Full, Conscious, and Active Participation: The Faithful’s Right and Duty

by Kathleen Dorsey Bellow

The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to the 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; 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. 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.1

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL), promulgated in 1963, conveys the purpose, potential, and challenge of Church renewal undertaken by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Reaching back into history and reflecting on the current signs of the times, the Council established in the CSL that sacred liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed . . . the fount from which all the Church’s power flows” (CSL 10). In some other words: the Church’s engagements and all its work is to ultimately point the faithful to liturgical activity, as sacred liturgy energizes the mission of Christ through the Church in the world. Instrumental in the ongoing campaign to promote sacred liturgy is the “full, conscious and active participation” of the faithful as stipulated in the opening quote. The Council further asserts that their holistic engagement in worship “is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit . . . .” Fifty years after CSL’s promulgation, its follow-up discussion, and its explication in official documents and other resources and months into the introduction of the newly revised Roman Missal in the US Church, the urgency of the task persists because the present times are at least as challenging as the 1960s, and the need for an effective evangelization of contemporary society is as important as ever.

This article will more broadly reflect on the guiding liturgical principle of full, conscious, and active participation by the Christian assembly at Mass and in everyday life—a participation that is “their right and duty by reason of their baptism.” It will conclude by highlighting a useful process for engaging members of the Sunday assembly with


Kathleen Dorsey Bellow is Associate Director for Certificate and Enrichment Programs, the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University of Louisiana.
the preacher in an extraordinary preparation for Sunday Mass, as outlined in Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Liturgy (FYH), a 1982 document published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.2

A Participation in Liturgy and Life

The first major document of Vatican Council II, CSL, situated sacred liturgy squarely in the center of life in the modern world. From this renewed orientation, the church was positioned to address a variety of significant modern-day issues, including Ecumenism (1964), Christian Education (1965), the Church’s Missionary Activity (December 1965), Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (1965), Religious Liberty (1965), and the Apostolate of Lay People (1965).3 The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World asserts: “...the church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has utilized the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in varying aspects of the life of the faithful” (58).

There are examples, such as that, in which Church leadership speaks of human cultures, faithful living, and liturgy in the same sentence. However, a solid line between the Sunday liturgical and daily practical life of the people of God is not regularly or explicitly drawn in official documentation—Conciliar or post-Conciliar. The theology of our Catholic documents, written in the main for diocesan, national, and international audiences of church officials, scholars, and ordained ministers is often so broadly written that it seems to unwittingly support secular society’s view that Christian discipleship and public life are separate realities and are best kept that way. Given the vital importance of sacred liturgy in the building up of the Body of Christ and the centrality of Sunday Eucharist in the life of the Christian disciple, every level of Church administration should empower believers to connect in authentic and actualizing ways their Sunday worship experience and their daily practice of the faith at home, in the community, and in the marketplace. Accentuating full, conscious, and active participation on the part of the Christian faithful in the context of Sunday Eucharist can help bridge that gap. The following reflections, very limited in scope, focus on local ways to make the Sunday worship of God's people and their everyday engagement in the world more reciprocal and mutually supportive.

Full, Conscious, and Active Participation

Liturgical texts typically address the role of the assembly according to the traditional actions ascribed to them in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.4 The particular duties of liturgical ministers are also specified in liturgical documents and supplemental resources approved by the Church. The principle of “full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful” is usually referenced exclusively in terms of the actual celebration of Mass. Although particular needs may differ by location, full participation of the faithful would seem to require their engagement throughout the policy-making, planning, Mass preparation, post-celebration, de-briefing, and evaluation stages of the entire liturgical enterprise.

Nurturing the conscious participation of the people in Sunday liturgy demands an effective and ongoing catechesis that offers formal and informal opportunities to study the Mass and related church teachings. Most important in

this regard is to foster a learning environment that welcomes members’ suggestions and invites their questions. Receiving the assembly’s input and devising a workable method for processing it respectfully and without judgment, enables creative contemplation, inquiry, prayer, and dialogue among the faithful.

The assembly’s active participation in the Sunday Eucharist should be linked with the evangelizing mission of the Church so that the assembly might become more sensitized to the needs of members who worship at the margins of the faith community. These may include persons with disabilities, shift-workers, divorced/separated/widowed members, youth and young adults, shut-ins, the poor, disaffected Catholics, and inquirers looking for a church home. Through more socially-active parishioners, the faith community can build bridges with the community at-large to collaborate in civic, educational, cultural, and spiritual projects, extending the mission of Christ beyond parish boundaries into the world. The point here is not to create extra work for already-busy Christians but to help them draw connecting lines between their Sunday worship and their lives of Christian discipleship practiced in the world.

**Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (FYH)**

This document on preaching does a holistic treatment of the listening assembly, the mediating homilist, and the practical ministry of liturgical preaching. It is challenging to do it justice here. Although the document is expressly addressed to presider-homilists, there is much here to recommend a much broader circulation, especially among the faithful who pray for more effective and relevant homilies in their parishes. For the purpose of this work, I will focus on a suggested approach to homily preparation that involves members of the assembly and supports the preacher in his discernment of what the faithful needs, wants, and is able to hear in the Sunday homily to build up their faith so that they may fruitfully participate in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharistic and thereby become a sacrament of Christ in their daily living. FYH recommends that parish homilists “invite four or five people they can trust and can work with easily to join them for an hour at the beginning of the week” (FYH 106).

These are the steps for group homily preparation presented in Fulfilled in Your Hearing (FYH 108):


2) Members share the words or images in the readings that stand out for them. “As this sharing goes on, the homilist may pick up some recurring words and phrases. He may be surprised to hear what parts of the Scripture are being highlighted. These responses are already a sign of the concerns, questions, and interests that are present in the lives of the congregation.”

3) A group member presents a short exegesis of the texts, focusing on the human issues addressed by the author.

4) Members share the Good News that the original audience might have heard, the good news for today, and God’s message to God’s people across the ages.

5) Members share the challenges that the Scriptures provoke in the lives of God’s people.

6) The group explores the consequences: “What difference can the good news make in my life? What happens if the scriptural good news is applied to contemporary bad news? Can my life be changed? Can the world be transformed if people believe in the good news and begin acting accordingly to it? These are questions to which final answers cannot be given. They demand prayer and reflection.”

7) The members end with prayers of praise and thanksgiving.
Fulfilled in Your Hearing proposes a workable method for representatives of the Sunday assembly to exercise their right and duty to participate in liturgical celebrations of their faith communities. In the interest of the ongoing renewal and revitalization of Catholic liturgy called for in the CSL and Vatican Council II, pastoral leaders are wise to zealously explore this and other means of instruction for the faithful. In these days, the Church and society at-large are in critical need of assemblies whose regular investment at Sunday Mass rises to the liturgical standard of “full, conscious, and active participation” and inspires a practice of Christian discipleship in everyday living that is likewise full, conscious, and active.