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Offering Our Lives: Liturgical Participation and the Reception of Grace

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OFFERING OUR LIVES:
LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE RECEPTION OF GRACE

by

Betty-Ann Medeiros Hickey

Thesis
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theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and was fostered through my studies with Dr. Paul Gondreau. I am grateful to him for answering my many questions over the years and for his encouragement in pursuing this topic. Likewise, I am grateful for Dr. Daria Spezzano, who directed the writing of this thesis. The close reading and attention to detail which she gave to this project proved to be invaluable.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to show that it does not matter whether or not the assembly can understand the words of the Mass, a blog author wrote:

“I knew that not a single thing I did, whether I prayed my missal, walked a crying baby, zoned out because I was tired, or even prayed my rosary during some portion of the liturgy made a whit of difference as to whether the sacrifice was efficacious. I was completely irrelevant to the outcome of the liturgy, even though the outcome of the liturgy was the most relevant thing in the world to me.”¹

The author quoted above believed that, because his participation in the Mass had no effect on whether or not transubstantiation occurred, he had no role in the effectiveness of the Eucharist and the Mass. He did not feel a need to pay attention or to attempt to understand the words, signs and symbols, because he believed that doing so would not change anything. Although the attentiveness or presence of the assembly is not required for the valid confection of the Eucharist, the disposition and attentiveness of the assembly does affect the outcome of the liturgy because the valid celebration of the sacraments is not an end unto itself. The aim of the liturgy is both the glorification of God and the sanctification of the Christian community.² In the liturgy, the faithful encounter Christ, and by glorifying him, are immersed into the mystery of God’s divine love: a love which calls each of us into a new relationship with God, who stands ready with the gift of God’s own self. Our ability to receive and use this gift of relationship is affected by our disposition and attentiveness.

¹ Steve Skojec, “Coming Clean About My Latin Problem”. One Peter 5 (blog), April 18, 2018, [//onepeterfive.com/coming-clean-about-my-latin-problem](https://onepeterfive.com/coming-clean-about-my-latin-problem).

² Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 December 1963) §10. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

If we understand that sacraments are, as Liam Walsh describes, “rituals that are God-given and God-driven acts of human moral choice, made in community, in which humans seek out the blessedness of eternal life” it becomes clear that making that moral choice is an action on the part of the worshipper so that he or she can grow in union with God.³ Colman O’Neill states that:

the sacraments...are seen in a false light if they are thought of as sudden inputs of spiritual energy having no relation to what goes before or afterwards. They form an integral part of the whole Christian life-process which is characterized throughout by a continuous moral effort from the time the responsibility begins.⁴

Authentic liturgical participation of the faithful occurs within the heart and mind and is manifested through physical actions and unites the liturgy to daily life. However, if what happens during liturgy does not carry over into daily life, that moral effort can be drowned by the tide of secular influences. Timothy O’Malley states: “Ritual practice is not reducible to an act of conveying a worldview. Ritual action requires...shaping the self to become a certain kind of person in the world.”⁵ This cooperation with divine grace both nourishes and flows from liturgical participation and is at the heart of Christian worship. It is essential for a fully effective liturgical celebration which will not only change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, but which will most effectively transform us and our world into the Kingdom of God on earth.

³ Liam G. Walsh, *Sacraments of Initiation: A Theology of Rite, Word, and Life* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2011), 327.

⁴ Colman E. O’Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, ed. Romanus Cessario (New York: Alba House, 1991), 127.

⁵ Timothy O’Malley, “The Difference Between Liturgical Naïveté and a Eucharistic Culture of Affiliation,” *Church Life Journal*, June 15, 2021, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-eucharistic-culture-of-affiliation>.

This thesis will argue that authentic liturgical participation, as will be described in the subsequent pages, does not cease when the liturgy ends. In order for liturgy to enable the faithful to receive the effects of grace fully, what we experience liturgically must shape our daily lives and the life of our parishes. Well-celebrated, beautiful and reverent celebrations of liturgy draw the faithful into internal and external participation which helps them to open their minds and hearts so they can more readily allow grace to permeate their lives. This allows the liturgy to be evangelistic, building not only a relationship between Christ and the individual, but creating a Christo-centric and Eucharistic culture which draws others to Christ, the source of all grace and love. In that way our liturgy can most effectively transform us and our world into the Kingdom of God on earth.

I will accomplish this by examining the essential nature of liturgical participation from the theological and the pastoral perspectives. The second chapter will address the effectiveness of the sacraments and the role of grace, the Thomistic roots of the idea of liturgical participation, the history of the notion, and why participation is necessary and integral to the liturgy. The third chapter will examine the role of ritual in human life, the place of liturgical celebrations in the wider context of ritual, the relationship between sacraments and life, and how well celebrated liturgical rituals foster liturgical participation by speaking and modeling divine truths in ways that communicate and express the faith of the Church with an effectiveness greater than words. The fourth chapter will examine how liturgy is itself a form of evangelization, how beauty serves to engage the faithful in worship, and how liturgical participation can build a Eucharistic culture and most readily attain its desired end, the glorification of God and the sanctification of humankind.

When this thesis was begun, music and silence, vestments and furnishings, art and architecture seemed to be at the core of what constituted good liturgy. As churches closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a new liturgical creativity in both in-person and live-streamed Masses developed. Masses celebrated in empty churches and people watching Mass on their computers were clear reminders that music, vestments and vessels are important and contribute to creating beauty, fostering liturgical participation, and furthering liturgical understanding, but the style of these cannot be considered to be the primary test in evaluating what makes good liturgy. Deeper than stylistic preferences, the truest determining factor of good liturgy is whether the faithful are drawn into liturgical participation and community and so are formed in faith. We are called to participate, not simply to watch. We are called to gather, not to be content with praying in isolation. We are called to receive, so that we can be sent.

CHAPTER 2: LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION

Sacramental Effectiveness

In order to understand the importance of liturgical participation, one must first understand the liturgy as an intimate encounter of God and humanity, through which God reaches the faithful to nourish the relationship between God and humankind, in order that the faithful can know God and become the people God created them to be. One of the primary aims of liturgy and liturgical participation is the reception of grace, which brings about this transformative relationship. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* explains it in this manner:

The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it; that is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith.’ They do indeed impart grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to worship God duly, and to practice charity.⁶

The sacraments were instituted in order that humans might receive grace most effectively.

Thomas Aquinas teaches that God instituted the sacraments in order to meet the needs of human nature. He explains that sacraments use physical and sensible signs because humans achieve “knowledge deductively through...experience of physical and sensible realities” and because humans are attracted to physical things and have a need to worship through physical actions.⁷

“Through the sacraments, therefore, sensible things are used to instruct man in a manner appropriate to his own nature.”⁸

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q.61. a.1, trans. David John Bourke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ *ST, III*, q.61. a.1, trans. David John Bourke.

Likewise, worship must be both interior and exterior in order for it to fulfill the human need to express physically that which exists intellectually and spiritually. Thomas teaches:

As Damascene says (De Fide Orth. iv, 12), since we are composed of a two-fold nature, intellectual and sensible, we offer God a twofold adoration; namely, a spiritual adoration, consisting in the internal devotion of the mind; and a bodily adoration, which consists in an exterior humbling of the body. And since in all acts of latria that which is without is referred to that which is within as being of greater import, it follows that exterior adoration is offered on account of interior adoration, in other words we exhibit signs of humility in our bodies in order to incite our affections to submit to God, since it is connatural to us to proceed from the sensible to the intelligible.⁹

Therefore, through sacramental signs and physical actions, humans are more effectively disposed to receive the grace caused by the sacraments and the sacraments most readily attain their full effectiveness.

We can speak of sacraments as being effective in three ways: the *sacramentum tantum*, the *res et sacramentum*, and the *res tantum*.¹⁰ The *sacramentum tantum*, the sign as such, is the matter and form of the sacrament, that is the outward sign. In the case of the Eucharist, this is the bread and wine together with the words of consecration. The *sacramentum tantum*, signifies the *res et sacramentum*, the reality and the sign, which is the immediate effect of the sacrament. The *res et sacramentum* of the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. Christ bestows the *res et sacramentum* despite our inattentiveness or our disposition, but there is another gift: the *res tantum*. The *res tantum*, the reality alone, is the further spiritual effects of the sacrament which are both signified and caused by the *res et sacramentum*. This gift, received in accord to our disposition of devotion, opens us to this

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae II-II*, q. 84, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920. (<https://www.newadvent.org/summa>).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *The Catechetical Instructions of Saint Thomas*. At EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/catechetical-instructions-of-st-thomas-12545>.

richness of grace beyond our comprehension, a relationship more true than any we have ever known; an encounter with the triune God who draws us into anamnesis where we are changed through a mercy that not only forgives our sins, but recreates what has been lost through sin, so that we can be restored to the likeness of God. As Thomas explains, “the reality of the sacrament is the unity of the mystical body”. Likewise, he teaches, “the Eucharist is termed the sacrament of charity, which is ‘the bond of perfection.’”¹¹ Unity and charity is the ultimate goal of the Eucharist.

The liturgy and the sacraments are the ordinary means through which God supplies the grace which will sustain us and bring us closer to God. God makes all this available even if we do not make ourselves available. However, if we do not dive into the prayer with our whole selves — heart, soul, mind, and body, using our senses and our voice in full, conscious, and active worship of God, if we do not enter into the relationship God offers, if we do not approach God in contrition, if we do not open our fearful hearts to God’s merciful love — then we miss the fullness of the encounter. Yes, God is there, as will be explained in further depth shortly below. God is reaching out to us and can work in us. God has given us the key, through the Church, to help us access all that God offers. This key is liturgical prayer and it is found in the proclaimed texts of Sacred Scripture and the offered liturgical prayers, in our gestures and responses, in the beauty of churches, the richness of liturgical music, and the dignity of the vestments and vessels. Our full, conscious, and active participation allows the sacraments, which cause what they symbolize, to bear greater fruit in our lives and in our world.

¹¹ *ST, III*, q. 73, a.3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

What is Grace?

Grace is the gift of transformative relationship with the triune God. Granted freely to each person through baptism, grace both creates and nourishes the supernatural relationship between God and the individual. Upon baptism, the newly baptized is forgiven of all sin, made a partaker in the divine nature, becomes a member of the Church, is brought into communion with all Christians, and receives a spiritual character or mark.¹² Thomas Aquinas teaches that through the spiritual character bestowed through baptism “each individual of the faith is deputed to receive or to hand on to others the things pertaining to the worship of God.”¹³ Likewise, he teaches that “a configuration to his priesthood is imparted to the faithful through sacramental characters which are nothing else than a certain kind of participation in the priesthood of Christ deriving from Christ himself.”¹⁴ We are therefore consecrated in baptism for worship through the priesthood of Christ.

Because the reception of grace continues throughout life, if the individual does not reject grace, he or she is strengthened to reject sin and to fight concupiscence. As one receives sanctifying grace and grows through that grace, greater graces will be given and spiritual growth continues.¹⁵ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes grace as being both “favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life [and] ... a participation in the life of God.”¹⁶ Sanctifying grace received in the sacraments establishes our filial relationship with God;

¹² Paul Haffner, *The Sacramental Mystery* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2008) 43-52.

¹³ *ST, III*, q. 63, a.3, trans. David John Bourke.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Grace* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1960), <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/meaning-of-grace-3123>, II, 1.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), 1996-1997.

the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and brings us into union with Christ through whom we are united to one another making us part of the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church.¹⁷ Through this gift of relationship, we are enabled to learn to respond to God and to develop and perfect virtue. Within sanctifying grace, there are sacramental graces which are proper to each sacrament that help us to develop and grow in virtue in particular ways. For example, the sacramental grace of Holy Orders configures the candidate to Christ and helps him to carry out the promises of ordained ministry.¹⁸ In that way, “the person who exercise its powers as Christ’s instrument will be enabled, according to the intensity of grace in him, to administer [the sacraments] with the heart of Jesus himself” as Charles Journet explains.¹⁹

How Grace is Received

Because sacraments effect what they symbolize and cause grace *ex opere operato*, which is translated “through the work worked,” they cause grace each time they are validly celebrated. In order to emphasize that the sacraments cannot work independently of Christ or the Church, the Thomistic terms *ex actione Christi*, through the action of Christ, or *ex virtute Christi*, through the power of Christ can be used.²⁰ Validly celebrated sacraments cause grace through the power of Christ and the office bestowed on the minister. For that reason, the holiness of the minister or other liturgical attributes do not affect the grace which flows from the sacraments as long as the proper matter and form are used and the minister seeks to do what the Church intends. Edward

¹⁷ Pius XII, Encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943) §56-57, at the Holy See, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html.

¹⁸ CCC, 1585-1588.

¹⁹ Journet, *The Meaning of Grace*, VII, 9.

²⁰ *ST, III*, q.64. a 9. trans. David John Bourke. *ST, III*, q. 82. a. 5, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Avery Dulles, “The Theology of Worship: Saint Thomas,” in *Rediscovering Aquinas and the Sacraments: Studies in Sacramental Theology*, edited by Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais, (Chicago, Ill: Hillenbrand Books, 2009).

Schillebeeckx writes that “the significance of sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* is that the bestowal of grace is not dependent upon the sanctity of the minister, nor does the faith of the recipient put any obligation on grace; Christ remains free, sovereign and independent with regard to human merit whatsoever.”²¹

This could cause one to think that as long as the sacraments are celebrated validly, the rest of the liturgy is a type of unimportant window dressing. Through the sacraments, God descends to reach humankind, but God, who offers grace and longs to be in relationship with each person, does not force that grace upon the recipient. In sacraments which produce a character, such as Confirmation, the character is marked and the grace is given by virtue of the action of the sacrament. However, in order to benefit fully from the grace bestowed, the one who has been confirmed must accept that grace and be open to the working of grace in his or her life.²² This does not mean that the sacraments and sacramental grace are bound by the cooperation of the recipient.²³ Yet, because grace bears greater fruit *ex opere operantis*, through the work of the doer, grace is received in relation to the openness, also called disposition, of the recipient. However, this is not separate and distinct from God, rather, it is God who produces the spiritual effect with the cooperation the individual. Cyprian Vagaggini explains it in this way:

The spiritual effect of the *opus operantis* is not simply the fruit of man’s effort or dignity, but is an effect produced by God which transcends man’s power. (...) ...the action itself of the man who performs the rite or receives it has the value, with regard to the spiritual effect which God produces, of moral and intentional cause which is impetratory, satisfactory, meritorious: God produces a spiritual effect of such and such a nature and

²¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Sheed and Ward, 1963), 69-70.

²² Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976), 125.

²³ Likewise, young children and those who do not possess the use of reason are not deprived the grace of the sacraments. Colman O’Neill addressed this necessary distinction stating that “Such a disposition is not called for in a child or one who is unconscious, because of the very fact that these do not enjoy the use of reason and are justified by God according to their condition.” See: Colman O’Neill. “The Role of the Recipient and Sacramental Signification” *The Thomist*, Volume 21, Number 4, October 1958, pp. 508-540.

intensity in response to the prayer, the power of satisfaction and of merit which is expressed in the religious action of the man who performs the rite or receives it.²⁴

This results in a dynamic between God who offers grace and our limited capacity to receive grace. It is akin to sunlight beating against a window covered by heavy drapery. The sunlight is there, but it cannot illuminate the room until the drapes are parted. *Ex opere operantis* does not mean that the sacraments produce grace based on the openness or disposition of the recipient or that the *res et sacramentum*, the immediate effect of the sacrament, is dependent on the disposition of the recipient. Rather, although it is incorrect to say that the Eucharist received in Holy Communion is the Body of Christ if the recipient has faith but is merely bread when received by someone who does not have faith, it is correct that the effect that the reception of the Eucharist has on the life of the person is the result of the openness of the individual to the working of God's grace in his or her life. That is because the *res tantum*, the further spiritual effects of the sacrament which are signified and caused by the *res et sacramentum*, has effect in the life of the recipient in accord with his or her disposition.

This distinction can be described using Mark Searle's example of how sacraments work by using the example of naturalization ceremonies. The ritual of naturalization grants citizenship to immigrants no matter their intent or openness to the ways of their new country, but it does not make them loyal. Only their personal openness and acceptance of all that citizenship entails can do that. In the same way, ordination makes a man a priest, but it cannot make him holy or compassionate unless he embraces all that his priesthood means.²⁵ Each time a sacrament is

²⁴ Vagaggini, *The Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, 114.

²⁵ Mark Searle, *Called to Participate: Theological, Ritual, and Social Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 32.

received, there is an expectation that what is signified by the sacrament or the rite will not only occur, but that it will be accepted and carried out by the recipient.

Devotion and Worthy Disposition

Sacrosanctum Concilium reminds us of the importance of proper disposition, and full, conscious and active participation:

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.²⁶

Schillebeeckx explains that when the recipient of a sacrament does not possess the proper disposition “the sacramental symbolic act is an untruthful sign, for he contradicts by his interior disposition what the sacramental rite is affirming.”²⁷ When one receives Communion without possessing a worthy disposition, as when someone is in a state of mortal sin, this untruthful sign can be considered a sacrilege as Thomas Aquinas explains:

Therefore, whoever receives this sacrament, expresses thereby that he is made one with Christ, and incorporated in His members; and this is done by living faith, which no one has who is in mortal sin. And therefore it is manifest that whoever receives this sacrament while in mortal sin, is guilty of lying to this sacrament, and consequently of sacrilege, because he profanes the sacrament: and therefore he sins mortally.”²⁸

In addition to mortal sin, another example of the lack of worthy disposition would be reception of Holy Communion by one who is not Catholic. In both of these cases, the individual receives

²⁶ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 134.

²⁸ *ST, III*, q. 80, a. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

the Body and Blood of Christ, but cannot receive the spiritual benefits because he or she does not possess the necessary union with Christ and his Church, causing the sacrament to symbolize a unity which does not exist. Lack of proper disposition is not always so drastic and there are other times when one who is in union with Christ and his Church lacks the proper disposition in a less sense. Thomas Aquinas explains:

venial sins do not utterly hinder the effect of this sacrament, but merely in part. [...] the effect of this sacrament is not only the obtaining of habitual grace or charity, but also a certain actual refreshment of spiritual sweetness: which is indeed hindered if anyone approach to this sacrament with mind distracted through venial sins; but the increase of habitual grace or of charity is not taken away.²⁹

Proper disposition, therefore, has different aspects and there are many factors which affect one's openness to the working of God in his or her life. There is a difference between the reception of Communion by one who is not baptized, and therefore not in union with the Church, and the reception of Communion by one who is distracted by the events of the day. At any moment the heart, mind and voice of individuals might be distracted or otherwise not be attuned to each other or to what is taking place in the liturgy. The first type is the remote disposition of the individual. For example, in the case of the Eucharist: is the person baptized, is the person in a state of grace, does the person believe, does the person have at least a minimal prayer life? This disposition tends to be stable and does not fluctuate from moment to moment. The second type is the proximate disposition of the individual. For example, is the person attentive or distracted, is the person engaged in the prayer, is the person in a minor struggle with faith?³⁰ In most cases what is happening in the moment would not cause the reception of the sacraments to contradict

²⁹ *ST, III*, q. 79, a. 8, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

³⁰ O'Neill. *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, 121-122.

the disposition of the recipient because although it diminishes the ability of the person to give oneself to God, it is not contrary to the willingness of the person to do so.

Grace is itself the gift of transformative relationship which gives us a share in the divine nature and allows us the capacity for supernatural and meritorious action. Primary among the purposes of the sacraments is the imparting of grace. This grace builds and strengthens the relationship between God and the individual, the individual and the Church, and the Church and God. From this relationship flows devotion. Thomas Aquinas defines devotion as “an act of the will whereby a man offers himself for the service of God.”³¹ Thomas taught that devotion is the primary internal act of the virtue of religion. Therefore, the fostering of devotion is one of the central purposes of religion.³² By offering oneself to God, the worshipper’s heart and mind grows in responsiveness to God, which results in a deepening of faith. This deepening of faith allows the sacraments to attain a greater fruitfulness because devotion provides a worthy disposition which aids the soul in the reception of grace.

Through this grace, the liturgy allows the believer to participate in Christ’s work of redemption.³³ Everything in the Christian life flows from and is to be directed toward the divine encounter which occurs in the liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* describes the liturgy as:

...the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows [...] From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way.³⁴

³¹ *ST, II-II*, q. 82, a.1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

³² *ST, II-II*, q. 82, a. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

³³ Kevin W. Irwin, *What We Have Done, What We Have Failed to Do: Assessing the Liturgical Reforms of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 47.

³⁴ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

An authentic encounter, however, requires an engagement which is more substantial than a mere acknowledgement of the other's presence. A true liturgical encounter with God requires a coming together between God who descends to earth and the person who raises heart and mind to God.³⁵ When consciously engaged, the liturgy becomes an imitation of Christ, through which the face of Christ praying is revealed so that the faithful can be transformed. As Dietrich Von Hildebrand writes:

The face of Christ is revealed in the liturgy: it is Christ praying. To learn the fundamental dispositions embodied in the Liturgy means to penetrate more deeply into the great mystery of the adoration of God, which is Jesus Christ. The more consciously the spirit of Christ is grasped and realized in the Liturgy, the more the latter becomes a "way of following Christ", the deeper the transformation of man in Christ.³⁶

Christ reaches out to us in the sacraments through both words and physical signs which require human contact. The clearest example of this is the Eucharist, where he gives us his own Body and Blood. This physical outreach on the part of God requires a physical, corporeal response on the part of the baptized. The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council established a liturgy intended to facilitate and promote the liturgical participation of all the faithful so that this imitation of Christ could be more accessible and the fruits of the liturgy could be borne more readily in the lives of God's people. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* stated, "In the restoration and promotion of the sacred 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."³⁷

The disposition and devotion of the minister also plays a role in the celebration of the sacraments. As acts of ritual worship, the liturgical rites belong to the entire Church and are acts

³⁵ Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 133.

³⁶ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1986), 9.

³⁷ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14b.

of the entire Church, carried out by the sacred minister who acts on the part of the people of God, the Church. Although it does not affect the validity of the sacraments or the efficacy of the sacraments in the lives of the recipients, the full, conscious, and active participation, which is described in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, is also required of the celebrant. The celebrant is also a member of the faithful and receives grace and spiritual nourishment from the sacraments he celebrates. Likewise, Thomas asserts that the fruitfulness of the priest's prayers is also affected by his devotion.³⁸ A priest who celebrates the sacraments is to not only say the prayers and do the actions properly, but the liturgical celebrations must also be part of his personal prayer so that through his devotion he might be united to Christ, in whom he acts *in persona Christi*. Through this encounter with Christ, the priest receives the grace which is the fruit of the liturgy in his own life, as he prays for grace to be more readily accessible to those to whom he ministers.³⁹

Our liturgical celebrations are not closed events and are attended by many people who are not Catholic. Although a person who is not baptized can do everything called for by the liturgy, and can even do so with great reverence, that person cannot be said to have truly participated.⁴⁰ This does not mean that only participation by the baptized can be fruitful. If one considers that it is possible for humans to know God as revealed through natural means, it follows that it would be even more possible for God to be revealed to the unbaptized through the liturgy.⁴¹ Liturgy is a form of evangelization which meets each person where they are and invites all to participate according to his or her own spiritual state, beginning with the one who does not believe in God on a continuum to those who are virtually living saints. Although the fruits are received

³⁸ *ST, III*, q. 82, a. 6, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

³⁹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 104.

⁴⁰ Richard Schuler, "Participation," *Sacred Music* 114, no. 4 (1987), 8.

⁴¹ *ST, I*, q. 12, a.12, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

corresponding to the fullness of liturgical participation and connection with God, the liturgy can still reach those who do not have faith. Cardinal Francis Arinze explains that participation in the liturgy has the potential to bring about a curiosity that can cause the individual to open his or her heart and mind to God. As a result of that curiosity, God is able to bring that person to faith.⁴² Although the unbaptized cannot receive sanctifying grace from the liturgy and cannot be engaged in the fullness of participation found in the reception of Holy Communion, since the desire to worship can be understood as coming from God, liturgical participation by the unbaptized can be understood as a participation in God. For all people, it is an invitation to participate in God's divine life which requires a response on the part of the individual so that the grace which flows from liturgy and the sacraments can be received.

The Historical Background of the Idea of Liturgical Participation

The idea of liturgical participation is most closely associated with the Second Vatican Council; however, recognition of the importance and purpose of liturgical participation did not first arise with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Although the ways in which liturgical participation has been expressed since the Second Vatican Council would have been foreign to him, some of the theological reasons for the importance of liturgical participation can be found in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he explains that it is possible for a person to receive a sacrament without receiving the fruits of the sacrament because "it sometimes happens that a man is hindered from receiving the effect of this sacrament; and such receiving of this sacrament is an imperfect one."⁴³ For example, those who receive Holy Communion without the proper

⁴² Francis Arinze, *Celebrating the Holy Eucharist* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), 56.

⁴³ *ST, III*, q. 80, a.1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

disposition receive the sacrament but do not receive the spiritual benefits of union with Christ.

Thomas Aquinas taught that the preparation for Mass and what takes place before the reception of sacraments affects the level of devotion in which the sacrament is received:

The greatest devotion is called for at the moment of receiving this sacrament, because it is then that the effect of the sacrament is bestowed, and such devotion is hindered more by what goes before it than by what comes after it. And therefore it was ordained that men should fast before receiving the sacrament rather than after.⁴⁴

Using the example of Baptism, Thomas teaches that:

adults, who approach Baptism with their own faith, are not equally disposed to Baptism; for some approach thereto with greater, some with less, devotion. And therefore some receive a greater, some a smaller share of the grace of newness; just as from the same fire, he receives more heat who approaches nearest to it, although the fire, as far as it is concerned, sends forth its heat equally to all.⁴⁵

Thomas states that the assembly should know and understand the prayers which the priest offers at Mass on their behalf:

Common prayer is that which is offered to God by the ministers of the Church representing the body of the faithful: wherefore such like prayer should come to the knowledge of the whole people for whom it is offered: and this would not be possible unless it were vocal prayer. Therefore it is reasonably ordained that the ministers of the Church should say these prayers even in a loud voice, so that they may come to the knowledge of all.⁴⁶

As seen earlier in this chapter, although he clearly gives precedence to interior participation, Thomas Aquinas also recognizes the importance of the union of interior and exterior participation and the human need to express devotion through the body in worship. Therefore,

⁴⁴ *ST, III*, q. 80, a.8, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁴⁵ *ST, III*, q. 69, a.4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁴⁶ *ST, II-II*, q. 83, a.12, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

not only is it important that the faithful be able to understand the prayers, Thomas states that vocal prayer is important because it fulfills the needs of human nature for three reasons:

First, in order to excite interior devotion, whereby the mind of the person praying is raised to God... Augustine says (ad Probam. Ep. cxxx, 9) that "by means of words and other signs we arouse ourselves more effectively to an increase of holy desires." [...] Secondly, the voice is used in praying as though to pay a debt, so that man may serve God with all that he has from God, that is to say, not only with his mind, but also with his body: and this applies to prayer considered especially as satisfactory. [...] Thirdly, we have recourse to vocal prayer, through a certain overflow from the soul into the body, through excess of feeling, according to Psalm 15:9, "My heart hath been glad, and my tongue hath rejoiced."⁴⁷

In another place Thomas writes that "we need to praise God with our lips, not indeed for His sake, but for our own sake; since by praising Him our devotion is aroused towards Him, [...] And forasmuch as man, by praising God, ascends in his affections to God, by so much is he withdrawn from things opposed to God."⁴⁸ Humans relate to things that they love through physical gestures and spoken words and those gestures help to form a bond between the one who loves and the beloved, so it is natural that we would relate to God through the use of our bodies.

Although these quotes are not directly in reference to liturgical prayer, Thomas does address liturgical prayer with reference to the Mass when he describes how the parts of the Mass exist to draw the faithful into the proper disposition. Alluding to the union of interior and exterior participation, Thomas Aquinas describes the Preface of the Mass as being a prayer through which people are "excited to devotion" and respond by "devoutly praising Christ's Godhead, saying with the angels, Holy, Holy, Holy."⁴⁹ Likewise, he states that the ritual solemnity with which the sacraments are celebrated fosters devotion. In the case of baptism,

⁴⁷ *ST, II-II*, q. 83, a. 12, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁴⁸ *ST, II-II*, q. 91, a.1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁴⁹ *ST, III*, q. 83, a. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

actions such as the anointing with oil in baptism help to distinguish the difference between baptism and regular washing.⁵⁰

Although liturgical participation was not among the primary concerns addressed by the Council of Trent, the 1562 instruction *De Sacrificio Missae* promulgated by the Council of Trent called for priests to explain the Mass to the people recommending that “often, during the celebration of Mass, they or others whom they delegate explain something about what is read in the Mass and, among other things, tell something about the mystery of this most holy sacrifice. This is to be done particularly on Sundays and holy days.”⁵¹ Although Latin was no longer spoken by the faithful and Mass was not permitted to be celebrated in the vernacular, the council fathers affirmed the importance of the faithful understanding what occurs and is said at Mass.

The liturgical movement of the 20th century further developed these ideas and as the Church published official documents more explicitly calling for attentiveness to prayer, understanding of the liturgical rites, dialogue Masses, and singing, liturgical participation developed into what we experience today. In response to the increasing secularization of the world and the ways in which the liturgy was being influenced by the world, particularly the ways liturgical music was being influenced by secular music, Pope St. Pius X promoted participation in the liturgy as the way to nourish and strengthen the Church. In doing so, he introduced the term “active participation” in his 1903 motu proprio on liturgical music, *Tra le Sollecitudini*:

Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, We deem it necessary to provide before

⁵⁰ Thomas Augustine Becker, “The Role of Solemnitas in the Liturgy According to Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in *Rediscovering Aquinas and the Sacraments: Studies in Sacramental Theology*, edited by Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais, (Chicago, Ill: Hillenbrand Books, 2009).

⁵¹ Council of Trent, Session XXII, *De Sacrificio Missae*, C. VIII as quoted in Pius XII, Encyclical On Sacred Music *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* (25 December 1955) §48. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/piusxii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae.html.

anything else for the sanctity and dignity of the temple, in which the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.⁵²

Pius X sought a renewal of liturgical music which would bring beauty and reverence into the liturgy and thus restore all things in Christ. He taught that the purpose of liturgical music was to be a source of beauty and to help the faithful understand the texts so that they would be “better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy mysteries.”⁵³ With the sung liturgical texts being in Latin, he believed appropriate music, particularly chant and polyphony, would help the faithful to understand the tone of the prayer, even if they could not understand the text. Much in the same way that stained glass could tell the stories of the Church to the illiterate, liturgical music could demonstrate the sorrow of Lent, the joy of Christmas, and the glorious grandeur of Easter, even to those unable to understand the prayers.

In 1909, Lambert Beauduin, a Benedictine priest, led a conference in Belgium which sought to promote the ideas of active participation in the liturgy. Scholars from around the world attended and the liturgical movement developed and grew as liturgical institutes were formed.⁵⁴ In 1926, influenced by Beauduin and seeking to promote liturgical participation in its various forms, Virgil Michel and several other liturgically interested clergy and laity in America founded a magazine dedicated to liturgical matters called *Orate Fratres*. In the first edition of this journal, Michel writes that the aim of publication was “to develop a better understanding of the spiritual

⁵² Pope Pius X, Motu Proprio Instruction on Sacred Music *Tra le Sollecutudini* (November 22, 1903) Introduction. At Adoremus. <https://adoremus.org/1903/11/tra-le-sollecutudini>.

⁵³ Pope Pius X, *Tra le Sollecutudini*, 1.

⁵⁴ Rita Ferrone, *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 7.

import of the liturgy” aiming “at an interest that is more thoroughly intimate, that seizes upon the entire person, touching not only intellect, but also will, heart as well as mind.”⁵⁵

In 1926, Virgil Michel had argued that the laity practicing private devotions during Mass and even reading devotional material intended to complement the liturgical prayers and actions caused the laity to be largely unable to follow the Mass correctly in their missals because they were unable to read in parallel with what was being said by the priest. He described it as similar to people being at a meeting with the governor, but as the leader was speaking, they were napping, reading the newspaper, or examining the artwork in the room.⁵⁶

In 1928, with the groundwork of the developing liturgical movement in place, Pope Pius XI promulgated an Apostolic Constitution entitled *Divini Cultus Sanctitatem*. In this document, he noted that in the places where *Tra le Sollecutudini* had been followed, the expected flourishing of the Christian spirit flowed, but in the places where it had not been heeded, the secular culture prevailed. He writes:

Wherever the regulations on this subject [sacred music] have been carefully observed, a new life has been given to this delightful art, and the spirit of religion has prospered; the faithful have gained a deeper understanding of the sacred Liturgy, and have taken part with greater zest in the ceremonies of the Mass, in the singing of the psalms and the public prayers. [...] It is, however, to be deplored that these most wise laws in some places have not been fully observed, and therefore their intended results not obtained.⁵⁷

Building upon the idea of active participation, he called for both the clergy and the faithful to be taught about the liturgy and liturgical music, for the faithful to be engaged in the singing of Gregorian chant and to say the responses proper to them and to “not be merely detached and

⁵⁵ Virgil Michel, “Introduction,” *Orate Fratres* 1, no. 1 (November 28, 1926), 1.

⁵⁶ Virgil Michel, “Participation in the Mass,” *Orate Fratres* 1, no. 1 (November 28, 1926), 17-18.

⁵⁷ Pius XI, Apostolic Constitution On Divine Worship *Divini Cultus Sanctitatem* (20 December 1928). At Adoremus. <https://adoremus.org/1928/12/on-divine-worship>.

silent spectators.”⁵⁸ This document attracted more attention and within six months of the promulgation of *Divini Cultus Sanctitatem*, the popular practice of encouraging the laity to pray the rosary or participate in other devotional practices instead of participation in the Mass began to be more critically lamented. In his address to the 1929 National Eucharistic Congress of South Africa, Kenneth McMurtrie decried the lack of active participation of the laity as well as the devotional practices in which the laity engaged during Mass.⁵⁹

The movement for liturgical participation continued to grow as additional scholars, such as Dietrich Von Hildebrand, began to speak and write on liturgical participation. In 1943, Dietrich Von Hildebrand writes that:

there are many who still prefer other forms of devotion and religious exercise. They do not realize the fact that it is precisely the Liturgy which grants us the deepest and most organic form of development of the divine life received by us in baptism, and that the man who is entirely formed by the spirit of the Liturgy is like to Christ.⁶⁰

The growth of the idea of liturgical participation was furthered by Pope Pius XII’s 1947 encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, which formalized the distinction between exterior and interior worship and declared both to be essential to true worship, while giving greater importance to interior worship.⁶¹ Pope Pius XII heralded those who engaged in liturgical catechesis, congregational hymnody, and dialogue Masses which were occurring in certain places. He also recommended that the faithful follow the Mass using the Missal.⁶² Despite the growing rejection of private devotions during Mass, recognizing that many people did not have access to missals or were

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ R. Gabriel Pivarnik, *Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Liturgical Participation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 9-10.

⁶⁰ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 9.

⁶¹ Pius XII, Encyclical On the Sacred Liturgy *Mediator Dei* (20 November 1947). §23-24. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20111947_mediator-dei.html

⁶² Ibid, 105.

unable to read them, and that not all people were capable of understanding the liturgical rituals, Pius XII, in an attempt to unite interior and exterior participation, encouraged the faithful to “adopt some other method which proves easier for certain people; for instance, they can lovingly meditate on the mysteries of Jesus Christ or perform other exercises of piety or recite prayers which, though they differ from the sacred rites, are still essentially in harmony with them.”⁶³ Although this concession draws the faithful away from the liturgical action, it was intended to draw the faithful into prayer and away from distraction during Mass.

During this time, there were also errors which had arisen suggesting that priests concelebrated Mass with the laity and that both the priest and the laity offered the sacrifice together in the same manner.⁶⁴ Pius XII rejects this idea but asserts that the faithful do participate in offering the sacrifice with the priest, in their own proper manner. Quoting the late 10th century treatise by Pope Innocent III, *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio*, Pius XII states:

This has already been stated in the clearest terms by some of Our predecessors and some Doctors of the Church. ‘Not only,’ says Innocent III of immortal memory, ‘do the priests offer the sacrifice, but also all the faithful: for what the priest does personally by virtue of his ministry, the faithful do collectively by virtue of their intention.’”⁶⁵

Pius XII further states that while the laity offer the sacrifice through the hands of the priest, they do not do so by carrying out any liturgical rite. Rather, the offering of the sacrifice by the people

is based on the fact that the people unite their hearts in praise, impetration, expiation and thanksgiving with prayers or intention of the priest, even of the High Priest himself, so that in the one and same offering of the victim and according to a visible sacerdotal rite, they may be presented to God the Father.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid, 108.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 83.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 93.

The laity, therefore, offer the sacrifice through their own interior participation in the Mass.

The idea of music as a means of fostering liturgical participation grew with the 1958 instruction from the Sacred Congregation for Rites, *De Musica Sacra*. Here, the distinction of the two types of liturgical participation was further developed with the primary means being interior participation consisting of listening, attentiveness, and silent prayer and the secondary means being exterior participation consisting of postures, singing, vocal prayers and responses. *De Musica Sacra* affirms that active participation is perfected when interior and exterior participation are united with sacramental participation through the reception of Holy Communion.⁶⁷

During the time preceding the Second Vatican Council, theologians argued one of the factors preventing true liturgical participation was a sense among the faithful that the liturgy was the domain of the priest, and the laity knew little about what was taking place at Mass and did not think that there was much that they needed to know. In 1960, Gabriel Braso described many faithful Catholics in this way:

They fulfill with sincerity and even with a certain devotion a religious duty imposed by the Church, but they do not succeed in grasping the intrinsic necessity of this obligation. Hence their attitude in relation to the liturgical rite is purely passive. If they pray, a little or a good deal, they do so on their own account, without any direct link with the action of the celebrant.⁶⁸

These words, which echo those of Virgil Michel in 1926, show that the liturgical movement had done little to change the experience of the average Catholic.

⁶⁷ Pius XII, Encyclical On Sacred Music *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* (25 December 1955) §22. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/piusxii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae.html.

⁶⁸ Gabriel M. Braso, *Liturgy and Spirituality*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960), 209.

In a similar way, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, who would become Pope Paul VI, wrote in his 1958 pastoral letter to the Diocese of Milan:

We cannot be content with having a church full of people, with having an amorphous crowd of individuals, a meaningless mass which assists at the sacred rite spiritually distracted or without inner unity. We strive to give composition to those present, an order, and awareness, so as to establish the sacred atmosphere in which the religious rite takes place. The idea is not just to require an educated behavior, such as might be required for a spectacle of some kind. We need to infuse into all the sense of a common action, which is precisely the sense of participation.⁶⁹

Recognizing that the current liturgical norms were unable to facilitate the depth of participation sought by these documents⁷⁰, the council fathers called for liturgical reforms which would be shaped by the promotion of liturgical instruction and active participation.⁷¹

What is Liturgical Participation?

Authentic liturgical participation as envisioned by the history of the Church and the liturgical documents is one which is full, conscious, and active. By its nature, for participation to be full, it must use the entirety of the human mind and body. It must engage all the senses so that the worship as experienced through human senses draws the worshipper into that which the senses cannot perceive, into an understanding of the divine mystery celebrated and made present through sign and symbol.⁷² Those taking part in the liturgy must do so with knowledge of what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what it means. They must also be attentive to the prayer in which they are participating. All of this is critical because an assembly which is mindlessly reciting words could, in fact, be nothing more than a group of vocal spectators.

⁶⁹ Montini, Giovanni Battista, *Pastoral Letter to the Archdiocese of Milan, 1958*, as quoted in R. Gabriel Pivarnik, *Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Liturgical Participation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 34.

⁷⁰ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (24 July 2010), § 11. At USCCB. <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal>.

⁷¹ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14.

⁷² Pivarnik, *Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Liturgical Participation*, 35.

Cyprian Vagaggini emphasizes that authentic and full liturgical participation is an internal and external encounter which transforms the individual:

Just any sort of presence or any sort of participation will not suffice. It is not a question of purely material, purely external encounter, but of an internal encounter, an encounter of the soul. Liturgical pastoral⁷³, therefore, must have for its aim not only a material conducting of the individual into a church so that he may in one way or another participate in the liturgy, but creating in him of an internal moral attunement with the liturgical reality as sanctification in Christ and worship of God in Christ. [...] The goal therefore is plenary participation, that is, that participation in which the Catholic, responding with perfect attunement to the given objective of the celebration, displays in full the possibilities of the supernatural activities included in his supernatural existence as a man deputed to the worship of God in Christ.⁷⁴

As we have seen from the previous documents, active participation begins with interior participation which finds its source in interior devotion, love of God, and the desire to praise and worship God. It begins before the individual arrives at the church and is nourished by prayer and spiritual preparation. This preparation allows for the faithful to engage the senses so that the sweet scent of incense, the coolness of water, the beauty of vestments, and the architecture of the church building might create a solemnity which draws them into a deeper attentiveness. This also requires silence. Interior participation in the liturgy consists of both an interior quiet where the faithful listen attentively and unite themselves to the readings, prayers, music, and action with a true silence, such as the silence after the readings or following the end of Holy Communion, where all the people, clergy and laity, can reflect, and moved by their own devotion and personal piety unite themselves to God in silent prayer.⁷⁵

⁷³ Vagaggini defines “liturgical pastoral” as “the general way of conceiving and putting pastoral into practice by consciously centering it in the liturgy.” Vagaggini, *The Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, 838.

⁷⁴ Vagaggini, *The Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, 838-839.

⁷⁵ *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2008), 12, 118.

Although silence might seem to be contrary to the idea of participation, it is necessary to promote interior participation and to achieve balance in exterior participation. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states, “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.”⁷⁶ The 2007 document from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sing to the Lord*, makes the distinction between the silent spectator bemoaned in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the reverent silence which is required for the growth of interior participation:

At the proper times, all should observe a reverent silence. Through it the faithful are not only not considered as extraneous or dumb spectators at the liturgical service, but are associated more intimately in the mystery that is being celebrated, thanks to that interior disposition which derives from the word of God that they have heard, from the songs and prayers that have been uttered, and from spiritual union with the priest in the parts that he says or sings himself.⁷⁷

God is owed interior devotion and love, but is also owed verbal and bodily praise. Exterior participation, however, encompasses more than praise. The actions carried out are themselves signs and symbols. As embodied beings, interior participation and devotion is necessarily expressed through outward actions. As we have seen, Thomas Aquinas taught that human senses must be engaged in worship because it is through the senses that the human mind can come to understand God and “in the Divine worship it is necessary to make use of corporeal things, that man’s mind may be aroused thereby, as by signs, to the spiritual acts by means of which he is united to God.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Sing to the Lord*, 17.

⁷⁸ *ST, II-II*, q. 81, a.7, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

United to and rooted in interior disposition the postures, acclamations, responses, and singing of the faithful express and nourish faith and so allow a deepening of interior participation.⁷⁹ When interior and exterior participation is brought to completion through the reception of Holy Communion, individuals can receive the fruits of the liturgy to the fullest.

The liturgical documents have consistently described exterior participation as flowing from and back into interior participation, but misunderstandings have still arisen and been manifested in exaggerated participation. In the years after the Council, the idea of exterior participation experienced a great pendulum swing. No longer were the faithful silent spectators, but in many places, in an attempt to foster active participation, there were great attempts made to ensure that as many people as possible were doing something. Offertory processions of dozens of children bringing up textbooks and balloons along with the bread and wine, skits in place of the Gospel, and choirs that overpower the liturgy are only a few examples of exaggerated participation. An exaggerated focus on exterior participation can drown out the possibility for interior participation and contemplative prayer.⁸⁰

One of the reasons for this misunderstanding might be that the term “active participation” tends to bring to mind a person who is constantly in motion. Looking at the original Latin text of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* we find that the term is not *activa*, but is *actuosa*, which is also the term used by Pius X. There is no English word that can adequately convey the meaning of *actuosa*. Colman O’Neill defines *participatio actuosa* as “that form of devout involvement in the liturgical action which, in the present conditions of the Church, best promotes the exercise of the

⁷⁹ *Sing to the Lord*, 13.

⁸⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 171.

common priesthood of the baptized.”⁸¹ In his 2007 Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI sought to draw attention to the importance of interior participation and correct the liturgical hyperactivity which sometimes occurs. He writes:

It should be made clear that the word ‘participation’ does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council must be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life. [...] The beauty and the harmony of the liturgy find eloquent expression in the order by which everyone is called to participate actively. This entails an acknowledgment of the distinct hierarchical roles involved in the celebration. It is helpful to recall that active participation is not per se equivalent to the exercise of a specific ministry. The active participation of the laity does not benefit from the confusion arising from an inability to distinguish, within the Church's communion, the different functions proper to each one.⁸²

As Benedict XVI wrote prior to his election to the papacy, “The word ‘part-icipation’ refers to a principal action in which everyone has a ‘part’.”⁸³ The laity participate in the liturgy by virtue and by right of their baptism and the priest presides by virtue and right of Holy Orders. As Vagaggini writes, “The liturgy is, in fact, by its very nature an action not only of the priest but each of the faithful present, although in a way that is not properly that of the priest and hence without an equation of roles and without a confusion thereof.”⁸⁴

Full, conscious and active liturgical participation begins with preparation for Mass, the fostering of the proper spiritual disposition which allows for the greatest benefit, and it does not follow a universal norm. Liturgical participation is not one size fits all. It allows for the varieties

⁸¹ Colman O'Neill, “The Theological Meaning of Actiosa Participatio in the Liturgy,” in *Sacred Music and Liturgy Reform after Vatican II: Proceedings of the Fifth International Church Music Congress, Chicago-Milwaukee, August 21-28, 1966*, ed. Johannes Overath (Rome: Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae, 1969), 105.

⁸² Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation On the Sacrament of Charity *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), §52. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html.

⁸³ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 171.

⁸⁴ Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, 839.

of people, cultures, formation, and liturgical variations found within the Church. It allows for the person who is struggling with faith and the person who is assured in faith, for the person who prays with their heart and voice and the person who weeps interiorly but cannot bring themselves to speak or sing the prayers, to be engaged in conscious and active participation. It allows and helps people to grow in their closeness to God. It allows for the rural simplicity of a daily Mass celebrated in a small country parish by a heavily accented priest and the majesty of the Christ Mass at a great cathedral preached by an eloquent bishop. *Participatio actuosa* allows for the baptized, through the liturgy, to meet God where they are so that God can draw them into this divine encounter where they will be nourished and empowered to stand on the edge between heaven and earth without prejudice.

The 2001 *Directory of Popular Piety and the Liturgy* from the Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments clarifies Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, which sought to address the difficulties faced by certain individuals and populations and which recommended that the faithful engage in other forms of prayer if the Mass is too difficult for them to follow. It states:

The ambivalence that the Liturgy is not "popular"⁸⁵ must be overcome. The liturgical renewal of the Council set out to promote the participation of the people in the celebration of the Liturgy, at certain times and places (through hymns, active participation, and lay ministries), which had previously given rise to forms of prayer alternative to, or substitutive of, the liturgical action itself. [...] the formulae proper to pious exercises should not be commingled with the liturgical actions. [...] any form of competition with or opposition to the liturgical actions, where such exists, must also be resolved.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ The definition of "popular" in this instance "being of the people".

⁸⁶ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (17 December 2001), §11, 13. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html.

Devotional practices such as the recitation of the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, and similar acts of devotion can serve as a preparation for Mass and have the ability to bring the faithful to a deeper reflection and understanding of the mystery of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. Likewise, when visits to the Blessed Sacrament foster an understanding of the Eucharist as the presence of Christ flowing from the Mass dwelling with us for all time, that prayerful encounter with the divine leads the faithful into the liturgical celebration and can deepen the interior and exterior expression of liturgical prayer.⁸⁷ For that reason, acts of popular piety which are carried out apart from liturgical celebrations can be considered part of liturgical participation when, rather than being understood as ends in themselves or something to be done during liturgy, they are understood as a means of preparation which fosters the interior devotion which is expressed in the liturgy.

Conclusion

Liturgical participation is to live the relationship with God, which was established in baptism, and to allow that relationship to grow through sacramental grace. Grace allows humans to enter into a relationship with God, and through that relationship, to see beyond that which can be perceived by human knowledge. Because it is in baptism that one enters into relationship with God, full, conscious, and active liturgical participation presupposes that those who are participating are baptized members of the Body of Christ who are carrying out their right and obligation of true worship.

When liturgical participation is separated from its aim, which is the reception of grace and encounter with God, we risk participation for its own sake. We risk adding unnecessary and

⁸⁷ Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 250-251.

inappropriate elements in an attempt to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to do something. We risk diminishing the role of the assembly and the importance of internal disposition and participation. We risk focusing on the emotive and forgetting that liturgy is a reflection of the heavenly kingdom and a spiritual vehicle that allows us to build that kingdom on earth.

As primary sources of grace, the liturgical celebrations of the Church, in particular the celebration of the Mass, are at the heart of the Christian life and faith. All things in the Christian life flow from and are to be ordered to the celebration of Mass so that the faithful, both clergy and laity, may be nourished by grace, respond to that grace in liturgical worship, and thus be sustained and transformed in the Christian life.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal states that the fruits of the Mass will be received by the faithful “if, with due regard for the nature and other circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is arranged in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful.”⁸⁸ Liturgical participation, therefore, is one of the elements which affects the individual’s ability to receive the grace which flows from the sacraments. Since liturgical participation is both internal and external, the state of the person, the manner in which liturgies are celebrated, and the person’s understanding of the rites being celebrated all affect the ability of the person to participate. In this way, the grace which is received through the celebration of the sacraments may bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.

⁸⁸ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 18.

CHAPTER 3: RITUAL AND LITURGY

Ritual in the Secular World

Rituals are an integral part of being human. Suggesting the elimination of singing “Happy Birthday” and the blowing out of candles would be seen by most people as a type of secular sacrilege. Political inaugurations, graduations, and birthday parties are all examples of what could be considered formal secular rituals. Formal rituals allow us to mark special events and communicate messages greater than ourselves. However, there are also informal rituals, such as bedtime routines and routes taken to work, which are thought of as simply part of daily life. People often speak of feeling out of sorts and ill at ease when these informal rituals are disrupted. The commonality between formal and informal ritual is that they provide a sense of comfort by giving a structured framework, order, and rhythm to the event so that those participating will know what is expected of them.⁸⁹ Through the sharing of time, space, and symbols, rituals can transform the chaotic energy, which so often overwhelms crowds, by turning a crowd of strangers into an orderly community.⁹⁰

Despite this, there is often expressed a certain negativity toward rituals as we often hear people refer to religious celebrations as “only a meaningless ritual” while others consider rituals to be bonds that stifle creativity. However, after watching any of the seemingly countless wedding shows on TV or browsing wedding websites, it can be noted that there is no lack of

⁸⁹ Searle, *Called to Participate*, 18-19.

⁹⁰ Michael John Zielinski, “Liturgy, Ritual and Contemporary Man: Anthropological and Psychological Connections,” in *The Sacred Liturgy: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church: The Proceedings of the International Conference on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacra Liturgia 2013, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, 25-28 June 2013*, ed. Alcuin Reid (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 239.

newly created wedding rituals. Unity candles, unity sand, unity paintings, ring exchanges between stepparents and their new stepchildren, and an ever-growing myriad of neo-rituals have taken the place of established religious rituals. Mircea Eliade writes that, “To whatever degree he may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds completely in doing away with religious behavior.”⁹¹ Therefore, where religious ritual is removed, secular ritual will fill the void.

Ritual is by its essence, a communal act where everyone has a role. There is usually a leader and a number of people who work with the leader. Those taking part in the ritual do not make it up as they go along. Instead, they follow a set of written or unwritten rules. By their nature, spontaneous acts are not ritual. A ritual is a series of actions which communicate a reality and cause it to happen. Through their participation, those who participate accept their role and submit to the effect. By accepting our role and carrying out what is expected of us, ritual teaches us about ourselves, our community, and the ideals to which we aspire.⁹²

Ritual in the Ecclesiastical World

Sacred ritual carries within it a certain tension between mystery and accessibility; between the divine and the natural. Louis Bouyer argues against exaggerated horizontal or vertical emphases that have accompanied liturgical ritual. As an example of an exaggerated vertical tendency of ritual, Bouyer uses aspects of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass, where there is mystery and an ineffable transcendence which is closely protected to the detriment of human involvement. In this model, because it is sacred, the Mass must be set apart and remain unlike the things of the world. An altar, therefore, can only be an altar and to think of the altar as

⁹¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1968), 13.

⁹² Searle, *Called to Participate*, 19-26.

a table would degrade the sacred. As an example of an exaggerated horizontal focus of liturgy, Bouyer uses the liturgical experiments of the 1960's, where all that was vertical and transcendent and set apart were rejected.⁹³ To the detriment of the divine, Mass was considered to be no different than any other meal and there was no reason for it to be set apart. In this model, Christ is thought of as making everyday life sacred. The surface on which the liturgy is celebrated is not only not an altar, there is no need for it to even be a special table because God equally sanctifies the table where Mass is celebrated, the family table in the dining room, and the folding table where the cakes from the parish bake sale are sold. Rather than creating a conflict between the Mass as a communal meal and a sacrifice, Bouyer argues that the liturgy should be a superimposing of both models, so there can be a balance and a union between the natural and the divine.⁹⁴ The altar of the liturgy can be recognized as a table, but a table which, without losing its connection to the table in our own dining rooms, is an altar which has been set apart for sacred purpose. In this way, the mystery is neither lost nor obscured by the familiar and the common, but that which is common and familiar is sanctified. Bouyer teaches that “that the originality of Christianity consists of consecrating [our] everyday lives through the incarnation.”⁹⁵ In this way, the liturgy reveals to us that God is both more immanent and more transcendent than we could have ever known.

Liturgical prayer and ritual is intended to bring about a union between the human and the divine so that Christ, who is both human and divine, can draw us into his divinity. According to Dietrich Von Hildebrand, “Liturgical prayer means emerging from the narrowness of one’s own

⁹³ Louis Bouyer, *Rite and Man: Natural Sacredness and Christian Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

life and rejoining the life of Christ and the universal sphere of the praying Church. It is an immersion into the world of God.”⁹⁶ This world is, by its nature, a fearful and fascinating mystery into which we are invited to participate. It is an encounter with the ineffable God who became flesh, so that we could not only worship, but so that we could know and love God and become like God.

Ritual as Language

One of the ways God reveals himself to us is through the words of Scripture, but it is through sacramental signs, symbols, and liturgical rites that we most readily come to an understanding of that which is unknowable. In this way, the rites themselves become a language. Language through signs is one of the most primitive and universal means of human communication. Infants point and can learn sign language before they can verbally form words. People who speak different languages can communicate through symbols and gestures. Like spoken language, signs and symbols must be understood in order to be effective. A rite is a type of human communication of the divine, but the meaning must still be understood. When the meaning of the message which is intended to be communicated by the rite is lost or hidden, the result is superstition where rites become a substitute for God. Much of the Protestant Reformation was a reaction to the misappropriation of rituals and a lack of understanding of the rituals on the part of the laity and, even in many cases, on the part of the clergy. It was a reaction to the appearance of superstition, as the rituals no longer communicated to the people.⁹⁷ Bouyer explains that:

Protestantism can only be understood if it is seen as a reaction to a religion that had degenerated, if not into magic, at least into superstition. In the Middle Ages, when few

⁹⁶ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 104.

⁹⁷ Louis Bouyer. *Rite and Man: Natural Sacredness and the Christian Liturgy*, 57-58.

people, even among the priests, understood Latin, the tendency was to make of the liturgy something that took on the character of the incomprehensible... Under the pretext that grace is given, and that the sacraments act, *ex opere operato*, men gave up any attempt to understand them.⁹⁸

Bouyer explains that as a result, “the ritualistic action became dehumanized.”⁹⁹ In other words, as rituals seemed to lose the ability to communicate, non-liturgical churches developed where words replaced ritual. This resulted in a type of intellectual worship where the unknowable is thought to be revealed through study or through a type of worship where one’s relationship with God was built on an emotional response.

To a lesser degree, Catholics have sometimes fallen into these errors. At times, the explanation of the rituals within the liturgy causes the explanations to overtake the power of the ritual and fails to allow the signs and symbols to speak for themselves. Likewise, it is not uncommon to find Catholics who have been taught that authentic faith and worship must be felt emotionally. They may despair when worship becomes a routine or mundane part of life. However, like a marriage where the husband and wife are confident in their love for one another, even though the flutters of early love are long gone, liturgical worship is no less authentic or valuable when it is not accompanied by a strong emotional response. Like a marriage, liturgical participation is about relationship with God and a giving of self to God which is deeper and more enduring than emotions of the moment. The rituals continue to communicate the truth of the relationship even when one may be tired, distracted, immersed in the routine.

Mark Searle teaches that the faithful participate in ecclesial ritual on three levels. First, the faithful participate in ritual through the natural ritual behavior as previously described.

⁹⁸ Bouyer, *Rite and Man*, 58.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 59.

Second, they participate in ritual as a participation in the life of Christ. It is this participation in the life of Christ which distinguishes Christian ritual from all others. Searle writes, “We do not own the liturgy. Rather it is the liturgy of the whole Church that is given us by Christ as the means whereby we may enter into his liturgy.”¹⁰⁰ Christian ritual belongs to Christ and through Christ, to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. It is not the possession of an individual, or a community, or a diocese. Through these rituals we assume the identity of Christian, enter into relationship with Christ, and take on our proper role in the Church.¹⁰¹ This requires obedience in faith. At its core, faith is believing in God’s truth which allows us to trust in God. Fruitful rituals require both the faith of the Church and the faith of the individual. Third, the faithful participate in ritual as participation in the life of God. Searle writes that the “practice of saying prayers, including liturgical prayers, must keep the mystery of God before us and not allow God to become reduced to a handy-dandy, pocket-sized deity or a convenient friend in the sky [...] the sacraments ... deliver us to a place where God can be God for us.”¹⁰² The sacraments are not vending machines of grace. Sacraments are the means through which we are brought to the source of all grace and are immersed into relationship with God: not as a transactional relationship where God gives us what we need and we move along, but in a unitive relationship where we are transformed by grace. This transformation cannot fully take place unless we are open to it.

Reaping the Fruits of Ritual

The Church’s rituals are made for those who are open to this transformative power of God. This requires that those who take part in them believe and understand what is taking

¹⁰⁰ Searle, *Called to Participate*, 28.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 27-32.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 39-40.

place.¹⁰³ The rituals also must be celebrated in accord with the liturgical norms and rubrics. One might suggest that if many people do not understand the ritual, then individual presiders can and should modify them in a spirit of creative spontaneity to make the ritual more accessible.

However, Aidan Kavanagh says:

Rite is sustained by rote and obedience far more than restless creativity, and obedience is a subordinate part of justice. [...] Creativity of the Spontaneous Me variety condemns rite and symbol to lingering deaths by trivialization bemusing those who would communicate by rite and symbol to a point where they finally wander away in search of something which appears to be more stable and power-laden.¹⁰⁴

Ritual communicates meaning when it is carried out fully and consistently. It could be possible, in many cases, that the reason the rite is not understood is because those participating in it have never experienced them fully, have experienced them haphazardly, or have received poor liturgical catechesis and as a result have never learned the language of liturgy. The liturgical rites are a communication of faith, of life, of relationship, of identity. Through these rites we both learn who we are as Catholics and become who we are as Catholics. Just as garbling or leaving out sentences or words from a speech will result in a message which is difficult or even impossible to understand, shabbily or carelessly celebrated liturgies can result in those who participate being unable to be fully open to divine transformation because the profundity and power of the message has been lost.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

Since signs, symbols, and rituals constitute a form of language, the manner in which these rites are celebrated and the actions contained within them, speak clearly about the faith of

¹⁰³ Braso, *Liturgy and Spirituality*, 210.

¹⁰⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: the Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981*(New York, NY: Pueblo, 1984), 102.

the Church and also transmit that faith to the worshippers. The saying “*lex orandi, lex credendi*,” the law of prayer is the law of faith, succinctly states that the way we pray affects what we believe. Our prayers, texts, and ritual signs communicate the faith of the Church. Kavanaugh asserts that “Sacramental discourse will bespeak Gospel in ways that embrace and articulate not just words but the whole worldly context in which such a pouring out occurs.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Kevin Irwin says that the primary purpose of liturgical prayer is “to shape our belief in what we are celebrating and to underscore how we are drawn into what we believe through liturgy. They are complimented through the actions of the liturgy and the actions that derive from the liturgy.”¹⁰⁶

In that way, it could be said that every person who participates in liturgical worship is a theologian because their understanding of God is formed by the celebration. Kavanaugh writes that “What emerges most directly from an assembly’s liturgical act is not a new species of theology among others. It is *theologia* itself.”¹⁰⁷ The average person in the pew may not know the intricate language of theology or be able to explain Irenaeus’ doctrine of recapitulation, but they engage in the work of theology when they come to know God through the liturgy and allow the liturgy to shape their lives.¹⁰⁸

Since the liturgical celebration is form of evangelization and theological formation, our liturgical texts must be prepared with the utmost care. Our music must not only be well written and worthy of the celebration, but also be theologically correct. Music is particularly suited to this sort of liturgical evangelization because as James K.A. Smith explains, “Music gets ‘in’ us in

¹⁰⁵ Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Irwin, *What We Have Done, What We Have Failed to Do*, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

¹⁰⁸ David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology* (Chicago, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2002), 143.

ways that other forms of discourse rarely do. A song gets absorbed into our imagination in a way that mere texts rarely do.”¹⁰⁹ In this way, the sung liturgical texts emerge from the hymnals and travel with us throughout our week, shaping our theological imaginations. *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*, a document from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine published in 2020 states:

There is a necessary and direct relationship between the living Word of God and the Church’s worship. Thus, the sacred texts, and the liturgical sources which draw on the living Word, provide something of a “norm” for expression when communicating the mystery of faith in liturgical poetics, or hymnody.¹¹⁰

Our words, therefore, must reflect what we believe. Kevin Irwin reminds us that, “it is imperative that our liturgical texts reflect as accurately as possible what we believe. In the end they are nothing less than words about the living God and the things of God. The implication is that what we say and do in the liturgy can and will continue to shape what we believe.”¹¹¹

Our church buildings and the items within them silently proclaim what we believe. They can be considered as Denis McNamara states, “faith’s grammar in built form.”¹¹² They are part of the liturgy and not mere window dressing.¹¹³ Chalices and ciboria must be suitable not only for fine dining, but worthy to contain the Bread of Life which is the very presence of Christ. Vestments must be dignified so that the priest is recognizable not only clearly as the leader of the assembly, but as standing in the person of Christ the head. Our altars must be substantial enough

¹⁰⁹ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 171.

¹¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine, *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*, (September 2020), Preface. <https://www.usccb.org/resources/catholic-hymnody-service-church-aid-evaluating-hymn-lyrics>.

¹¹¹ Irwin, *What We Have Done, What We Have Failed to Do*, 115.

¹¹² Denis R. McNamara, *Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009), 15.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 17.

so that they look as though they can hold the weight of both the Missal and the Mystery. The art and environment in the church must not only celebrate the liturgical seasons, but they must highlight the altar and ambo as the focal points of the liturgy. When the liturgical actions and the liturgical environment support the words which are sung and spoken, they teach and confirm what we profess.

Even though most people today have not developed a theological imagination our rites can still speak for themselves. Our minds, which have become accustomed to sound bites and 280 character Twitter messages, have been trained to be entertained rather than to reflect; to see the literal rather than the symbolic. Despite this, the proper celebration of the rites continues to be more powerful than any explanation.

The priest reverences and kisses the altar at each Mass because it is a sign of Christ, but it is likely that if one were to survey the average Mass-goer, the most common response would be that the priest was bowing to either the tabernacle or the crucifix. However, if one hears the prayer of dedication of an altar from the *Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, the reasons for the reverence and the kissing of the altar become clear.

Let this altar be for us a sign of Christ,
from whose pierced side flowed blood and water,
by which were established the Sacraments of the Church.
Let this be a festive table,
to which the guests of Christ hasten with joy,
so that, casting on you their cares and burdens,
they may gain new strength of spirit for new paths ahead.
Let it be the source of the Church's unity
and of fraternal harmony,
where your faithful, gathering as one,
may drink of the spirit of mutual charity.
Let it be the center of our praise and thanksgiving
until we come jubilant to the eternal dwellings
where we are to offer you the sacrifice of unending praise

with Christ, the high priest and living Altar.¹¹⁴

Hearing the prayer offered clearly and witnessing the rite of dedication celebrated fully, the attentive worshipper learns what the altar means and what the altar is. Through the words of the prayer, the anointing with sacred Chrism, and the incensing of the altar, he or she is brought to the realization that the altar is revered because it is a sign of Christ, because it is the center of our liturgical celebration, because it is set apart as a reminder of the things of heaven, and because it is our family table. From there, the attentive worshipper goes home to his or her own family table and is reminded that those who gather around the home table are also united as one family. Furthermore, having seen the altar be sprinkled with holy water and anointed, dressed and lit with candles, the faithful become aware of the connection to their own baptism. As the altar has been set apart for sacred use, so too have their own bodies been consecrated to God through baptism.¹¹⁵ Through this ritual, the ecclesial and the secular are united, and that which is learned and experienced in the church permeates daily life. Mark Boyer explains:

The rite of dedicating an altar is meant to renew the members of the assembly in their initiation commitment as they continue their lives. In other words, as the altar is dedicated, so is the assembly rededicated to its purpose of being Christ in the world today.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, each time the attentive worshipper bows to the altar, he or she is reminded that the altar is a sign of Christ and that they themselves are to be signs of Christ in the world. Here,

¹¹⁴ *The Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), 48,

¹¹⁵ Mark G. Boyer, *The Liturgical Environment: What the Documents Say*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 47.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

liturgical catechesis has occurred. Through this catechesis, we learn not only what the Church teaches, we learn how to live.

Relationship Between Sacraments and Life

These rites, which transform us, do so because they welcome us into this relationship with the triune God and the Church. In the liturgy, faith grows and is nourished by this relationship. Kavanagh reminds us that “It was a Presence, not faith, which drew the disciples to Jesus [...] Their lives... were changed radically by that encounter with a presence which upended all their ordinary expectations.”¹¹⁷ For them, Jesus was not a legend, historical figure, or a theological idea. They may have made the trip to see Jesus because they had heard about him, but they stayed because they heard his voice, felt his touch, shared meals with him, witnessed the way he lived and the way he treated people. The presence of Christ stirred in them a faith that changed them, and caused them to leave their lives to evangelize their families and the world. The liturgical rites which draw us into relationship with Christ are intended to have an effect on our daily lives and not remain simply in the Church. The texts for the Dismissal from Mass found in the 3rd Edition of the *Roman Missal* state it well. “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life” tell us that the liturgy we celebrate is intended to send the faithful into action.¹¹⁸ Von Hildebrand described the connection between liturgy and life in this way:

He who lives in the liturgy becomes filled with reverence not only in the sense of that fundamental reverence which is a *praeambulum fidae*, a precondition of faith, but also in the sense of that reverence which is a part of faith in the Triune God, hope in God, love

¹¹⁷ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 92.

¹¹⁸ *The Roman Missal*, 3rd ed. The Order of Mass. (New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing, 2011), 144.

of God – in other words of the reverence of the God-man Jesus Christ Himself. [...] This man formed by the liturgy is reverent toward his neighbor.¹¹⁹

This transformation occurs because the sacraments and the liturgical rituals through which they are celebrated are at the core of who we are as Catholics. Kavanagh stated that “The liturgy is not something separate from the Church, but simply the Church caught in the act of being most overtly itself.”¹²⁰ For that reason, the Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, “the law of prayer is the law of belief, is the law of life,” is more than a nice ecclesiastical catch phrase. As Alcuin Deutsch writes, for the early Christians:

His worship modeled his life, and the *lex orandi* [rule of prayer] was for him not only the *lex credendi* [rule of faith] but also the *lex vivendi* [rule of life] [...] This is what the Liturgical Movement seeks to bring about: a sense of what the liturgy is, a repristination of the spirit which brought it forth and which derived from it the nourishment that made Christian life flourish and produce the fruit of Christian virtue. This is putting liturgy into life. Liturgy is the life of the Church; it must become the life of our lives, if we are in intimate contact with it.¹²¹

One hour a week spent in liturgical prayer is not enough to allow the transformative power of the liturgy to have its full effect. Liturgical participation requires that participation in the life of God permeate every aspect of life, guides our moral choices and keeps us focused on truth and on God. However, when the influence of the liturgy is left at the door of the church, the influence of media and the world fills the void. These secular influences seek to focus our desires on whatever they are promoting, whether it be a product or an image or their brand of success.

¹¹⁹ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 58-59.

¹²⁰ Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 75.

¹²¹ Alcuin Deutsch, “The Liturgical Movement” *Orate Fratres* 1, no 13 (October 30, 1927), 392-393.

James K.A. Smith teaches that in addition to Christian liturgy, “disordered secular liturgies, ordered to a rival *telos* [goal] also work on the imagination.”¹²² Smith presents the mall as a model of secular liturgies that train us to love and desire their image of the good life. Commercials show us happy people and we want to be like them. Mannequins become a type of secular statue of the ideal. Soon, we buy into the ideas of brand loyalty and shopping therapy because we want to experience and eventually attain that ideal life. This marketing is effective because “we are ultimately liturgical animals because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends.”¹²³

When our faith does not influence every part of our lives, over time and imperceptibly, these secular liturgies gain greater influence than Christian liturgy. Smith explains that:

Through a vast repertoire of secular liturgies, we are quietly assimilated to the earthly city of disordered loves governed by self-love and the pursuit of domination. So we toddle off to church or Bible study week after week comforting ourselves that we are devoted to the temple of the Lord...without realizing that we spend the rest of the week making bread for idols.”¹²⁴

When our participation in the Christian liturgy extends into and influences every aspect of our lives then the law of prayer is truly the law of faith. Augustine of Hippo famously taught, “If you receive [the Eucharist] well, you are yourselves what you receive.”¹²⁵ Christians seek to be like God and the saints rather than like photoshopped models and ultimately, we seek the

¹²² James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 140.

¹²³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

¹²⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 141.

¹²⁵ Augustine, *Sermon 227*. <https://stanselmminstitute.org/files/SERMON%20227.pdf>.

transformation of our lives that the liturgy can accomplish so that we can attain the fullness of the good and perfect life in heaven.

Liturgy as a Rehearsal of Heaven

The earthly liturgy is the sacramental accomplishment of the heavenly liturgy, the foretaste of an anticipated reality, the enactment of the desire and hope for something that already exists in heaven, while at the same time, being a real participation in the heavenly liturgy.¹²⁶ When we participate in the liturgy we experience through sacrament and ritual what we will experience in heaven and we learn how to live on earth so that we can gain eternal life in heaven. Like children who learn by imitating their parents and teachers, we learn the heavenly reality through the liturgical celebration. Searle reminds us that “The liturgy... is the rehearsal or appropriate enactment of relationships: our relationship to God, to one another, to those who have gone before us, to those who will come after us, and to the world as a whole.”¹²⁷ Like children who play house or school, in the liturgy we play kingdom where the liturgy is a “kind of anticipation, a rehearsal, a prelude for the life to come, for eternal life...”¹²⁸ In the openness of play, we can experience that which is yet to come and practice how we are to live today.

In heaven, we will hear God’s voice; at Mass we learn to be attuned to God by listening to scripture. In heaven, all are united as one family; at Mass we learn to be united in common actions and we reach out to welcome one another. In heaven, we will be gathered and fully satisfied at the Lord’s banquet; at Mass we gather at the altar and are nourished by the Eucharist. In heaven, all worship and praise God; at Mass we sing and proclaim the Lord’s goodness. In

¹²⁶ Edward J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 190.

¹²⁷ Searle, *Called to Participate*, 25.

¹²⁸ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 14.

heaven, we are united perfectly with God and one another; at Mass we are united to God and one another through the Eucharist.

This rehearsal is also a real participation in the heavenly liturgy. Through liturgical participation, we take part in and experience not only the liturgy, but the life of Christ. We can then experience the heavenly reality which Von Hildebrand describes:

The atmosphere of the Liturgy is saturated with Christ, with the hidden God revealed in Christ. Not only does it deal with God as do all other prayers; more than all it shows us the ultimate all-embracing entirety of supernatural reality; it speaks from the ultimate truth of metaphysical man; it reflects God's face in a unique adequateness; it envelops us in an atmosphere of eternity which soars above the limitations of particular times and places.¹²⁹

Drawn into the mystery of Christ's sacrifice through our offering and participation, we remember God and are remembered by God. However, to remember is not only to look at the past, but simultaneously to look at the present and the future as well.¹³⁰ Therefore, in a real way, the liturgy causes the sacrifice of Christ to be actualized in the present so that we can live as those who have been redeemed.

Conclusion

Rituals communicate reality and cause that reality to happen. They foster community because they are an expression of community; they foster identity because they remind us of who and whose we are; they foster relationships because they unite individuals into family. They communicate that which words cannot. Christian liturgy communicates not only meaning beyond words, but God himself so that God can transform us. Through liturgical rituals we learn to

¹²⁹ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 38.

¹³⁰ Kevin W. Irwin, *Liturgy, Prayer and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984), 127-128.

embrace our identity as Christians, we learn what God expects of us, and we allow God to shape every aspect of our lives. If we do not understand the ritual or do not allow what happens within the liturgy to emerge beyond the doors of the church and into our homes, workplaces, recreation, and every aspect of our lives, we will be formed by other influences.

One hour a week in church is not enough to overcome the influence of secular media. In 2020, the *Associated Press* reported that, “The average American spends a staggering 11 hours, 54 minutes each day connected to some form of media.”¹³¹ That influence forms our desires and our values and sets a model for what we perceive to be the ideal, creating a type of secular and worldly heaven. This does not mean that we should disconnect from all media or spend twelve hours a day praying. Rather it means that we must allow our faith and our liturgy to shape us so that we are transformed and renewed and so that our desires and values are oriented to Christ. We learn to do this through our liturgical experiences because our rituals form us in our identity and give us a living and real foretaste of heaven. Liturgy not only communicates the holy and the divine: it gives us the opportunity to become holy through this unifying encounter with God.

¹³¹ David Bauder, “Study Shows Explosive Growth in Time Spent Streaming TV,” *Associated Press*, February 12, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/smartphones-us-news-ap-top-news-entertainment-united-states-e3d10e3835eb7f953309d698f0fc35cc>.

CHAPTER 4: PASTORAL REALITIES OF LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION

Liturgy as Evangelization

As seen in the previous chapter, liturgy is an expression of faith and a conduit of faith. In our liturgical celebrations, we have the opportunity to welcome and to heal, to embrace and to restore, to show what is true through the richness of signs and symbols, and to experience the wonder of God's kingdom. Baptisms, funerals, weddings, first Communions, and Confirmations are all opportunities to bring the love of Christ to those whom we might not meet in church each Sunday, but these special occasions are not the only opportunities to evangelize through the liturgy. Rather, every liturgy is an opportunity for evangelization. Timothy O'Malley defines evangelization as "nothing less than shorthand for how the church is to relate to the world, an expression of an ecclesiology that seeks the redemption of all humanity through the agapic pedagogy of the church".¹³² This view presents evangelization as teaching in the manner of Christ: through self-offering love.

In the previous chapters, we saw that liturgy is an encounter with God and an experience of heavenly realities through which we learn to build God's kingdom here on earth. In the life and ministry of Jesus and in the heavenly liturgy, all are radically one and equal at the Lord's table. Jesus ignored the customs of his time and invited not only his friends and followers to dine with him, but welcomed the poor, the disenfranchised, the sinner, the unclean, the child, and the woman. In the Gospels, Jesus teaches again and again that we might be surprised by whom we

¹³² Timothy P. O'Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization: Practicing the Art of Self-Giving Love* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 11.

find in heaven, and whom we do not. The examples of sheep and goats, the camel passing through the eye of the needle, Lazarus and the Rich Man, and the importance of fidelity over blood relationships show us that our social status on earth will have no bearing on our entering heaven.

The liturgy allows us to enter into this experience of radical oneness with Christ and each other, but it can only happen when our words and actions are in tune with each other. This revelatory encounter “empowers us to perceive and experience the world itself as the space where God’s unfailing Word does what it says and gives what it does.”¹³³ The words of the “Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions I” present the ideal of what our church communities should look like:

For by the word of your Son’s Gospel
you have brought together one Church
from every people, tongue, and nation,
and, having filled her with life by the power of your Spirit,
you never cease through her to gather the whole human race into one.¹³⁴

The prayer later acknowledges the divisions in our world and calls the gathered assembly to move beyond them saying:

Strengthen the bond of unity
between the faithful and the pastors of your people,
together with our N. Pope, N. our Bishop,
and the whole Order of Bishops,
that in a world torn by strife
your people may shine forth
as a prophetic sign of unity and concord.¹³⁵

¹³³ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 144.

¹³⁴ *The Roman Missal*, EPVN I Preface, and 7.

¹³⁵ *The Roman Missal*, EPVN I, 7.

Since we believe that *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* is true, we understand that this unity is fostered through liturgical signs and symbols, words and actions. We have established that those participating in the liturgy should be engaged in the liturgy both internally and externally and as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states our “minds should be attuned to our voices.”¹³⁶ Yet, we cannot deny that the responsibility for fostering full, conscious and active participation does not belong solely to the worshippers. Timothy O’Malley states, “The liturgical life of the church becomes evangelical when the liturgical and sacramental rites of the church cease being performed in a perfunctory manner, but re-inscribe human life as a divine offering of love to the Father, through the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”¹³⁷ How the liturgy is celebrated affects its fruitfulness. *Ars celebrandi*, the art of celebrating the liturgy, is integrally connected to the liturgical participation of the faithful. Pope Benedict XVI writes in his encyclical *Sacramentum Caritatis*: “The primary way to foster the participation of the People of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself.”¹³⁸

There are many factors involved in the proper celebration, but *Music in Catholic Worship* states that “no other single factor affects the liturgy as much as the attitude, style and bearing of the celebrant: his sincere faith and warmth as he welcomes the worshipping community, his human naturalness combined with dignity and seriousness as he breaks the Bread of Word and Eucharist.”¹³⁹ In other words, if he does not minister to his parish community with a father’s love and is not interiorly attuned to the liturgical words and actions, it shows.

¹³⁶ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11.

¹³⁷ O’Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 13.

¹³⁸ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 38.

¹³⁹ Bishop’s Committee on the Liturgy, *Music in Catholic Worship*. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1972), 21.

That admonition of the celebrant does not leave him solely responsible for the tone of the liturgy and its *ars celebrandi*. If our liturgy seems ineffective in the daily lives of the assembly, perhaps it is because the lived Christian experience in the parish church often speaks a message which is unclear or contradictory to that of our ritual signs and symbols. Our liturgical signs and symbols are intended to make that prayer a living and effective rehearsal of heaven. For that reason, the attitude, bearing, and style of each person affects the tone of the liturgy. The assembly gathering as a corporate body; unity of gestures, postures and words; and the breaking of the Body of Christ for distribution of Holy Communion to the many, are all intended to be signs and experiences of that unity and love which we proclaim in our liturgical texts. However, when VIP seating is provided to dignitaries, seats at Easter and Christmas Masses are auctioned off at parish fairs, small children are banished to cry rooms, when individuals refuse (apart from disabilities) to sit, stand, or kneel in accord with the rubrics, and when individuals fail to speak or sing the congregational parts of the Mass whether acclamations or hymns, divisions are created where the liturgy intends to develop unity. These lived signs can cause our ritual signs to be perceived as falsehoods. If we have truly entered into a relationship with God and intend to allow God to transform us into the Body of Christ, the Church, we must give up our comfort zone or preferred seat and enter fully into community: singing and standing and responding to the best of our ability.

Liturgical furnishings and appointments are more than purely functional. They communicate what we believe through their design and material. Benedict XVI writes in *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

an important element of sacred art is church architecture, which should highlight the unity of the furnishings of the sanctuary, such as the altar, the crucifix, the tabernacle, the ambo and the celebrant's chair. Here it is important to remember that the purpose of

sacred architecture is to offer the Church a fitting space for the celebration of the mysteries of faith, especially the Eucharist.¹⁴⁰

When the material, colors, and design of the altar, ambo, and chair are substantially similar and are dignified and substantial, they communicate the message that these items are connected as

Built of Living Stones describes:

The principal ritual furnishings within the sanctuary are the altar on which the eucharistic sacrifice is offered, the ambo from which God's word is proclaimed, and the chair of the priest celebrant. These furnishings should be constructed of substantial materials that express dignity and stability. Their placement and design again make it clear that although they are distinct entities, they are related in the one Eucharistic celebration.¹⁴¹

Then, the faithful will not be surprised when they hear that the altar and ambo are two tables of one nourishment or that the altar, ambo and chair show us that Christ is present in the liturgy through the priest, the Word, and the Eucharist. However, when the altar is carved marble and the ambo is a plywood podium and the chair is borrowed from the rectory dining room the unity of Word and Sacrament is not as clearly evident.

Likewise, when our music is well prepared, theologically rich, singable, and sung by the entire assembly, it is easy for the assembly to understand that liturgical music is prayer.

However, when the music is trite, overly complex, poorly prepared, or sung by only a few diehards in the church, it can be hard to convince those gathered that music is not performance or filler. Determining which music is appropriate for the liturgy requires evaluating the liturgical, pastoral, and musical qualities of each piece as set forth in *Sing to the Lord*.¹⁴² Therefore, the music must be suited for the celebration and the point in the liturgy where it will be played. It

¹⁴⁰ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 41

¹⁴¹ *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007), 55.

¹⁴² *Sing to the Lord*, 126.

must accompany the liturgical action without either overpowering it or underwhelming the solemnity of the celebration while presenting the texts or themes required by the rubrics. It must draw the faithful to holiness by engaging and fostering their interior and exterior participation. It must present the teachings of the Church and the mysteries celebrated in a way that fosters their own faith. It must meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the assembly. It must be singable by both the leaders of music and the assembly and deemed to possess musical quality to endure the test of time.

Our liturgy must be at the heart of our parish life and guide every aspect of parish life. If the Church intends to communicate the love of God, then there no such thing as “just a weekday Mass” because every Mass and every liturgy is formative and evangelizing. The welcome and care received in the parish office must reflect the love of Christ preached from the ambo because lived experience speaks louder than liturgical signs. We can grow complacent and forget that the little things can speak a great deal. O’Neill reminds us:

Our very familiarity with the sacramental system not only closes our eyes to its truly extraordinary character but in addition, because we concentrate on the salient fact of its intrinsic efficacy, tends to draw our attention away from its basic structure which is that of an expression of faith in Christ.¹⁴³

If we never lose sight of the power of the liturgy it will be reflected in our *ars celebrandi* and our liturgical participation and will help the self-offering love of Christ to be communicated through the liturgy.

¹⁴³ O’Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, 36.

Beauty and the Liturgy

Our liturgy is most fruitful and most effective in evangelizing when it is beautiful. Pope Francis tells us in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Evangelization with joy becomes beauty in the liturgy, as part of our daily concern to spread goodness. The Church evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving.¹⁴⁴

What, then, is beauty in liturgical arts? Since there is no universal standard for beauty, we could consider that true beauty is found in those things that reflect God, who is the true source of beauty, truth and love. As Piero Marini states:

The Liturgy's aesthetic value, its beauty, depends primarily therefore not on art, but on the paschal mystery of love. The beauty of a Eucharistic celebration depends not essentially on the beauty of architecture, icons, decoration, songs, vestments, choreography and colours but first of all on the ability to reveal the gesture of love performed by Jesus. Through the gestures, words and prayers of the Liturgy we strive to repeat and render visible the gestures, prayers and words of the Lord Jesus.¹⁴⁵

Therefore, liturgical beauty is more than finding things pleasing or attractive. Timothy O'Malley echoes Marini's statement when he says that "For Christians, our notion of liturgical beauty is shaped first by allowing the form of God's beauty revealed through Jesus Christ to attune us to the wonder of divine beauty."¹⁴⁶ Things are beautiful when they reveal and draw us to God so that we can contemplate and learn what is true.

¹⁴⁴ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), §24. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁴⁵ Piero Marini, "Liturgy and Beauty - Nobilis Pulchritudo," The Holy See, March 15, 2006, https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2006/documents/ns_lit_doc_20060315_liturgia-bellezza_en.html.

¹⁴⁶ O'Malley. *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 117.

The items used in the liturgy reveal God and attest to what we believe about God. The architecture, art and music in church should move us beyond what is before us and draw us to think of the things of God as they reveal divine truths. These items must be dignified and of quality. When these things teach the faith and knit the things of God into our daily lives, they can be considered beautiful, even though the style might not be appealing to a particular individual. Likewise, the Stations of the Cross tell a gruesome story of suffering and death, but they are beautiful because they lead us to the truth of the Paschal Mystery. The greatest truth is God who loves humanity so much that God became man.

This self-gift of Christ was not forced or coerced. The liturgy, therefore, should not seek to manipulate us, but rather meet us where we are and draw us naturally to God through the gift of love rather than lies. O'Malley teaches that:

The images of photoshopped models on the covers of magazines are not beautiful (even if they are sexy), because they exist outside of gift, they are a form of violence, which seeks to sell us an image of what constitutes human flourishing connected to certain products, to raise our desires above our wills.¹⁴⁷

That type of beauty manipulates our desires away from what is truly good and true and draws us to seek pleasure and power so that we can be like the people in the ad. However, even the images of the people in the ad are manipulated to present an unattainable ideal. Pope Benedict XVI refers to this as:

a beauty that is deceptive and false, a dazzling beauty that does not bring human beings out of themselves to open them to the ecstasy of rising to the heights, but indeed locks them entirely into themselves. Such beauty does not reawaken a longing for the Ineffable, readiness for sacrifice, the abandonment of self, but instead stirs up the desire, the will for power, possession and pleasure.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ O'Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 120-121.

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, "The Beauty and the Truth of Christ," EWTN Global Catholic Television Network, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/beauty-and-the-truth-of-christ-10145>.

True beauty is attained when gifts flow naturally and authentically rather than being forced or manipulative. O'Malley states that:

The beauty of the crucifix is not that it seeks to cajole us into a certain affective state in which belief becomes possible. Its beauty comes through the invitation to perceive the cross for what it is – the self-offering of the God-Man that transformed the created order into a space of peace.¹⁴⁹

We participate in that self-offering by being living signs and experiences of God's love. It is beautiful when a stranger enters a church for Mass and is greeted with an authentically warm hello by his fellow worshippers. However, when an announcement is made before Mass inviting everyone to turn and greet one another, it becomes forced and is a manipulation of those present.

At times, art, architecture and music will move worshippers to joy, tears, repentance, forgiveness, a sense of awe of God and the whole range of human emotions. When these emotions reflect and nourish what is truly in the human heart and flow from the truth and love of God, they are gift. However, music at liturgy can become a means of spiritual and emotional manipulation when it seeks not to praise God, but to bring people to tears: what O'Malley refers to as "Dionysian intoxication that manipulates human affections."¹⁵⁰ Musicians who use this type of musical manipulation believe it encourages liturgical participation, but it is a participation which is not rooted in the true condition of the individual's heart and soul, and so is little more than a momentary response to external stimuli. True liturgical participation is always authentic and never forced and brings us to God's greatest gift: Christ himself.

¹⁴⁹ O'Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 121.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 122.

Beauty is found when the diversity of humanity enters the liturgy so that the variety found in our prayers and our community is embraced. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states:

“Even in the liturgy, the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community; rather does she respect and foster the genius and talents of the various races and peoples.”¹⁵¹

God made humanity in the divine image and likeness, yet we are all different. We come from differing cultures and traditions; we are different sexes and ages; we have different experiences; and that is beautiful.

O’Malley explains that “Beauty involves difference. No one desires to listen to music with the same note repeated again and again. No one wants to attend an art gallery filled with copies of the same painting.”¹⁵² The beauty of difference means that liturgical texts should be read according to their own literary form. Babbling babies should be welcomed rather than banished to cry rooms. Churches should be built to accommodate the old and the young and the disabled. Communities should be encouraged to embrace their cultural identity.

This image of beauty embraces humanity with all its imperfections and accepts that true holiness is found in the repentant sinner and the living saint and allows both to be offered to God to be recreated and renewed and perfected. In this, we find a beauty that is sacramental, a beauty that points to a reality greater than itself. Recognizing the intrinsic beauty of the liturgy often requires a deeper level of liturgical growth. It requires the ability to see beyond what lies in front of us. Not everything that takes place during Mass will be done perfectly. Musicians will hit wrong notes, homilists will offer shallow reflections, the prayers of the Mass will become stale

¹⁵¹ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 37.

¹⁵² O’Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 125.

and routine, but even though aesthetics might be imperfect, the liturgy continues to be beautiful because it reveals the source of all beauty and Love.

The growth that liturgical participation causes within the worshipper and the relationship formed with God through grace allows us to see beyond these imperfections. O'Malley explains it in this manner:

Certainly, one would not want to discount the value of the sign, the importance of beautiful artwork, of musical texts, of the physicality of our bodies. But, we have all encountered elderly couples whose physical beauty has slowly faded away with the advance of age. The manner in which this couple holds hands, attends to each other's deepest needs, points us toward the spiritual reality of the permanence of love. When memory itself begins to fade from one of the spouses (at is too often does), still beauty remains as the other spouse embodies love through patiently attending to the gradual decline of the beloved.¹⁵³

In this way, despite human imperfections, the beauty of worship remains through our offering of self to God and Christ's sacrifice for us.

Beauty rooted in a revelation of Christ's truth and love does not pigeonhole us into certain styles of art, music, or architecture. Rather it allows for each worshiping community to apply these ideals in their own way and according to their own time. Through the experience of liturgies which flow authentically, where each person is welcomed and loved, our assemblies can be better prepared to participate with open hearts so that their lives can flow from the lived experience of the liturgy into the ethical living of daily life.

Liturgy and Presence

Liturgical participation is putting faith into action through the use of our minds and bodies in the building of community. This participation is fostered through the community by all

¹⁵³ Ibid, 127.

taking their place and carrying out all that is proper to them. The text for the first option of the Mystery of Faith in the 3rd Edition of the *Roman Missal*, “We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again,”¹⁵⁴ focuses on “our engagement in what we are doing, not our recollecting it or observing, but taking part in it.”¹⁵⁵ The very texts of our liturgical prayer make it clear that we are not to be the “detached and silent spectators” mentioned in *Divini Cultus Sanctitatem*, nor is our participation intended to be solely interior.

Von Hildebrand writes: “Even the participation of the body in religious worship, as in the act of genuflection, the inclination of the head during the Gloria, and the standing during the reading of the Gospel, represents an attitude of awakenedness, and at the same time a call to wakefulness.”¹⁵⁶ The gestures and postures themselves are a means of fostering liturgical participation by providing opportunities for interior and exterior participation. Our liturgical actions and gestures draw us from the sidelines where we can doze off and allow us to engage more effectively in interior participation.

We gather in churches, but we worship as bodies both personal and corporate.¹⁵⁷ We show the value of liturgical action through the bearing of those in the various processions that move and journey through the church; how readers approach the ambo with dignity and proclaim the Word of God clearly so that the assembly can hear and absorb not only words, but meaning; in the way altar servers carry out their duties with grace and skill; and how ministers of Holy Communion look with care at those to whom they are ministering. All of this requires that those

¹⁵⁴ *Roman Missal*, The Mystery of Faith.

¹⁵⁵ Irwin, *What We Have Done, What We Have Failed to Do*, 46.

¹⁵⁶ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 106-107.

¹⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery*, 149.

carrying out these roles are well-formed and well-prepared so that they are not merely functionaries, but true participants.

We show the value of our liturgical things through the manner in which we handle the sacred liturgical objects. The reverence with which the Book of the Gospels is carried in procession and kissed after the proclamation of the Gospel, the setting apart of the altar and ambo for word and sacrament and not using it as a table or a place for announcements, the handling of the sacred vessels with care within and apart from the Mass teach what we believe about the actions celebrated. Von Hildebrand writes:

We find this spirit [of reverence]... toward all that enters into contact with the Lord's holy Body, in the handling of the paten and the cleansing of the chalice. We also find it in all that symbolizes Christ or is dedicated to divine service, in the kissing of the divine altar and the Gospel book. It is expressed in the bodily comportment of the priest, the faithful and the religious; in the standing up during the reading of the Gospel, during the songs of praise.¹⁵⁸

We show the value of the family of God through the way we care for and engage with one another, and by recognizing how each member of the Body of Christ has a place at the table of God. Ritual is, by its essence, a corporate action in which all have their part to carry out. Priests show us Christ's example by leading, teaching, anointing, forgiving, offering, and washing feet. Lay ministers, such as choir members, altar servers, readers, hospitality ministers, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion put their faith into action through liturgical service and show that all the baptized are called to service and holiness. The few who bring the bread and wine to the priest at the presentation of the gifts represent the offering of the entire

¹⁵⁸ Von Hildebrand, *Liturgy and Personality*, 58.

assembly and the wider community. The entire assembly stands, sits, kneels, sings, and acclaims as one body united in and with Christ.

All of these things require reverent physical action and physical presence. During the COVID lockdown, when churches were closed, live-streamed and televised Masses offered a type of liturgical participation, but it was a pale substitute for the real thing. One liturgical composer described his experience of televised Mass as being “like looking at a picture of a lover and expecting a kiss.”¹⁵⁹ *Sacramentum Caritatis* states:

Visual images can represent reality, but they do not actually reproduce it. While it is most praiseworthy that the elderly and the sick participate in Sunday Mass through radio and television, the same cannot be said of those who think that such broadcasts dispense them from going to church and sharing in the eucharistic assembly in the living Church.¹⁶⁰

Live-streamed and televised Masses were a great gift during the lockdown and they continue to be for the sick, elderly, hospitalized, imprisoned and others who cannot participate in the church building. However, in watching at home, even though we hear the same words, we sing the same songs, and we can even sit, stand, and kneel together with the community gathered in the church, as Kevin Irwin states “the experience is extraordinarily passive.”¹⁶¹ Liturgy in the church is a multi-sensory experience, we smell the incense, we feel the pews, we see and greet those worshipping with us, we enter into the greatest form of participation, receiving the Eucharist.

We cannot lose sight that the reception of Holy Communion is the fullest and most perfect form of participation. It is in the Eucharist that the encounter with God for which we have been prepared and have entered into reaches its pinnacle. Sacramental grace is granted, albeit not

¹⁵⁹ Rory Cooney, “Watching Mass on TV” *Facebook*, March 15, 2020. <https://facebook.com/rorypcooney>.

¹⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 57.

¹⁶¹ Kevin W. Irwin, *Liturgy, Prayer and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984), 123.

in its fullness, in the reception of the Eucharist regardless of whether we have participated fully, consciously and actively or if we have slept through the Mass and woke up just in time to join the Communion procession.

The connection between participation at Mass and the reception of Holy Communion is emphasized by the rubric which recommends that the faithful receive Communion from the Eucharist confectioned at that Mass. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states "that more perfect form of participation in the Mass by which the faithful, after the Priest's Communion, receive the Lord's Body from the same Sacrifice."¹⁶² By emphasizing the unity between the liturgical celebration and the reception of Holy Communion, this often overlooked rubric highlights that Holy Communion is the fullest form of liturgical participation, which leads us to the ultimate goal of all worship: union with God.

Why vs. Can

The danger exists for this reverence to become exaggerated or unnatural, highlighting the one carrying out the action as a performer and drawing attention to the self or rather than to Christ or giving a simple act undue importance. The key to coordinating and preparing liturgies which communicate and engage is asking the question "why" rather than "can." The answer to "Can we have thirty gift bearers?" is "Why?" Can we replace the readings for our wedding Mass? "Why?"

Redemptionis Sacramentum reminds us, "The liturgy allows for the creativity and particular needs of the people to be engaged through music, prayers, homily, architecture and

¹⁶² Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 55.

décor without frequently altering the rites or creating new rites and rituals.”¹⁶³ We can do many things in the liturgy, but that does not always mean that we should. The only way to know what should and should not be done, rather than what can and cannot be done, is to understand why these things are done and what they mean. When the answer to why someone wants to have 30 gift bearers is “We want every child receiving First Communion to have something to do at Mass” the statement indicates a misunderstanding of not only the role of both gift bearers and the items presented, but also the role of the assembly and of liturgical participation itself. When the answer to “Why do you want to replace the readings?” is “Because I’d rather use my favorite poem,” the statement indicates a misunderstanding of the role of scripture in the liturgy and an inappropriate sense of ownership over the Mass.

Other times, misdirected attempts at liturgical creativity are rooted in theological misunderstandings or a sincere desire to address a perceived problem. The liturgical consultant who suggests that an amtar, an ambo with a top that flips open into an altar, is the best way to show the connection between the two tables of Word and Sacrament has forgotten that we do not put the Word aside or cover it up to make room for the Eucharist. Likewise, the innovator who developed sanitary pre-packaged packets of holy water has forgotten that the Church already has a long tradition of people bringing their own bottles to fill with holy water.

When we understand the why of the liturgy and the why of the misguided, we can begin to serve the requirements of the liturgy by knowing when, where, and how liturgical creativity can be legitimately incorporated while meeting the people of God where they are. These are

¹⁶³ Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction The Sacrament of Redemption *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (25 March 2004), §39. At The Holy See. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.

opportunities for liturgical catechesis of the faithful and they require that those preparing liturgies possess a well-formed understanding of liturgical rubrics rooted in liturgical theology and an understanding that the liturgy is a gift from God to the Church.

Liturgical catechesis is rooted in ritual practice but also requires understanding of these rituals and their signs and symbols. This begins with having well-formed priests, deacons and lay ministers and catechists who can teach children and those in RCIA about gestures, postures, symbols, and the parts of the Mass and the other rites. It means using opportunities with new parents, couples preparing for marriage, families meeting for funerals to talk about the rites being celebrated. Liturgical catechesis requires celebrating beautiful liturgies and allowing the rites to speak for themselves so that they reveal the truth of God. The faithful need and deserve a solid foundation in Catholic teaching which helps them to know God and desire a relationship with God. Liturgical catechesis involves creating a parish where the liturgy is lived and liturgical culture flourishes - a culture where the faithful can be honest with one another about the role of the liturgy in their lives, a culture where they can be supported and guided when their level of participation or understanding is lacking. O'Malley writes that:

liturgy is fundamentally a practice akin to soccer or baseball. You learn to play soccer not through spending ninety minutes at a convocation learning about the history of soccer. You play it. In the act of playing, questions arise. Coaching is needed. But such coaching takes place in the context of the practice itself.¹⁶⁴

By experiencing the liturgy well, according to the rubrics, within a community permeated by a liturgical culture, the liturgy can begin to permeate the lives of the faithful.

¹⁶⁴ Timothy P. O'Malley, "Liturgical Catechesis: Liturgy and the New Evangelization," USCCB, September 3, 2020, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2020/liturgical-catechesis-liturgy-and-new-evangelization>.

The rubrics are not adversaries but are friends and companions on the spiritual journey and they will guide us, if we allow them. Irwin writes:

Active participation in the liturgy is the means to serve unimaginable goals. Letting the liturgy be the liturgy is a first step in all its complexity and beauty toward the real goals of the liturgy – assimilation into God in the communion of the church for the sake of our witnessing in the world to what we celebrate.¹⁶⁵

In order to accomplish that lofty goal, we must acknowledge that no liturgy belongs to us. It does not belong to the bride and groom, to the reader, the priest, the bishop or even the pope. Edward Kilmartin reminds us that “The liturgy of the earthly Church is always Christ’s liturgy, because Christ is always actively present as the Head of the community assembled ‘in the name of Jesus.’”¹⁶⁶

From Participation into Action

Participation and unity are not ends unto themselves. They are intended to form us as Christians living in the world, so that we who have played kingdom can build the kingdom here on earth and attain the kingdom in the life to come. Pope Benedict XVI states that “there can be no *actuosa participatio* in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ's love into the life of society.”¹⁶⁷

When we experience our interconnectedness within the liturgy and learn to share the Eucharistic Bread which is the Body and Blood of Christ, we can more easily share the daily bread with the most needy among us. When we learn to put aside our own preferences and styles,

¹⁶⁵ Irwin, *What We Have Done, What We Have Failed to Do*, 63.

¹⁶⁶ Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice*, 191.

¹⁶⁷ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 55.

we can more easily understand those who do not look or sound like us. When we sing and speak and serve God with our mouths and our bodies, we will more readily serve our neighbor in our daily lives. When we allow Christ to transform us, when we allow grace to fill us, we can see that the liturgy we celebrate as meal, sacrifice and encounter moves us into the world to feed, to share, and to meet the outcast and the popular, the friend and the stranger and to see them as he does. We will become more Christlike: kinder, gentler, more patient and understanding, more forgiving and more willing to seek forgiveness. It is there that the liturgy reaches its outcome and achieves its highest efficaciousness: the sanctification of the Christian community by revealing, rehearsing, and effecting all that opens our hearts to God.

As O'Malley states, "Liturgy is essential to the task of the new evangelization precisely because it empowers the Christian to perceive anew that the heart of existence is not an economy founded upon a pragmatic individualism. It is love made flesh."¹⁶⁸ Liturgy draws us out of ourselves to participate in something greater. Liturgy draws us out of ourselves to enter into a transformative relationship. If we truly love God and are engaged in this sacramental relationship with God, we are called, therefore, to love and care for others not because of anything they have done for us, but solely because they are loved by God. Thomas Aquinas writes:

...when a man has friendship for a certain person, for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way. Indeed, so much do we love our friends, that for their sake we love all who belong to them, even if they hurt or hate us; so that, in this way, the friendship of charity extends even to our enemies, whom we love out of charity in relation to God, to Whom the friendship of charity is chiefly directed.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ O'Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization*, 127.

¹⁶⁹ *ST, II-II*, q. 23, a.1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

Liturgy draws us away from selfishness and into community, away from individualism and into a family so that we see not only Christ who exists in the sacraments, but Christ who comes to us through one another. When we enter into full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy, we give our hearts to Christ, who has already given his divine heart to us, and our participation will not cease at the door of the church but will extend into every aspect of our lives. Then the liturgy will achieve its highest aim of glorifying God and sanctifying humanity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

A friend once recounted a conversation he had with a parishioner when the practice of Communion in the hand was first being introduced. She was struggling with the idea of receiving Communion in the hand and said, “Father, I can’t receive Communion with the same hand I use to slap my kids!” Whether one prefers to receive Communion in the hand or on the tongue, this woman recognized the truth. Liturgy changes us, it causes the things it touches to be set apart for sacred use: for the things of God. It sets apart our hands to comfort rather than to wound, our tongues to speak words of guidance rather than calumny. Liturgy sets us apart for sacred service and forms us to live in accord with that call.

If our liturgical participation ends when we step into the parking lot, it cannot achieve its full potential in nourishing our relationship with God. Our liturgical participation must shape our lives. The liturgy calls us to full, conscious, and active participation not only in the liturgy, but in the life of Christ and his Church. This participation is more than singing and speaking, more than sitting and standing, it is even more than praying. This participation is living in the triune God. The liturgy, the source of grace, is the primary means through which we enter into, grow, and maintain our relationship with God. God gives us that grace, but for grace to fully bear fruit in the life of the recipient, we must be open to the working of grace. We must be open to a relationship with God and be willing to give ourselves to God and allow God to transform us. Relationships require communication to grow and flourish and our relationship with God is no different.

God also gives us the liturgy as a means through which we can be prepared and opened to accept this gift of grace because God seeks to reach us through our own human nature. God communicates with us through Christian ritual and these rituals call us to participate through our thoughts and desires, words and gestures so that we can offer ourselves to Christ whose self-offering allows us to be sanctified. This communication speaks not only through words and music, but also through sign and symbol. Water, stone, bread, and flame all find new meaning within the liturgy and become revelations of the love and truth of God.

Liturgical ritual forms Catholic culture by revealing these truths so that we can come to know God and authentic faith. In that way, it is a type of language which communicates that which cannot be communicated by words alone. It is a language which communicates, teaches, shapes and forms. Through the liturgy, we learn how to live on earth and experience a foretaste of heaven. The way we worship affects what we believe which in turn affects how we live. Therefore, how liturgy is celebrated affects the message it communicates.

Like all forms of language, the meaning of these signs and symbols can become obscured and garbled if not delivered clearly or allowed to become overshadowed. However, when celebrated well and with care, the liturgy becomes a greater and more effective form of evangelization than any pamphlet or catechism class. Through the liturgy we learn in the way that Jesus taught. Liturgy teaches us how to live through example and experience. It teaches us to live through love and relationship. It teaches us to live through showing how to love.

As Nathan Mitchell writes, “Christian Liturgy begins as ritual practice, but ends as ethical performance.”¹⁷⁰ It begins with a stirring in our hearts and minds that leads us to worship

¹⁷⁰ Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery*, 38.

of God who longs to perfect us in his image so that we can perfect our world and build the kingdom of God on earth. Through the beauty and example found in God's self-offering love, we learn to love and care for one another as the family of God: a family where all have a place, all are needed, all are met where they are and are guided and supported. When we put that example into practice, our minds will be attuned to our voices and our lives will be attuned to the mind of God. Then our voices can resonate through our world with an authenticity that gives credence to the faith we profess.

When our participation, which is fostered through beautiful and reverent celebrations of liturgy, permeates the lives of the faithful it results in cohesiveness between the liturgical celebration and the parish community. This living out of the liturgy allows the liturgy to be evangelistic, building not only a relationship between Christ and the individual, but creating a Christo-centric and Eucharistic culture which draws others to Christ, the source of all grace and love.

There is no magic bullet as to how best to foster liturgical participation in our parishes, but if we follow the rites, prepare well, teach the faithful to speak the language of ritual, allow the rites to speak for themselves, and show the faithful that their participation is essential, each of us can be opened to the transformation found in the divine encounter of the sacraments. If we live the liturgy fully within the church and fully within our daily lives and bring our experience of the kingdom of God to every corner of our communities, then, not only us, but our entire world will be transformed as we offer our lives to God. *Ite, Missa est*, go you are sent.

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