

# NTR

## WORD AND WORSHIP

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### **Full, Conscious, and Active Participation: The Peace of Justice, the Glory of God's Worship**

The current focus of Roman Catholic liturgical policy has a retroactive quality that vexes the spirit and ministry of many of the faithful who were formed in the spirit of Vatican Council II. The church is still in the process of mystagogical reflection on the council. We are still discerning its implications for the people of God. But already it feels that the bishops are backing us away from the conciliar revitalization of the sacred liturgy.

It is clear that the right and responsibility to regulate the church's liturgical celebrations belongs to the bishops. Recent instructions and guidelines from the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments and the U.S. Catholic Bishops were instituted to correct liturgical abuses, clarify the meaning of ritual actions, and align some liturgical texts more closely with their original translations. Other mandates intend to regularize options that were previously exercised in eucharistic celebration. With due respect for the timeless and essential elements of the sacred liturgy, this increasingly central control of

local liturgical issues presents grave concerns, particularly if the worthy goal of Catholic unity is accomplished by imposing uniform standards of liturgical celebration that discount the vast diversity of the people of God. One size fits all is a risky approach to Catholic prayer and worship. Moreover, if the Order of Mass becomes so fixed and distant to the point that the assembly again envisions itself as mere spectators or retreats into private devotion, we Catholics will have disconnected from the source and summit of Christian life.

Given the church's present direction toward a more uniform celebration of the Eucharist, this column will discuss some of the ramifications of the shift and propose how parish ministers inspired by Vatican Council II can work effectively in the present situation.

#### **Liturgical Shifts**

Pope John XXIII, reading the signs of the times—signs that included a general malaise among the faithful as well as social, economic, and political upheaval in society at large—

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opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962. There ensued a creative dialogue between Catholic tradition and the contemporary experience of the universal Body of Christ in which human cultures surfaced as an essential component in the development of faith. By engaging tradition, experience, and culture, Vatican Council II began the work of updating the way the Gospel message was preached and articulating ancient church teachings in a language that connected with the modern faithful. Reflecting on the major questions of the day forced council leaders to confront the situations of the world's marginalized, and necessarily placed urgent new demands on the church to advocate for justice within its ranks and beyond.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), the first document promulgated during the council, was a remarkable reflection on the nature of Catholic worship. Many found it a departure from what they considered "traditional" liturgy. However, one of CSL's most definitive reforms was the restoration of the role of the liturgical assembly to a primacy enjoyed in the earliest ages of the church's development. According to the CSL, no.14:

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 Pet 2:9; cf. 2:4-5) is their right and duty 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 above all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful

are to derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, in all their apostolic activity, pastors of souls should energetically set about achieving it through the requisite pedagogy.

In this description of the assembly, the church envisions the baptized as thinking agents with a specific role and responsibility for the whole liturgical enterprise that is distinct from, but correlates with, that of the ordained minister.

Implied in this classic citation is an acknowledgment that the conscious Catholic assembly will worship God together out of the cultural context in which it lives. Catholic worship, therefore, will naturally represent in its various prayers and rituals great cultural diversity—generational, cultural and ethnic, national and socioeconomic—that will inevitably express itself as God's people fully and actively participate in eucharistic celebration. What is divinely instituted and unchangeable in the sacred liturgy coexists with other elements that have always changed through the ages. Here the CSL advises that excellent worship that demands that the people be fully, consciously, and actively present is the primary objective of liturgical reform. And excellent worship that requires their all-in-all is the responsibility and right of all the baptized.

At this moment in the post-Vatican II era, however, the church has reacted to perceived abuses in contemporary liturgical practice by curtailing the role of the assembly, reasserting the particular role of the priest-celebrant, and emphasizing cultural uniformity with rubrics that seem to inhibit, rather than promote, the people's participation in Sunday Mass. In their desire to safeguard the integrity of the sacred liturgy, a very serious and important responsibility, the bishops have effected a shift away from the Vatican Council II's ideal of "full, conscious, and active participation" by the laity at

worship. The movement is particularly chilling today because (1) the Catholic faith is flourishing in Asia, Africa, and South America—churches that have been on the margins of hierarchical decision making; (2) the people are just beginning to grasp the role of culture in faith formation as they embrace the cultural diversity of the Roman Catholic community; and (3) there is a growing corps of Catholic theologians, historians, catechists, liturgists, musicians, and other pastoral ministers from traditionally underrepresented populations poised to teach and train the faithful. As a result of Vatican Council II's outreach that broadened the vision of the Catholic Church, there is now a group of scholars whose reflections on Catholic Tradition in light of the particular traditions, gifts, and challenges of their own communities bring new resources to the table. Their work raises new questions and produces new expressions of Catholic thought and aesthetics that have made their way into liturgical life.

### **Pastoral Resources to Build Up the Assembly's Role**

The church is growing in new places and raising up new leaders in old places; the need for culturally relevant and culturally diverse liturgical celebrations increases. In the current climate, pastoral ministers are challenged to lead the assembly toward ever more “full, conscious, and active participation” in the sacred liturgy. Two parish-based processes called for by the council provide both the vision and the structure for ongoing formation of a liturgical assembly that worships energetically.

#### *The Catechumenate*

Vatican Council II restored the ancient catechumenate (also referred to as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]), and its implementation in the United States was mandated in 1988. Through the RCIA, faith

communities evangelize, welcome, and catechize newcomers to the faith and form them in the Christian way of life. Their initiation through celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist develops over four stages, each with a distinct purpose and catechetical content. Rites that actively involve the liturgical assembly mark catechumens' progress from one stage to the next. Broad instructions help parish ministers design catechesis, social interaction, prayer, and discernment that reflect the spirituality of the welcoming community and serve the needs of the learners. The *General Introduction* encourages appropriate adaptation of the rites according to local custom. Local communities have the wonderful opportunity to incorporate prayer styles, language, gestures, music, and art that reflect the culture of the community.

#### *Liturgical Commissions*

The charge to pastors (CSL, no. 14) to provide effective pedagogy that prompts the assembly's “full, conscious, and active participation” at Mass represents a strong endorsement of parish and diocesan liturgical commissions. Membership should consist of a broad cross-section of community members and representatives from each liturgical ministry—persons willing to collaborate, to listen to the people, and to keep the assembly well informed of commission proceedings. When clergy and laypeople gather on a regular basis to study, pray, and plan the community's liturgical celebrations, the assembly begins to appreciate the importance of worship. In study sessions, members can be exposed to the liturgical documents and follow-up dialogue can help assure that key liturgical decision making reflects church policy rather than personal likes or dislikes. Commissions should certainly recruit new ministers and arrange for quality liturgical training for all. At the local commission level, work can be done with the

assembly to help it mature in understanding its unique role in liturgical worship. In these conversations, connections can be drawn between the faithful's participation in the sacred liturgy and their participation as Christian disciples in the liturgy of everyday life.

Not only *can* pastoral leaders minister effectively with the faithful in an environment of very structured liturgical celebra-

tions, they *must* because (1) it is right and just that the people offer their best in worship to God; (2) when the worshiping assembly offers God glorious thanksgiving and praise, they are inspired and energized to share in Christ's mission of justice and peace; and (3) through Vatican Council II, the church has given pastors and other leaders the mandate to promote the role of the liturgical assembly and resources for that purpose.

## *References*

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy).

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html) (accessed December 9, 2006).