

SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

DAY TWO

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: ENTERING MORE DEEPLY INTO THE SACRED MYSTERIES

CHAPTER I, Sections 14-20

Yesterday we began our journey through *Sacrosanctum Concilium* by asking a question that will remain with us throughout this entire study: **What did the Council actually say?**

We discovered something important. Before the Council spoke about changing the liturgy, it spoke about what the liturgy is.

The liturgy is the action of Christ and His Church. Christ is present in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He is present in the person of the priest. He is present especially under the Eucharistic species. He acts through the sacraments. The earthly liturgy participates in the heavenly liturgy. And the Eucharist is the source from which the grace and power of the Church flow.

Today we come to one of the most important – and perhaps one of the most misunderstood – expressions in the entire Constitution: “Full, conscious, and active participation.”

For many Catholics, those words became almost synonymous with the liturgical changes that followed the Council. More responses. More singing. More lay ministries. More visible activity.

And eventually, in some places, the idea developed that unless everyone was doing something, they were not truly participating. But is that what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* means?

Before answering, we must notice something remarkable. The Council did not invent the idea of active participation. Long before Vatican II, St. Pius X had already spoken of the faithful participating actively in the sacred mysteries and the public prayer of the Church.

Pius XII developed the subject further in *Mediator Dei*. And *Sacrosanctum Concilium* itself gives us an important interpretive key in Section 19 when it speaks explicitly of

participation that is both internal and external. That distinction may prove extremely important. Because perhaps one of the questions we need to investigate is not whether the faithful should actively participate. The Church clearly says that they should. The deeper question is: What does active participation actually mean?

And then we must ask another: Did the understanding of active participation change as the liturgical reform unfolded?

Today we begin looking for the answer.

I. READ

Read Chapter I, Sections 14-20: "The Promotion of Liturgical Instruction and Active Participation"

14. Mother 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. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

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; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.

Yet it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing this unless the pastors themselves, in the first place, become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and undertake to give instruction about it. A prime need, therefore, is that attention be directed, first of all, to the liturgical instruction of the clergy. Wherefore the sacred Council has decided to enact as follows:

15. Professors who are appointed to teach liturgy in seminaries, religious houses of study, and theological faculties must be properly trained for their work in institutes which specialize in this subject.

16. The study of sacred liturgy is to be ranked among the compulsory and major courses in seminaries and religious houses of studies; in theological faculties it is to rank among the principal courses. It is to be taught under its theological, historical, spiritual, pastoral, and juridical aspects. Moreover, other professors, while striving to expound the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation from the angle proper to each of their own subjects, must nevertheless do so in a way which will clearly bring out the connection between their subjects and the liturgy, as also the unity which underlies all priestly training. This consideration is especially important for

professors of dogmatic, spiritual, and pastoral theology and for those of holy scripture.

17. In seminaries and houses of religious, clerics shall be given a liturgical formation in their spiritual life. For this they will need proper direction, so that they may be able to understand the sacred rites and take part in them wholeheartedly; and they will also need personally to celebrate the sacred mysteries, as well as popular devotions which are imbued with the spirit of the liturgy. In addition they must learn how to observe the liturgical laws, so that life in seminaries and houses of religious may be thoroughly influenced by the spirit of the liturgy.

18. Priests, both secular and religious, who are already working in the Lord's vineyard are to be helped by every suitable means to understand ever more fully what it is that they are doing when they perform sacred rites; they are to be aided to live the liturgical life and to share it with the faithful entrusted to their care.

19. With zeal and patience, pastors of souls must promote the liturgical instruction of the faithful, and also their active participation in the liturgy both internally and externally, taking into account their age and condition, their way of life, and standard of religious culture. By so doing, pastors will be fulfilling one of the chief duties of a faithful dispenser of the mysteries of God; and in this matter they must lead their flock not only in word but also by example.

20. Transmissions of the sacred rites by radio and television shall be done with discretion and dignity, under the leadership and direction of a suitable person appointed for this office by the bishops. This is especially important when the service to be broadcast is the Mass.

These sections reveal something that can easily be missed. The Council's first answer to the problem of participation is not more activity. It is formation.

Formation of professors. Formation of seminarians. Formation of priests. Formation of the faithful.

The Council appears to believe that people will participate more deeply in the liturgy when they understand more deeply what the liturgy is. That is worth remembering.

II. SCRIPTURE

Section 14 grounds active participation not in a modern theory of community involvement but in Baptism.

The Council quotes St. Peter: **"But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people: that you may declare his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"** (I Peter 2:9).

And immediately before this St. Peter writes: **“Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:5).**

Here we begin to understand participation. The baptized Christian does not merely watch the Church worship. He belongs to the Mystical Body of Christ. But neither does this mean that the distinction between the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the baptized disappears.

Christ remains the High Priest. The ordained priest acts sacramentally in the person of Christ the Head. And the faithful unite themselves to the Sacrifice being offered.

St. Paul gives us another key: **“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1).**

This is participation at the deepest level. We bring ourselves. Our prayers. Our sufferings. Our gratitude. Our repentance. Our families. Our work. Our crosses. Our entire lives.

And we place them spiritually upon the altar in union with the perfect Sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Participation therefore cannot be reduced merely to speaking, singing, reading, processing, carrying something, or performing a liturgical function. Those things may be legitimate forms of external participation. But external action must flow from something deeper. The soul must participate.

That is why the Council had already said in Section 11 that our minds must be attuned to our voices. And today, in Section 19, it makes the distinction explicit: participation is both internal and external

Sacred Scripture itself warns us about the danger of external worship separated from the heart. Our Lord quotes the prophet Isaiah: **“This people honoureth me with their lips: but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8).**

The mouth can speak while the heart remains elsewhere. The voice can sing while the soul remains detached. External activity by itself is therefore not the measure of participation. God desires the heart.

III. REMEMBER – WHAT CAME BEFORE?

This section is extraordinarily important because one of the easiest mistakes is to assume that Vatican II invented active participation. It did not.

In 1903 – sixty years before *Sacrosanctum Concilium* – Pope St. Pius X issued *Tra le sollecitudini* on sacred music.

His concern was the restoration of the sanctity and dignity of Catholic worship and the cultivation of the true Christian spirit among the faithful. And he described the sacred mysteries and the solemn prayer of the Church as the foremost and indispensable source of that Christian spirit, speaking explicitly of the faithful's active participation in them.

The similarity to Section 14 is unmistakable. This means that the language of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* did not suddenly appear in 1963. There is continuity. But we should also notice the context.

St. Pius X was not calling for the sacred liturgy to become more ordinary, casual, theatrical, or centered upon human personality. Quite the opposite. His liturgical reform was deeply concerned with restoring the sacred character of worship, particularly through authentic sacred music and Gregorian chant.

Then came Pope Pius XII. In 1947, sixteen years before *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, he issued the great encyclical *Mediator Dei*. Pius XII encouraged greater participation of the faithful in the Mass. But he also gave an important warning against reducing participation to one particular external method. He approved practices by which the faithful could respond liturgically and unite themselves more visibly with the sacred action.

Yet he also recognized that Catholics might participate fruitfully through meditation on the mysteries of Christ or through prayers that harmonized with the sacred rites.

His central concern was interior union with Christ the High Priest. That matters enormously. Because it tells us that before Vatican II the Church already possessed a concept of active participation that included external participation but was not reducible to external activity.

Pius XII also warned strongly against unauthorized liturgical experimentation. No priest was free to treat the sacred liturgy as his personal laboratory. So when we place St. Pius X, Pius XII, and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* beside one another, we begin to see a line of continuity: participation – yes, formation – yes, greater understanding – yes, appropriate external participation – yes.

But always ordered toward something deeper: the interior participation of the soul in the worship of Christ and His Church.

IV. BENEDICT XVI

Here Pope Benedict XVI becomes especially helpful. Decades after the Council, Benedict looked back at how the expression *actuosa participatio* – active participation – had sometimes been understood. And he acknowledged that there had been misunderstandings.

In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he explained that active participation must not be understood as merely external activity during the celebration. That is a very significant clarification.

Benedict did not reject Vatican II. He was explaining Vatican II. True participation begins with a deeper awareness of the mystery being celebrated. It requires conversion. It requires recollection. It requires silence. It requires a heart reconciled to God. It requires faith.

And Benedict raised another important distinction: active participation does not require everyone to exercise a particular liturgical ministry. This helps expose one of the great confusions that developed in some places after the Council.

At times, “participation” began to mean: Someone must read. Someone must carry the gifts. Someone must distribute Communion. Someone must lead singing. Someone

must perform some visible task. The sanctuary could begin to appear crowded with activity. And silence could begin to feel like a problem that needed to be filled. But Benedict reminds us that doing more is not necessarily participating more.

There are moments in the liturgy when the most profound participation may consist precisely in receiving. Listening. Adoring. Kneeling. Contemplating. Offering oneself. Being silent before God. This is especially important at the Consecration.

The faithful are not passive because they are not speaking. They are standing – or kneeling – before the mystery of Calvary sacramentally made present. The deepest action occurring at that moment is not something we manufacture. It is something Christ is doing. And our participation consists above all in entering into His action.

V. PILLARS COMMENTARY

Here we arrive at the question that will accompany us throughout this study: What went wrong – and when? We should be careful. It would be historically inaccurate to say: “Vatican II introduced active participation, and everything went wrong.”

Active participation preceded Vatican II. St. Pius X promoted it. Pius XII promoted it. The Liturgical Movement promoted it. The Council inherited that concern. So the problem cannot simply be active participation itself. Perhaps the problem begins when the meaning of participation shifts.

There is an enormous difference between saying: The faithful should participate more deeply in the sacred action, and saying: The faithful must constantly be doing something externally in order to participate.

The first proposition stands comfortably within Catholic tradition. The second does not follow from Sections 14-20. In fact, Section 19 works against such a reduction because it explicitly requires participation both internally and externally.

Notice something else. Sections 14-20, **DO NOT SAY**: Remove the communion rail. Turn the altar around. Eliminate Latin. Abandon Gregorian chant. Introduce extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Have lay people enter the sanctuary whenever possible. Replace sacred silence with constant speech or song. Make the priest's personality central to the celebration. Simplify worship until everything mysterious disappears.

None of those instructions appear here. What does appear again and again? Formation. The clergy must understand the liturgy. Seminarians must understand the liturgy. Professors must understand the liturgy. Priests must live the liturgy. The faithful must be taught the liturgy.

That raises a difficult question. **What if the greatest failure after the Council was not that Catholics were insufficiently active, but that they were insufficiently formed?**

What if Catholics were taught new responses, new postures, new songs, and new practices without being adequately taught the sacrificial and supernatural reality into which those things were supposed to draw them? If so, external activity could increase while interior understanding actually decreases. And that would be almost the opposite of what these paragraphs envision.

This is where our investigation into what went wrong and when must become careful. There was not one single moment when everything changed. The Liturgical Movement existed long before Vatican II and produced genuine fruits.

St. Pius X sought authentic liturgical renewal. Pius XII encouraged participation while also correcting excesses and warning against experimentation. Vatican II inherited the movement and called for liturgical formation and participation. Then came the implementation of the reform. And after that came the way the reform was actually received in dioceses and parishes throughout the world. Those are not necessarily the same thing.

We therefore need to keep distinguishing at least three things:

What the Council actually commanded.

What legitimate Church authority subsequently introduced.

What people eventually did in the name of Vatican II.

If we collapse those three categories into one, we will never understand the history accurately. Some things blamed on Vatican II were never commanded by Vatican II. Other things were indeed introduced during the official postconciliar reform, even though the Council itself did not explicitly require them. Still other practices arose locally and sometimes contradicted the Church's own liturgical law.

We must be willing to distinguish all three. And Sections 14-20 give us another important standard for making that judgment.

The Council says the clergy themselves must be deeply formed in the liturgy. That means authentic liturgical renewal should produce priests who understand that they are servants of the sacred mysteries – not owners of them.

Section 17 even says seminarians must learn “how to observe the liturgical laws.” That is significant.

Active participation does not mean liturgical improvisation. Renewal does not mean experimentation without boundaries. Pastoral concern does not give the priest permission to remake the liturgy according to his personality. The liturgy belongs to the Church. And ultimately, as we learned in the last reading, it belongs to Christ.

So where might the rupture begin?

We cannot answer that completely yet. We have only reached Section 20. But already we can identify a question worth watching: **Did the call for active participation gradually become interpreted as a call for constant external activity?**

If it did, that would represent a narrowing of the Council’s own language. The Council said internal and external.

A later mentality could easily emphasize the external until the internal became almost invisible. And when that happens, other consequences can follow. Silence begins to look like inactivity. Contemplation begins to look like passivity. The choir singing alone begins to look like exclusion. The priest praying quietly begins to look like something being withheld from the congregation. Sacred mystery begins to look like incomprehensibility. And eventually the temptation arises to make everything visible, audible, understandable, communal, and constantly active.

But there is a danger.

When everything must be explained, spoken, seen, and done, there is less room simply to adore.

This does not mean external participation is always wrong. The Council explicitly calls for it. It means external participation must remain ordered toward interior participation. The exterior serves the interior. The visible serves the invisible. And we should remember what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* itself told us in Section 2: **the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, and action to contemplation.**

That sentence may prove to be one of the most important interpretive keys to the entire Constitution.

VI. REFLECT

As we finish today's reading, ask yourself -

What do I personally mean when I say "active participation"?

Have I unconsciously assumed that participating at Mass means I must always be speaking, singing, or doing something?

When I am silent during Mass, is my silence empty – or is it filled with prayer and attention to God?

Do I consciously unite myself, my sufferings, my gratitude, and my entire life to the Sacrifice of Christ upon the altar?

Have I understood that my baptism gives me a genuine participation in the worship of the Church?

Do I see silence, listening, kneeling, contemplation, and adoration as genuine forms of participation?

Have I ever confused having a liturgical role with participating more fully in the Mass?

Do our priests and seminarians receive the kind of deep liturgical formation Sections 14-18 envision?

Have we sometimes tried to solve a lack of interior participation simply by increasing external activity?

And perhaps the most difficult question:

If I were doing nothing outwardly at Mass except kneeling before God with my whole mind and heart united to the Sacrifice of Christ, would I consider myself an active participant?

VII. DEEPER THOUGHTS TO CONCLUDE THIS DAY

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies in the history of the liturgical reform is that a phrase intended to draw Catholics more deeply into the mystery could sometimes be interpreted as requiring them simply to do more things.

But Christianity has always understood that there is a kind of activity deeper than motion. Our Lady stood beneath the Cross. She did not preach. She did not distribute anything. She did not direct anyone. She stood. She watched. She suffered. She loved. She united her heart perfectly to the Sacrifice of her Son.

Would anyone dare call her passive? Perhaps that image can help us recover something. The Mass is Calvary sacramentally made present. We do not come primarily because God needs our activity. We come because we need to be drawn into Christ's Sacrifice.

Sometimes that participation takes the form of words. Sometimes song. Sometimes bodily gestures. Sometimes responses. And sometimes profound silence. But all of it must lead inward. Toward faith. Toward conversion. Toward self-offering. Toward adoration. Toward Christ.

This does not reject *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. It takes *Sacrosanctum Concilium* seriously. The Council itself insists upon formation. The Council itself requires observance of liturgical law. And the Council itself has already told us that the visible must be ordered toward the invisible and action toward contemplation.

So perhaps our question after Day 2 should become more precise. Not: Was active participation a mistake? But: Did we forget what active participation actually meant? And if we did – when did we forget?

That question will remain open as we continue through the document. We will not force an answer before the evidence appears. We will keep reading. We will compare the Council with what came before. Then we will compare it with what came afterward.

And we will allow the evidence to show us where continuity remained, where legitimate development occurred, and where the meaning of the Council may have been stretched beyond what the text itself actually says.

VIII. CLOSING PRAYER

O Lord Jesus Christ, Eternal High Priest, You invite us to unite ourselves to Your perfect Sacrifice and to worship the Father through You.

Teach us what it truly means to participate in the sacred mysteries.

Guard us from mistaking activity for holiness, noise for prayer, or visibility for participation.

Teach us to speak when the Church asks us to speak, to sing when she asks us to sing, to listen when she asks us to listen, and to be silent when we stand before mysteries too great for words.

Form our hearts so that our outward actions may always express an inward faith.

Help our priests and seminarians to know, love, and reverence the sacred liturgy and to celebrate it faithfully according to the mind of the Church.

Give us wisdom as we continue this study.

Help us neither to condemn what we have not understood nor to defend what cannot be defended.

Give us the courage to follow the truth wherever it leads.

Help us distinguish what the Council actually taught from what was later done in its name, and help us recognize authentic development without surrendering what the Church has faithfully handed down through the centuries.

Above all, when we assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, teach us to place ourselves upon the altar with You.

May our prayers, our sufferings, our joys, our work, our families, and our entire lives become an offering pleasing to the Father, united to Your one perfect Sacrifice.

And may every celebration of the sacred liturgy draw our hearts away from ourselves and upward toward the eternal worship of Heaven.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us. Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

Amen.