



Participating Actively in the Mass: the Assembly's Liturgical Job Description

As we continue to deepen our understanding and appreciation for the liturgy it is important to describe what we mean by participating actively in the Mass. Active participation is vital because the Fathers at Vatican II declared that the most important reason for liturgical renewal was to turn ordinary Catholics from spectators to participants at the liturgy. Paragraph 14 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (CSL) states that the "restoration and promotion of the full and active participation in the liturgy by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else." In spite of the fact that the Council taught that by virtue of our baptism, active participation is both our right and obligation (our job description), many pastors have found it hard to change many of their parishioners' posture from watching to doing. Franciscan theologian Thomas Richstatter who has been at the forefront of catechesis on the liturgy for four decades suggests that we focus our efforts on the three major actions of Sunday mass: Gathering, hearing the Word, and sharing the Eucharist. I will share with you his great wisdom.

Gathering is the first action of the worshipping community. We have to be present in order to participate (our absence is a great loss to the community) and what a witness it is to the world since by obeying Christ's mandate, "Do this in memory of me," we "make visible and manifest to others the mystery of Christ's Body" (CSL, # 2). Fr. Richstatter cautions us not to underestimate the importance of showing up: "Your presence makes a difference. Your presence is needed not just to fulfill a moral obligation but to witness to the community that you care enough to get out of bed and come to church. Your presence says that you believe enough to plan your weekend so that you can be here with us to proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord. This sign, this witness, strengthens the faith of those who see it." He makes these four suggestions. First, punctuality: getting to church ahead of time helps us to get prepared for Mass. Second, be friendly: our assembling makes visible the Body of Christ and the Christ who welcomed everyone. Smile and say hello to people especially those you do not know. Realize that there are some at Mass who are there for the first time, or who are visiting, or returning after a very long time and may feel intimidated or isolated. The ministry of hospitality is not exclusively for the ushers. All of us need to work together to create a welcoming environment for everyone. Third, find a place that allows you to participate fully (from where you can see and hear well) while being courteous to those who come late.

Fourth, by picking up the bulletin or song book and joining fellow worshippers in singing we witness to our common faith and we avoid giving the impression of not believing the sentiments expressed in the songs. As you sing try to make the thoughts and feelings of the song your own or allow the song to transport you to another realm.

Hearing the Word of God is the second essential action of the assembly to which there are a few parts. First, is preparing to hear the Word. In last week's "Little Teaching" we emphasized that we hear better the Word as it is proclaimed at Mass if we have already read and studied and prayed with it at home or in a small Christian community. The Jesuits in Britain have a great service called Pray-as-you-go that has a downloadable reflection on each day's readings (commuters will find it spiritually filling!). Second, we receive the Word silently and respectfully: even though we have missalettes, reading along as the reading is proclaimed is discouraged. In the proclamation God is speaking to us and the right posture is undistracted listening (turning of pages is distracting). Those who come late should wait for the proclamation to end before being seated.

Sharing the Eucharist is the third major action of the assembly and it should start with our identifying ourselves with the gifts of bread and wine which as they are brought to the altar represent our food, drink, treasure, and our very lives being offered to God on the altar. Even though the Eucharist Prayer is mostly recited by the priest, we need not let our minds wander but participate in it by gratefully remembering God's love for us and offering ourselves to the Father in union with Jesus. Joining enthusiastically in the responses and acclamations ("And with your spirit," "Amen," "Lord I am not worthy to receive you . . ." etc) is an essential part of actively participating. To top it off, we participate by joining the procession to reverently and devotedly receive the Lord's body and blood. Let our "Amen" leave no doubt that we believe that is Jesus indeed.

In the months to come we will share more fully how we participate actively and consciously in the mass. Fr. Richstatter provides a fitting conclusion: "The ultimate in active participation is the renewed resolve at each Eucharist to go out into the world challenged by the Word that we have heard to share our lives . . . because only if we are breaking and pouring out our lives for the good of others Monday through Saturday will the breaking and pouring out we do in church on Sunday be real for us."

Fr. Richstatter's full article "How to Participate More Actively in the Mass" is available at www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU