We participate in a symphony concert by listening in silence. It can transport us to another world or move us to tears. We do indeed participate in the music, but is this the active participation demanded by the liturgy? I would say not. Because, while we participate personally in receiving the music, we are not participating in the event of making the music.

The Second Vatican Council said in its Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium):

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 of the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pt 2:9) 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. (SC, no. 14)

I have noticed in recent years a trend among some authors on liturgy to treat active participation almost exclusively as a kind of internal attention, akin to the way one would participate in a symphony concert. They turn to the Latin text and point out that the council says *actuosa participatio*, contrasting it with *activa participatio*, which the council did not use. Thus they marginalize the actions of singing, walking, kneeling, or anything else that can be termed “active” in their overemphasis on the ultimate spiritual aim of *actuosa participatio*. They will more readily speak of participation in the divine life, in the priesthood of Christ, an interior union with Christ in the Mystical Body. All of which, of course, can be accepted as the final goal of Christian worship. But the council is first urging the

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full, conscious and active participation in *liturgical celebrations* as the way into the underlying spiritual reality.

Active participation does mean more than mere activity or endless “busyness,” and there have indeed been errors in the last fifty years—I think of the school Mass where every child must have something to “do.” Those engaged in parish liturgy preparation have sometimes focused too much on the externals, the superficial workings of the liturgical event. But it is no solution to spiritualize active participation to the point where attentive listening or prayerful watching is sufficient to fulfill the demands of the council fathers, just so long as ultimately we are sharing with mind and heart in the divine life. The bishops at the council themselves recognized the problem, urging those responsible for pastoral care to foster people taking an active part in the liturgy, both inwardly and outwardly, in ways suited to their age, the circumstances they are in, the kind of life they lead, and their level of religious culture (SC, no. 19). It is “both—and.”

How do we relate “inwardly” and “outwardly”? What does *participatio actuosa* really mean? First we should not be tempted to understand the Latin phrase as “actual” participation instead of “active” participation (for this would rather be expressed in a phrase like *participatio vera*). *Activa* means “practical” as opposed to speculative or contemplative. *Actuosa* means “full of activity,” “very active or lively,” “with energy.” So it would be a mistake to suppose that the council fathers intended something different from physical “active participation.”

The council requires a full, conscious, and active participation in “liturgical celebrations.” *Celebratio* in Latin contains within it the idea of a great assembly, a concourse, a congregation. It is therefore a participation in the action of the liturgical assembly. This, the council asserts, is demanded by the nature of the liturgy and is the right and duty of Christian people by virtue of their baptism. Now we get to the heart of the matter.

“Who celebrates the liturgy?” asks the Catholic Catechism (CCC, no. 1136). “Liturgy,” it answers, “is an ‘action’ of the whole Christ (*Christus totus*) . . . it is the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates” (CCC, no. 1136–40). By our baptism, we are part of the Body of Christ, and it is our right and duty to act as part of the Body of Christ; it is the Body of Christ that celebrates the liturgy.

I would argue, therefore, that active participation means being present at the liturgy as “doers,” as the Actor, as those who really perform the liturgical action. This is more than a mental and spiritual concentration on what someone else is doing. It is being part of the doing. The people’s postures and movements, their words and singing, are a sign of their place in “liturgical events (which) are not private actions but celebrations of the whole Church. . . . These celebrations of the whole body, which is the Church, ‘touch the individual members of the Church in a way related to the differences of ranks, of roles and of “levels” of participation (*actualis participationis*)’” (SC, no. 26).

What then of silence in the liturgy or listening to the proclamation of the word or the eucharistic prayer? I am certainly not suggesting anything as grossly literal as a communal recitation of the Scriptures or the presider’s prayers. However, I am convinced that we must understand the proclamation of the Word as more than the action of the reader before an audience. The activation of God’s saving Word in the liturgy takes place in a proclamation from heart to heart, from faith to faith, in such a way that the engagement of the entire liturgical assembly makes God’s Word “something alive and active” (Heb 4:12). The liturgy of the word is ministered by a reader or cantor but is a divine event for and within the whole assembly.
The eucharistic prayer is given voice by the priest but it is the whole of the gathered church that offers in thanksgiving the holy and living sacrifice. The “doing” of the liturgy does not demand that each individual does every part of the liturgy, but it certainly means that each individual is fully conscious that they are part of a communal action. The liturgy is my prayer in so far as I throw my lot in with the church at prayer; I am part of something bigger than myself.

Therefore, whatever gives people a sense of being present at the liturgy as doers is of paramount concern, the aim to be pursued above all else. This embraces not only the activity of the liturgy, but the way the assembly is arranged and relates together as a body, the sense of ownership of the corporate liturgical action, and of course the way in which we actualize and enter sacramentally the great saving act of Christ on the cross. “We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you” (Eucharistic Prayer II). As we kneel in the pews, we stand at the altar.

Further Reading