

Actuosa participatio

Authentic participation

52. The Second Vatican Council rightly emphasized the active, full and fruitful participation of the entire People of God in the eucharistic celebration (155). Certainly, the renewal carried out in these past decades has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the wishes of the Council Fathers. Yet we must not overlook the fact that some misunderstanding has occasionally arisen concerning the precise meaning of this participation. 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 conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* encouraged the faithful to take part in the eucharistic liturgy not "as strangers or silent spectators," but as participants "in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly" (156). This exhortation has lost none of its force. The Council went on to say that the faithful "should be instructed by God's word, and nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to make an offering of themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other" (157).

Participation and the priestly ministry

53. 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. (158) There is a particular need for clarity with regard to the specific functions of the priest. He alone, and no other, as the tradition of the Church attests, presides over the entire eucharistic celebration, from the initial greeting to the final blessing. In virtue of his reception of Holy Orders, he represents Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, and, in a specific way, also the Church herself. (159) Every celebration of the Eucharist, in fact, is led by the Bishop, "either in person or through priests who are his helpers." (160) He is helped by a deacon, who has specific duties during the celebration: he prepares the altar, assists the priest, proclaims the Gospel, preaches the homily from time to time, reads the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful, and distributes the Eucharist to the faithful. (161) Associated with these ministries linked to the sacrament of Holy Orders, there are also other ministries of liturgical service which can be carried out in a praiseworthy manner by religious and properly trained laity. (162)

The eucharistic celebration and inculturation

54. On the basis of these fundamental statements of the Second Vatican Council, the Synod Fathers frequently stressed the importance of the active participation of the faithful in the

eucharistic sacrifice. In order to foster this participation, provision may be made for a number of adaptations appropriate to different contexts and cultures. (163) The fact that certain abuses have occurred does not detract from this clear principle, which must be upheld in accordance with the real needs of the Church as she lives and celebrates the one mystery of Christ in a variety of cultural situations. In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Lord Jesus, born of woman and fully human (cf. Gal 4:4), entered directly into a relationship not only with the expectations present within the Old Testament, but also with those of all peoples. He thus showed that God wishes to encounter us in our own concrete situation. A more effective participation of the faithful in the holy mysteries will thus benefit from the continued inculturation of the eucharistic celebration, with due regard for the possibilities for adaptation provided in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, (164) interpreted in the light of the criteria laid down by the Fourth Instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments *Varietates Legitimae* of 25 January 1994 (165) and the directives expressed by Pope John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa*, *Ecclesia in America*, *Ecclesia in Asia*, *Ecclesia in Oceania* and *Ecclesia in Europa* (166). To this end, I encourage Episcopal Conferences to strive to maintain a proper balance between the criteria and directives already issued and new adaptations (167), always in accord with the Apostolic See.

Personal conditions for an "active participation"

55. In their consideration of the *actuosa participatio* of the faithful in the liturgy, the Synod Fathers also discussed the personal conditions required for fruitful participation on the part of individuals. (168) One of these is certainly the spirit of constant conversion which must mark the lives of all the faithful. Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible. The faithful need to be reminded 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.

Clearly, full participation in the Eucharist takes place when the faithful approach the altar in person to receive communion (169). Yet true as this is, care must be taken lest they conclude that the mere fact of their being present in church during the liturgy gives them a right or even an obligation to approach the table of the Eucharist. Even in cases where it is not possible to receive sacramental communion, participation at Mass remains necessary, important, meaningful and fruitful. In such circumstances it is beneficial to cultivate a desire for full union with Christ through the practice of spiritual communion, praised by Pope John Paul II (170) and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life (171).