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Full, Active and Conscious Participation: Exteriorly

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, states in n. 14 that the Church “earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the Liturgy”. This desire, and especially the expression “active participation”, is easily misunderstood today especially in a culture where the word “active” conjures up images of frenetic and externally observable physical movement.

The people’s full, conscious and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy was as important before the Second Vatican Council as it was afterward. Though the celebration of the Liturgy in Latin often resulted in the recitation of some responses only by the servers, the members of the faithful present at Mass were not for that reason supposed to be mentally, spiritually and even physically inactive. On the contrary, being aware that the Holy Sacrifice that was being offered on the altar, they were to join themselves to it inwardly. Many followed along in Missals containing a vernacular translation of the Latin. By their gestures also, and especially by the reception of Holy Communion, they participated actively and profoundly in the Sacred Liturgy (cf. GIRM, 5).

After the Second Vatican Council, Catholics can and should still participate in of these ways at Mass and in the celebration of the Sacraments. What was added by the Council were new rubrics in the Roman Missal clarifying the liturgical role that the gathered community of the faithful always had, and giving additional, concrete directives for the exercise of that role. Celebration in the language of the people may further assist them to understand more easily those words of the Liturgy that nourish their understanding of the mysteries being celebrated and of their own liturgical identity. While the new liturgical forms thus introduced do not necessarily add any new ways...
of participating fully, actively and consciously, they do greatly facilitate that participation that was always allowed and desirable, and this was precisely their intention.

It will be evident upon the publication of the new translation of the Roman Missal that some of the prayers will require more effort to understand than the former translation. This is not an obstacle to full, active, and conscious participation but a rather striking invitation to it! This is because such participation requires that the mind be fully engaged in interpreting the depth of meaning contained within the texts, as it is when it is confronted with visual symbols that yield their fuller significance only upon deeper reflection, similarly to the parables of Jesus in the Gospels. Good catechesis also remains as important as ever for the realization of this goal.

It is well known that there are new roles in the Sacred Liturgy that the lay members of the faithful are able to fill in the years since the Council: some properly lay ministries (as for example serving as lectors or servers at the altar) and others introduced to fill a need of the moment (such as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion). These are good and important in their own right, but their value is quite distinct from that of the full, conscious and active participation that is proper not only to those exercising some particular liturgical ministry, but to every member of the liturgical assembly without exception, according to the proper role and the personal capacities of each. Full, active, and conscious liturgical participation involves neither the assumption of priestly roles by the laity or vice-versa, nor the desire to do so, but glories in the variety of ministries and roles given by the Holy Spirit for all time or developed in response to the pastoral needs of each passing age.