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Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

Redeemably Awful: Active Participation

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I remember as a seminarian being disgusted by some experiences of attempts to promote active participation in U.S. parishes, ideas such as the whole congregation being asked to come to church dressed in red for Pentecost or to bring a bell to church for the Epiphany, really turned me off. My issue was not with the dressing in red (although I still don't get the connection to Epiphany and bells), it was that this had almost seemed like a box that was ticked to guarantee "*active participation*."

If you are reading this article, the chances are that you have already heard the term active participation bandied around a lot. The problem is that many of us are hard pressed to define exactly what it is. It is often mistaken as meaning that we must give everybody something to do. If a class in the primary school is receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, then every candidate must be given something to say in the liturgy, with extra prayers being added to the ceremony just to facilitate this. Likewise when organizing funerals we think that every family member has to have a specific task and if all the legitimate ministries are taken, then we add a plant pot or bingo card to the offertory procession, or even invent a second offertory procession of "symbols" of the deceased's life. Our school Masses are full of gold fish bowls and text books being processed to the altar as "gifts" that are promptly taken back as soon as the liturgy is over. A recent First Communion Mass that I attended was put into crisis when a bored parent ate the bunch of grapes that was on a table at the back of the church awaiting the offertory procession.

Giving an unwilling child a hurley to bring down to the altar during Mass is not what the Second Vatican Council meant when it called for "*active participation*."

Active participation in the liturgy ought to be a privileged opportunity for each baptized member of the Church to meet the risen Lord. Obviously, there are many other places where we can

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue is a Lecturer in Systematic Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

meet Christ. Christ can be met in the beauty of nature, in a newborn baby's laugh, upon seeing an act of Christian charity and even, if you have faith enough, in the poor and the suffering. This was why St. Lawrence, the third century martyr, declared that the indigent, the crippled, the blind, and the suffering were the true treasure of the Church. Likewise St. Francis, at the start of his conversion kissed a leper with disgusting sores and later realized that it was Christ himself that he had kissed.

But, of the many places where we can meet Christ, the liturgy affords us the easiest access to our own "tent of meeting." My own particular favourite definition of what the liturgy is comes from a phrase that Pope Leo the Great preached in a fifth century homily, when he informed his assembly that everything "which was visible in our Redeemer has passed over into the liturgy" (Pl 54, 398).

Obviously, *participation* was not invented in the twentieth century. Christians have always participated in the liturgy. Famously the Roman Canon prays that "all of us, who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your son, may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing." When Christians participate in the liturgy, the events of salvation history become present again. The Church has always sung during the *Exsultet* at the Easter Vigil, that "this is the night, when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld." In the liturgy Christians can enter into direct contact with Christ's victory over death.

When I was a child I remember priests talking about a Mass as being "my Mass." Today, we know that the liturgy does not belong to the priest. Indeed the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "Liturgy is an "action" of the *whole Christ*. Those who even now celebrate it without signs are already in the heavenly liturgy, where celebration is wholly communion and feast" [# 1136].

However the term "active participation" was coined at the start of the twentieth century. Pope St. Pius X is rightly remembered for his promotion of frequent communion and lowering the age of communion. However, he also coined the term "active participation" which was to become the leitmotif of the liturgical movement. In his 1903 letter *Tra le sollecitudini* on liturgical music, he gave a significant papal endorsement of what was to become the liturgical movement.

The theological realization that the liturgy was not simply an obligation or a divine tax on our time, but rather a privileged place for a regular encounter with the Risen Christ, was perhaps the most important theological development of the twentieth century, and gave birth to the modern liturgical movement. While this movement developed in a parallel fashion in many places, the

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Belgian monk, Dom Lambert Beauduin, of the Abbey of Mont-César is the person who can be most correctly credited with being the founder of the twentieth century liturgical movement. Before entering the monastery, he had been a diocesan priest and was involved in giving pastoral care to workers. He realized that so many people were alienated from the Church and that the Church seemed to be on a different level to them. When he entered the monastery, he discovered the power of the liturgy and the spiritual life. He was particularly influenced by the spirituality of Blessed Columba Marmion, the monastery's prior. But Beauduin realized that the *liturgy* could be an answer to the religious indifference that was spreading throughout Europe. This new appreciation of the liturgy was that it possessed an ability to reach and transform every baptized Catholic and that it ought not to be the sole possession of monks or other religious professionals. In 1914 Beauduin published an influential book *La Piété de l'Église*, where he explained how the Church shapes us through the liturgical celebrations which constitute "the primary and indispensable source of true Catholic piety."

A multitude of other pioneers of the liturgical movement promoted new attitudes towards the liturgy in the awareness that people could find there a true source of spirituality. Many of the priests involved had experienced the terrible reality of the First World War as chaplains while a later generation would have similar experiences during the Second World War. This experience of what Robert Burns terms "man's inhumanity to man" was an eye-opener to priests who had been living a sheltered religious life. They also realised that many soldiers coming from traditional Catholic countries really didn't practice their faith in a meaningful way. Romano Guardini would even go so far as to ask whether "in this industrial and scientific age, with its new sociological structure" the human person "is no longer capable of a liturgical act?" They also realized how the liturgy as it was then celebrated, in Latin, with the priest facing the altar and not the assembly, using a missal that hadn't been systematically revised in centuries, was very alien to most people. After centuries without any change it was time to renew the liturgy. Already in 1947, soon after the end of World War II, Pope Pius XII published his encyclical *Mediator Dei*, where, he gave a resounding endorsement of the liturgical movement. He also began revising the Roman Missal with a renewed Easter Vigil and Holy Week. This was the first substantial revision of the Missal since the Council of Trent. His successor, St. John XXIII's major achievement was the calling of the Second Vatican Council. He also saw the need for continuing structural reform of the liturgy and, rather than do it himself, he decided that "the more important

principles governing a general liturgical reform should be laid before the members of the hierarchy” during the Council.

When the bishops of the world gathered for the Second Vatican Council the first document they composed was *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Liturgy. The document deals with many aspects of the liturgy. It gives some suggestions on how the liturgy should be renewed, for example, proposing that a greater quantity and selection of the Word of God be read during the liturgy. But the main contribution of this document was to promote active participation as the framework for the reform of the liturgy. Time and time again the Constitution returns to this theme. In number 48 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* we find perhaps the most important magisterial definition of active participation:

“Christ’s faithful when present [at the Eucharist] ... should be instructed by God’s word and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body; they should *give thanks to God; by offering the immaculate Victim*, not only through the hands of the priest, but also *with him, they should also learn to offer themselves*; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect unity with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all. (emphasis added)”.

Here *active participation* is not simply having some external action to perform during the liturgical celebration. It is not to bounce around with a tambourine. It is much more than this, it is to have the grace of living a life that is fully a thanksgiving to God, to offer Christ to his Father, and to offer ourselves with him. Active participation in the liturgy is no less than *experiencing* God to such a degree that we become one with his divine life so that “I am alive, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Amen. To say ‘Amen’ to the embodiment of Christ’s oblation in the consecrated Bread and Wine is an enormous and, we may as well admit it, a risky proposition. In a beautiful formula he recites silently before communion, the priest prays that the sacrament may be for him ‘a healing remedy’. For healing to spread through our consuming *of* it, we must be consumed *by* it, by the saving reality it represents.

- ERIK VARDEN, *The Shattering of Loneliness* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 95 .