### 1. Joint recitation of a number of major texts

The recitation by the people of the Lord’s Prayer, which was reserved to the priest in the Tridentine rite, is particularly welcome. I expect that most of the congregation experience it as their personal prayer before communion (‘Give us this day our daily bread’). The recitation by priest and people together of such texts as the Gloria and Creed is less effective: the sound of a mass of people reading a long text together is not beautiful to the ear, and the congregation simply joining in with the priest does not establish a real relationship between them. Antiphonal recitation would surely be both more beautiful and more meaningful.

### 2. The Readings and the Psalm

The reading of the lesson(s) before the Gospel by a lay person is certainly to be welcomed. The involvement of the whole congregation in the recitation of the refrain during the psalm is less satisfactory, however, because the refrain is intrusive and no genuine part of the psalm. Antiphonal recitation of a psalm between priest and people as in Anglican Matins and Evensong is much to be preferred.

### 3. The Bidding Prayers

These are supposed to give voice to the whole congregation as a ‘priestly people’ interceding for the Church and the world. The trouble, however, is that the choice of petitions is dictated by the celebrant, and they have normally been composed by the parish priest. The role of the congregation is further reduced by their words (typically ‘Lord, graciously hear us’) being a mere echo of the petition (‘Lord, hear us’) uttered by the reader. The effect is that the role of the congregation is reduced to the mere confirmation of the petitions of someone else. Nowhere in the whole rite of Mass is the gulf between the dignity of the laity and the role actually assigned to them so grotesque.

### 4. Miscellaneous Responses

The response ‘May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands...’ is a substantial response with real content. But it is unique in this

respect.<sup>4</sup> The great mass of the responses, in particular the frequent Amen or 'And with your spirit', are so minimal in content and wording that they would as well be assigned, as they were in the old rite, to a humble altar-server. They do not express the dignity of the assembled people of God.

(5) The Dialogue before the Preface

This is undoubtedly effective, the reason lying in the rhythm of a threefold versicle and response. The trouble is that this is unique in the whole rite of Mass.

The main points that arise in this discussion are clear enough. I would particularly emphasize, as the lesson of the Orthodox and Anglican liturgies, that we need a sustained rhythm of dialogue between celebrant and congregation. In the new Roman rite this lesson has not been learnt.

The task of giving the congregation a meaningful role, it must be admitted, comes up against a problem: it is the priest alone who (to use traditional language) 'confects' the Eucharist. However, the notion of the 'priesthood' of the laity made great strides in the last century. Both Pius XI and Pius XII linked the traditional theme of the priesthood of the laity to their participation in the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> The decree of Vatican II on the Sacred Liturgy says of the faithful, 'Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but *also together with him*, they should learn to offer themselves.'<sup>6</sup> This requires two elements in the words uttered by the congregation: a forceful expression that they too offer the sacrifice, and a degree of active participation that excludes any notion that they are mere auditors.

It is the major failing of the new rite of Mass that both these elements are lacking. As regards the first, the priest indeed prays that 'my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father', but this is too brief and too incidental, and the theme of sacrifice is not developed. The congregation respond by praying that 'the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands': this is the most meaningful response in the entire Mass, but it falls short of expressing the truth that the people offer the sacrifice together with the priest. As for the other texts of the Mass, the words uttered by the congregation alone (and not like the Creed together with the priest) are few and theologically vacuous.

4 The closest to it is the acclamation after the Lord's Prayer, 'For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever', marred unfortunately by the flat translation – that lacks the rhythm and resonance of the traditional 'For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever. Amen.'

5 See Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London 1965), 215 with n. 3.

6 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 48, trans. Flannery, p. 17, my italics.

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### A PASSIVE ROLE

Meanwhile, the simple extent of the people's parts falls short of what is required to make them feel they are active participants. The overwhelming impression left on the congregation is that they are read to and preached at, and that they witness the consecration and then receive communion. Their role remains essentially passive, or at best receptive. They are indeed required to utter brief responses, to join in the recitation of certain texts, and to stand at some points and to sit or kneel at others. All this is enough to make them follow the Mass rather than use it as an opportunity for private prayer, but it is not enough to constitute participation on anything approaching an equal footing with the celebrant. The feel of the Mass is not that of a rite performed by all, but of something akin to a school assembly.

At least, you may say, it is an improvement on the old Mass, where the faithful had nothing to do. But at least in the old rite the pious could choose to follow every detail of the liturgy, and to identify themselves with it spiritually. A problem with the new rite is that, once stress is placed on *active* participation, the faithful are likely to get restive when they are not actively participating. The Roman Canon is a long text, but a rich and beautiful one. But in the context of the new rite the absence of congregational participation during it (apart from the acclamation after the consecration) makes it feel too long. The same is true of the Fourth Canon, and perhaps even of the Third. What should be the climax of the Mass tends to sag, and the impetus built up by the Dialogue, the Preface and the Sanctus is dissipated.

There are other criticisms that could be made of the new rite, particularly of its first half – the too miscellaneous introductory rites, the too static character of the Liturgy of the Word, and the impoverished Offertory. But the most important criticism, surely, is the one I have advanced: the new rite gives wholly inadequate expression to the dignity and the priesthood of the people of God.