

Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 1

Do This in Memory of Me

Still, the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; at the same time it is the fount from which all the church's power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made children of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's Supper. *The Constitution on the Liturgy*, 10

The church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1Pt 2:9; see 2:4-5) is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. *The Constitution on the Liturgy*, 14

Do this in memory of me. Every Christian immediately recognizes the words of Jesus, spoken while taking, blessing, breaking, and giving the bread of the Passover feast to his disciples. Can you think of a

command more obeyed in the history of the world? In every age, Christians have responded to the call of Jesus to *Do this*.

What we often call the *Last Supper* is really a first supper: the first gathering of Christians for Eucharist, the first time believers began to recognize the *Lord in the breaking of the bread*. In coming to Mass on Sunday, we respond to an instinct in the Christian heart: namely, that it is only here, at the table of the Eucharist, where we can begin to grasp even a hint of what has been prepared for those who love God.

The twelve apostles might have been surprised at the words and actions of Jesus on that night before he died; but they were not idle spectators watching from a distance. They sang the songs they learned in childhood, and said prayers they knew by heart, and listened again to the stories which told them of their origin as a people, their vocation in the world, and their destiny. Yet even as they did these things, Jesus drew them into a new, unfolding mystery. He washed their feet, and told them, even amid their confusion and their protests, that just as he was a

We need to have in both mind and heart the Council's vision of a Church that can, with strong leadership, achieve the full, conscious, and active participation that is the "primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit". How else can this Church live without that spirit? And where else can such spirit be found. We will receive eagerly our Tradition, celebrate our rites, from Sunday to Sunday and season to season, so that we are slowly fashioned into Catholics whose lives are God's own love for the world.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony

servant, so must all his followers be. It is safe to say that they didn't understand it then. But in time they would.

Some years ago, a movie introduced us to a music teacher. Mr. Holland who, faced with a clumsy and screeching clarinet player, and weary from months of fruitless practice and repetition, exhorts her at last to *Be the Music!* The call to you is much the same. Like the wary disciples, or the hesitant clarinetist, you may wonder if this insistent word is not really meant for another; but the One who calls you has supreme confidence in your ability to *Be the music!* The command of Jesus, *Do this*, is made not only to twelve men around one table, but to every man, woman, or child who has ever passed through the waters of baptism.

Over the last hundred years, the Roman Catholic Church has retrieved an ancient insight that there are no spectators at liturgy, no *innocent bystanders*. You are essential to the celebration.

When the priest presiding at Eucharist calls out *Lift up your hearts!* his words are Christ's words,

addressed to you. No one else can lift up your heart on your behalf. When we are together as the Church, even on those days when you are discouraged or confused, you may well find your heart rising in Christ to praise the unfailing love of the Creator.

The word *liturgy* comes from ancient Greek words with a root meaning of *work of the people*. This word reminds us that when we come to worship we are not like an audience in a concert hall or spectators in a stadium, nor like a family clustered around a television. These are observers of something unfolding at a distance, but the worshipper is an essential participant in the prayer.

Over the next several weeks, this series of bulletin reflections will explore the importance of your participation in the Church's worship. *Do this in memory of me* is an invitation to assemble with other believers in Jesus's name, to serve one another's needs, and to be transformed by the one who always waits for us at the table.



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 2 The Assembly

Christian liturgy is a living icon, one composed primarily of persons, not signs. It is a peculiar image, in that it is a human, dynamic one. Its primary components are persons, not things, for we are a constituent part of it. It is not something outside of us that we contemplate, just as the dance has no subsistence apart from the dancers dancing, nor love apart from the lover loving the beloved. Robert Taft, S.J.

Most grade school children relish the call to an *assembly*. Unless report cards are to be handed out, or the student body berated for some stretching of the rules, the pupils pour into the hall happy to be freed from the classroom routine. There is remarkable energy when a school community comes together. A display of school spirit is usually in order, and everyone is in good humor (except, sometimes, the teachers.)

These vigorous gatherings seem to have little in common with Sunday morning worship, and yet just as surely as the children respond to the school-bell summoning them to the auditorium, worshippers

are called. The Holy Spirit moves in our hearts and calls us together: no one comes into the church building on a Sunday morning except in response to this call. Catholic Christians have a distinctive name for what happens when we gather on Sunday morning: we call it the *assembly*.

Assembly is an ancient word, a biblical word. The people of ancient Israel had a distinctive sense of being *brought together*. They were in solidarity in slavery, were delivered into freedom in one body, and kept their imaginations fixed on Jerusalem, the one Holy City from which salvation would spring and in which everyone would be at peace.

The ministry of Jesus had to do in large measure with restoring people to the assembly, with getting people to sit at table together, with expanding the horizons of belonging. The actions of Jesus revealed that God always takes the first step. It is by God's call that we come together. For us as his disciples, being together with one another is an essential feature of the Christian life.

Who are we when we are gathered together? We are more here than meets the eye. The liturgy tells us that we are assembled not only with the persons under one roof, but the whole Church throughout the world, and all who have gone before us into death.

We come to the liturgy first and foremost because we have heard a call from God to be there. The words of a eucharistic prayer acknowledge the depth of the mystery of this call: “we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.” It is not always easy to answer the call. Excuses and distractions and collisions of schedules abound, as well as our own bad habits. Roadblocks and detours are familiar mileposts on the way that leads to the assembly.

“I cannot come to the feast,” complains the person in the Gospels with a new spouse or house or ox. But the feast must go on, and so the Lord turns to the rest: the tax collectors, shady ladies, all the bad pennies and lost sheep and the likes of us.

It must be admitted that one of the barriers to the full vigor of the liturgical assembly is the memory of former days when the bare minimum of participation in the Sunday assembly was sometimes taught. The liturgy today summons a new and deeper response from us. The liturgy is woven of signs and symbols, and the way that we gather has immense importance for the whole celebration. Our preparation for the liturgy begins not with the opening song in church but in the home. It begins with how we order the day: the way we choose and prepare special clothes, pray with the children, and deal with the spilled milk at breakfast and the sullen teenager.

Our preparation continues to unfold as we move towards the church, trace the sign of the cross on our bodies with holy water, bow to the altar, smile to our neighbors, recognize and greet the stranger, and settle for a few moments of stillness before rising to join the song. As the separate voices begin to take up the song, the members of the assembly begin to breathe together, to act together as one body.

The gathering of the people is the most basic requirement for the Mass. It is linked with the promise of the Lord: “Where two or three gather in my

name, I am in their midst.” This is underscored by the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, which speak of the importance of the opening moments of the Mass in helping the faithful who come together to “establish communion and dispose themselves to listen properly to God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.” (GIRM, n. 46)

The liturgical assembly therefore differs from other human gatherings, because so much rests on you and the quality of our participation. When we go to an eight o’clock movie, for example, we know that we can arrive ten minutes late because the previews and popcorn ads will still be running. The opening moments of worship are entirely different as we are drawn together into community to pray together: fully, consciously, actively.

One September morning in a parish near a large university, a few parishioners gathered around a young woman who was crying. She explained that she was a new student from abroad, just ending her first week for orientation to a new school in a new country. She had struggled with homesickness all week...until Sunday. She had yet to learn a single person’s name in the church, but she was struck by the insight that they were her brothers and sisters, that their hearts were turned to her heart in Christ. She realized that the Word of God they gathered around was the same word spoken that day in her village half a world away, and that she was united with them in praying the Eucharist, and receiving holy Communion. In the gathering of the Church for prayer, this woman experienced hope, healing, and an overwhelming experience of the Lord’s presence which moved her to tears of joy.

The liturgical assembly is the place where, over the course of your lifetime, we will receive the clearest teaching of who God is—and of who we are in Christ. There, as a wise and wonderful priest used to say, you will learn two things: your life has meaning, and you will live forever. If someone makes you a better offer: take it!



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 3 *Engaging the Senses* *Participation by Seeing*

God may be of no concern to us, but we are of much concern to God. The only way to discover this is the ultimate way, the way of worship. For worship is a way of living, a way of seeing the world in the light of God. To worship is to rise to a higher level of existence, to see the world from the viewpoint of God. In worship we discover the ultimate way is not to have a symbol, but to be a symbol, to stand for the divine.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Some years ago, a collection of paintings by the French impressionist Claude Monet was on tour. He painted ordinary subjects repeatedly: the same patch of waterlilies, the same cathedral tower, the same bank of trees or field of flowers or haystack; but always at a different season or time of day.

Some museum guests, wandering into a room crammed with huge canvases of haystacks, certainly wondered what all the fuss was about. In Boston's museum one day, a woman approached the first canvas, carefully guiding a small child through the crowd. The child carried the red-tipped cane of the

blind. A few glanced at the unlikely pair: it seemed to them an odd place to bring a blind child.

The woman broke her silence as she gazed at the first haystack: "It's early in the morning, cold and quiet, and there is frost on the haystack and, in the fields, the grain is dark and too late to harvest."

Soon, she moved on, stood in silence before the next canvas, leaned down to the child and began, "Oh, it's summer and hot, and grasshoppers are jumping and chirping and the breeze is blowing bits of hay and grain up into the sky, and the air is filled with a toasty, nutty aroma."

Soon, an assortment of eavesdroppers began to move in step with the woman who was opening up their eyes to see the paintings for the first time.

Christians have a unique vision of the world. Liturgy is a school of life and surprises us with bright new vision and possibilities. It colors our whole life with its vision, its hope, its promise.

Some years ago, Mother Theresa of Calcutta was invited to give an address at the Harvard Commencement. In the course of her remarks, she held a loaf of bread up before the astonished graduates, tore it in half, held up the pieces and said: "This is what God is like."

Her surprising action literally caught people by surprise, wondering what she could have meant by this. Is it God's desire to nourish the world? Does God have a place in this plan for these future doctors, lawyers, diplomats, and captains of industry? Is God so available? So vulnerable? So ordinary? As ordinary as a loaf of bread? Could it be that we who are so filled with achievement and prestige, and who have hungered for this day, could yet hunger for something more?

Once you have recognized the potential of bread to be an entry point of God into this world, you open the door to surprising questions. The Christian mystery—as once was said in praise of the painter El Greco—is mystery in broad daylight. Because of what we have done at the table of the Eucharist, we Christians learn to see beneath the surface of persons, and things, and actions, to their deepest meaning and value.

We celebrate liturgy to help us to see better the signs of God's action among us. Ordinary things are

treated in extraordinary ways: a book is raised in the air, bread is broken, wine poured out, hands reach out to touch in blessing and healing, bodies are clothed in splendid colors and textures, words are wed to melody. There is a great deal going on if we open our eyes.

Open eyes seem to be a requirement for life in the Kingdom: Jesus puts much of his healing ministry at the service of the blind, often in an effort to help sighted people realize their own lack of vision.

Moses had his attention captured by a glimpse of a burning bush, and evidently had to stare at it for awhile before he was ready to enter into a covenant with God. A rabbi has pointed out that the burning bush of Moses was not a miracle, but a test.

It was a test by God who wanted to find out if Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke.

Is it time to check our vision? If we open our eyes in the assembly on Sunday and let the light stream in: what do we see?



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Part 4 Hearing the Word Active Listening

The Church has always venerated the divine scriptures as it has venerated the body of the Lord, in that it never ceases, above all in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the body of Christ. Constitution on Divine Revelation, 25

The eminent professor from a Midwest university set out to deliver a guest lecture to a Boston audience, but a tangle of airplane schedules marooned him at O'Hare airport in Chicago. His secretary offered a solution: get on the next plane to New York, jump on the shuttle for the quick flight to Boston, hail a cab, give the talk.

Two hours later at LaGuardia Airport in New York, he dashed onto the shuttle flight, settled into his seat, reviewed his notes, accepted a cup of coffee, and surrendered his credit card to the attendant collecting his fare. Once back on the ground, and with only twenty minutes to spare, he dashed towards the rank of taxis, glancing quickly to the panoramic window

on the airport concourse. There, where he expected to see the Boston skyline, he caught an astonishing view of the soaring spindle of the Washington monument, and the stately dome of the U.S. Capitol. "How could you be in the Washington DC," sputtered his Boston host on the telephone, "didn't you listen to the announcements on the airplane?" "But, Charles," said the professor, " *No one* listens to announcements on airplanes."

The hapless professor learned a lesson on his fruitless journey: the enterprise of travel requires *active* listening. Absorbed in his narrow agenda, he ignored the important words addressed to him.

Most of us experience a daily torrent of words which far exceeds anything the human ear has had to endure throughout history—the advertising words of Madison Avenue, the endless chatter of talk shows, the double-speak of politics, and the eternal drone of electronic voices. When so many truly unimportant words wash over us all day long, our Christian task of listening together in the assembly to God's word is not an easy one. It requires generous

helpings of silence, and time for the ears to attune to a different way of speaking.

Indeed, the purpose of the opening moments of Mass is to prepare us to receive a truly important word. Because the readings we share at Mass are nothing less than an encounter with God, the manner in which they are read and heard is of great importance.

This is why the readings are to be treated with great reverence. The books from which Scripture is proclaimed at Mass are purposefully different from other books. They are meant to be treasures of the parish, handsomely bound and beautifully adorned. Once the assembly has gathered, the Book of the Gospels is carried in solemnly in the entrance procession as a great treasure of the community.

The readers are called to delight in the cadence and beauty of poetry. They are expected to be well prepared by prayer and study, and to have a grasp of the meaning of the scriptural text.

As hearers of the word, we can prepare as well. It is immensely helpful if the Sunday readings are first read in the home, either by individuals or families. When we come to the liturgy with a sense of how the readings unfold, and with the questions and insights which come from the readings already in our grasp, then the reading and homily can engage us more fully.

In the readings a portion of our story as Christian people begins to unfold. Usually, we hear first from the Old Testament. The reader declares that we have heard not an ordinary word, but the Word of the Lord. Our response is strong and certain, a sign of our attention: *Thanks be to God!*

Silence follows, and then we are drawn into the singing of a psalm. The melody can help implant the prayer more deeply so that we always have access to them. In the liturgy, the psalm serves not only as a response to the first reading but also as an deepening of our ability to hear the word.

The second reading which follows the psalm, is not chosen to harmonize with the first, but is a way of bringing the treasures of the New Testament writing to the assembly.

With the reading of the Gospel the liturgy of the Word reaches its summit. We change our posture, standing in expectation, alert and ready. The book is carried with reverence, perhaps accompanied by light and clouds of incense. We sing *Alleluia* an ancient Hebrew word sung in praise for the coming of God.

The honor we pay to the Gospel book is paid to Christ. There is an exchange of greetings between priest and people, indicating a new way of being together: *The Lord be with you... And also with you!* And then, as he traces the sign of the cross on the book, all of us in the assembly trace the sign of the cross on our forehead, lips, and breast. This is the whole body at prayer: by blessing ourselves we pray that these words we are about to hear will resound in our minds, be repeated in our daily speech, and live always in our hearts.

Why all this attention to hearing the Word? Creation comes into being by a *word* from God: *Let there be light.* None of the words we can spin from all of the world's alphabets can spell out the deepest truth about our lives. But this Word from God, resounding in our ears again and again, Sunday after Sunday, can summon our dry bones to new life.



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 5 Music *Singing the Liturgy*

We are celebrating when we involve ourselves meaningfully in the thoughts, words, songs and gestures of the worshipping community, when everything we do is wholehearted and authentic for us—when we mean the words and want to do what is done. *Music in Catholic Worship* (1972) #3

Years ago, my childhood pastor had a distinctive hobby: birdcalls. He was remarkably adept at imitating the distinctive sounds of an entire menagerie.

Even more remarkable were his ventriloquist talents: he could throw his tuneful chirping into the trees. Everyone was charmed by his skill, until the day he exercised his talent during an encore for a Boston Pops concert.

The maestro was clearly unprepared for the chorus of birdsong which burst around him as he waved his baton through the stanzas of a Sousa march. The parish children were delighted to see the tuba player peer into his horn looking for the canary, but most of the concert patrons and musicians were aghast at this unexpected audience participation.

While audience participation is not part of a concert, it is an essential element of Catholic worship. Worship and music are woven together in such a way that they cannot be parted.

When we pray the liturgy, we are gathered by the Spirit to enter into Christ's worship of the Father. Baptized into Christ, we are united in his prayer in such a way that when we pray as the assembly, it is Christ who prays in us.

Throughout the history of the church, the wedding of prayer and song has brought humanity's music to life. St. Paul encouraged the Colossians: "let the peace of Christ, rejoice in your hearts; let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another, in psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:15-16)

At the heart of our liturgy is the action of the people, giving praise and thanks to God together. It is a wonderful thing to listen to the tremendous variety of voices in church. The music of the assembly has the potential to engage the spirit, move the heart,

strengthen the bonds of community, direct the Christian life, and render God's love visible.

Catholics are called to *sing* God's praise. Yet our task is challenging in a culture where public singing is infrequent. Many of us are surrounded by music all day long, but it is amplified, computerized, and digitized to perfection. Music accompanies our exercise and our travels. Even the evening news is woven together by urgent electronic music. There is an explosion of music, but a reduction of places where our voices are sought after and welcomed. For people whose lives are filled with music, we are often curiously silent and passive.

Where is our participation in the song of the liturgy most desired? First, there are the texts of the liturgy itself: chanted responses to invitations like *The Lord be with you the Lord have mercy*, the gospel *Alleluia*, the *Gloria*, the acclamations of the eucharistic prayer, the *Lamb of God*.

If the priest sings the principal prayer texts, a vigorous *Amen* is to be sung. Often, in Masses with children, the sung acclamations by the people weave through the entire eucharistic prayer. The back-and-forth singing of priest and people is a reminder that the liturgy is a dialogue between the assembly and God. The *Responsorial Psalms* are joined to melody so they may be implanted in our memory, abiding in our hearts as a treasury of prayer, always available to the circumstances of the everyday.

When we view the liturgy from the perspective of the singing assembly, it is clear that the gathered people "do" the liturgy. As a place of active engagement, the liturgy insists that its music be tuned to

every voice. At a diocesan assembly recently, the people singing the responses soon realized that a delegation of people representing the ministry to the deaf were following the responses not by singing, but by signing. The synchronized movements of their arms and hands were a powerful reminder that no one is a passive spectator at worship.

Since the liturgy is a school of prayer, part of our preparation for liturgical prayer is learning to sing. How can our singing be more effective? The most familiar songs in parish prayer can accompany daily prayer: we can chant a familiar *Gloria* in the car on the way to work, rehearse a memorized psalm in the shower, sing a favorite hymn as part of grace before meals on Sunday, or repeat *Lord have mercy* as the children go through their bedtime blessings.

A tape of sung morning or evening prayer can accompany our commute and transform the daily drudgery into a sung pilgrimage. It helps further to arrive early at Sunday Mass in time to listen to the choir warm-up or to participate in any rehearsals, to have hymnals and other materials at hand, and to sit close to other persons. Their song will lend wings to our own, and soon we will be drawn into the prayer.

Darling, they're playing our song! declares the beloved, taking her partner by the hand onto the dance floor. The basic rule of thumb for music in liturgy, symbolized by the irrepressible monsignor who could not withhold his birdsong from the symphony, is this: at worship, they're always playing our song!



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 6 *Eucharist: It is right to give God thanks and praise*

Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: namely, the Eucharistic Prayer, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving; he unites the congregation with himself in the prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the meaning of the Prayer is that the entire congregation of the faithful should join itself with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 78

Recently, the adult children of an aging mother decided, in order to spare her the stress and excitement of the day, to relocate the traditional Thanksgiving dinner from the family home to a fine restaurant. They were seduced by glossy advertising, showing a beaming family, attentive server, and a photogenic centerpiece turkey with all the trimmings.

Their meal was an unrelieved disaster. Their mother cried and said she missed her wedding china; the customary grace was interrupted by the officious captain who wanted to know if everything was “all right” when he noticed everyone silently peering down at their plates. The *traditional* menu did not connect with memories of family recipes. Everyone missed something, everyone agreed never to come back. The sterile meal, done *for* them, was amazingly different from the family production done *by* them.

In the past weeks, we have thought about how we participate in liturgy by gathering, by attentive listening and seeing, and by singing.

These aspects of participation weave throughout the action of the assembly on Sunday morning, but they reach their highpoint at the heart of Sunday prayer: the eucharistic prayer. *Eucharist*, which derives from a Greek word meaning *thanksgiving* and is an ancient title for the Mass, refers to the prayer over our gifts of bread and wine, changed for us into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Curiously, it sometimes seems that at this part of the Mass attention moves from the active prayer of the people to the actions of the priest. This common misunderstanding can be dispelled first by careful attention to the words of our prayers which always refer to the prayer of all believers. This is *our* prayer.

Secondly, we see clearly in the structure of the eucharistic prayers that there are frequent interventions by the people to sing responses and acclamations to enter into the prayer and make it our own.

Thirdly, we see in the design of many Catholic churches today a retrieval of the ancient understanding of the people's role in the eucharistic prayer: the people surround the altar rather than face it as an audience does a stage.

Finally, posture and gesture gives us clues as to our role in the prayer. We stand as the priest says or sings *The Lord be with you*, as he introduces the *Preface*, which will hymn some of the reasons we have for giving God thanks and praise. In the United States we kneel for most of the eucharistic prayer: "they [the faithful] should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the Sanctus until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health, lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason." (GIRM 43)

From time to time, we may be called on to carry the gifts in procession, carefully holding the plate of bread and chalice of wine high and moving in reverence toward the altar, or to help collect the money for the support of the community and the poor.

All of these actions express our understanding that Eucharist is not something done *for us* by the priest, but done *by us* as a community of faith. The priest is ordained by the Church to speak and act in the name of Christ and in dialogue with the assembly.

As presider at prayer he exercises special care for the quality of the community's worship, but he by no means acts in isolation from the people he serves.

In the last hundred years, Christians have retrieved an understanding of the Eucharist as an action faithful to the actions of the Lord Jesus on the night before he died: namely, he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. This basic pattern holds true every Sunday as we take our gifts of bread and wine, bless God for all the gifts given us, we break the bread of Christ's body and pour out the wine of Christ's blood, and receive that life for nourishment, strength, and transformation.

The Eucharistic Prayer which is molded on this framework is thanksgiving for all of God's creation and the saving deeds of Christ, and it opens our eyes to see a sign of the world that is coming to birth. Eucharistic prayer always moves from the memory of what God has already done to an alignment of our hearts with the tasks remaining: a sharing of the abundant life of God with all believers, with all the nations of the world, and with all who have gone before us in the love and service of Christ. The Eucharist reveals to us the deepest meaning of our lives.

Over the course of a lifetime, weekly entry into the community's eucharistic prayer can shape our lives. It may take many years for its rhythms and patterns to be implanted in the heart. In time, for those who respond faithfully to the call to the Sunday assembly, daily life will be filled with an awareness of Christ's abiding love, empowering us for forgiveness as the pattern of our lives, and enabling us to bring God's justice and mercy to the light of day.



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 7

Communion

Take and eat, take and drink

"Sometimes," says Christ, "parents entrust the feeding of their children to others—but not I. I nourish my children with my own flesh.... Love urged me to become your brother. I took your flesh and your blood so I might give them back to you—the very flesh and blood that has made me your kin!"

This blood makes Christ's royal image flower and shine in us. This blood gives birth to an unsurpassable beauty because the soul it feeds and waters grows forever fresh and green, incorruptible! St. John Chrysostom (4th Century)

We learn by heart the things we must do in the liturgical assembly. We learn by heart in order to take to heart the saving mystery we celebrate. But learning by heart, listening with the ear of the heart, and taking to heart the mystery of Christ are the work of a lifetime, not a lesson to be mastered in a short course or a single day's participation. Mary Collins

Look for a senior member of the parish and ask about Sunday Mass fifty years ago. One of the details that may take you by surprise will be the lack of reception of holy Communion. As we turn the pages back on our recent history, we see that Catholics in earlier generations did not receive Communion in large numbers on Sunday, despite the call for fuller participation in the Eucharist begun by Pope St. Pius X in the first decade of the twentieth century.

If we begin to list the changes that have taken place in the life of the Church the most evident is the increase in the number of worshippers who receive Communion at every Mass. The reception of holy Communion by the assembly is now seen everywhere as a typical feature of Catholic liturgy.

The participation of the people is very highly focused at the Communion rite. Even in parishes where people tend to follow the words of the Mass closely in missalettes or hymnals, this is the time when books are put aside. We pray together the *Lord's Prayer*, memorized in childhood, repeated again and again throughout our lifetime.

We become more aware of those around us as we turn to touch the stranger and embrace the friend, speaking words of peace. The sign of peace that we give is much more than a cheerful greeting: but a sign that Christ's work of reconciliation is a requirement for those who come forward to eat and drink.

We watch as the gifts are prepared and sing the repeated prayer for mercy, *Lamb of God...* We make our own prayer from the words of a soldier spoken long ago, *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word...* We follow in procession, singing as we go. We bow our heads as a sign of reverence and extend our hands to receive Christ's body and blood. And finally, we yield to a holy silence which we keep together as God's love enfolds the assembly.

At the heart of the Communion rite is the procession to the table: a line unlike any other for by it we trace the pattern of our life's journey, close to one another, moving together towards the heavenly banquet. Often, we sing a psalm or hymn that draws us more deeply into the meaning of our action.

The manner in which holy Communion is distributed is itself a reminder that our faith always includes contact with another believer. We are looked in the eye, words are spoken to us and summoned from us, the host is placed gently in our palm, or on our tongue. No haste, no hurry.

We place the host in our mouth and move to the cup. Again, a caring look, a word of faith. We

stretch out our hands to take the cup of salvation and once having drunk, return it to the minister with care. Even if for some reason we do not receive from the cup, we do not ignore its presence, but bow reverently as we pass nearby.

As we visit other parishes, we have certainly observed that there are some places where the people do not receive from the cup. Yet, the liturgical directives are extremely clear. The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* declares:

Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom. (GIRM, n. 281)

Seen from the viewpoint of Communion, our worship is not a compartment in our week's schedule, but rather a moment when we may become more aware of the meaning of all of life. Participation in the body and blood of Christ is about the entire direction of one's life, and indeed interprets everything we do outside of the act of worship.



Full Conscious Active Participation



Part 8

Dismissal

Go in Peace, the Mass is ended

Finally we go from that room to our separate worlds—but now carrying the tune we have heard, murmuring the words we have made ours, nourished by the sacred banquet, ready in so many ways to make all God's creation and all the work of human hands into the kingdom we have glimpsed in the liturgy.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin

Not so long ago when a New Hampshire parish broke ground for its new church building there was an interesting tableau: the bishop carried the ceremonial shovel yet the parishioners had also brought their own. An elderly lady wielded a garden trowel, a little boy had his beach pail and shovel, a commuter brought out the emergency snow shovel from his car. They all turned the earth, preparing a place where God will be worshipped in the beauty of holiness. For these people, the Eucharist they have celebrated over time has molded them into a community committed to make Christ's presence known in the world. The building they prepare is a symbol of their mission in the world.

One of the names we give our worship comes from its ending *Mass*. In Latin, the last words of the priest to the assembly were *Ite, missa est*; literally *Go, you are dismissed*. *Missa* comes into English as *Mass*. The fact that this came to be known as the title of the whole worship event tells us that our dismissal has a great deal to do with the quality of our participation.

Our liturgy is about movement: procession into the place of assembly, movement to the word, procession to the table, and then dismissal back to the rhythms and patterns of daily life. As the cycle continues Sunday by Sunday over a lifetime, we become more attuned to the Eucharist we celebrate, and the rhythms and patterns of our lives are gradually transformed, becoming more revelatory of the presence of Christ in the world.

The mystery of God's life is communicated and exchanged. *Go in peace, the Mass is ended* and immediately we respond: *Thanks be to God*. The Roman Catholic liturgy always ends with a certain urgency. Once holy Communion has been received and a

period of attentive silence is ended by a prayer, the words of dismissal follow at once.

Yet, it is the custom in most places that we are slow to disperse once we have become so aware of ourselves precisely as the Body of Christ. So there is a hymn to be sung, neighbors to be greeted, and the aroma of coffee to lead us to a place where we can begin to put names on the faces of the assembly, and to discover how their stories are woven together in wonderful ways.

Being together for the life of the world: that is a job description for the Church. St. Augustine described the Church as a *new human society* created by the life, death, and rising of Jesus.

Baptized into Christ, we can never be separated from the love of God: no matter the storms that rage around us and threaten to overwhelm us. We are the people in the water: we are inserted together into Christ's saving death and, therefore, into an eternal sacrifice of praise.

When we assemble on the Lord's Day for liturgy, we remember God's saving deeds in the past, we look for signs of this saving life today, and we are moved to give thanks. When we are dismissed, it is only for a time. The next Lord's Day, in obedience to the Lord's own command, we return to the Word that brings us hope, to the bread and wine that bring us life.

In the last eight weeks, we have considered some ways in which we may celebrate the liturgy with greater attention and devotion. *Full, conscious, and active participation* in the liturgy is the birthright of all baptized into Christ.

A half century ago, Pope Pius XII instructed the church in *Mediator Dei*:

The paschal mystery is not a cold and lifeless representation of the events of the past or a simple and bare record of a former age. It is rather Christ himself who is ever living in his church. Here he continues that journey of immense mercy which he began in his mortal life...with the design of bringing people to know his mysteries and in a way live by them. These mysteries are ever present and active.

We are invited into this procession with Christ and the Church, this journey of immense mercy. This is what the Sunday assembly is all about.

In the words of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, from a pastoral letter on the liturgy published after his death:

We are sent from the eucharistic table as a holy people always in mission. (The word Mass—in Latin *Missa*—means sending or mission.) The spirit which fills us in the liturgy inspires us to re-create the world and in so doing to prepare ourselves for fulfillment in heaven....The dismissal of the assembly is like the breaking of the bread. We have become the "bread of life" and the "cup of blessing" for the world. What happens at home, at work, at meals? What do we make of our time, our words, our deeds, our resources of all kinds? That is what matters.

