



Episode 9: Active Participation

SUMMARY

Pope Saint Pius X introduced the phrase “active participation” to the Catholic world. It first appears in his Motu proprio, *Tra le sollecitudini*, on November 22, 1903. On the feast of Saint Cecilia, patron of music. The holy pope was calling for the restoration of Gregorian chant:

“We deem it necessary to provide before 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.”

Vatican II will use the term in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Time has shown us that there is a challenge with the English translation. Active does not simply mean “doing things”. The Italian version, “*attiva*”, includes the nuance of attaining full participation. The Latin, “*actuosa*”, adds the nuance of actualizing or realizing authentic participation.

The Church weaves the notion of active participation, together with full and conscious into her understanding. We should be engaged fully, conscious of what we are doing, aware of the liturgy’s beauty and richness. This participation is first and foremost interior. Like Christ, we offer ourselves from our hearts, completely to the Father. Only then can our participation be full.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

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. (n°. 14)

Mediator Dei

But the chief element of divine worship must be interior. For we must always live in Christ and give ourselves to Him completely, so that in Him, with Him and through Him the heavenly Father may be duly glorified. The sacred liturgy requires, however, that both of these elements [interior and exterior] be intimately linked with each other. (n°. 24)

IN THE TRADITION

You will keep this practice forever as a statute for yourselves and your descendants. Thus, when you have entered the land which the LORD will give you as he promised, you must observe this rite. When your children ask you, “What does this rite of yours mean?” you will reply, “It is the Passover sacrifice for the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt; when he struck down the Egyptians, he delivered our houses.” Then the people knelt and bowed down, and the Israelites went and did exactly as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron.

Exodus 12:24-28

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 1324

✠ All gather together. Christians come together in one place for the Eucharistic assembly. At its head is Christ himself, the principal agent of the Eucharist. He is high priest of the New Covenant; it is he himself who presides invisibly over every Eucharistic celebration. [...] All have their own active parts to play in the celebration, each in his own way: readers, those who bring up the offerings, those who give communion, and the whole people whose “Amen” manifests their participation.

CCC, n°. 1348

✠ 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 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.

Sacramentum Caritatis, n°. 52, 55

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Grant, O merciful God, that we may be worthy to serve ever fittingly at your altars, and there to be saved by constant participation. Through Christ our Lord.

Prayer over the Offerings, Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read I Samuel 15:22. Why does the prophet say that “obedience is better than sacrifice”?
2. How can we become more aware of our internal participation in the Mass?
3. What words or prayers in the Mass find an echo in your heart and remain with you throughout the day?

FOR FURTHER READING

Pamela Jackson, *Abundance of Graces: Reflections on Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004).