

THE PRINCIPLE OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM

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Riassunto: L'articolo si propone di approfondire i fondamenti teologici del principio della partecipazione liturgica nel documento conciliare *Sacrosanctum Concilium* e di mostrare la sua attualità a 50 anni dall'evento conciliare.

La partecipazione attiva alla liturgia è richiesta dalla stessa natura della liturgia, in quanto ogni celebrazione liturgica è azione sacra per eccellenza compiuta da Cristo in unione con il suo corpo mistico, la Chiesa. Siccome la Chiesa è "stirpe eletta, sacerdozio regale, nazione santa, popolo acquistato" (1 Pt 2,9; cfr 2,4-5), tutto il popolo cristiano ha, in forza del battesimo, il diritto e il dovere di partecipare attivamente alla liturgia. Tale partecipazione non riguarda quindi solo i ministri dell'altare ma l'intera assemblea liturgica, con tutti i suoi membri battezzati. L'oggetto ultimo della partecipazione liturgica è il mistero della fede, al quale si arriva attraverso i riti e le preghiere delle azioni liturgiche.

La partecipazione al mistero della fede attraverso i riti e le preghiere deve essere attiva, consapevole, interiore ed esteriore, piena e fruttuosa. Il suo frutto più rilevante è l'accoglienza della salvezza nell'esistenza attraverso una vita di comunione con Dio e i fratelli. Per questo rappresenta ancora a 50 anni dal Concilio lo scopo principale della pastorale liturgica di ogni Chiesa locale.

Parole chiave: Vaticano II, Sacrosanctum Concilium, partecipazione, liturgia.

The *Sacrosanctum Concilium*¹ (SC) Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is the first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. It was for the first time that a council dedicated a document of such importance to the liturgy, enclosing it in a strictly theological perspective. This theological background is especially emphasized by the interest expressed firstly not in the rites themselves, but in the content of faith that these must express. An important consequence of the theological deepening of the liturgy is considering it as the font and summit of the whole life of the Church (cf. SC 10). Starting from this statement, the Council Fathers showed the need for the Christians' active participation in the Church's liturgical actions. The principle of active participation would then also become the purpose of the liturgical reform that updated the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution

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¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, ARCB, Bucharest 2000, 9-43.

during post-conciliar times. This study aims to illustrate the theological foundations of the principle of active participation in the conciliar constitution as well as to indicate its topicality 50 years after the completion of the Second Vatican Council's works.

A dual premise is required to develop the argument of active participation: on the one hand, it is necessary to trace the historical background of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and on the other hand its conceptual structure must be mentioned. Then, we will pass to the articulated development of the chosen theme, deepening and highlighting the essential characteristics of liturgical participation.

1. The historical-theological background of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution

1.1. The historical background

The historical context of the Constitution and of the Council, generally, is marked by the conviction of the need to return to the sources of Christianity². This is the intellectual initiative called *ressourcement* materializing at the beginning of the twentieth century in the biblical, patristic ecumenical and liturgical movement. The Liturgical Movement promoted the enrichment, in the light of tradition, of the ritual form of the liturgy that, meanwhile, had acquired a self-referential style, sometimes lacking the ability to properly communicate its genuine content to people. Here are some of the most important representatives of the Liturgical Movement and their fundamental idea: Prosper Guèranger proposes an experience of the liturgy as praise and thanksgiving brought by the Church to the Holy Trinity; in his book "The five wounds of the Church", Antonio Rosmini indicates the wound on the left hand as being the first wound, which is the separation of the people from the clergy in the public worship of the Church; Lambert Beauduin, the father of the Liturgical Movement, insists on the need of the active participation of the entire Christian people in the Church's liturgy; Pius Parsch states that spiritual rebirth after the First World War can only take place starting from the Bible and the Liturgy; Odo Casel reveals the theological depth of liturgical actions, providing room for the mystery of Christian worship through which the salvation events are updated with their salvific richness; finally, Romano Guardini focuses on the community forms under which the Church's act of worship can be lived as well as on the liturgical formation³. All these authors wanted

² Cf. X. BASURKO, *Historia della liturgia*, Centre de Pastoral Litúrgica, Barcelone, 447-457.

³ Cf. A. GRILLO, „Verso Sacrosanctum Concilium”, in *La riforma della Liturgia. Introduzione a Sacrosanctum Concilium*, ed. A. GRILLO – M. RONCONI, San Paolo, Milan 46-47.

to facilitate a renewal of Christian life by promoting the participation of all the faithful in the Church's liturgical actions.

The origin of this principle that will become the leitmotif of the Liturgical Movement can be found in the *Motu proprio* of Pope Pius X of 1903 about liturgical music, *Tra le sollecitudini*, showing the Church's wish for the true Christian spirit to be acquired from its primary and indispensable font, "active participation in the holy sacraments and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church"⁴. The Magisterium of the Church will largely assimilate the Liturgical Movement's effort and the principle of active participation through the *Mediator Dei* encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII⁵ in 1947. Here, the Pope speaks of the right and duty of all believers to actively participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice in order to enter into communion with Christ the High Priest⁶.

The announcement of the convening of an ecumenical council by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959 has brought joy and hope among those who promoted the spirit of the Liturgical Movement. On June 6, 1960, together with other committees, Pope John XXIII established the preparatory Commission on the Liturgy, naming Cardinal Gaetano Cicognani its President. He has prepared a scheme of the Liturgical Constitution in eight chapters, approved on February 1, 1962. The Council opened on October 11, 1962 and on October 16, during the second general congregation, the liturgy was chosen as the first topic of discussion, despite being the fifth on the initial agenda⁷. This election demonstrated that the scheme of the Constitution on the Liturgy was considered to be the most advanced for the discussions during the conciliar debates, and at the same time the liturgical reform was claimed by most of the council fathers.

The conciliar scheme was debated over within fifteen general congregations, from October 22 to November 13, 1962, with 328 speeches being given during the 50 hours of talks. From the first chapter that concerned the theological principles of liturgical reform, attention was monopolized by the argument related to the introduction of the vernacular in liturgical services. Regarding Chapter II, treating the mystery of the Eucharist, the debate focused on sharing under both species and concelebrating. The other five chapters, on sacraments and sacramentals, the Divine Office, the

⁴ PIUS X, „*Motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini* (November 22, 1903)”, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 36 (1903-4) 330.

⁵ Cf. PIUS XII, „*Litterae encyclicae Mediator Dei et hominum* (November 20, 1947)”, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 39 (1947) 521-595.

⁶ Cf. PIUS XII, *Mediator Dei* 128.

⁷ Cf. A BUGNINI, *La riforma della liturgia*, C.L.V. – Edizioni Liturgiche, Rome 1997, 43-45.

liturgical year, sacred music and sacred art did not stir significant debates or polemics. Therefore, the final scheme of the Constitution on the Liturgy was voted on November 22, 1963: from a total of 2178 voters, 2158 voted for the scheme and 19 against, with one invalid vote. On December 4, 1963, when the fourth centenary of the completion of the Council of Trent's works was celebrated, the Second Vatican Council solemnly approved the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution. The Secretary General read the beginning and end of the various chapters and the passed onto the last vote: in favor, 2,147; not in favor, 4. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was thus in effect promulgated unanimously.

The final version of the Constitution contains seven chapters and an appendix. However, the first chapter is the foundation of the whole constitution and occupies almost a third of the document. Here is the internal structure of the liturgical Constitution: Chapter I: General principles for the restoration and promotion of the Sacred Liturgy; Chapter II: The most sacred mystery of the Eucharist; Chapter III: The other sacraments and sacramentals; Chapter IV: The Divine Office; Chapter V: The Liturgical Year; Chapter VI: Sacred music; Chapter VII: Sacred art and sacred furnishings; Appendix: A declaration of the second ecumenical council of the Vatican on revision of the calendar.

The approval of the document started off the liturgical reform, which had two important updating phases: 1) the reforming and publication of the new liturgical books in Latin; 2) their translation into the vernacular by the Episcopal conferences. The second phase of the liturgical reform is not limited only to a translation activity of the local churches, but is a prerequisite for a long process and liturgical training effort of the clergy and the faithful for a full, conscious and active participation in the celebration of the holy mystery.

1.2. The theological background of the Constitution and of the principle of active participation

There are two theological pillars that sustain the structure of the conciliar document: the liturgy is considered closely related to the mystery of Christ, more precisely to the paschal mystery, and to the mystery of the Church, God's people⁸. The particular attention paid to the paschal mystery wants to emphasize that the liturgy is not a simple conduction of ceremonies, but the sacramental celebration of the work of our redemption that Christ "achieved principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension" (SC 5). The

⁸ Cf. M. AUGÉ, *Liturgia*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1992, 57-58.

work of our redemption is not an object or a simple concept, but a person: Jesus Christ. Our salvation is Christ in all his human life, so that “humanity, united with the person of the Word, was the instrument of our salvation” (SC 5). And as far as the liturgy updates our redemption, it can only be the life of Christ himself (cf. SC 7). His gestures of salvation are today sacramental actions so that “when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes” (SC 7). His Word of salvation is today the sacramental word of the Scripture because it is “He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church” (SC 7). Thus, the first key issue for understanding the liturgy appears obvious: in the Christian faith, life in Christ is the only liturgy pleasing to the Father, because “the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (John 4,23).

The second pillar is related to the mystery of the Church. The Liturgical Constitution states, “for it was from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” (SC 5). Through his Paschal Mystery, which leads his whole life to fulfilment, Christ gathers together “the children of God who were scattered abroad” (John 11:52) and thus gives life to the new people of God: the Church. The life of the Church itself is inextricably linked to Christ’s Paschal mystery and the liturgical actions that update this mystery. In this sense “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows” (SC 10).

But if the liturgy is in fact the life of the Son of God, and the Church’s life, his ecclesial body, is contained in it, then the liturgical actions become “the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit” (SC 14). As a conclusion, we can say that the rediscovery of the profoundly Christological and ecclesial nature of the liturgy determined the Council Fathers to emphasize the requirement for the fully conscious and active participation of the faithful in the celebration of the mystery of their salvation.

2. The principle of active participation

The participation of the faithful in the liturgical services of the Church is one of the fundamental principles of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution and of the liturgical reform accomplished during post-conciliar times. The noun *participatio* is mentioned sixteen times in the Constitution and appears in all those texts presenting the main principles of the liturgical reform: the introduction of the vernacular, the liturgical catechesis, the simplification of rites, the presence of the Holy Scripture in the

celebrations, adaptation to the culture and mentality of peoples, the editions of liturgical books.

In order to analyse the conciliar teaching about the active participation, we wish to let ourselves guided by four questions: why is active participation necessary or what is the foundation of this principle?; who is called to actively participate or who is the subject of this principle?; what is the object toward which liturgical participation is oriented?; how is active participation described by the conciliar text?

2.1. *Why is active participation necessary?*

Entering the theme of the participation of the faithful in liturgical actions, it should be noted that the liturgy is above all *opus Dei*. God's saving work, continued by the Church, is achieved particularly in the liturgy: "To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical services" (SC 7). This statement highlights the primacy of Christ and his action in the Church's liturgy, so that we could say that the first active participant, "the first protagonist of all liturgical actions is always the living Christ manifested *hic et nunc* in the Church"⁹. However, on the other hand, number 7 in the Constitution mentions "Christ indeed always associates the Church with Himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is His beloved Bride", and the last paragraph of the same number adds: "every liturgical celebration [...] is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church". We are thus reminded that the liturgy is a divine-human synergy, that it is not only the action of God, but also the action of the Church. We cannot mention here the etymology of the word liturgy that contains both a collective dimension (*laos*, people) and an involvement into action (*ergon*, action, work).

The Second Vatican Council states, therefore, that active participation in liturgical services is founded on the very nature of the liturgy. Number 14 in the Constitution is a kind of charter of liturgical participation:

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;

⁹ M. AUGÉ, „A cincuenta años de Sacrosanctum Concilium con una mirada al futuro de la reforma litúrgica”, *Phase* 320 (2014) 164.

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

We cannot fail to notice, first of all, the use of a verb in the passive form to talk about active participation “to be led to that participation”. The nature of the liturgy requires the active participation of all the faithful, but in many cases they are not aware that this falls within their rights and duties as Christians. Therefore, they should be guided through a continuous pastoral work of liturgical training to that active participation by means of which they actually live their baptism. If everyone’s participation to the liturgical actions derives from the very nature of the liturgy, this means that it cannot be understood as a pastoral choice or option. On the contrary, between participation and liturgy a link of intrinsic necessity is established: without participation there is no authentic liturgical action.

Secondly, the Council indicates active participation as the way to fully effective liturgical actions. The effectiveness of a celebration is achieved when the saving grace reaches its full effectiveness in the life of believers.

But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain (SC 11).

In fact, the validity and liceity of a celebration tend towards this very same effectiveness. In this regard, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* shows that

pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects (SC 11).

The effect of the sanctification of man and glorification of God depends on the intimate nature of the liturgy itself and requires active participation of the faithful in the celebrations.

2.2. *Who is called to participate actively?*

Number 14 already provides an answer to this question when it speaks of participation as a right of all “Christian people”, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1Pet 2,9)”. Therefore, active participation does not only concern the altar servants, or those who have a particular liturgical role, but the whole liturgical assembly with all its members by virtue of their baptismal priesthood. Continuing the idea of the Second Vatican Council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states

under number 1140, where it speaks of the celebrants of the sacramental liturgy: “It is the whole *community*, the Body of Christ united with its Head, that celebrates”¹⁰. The Council Fathers were convinced that the active participation of the entire community in the liturgy becomes a genuine epiphany of the mystery of the Church:

the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God’s holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer [...] at which there presides the bishop surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers (SC 41).

The principle of active participation of the entire liturgical gathering led to a very practical intervention in the rituals containing the carrying out of the Church celebrations: “The revision of the liturgical books must carefully attend to the provision of rubrics also for the people’s parts” (SC 31). In fact, until then the columns of liturgical books took account only of the sacred ministers’ actions and mentioned nothing about the participation of other members of the liturgical assembly.

2.3. What is the object of active participation?

The answer to this question is given by two important numbers of the conciliar document. Firstly, number 21 presents a general reform established by the council

both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community (SC 21).

We are told that the ultimate object of the believers’ participation is “the sacred realities” (*sancta*) and that for them to happen a full, active and community celebration is needed. We come to an important element here that will be better expressed at number 48, one of the most important paragraphs of the Constitution on the Liturgy¹¹:

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ’s faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God’s word and be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body; they should give thanks to God;

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ARCB, Bucharest 1993, 256.

¹¹ Cf. E. MAZZA, „La partecipazione attiva alla liturgia. Dalla *Mediator Dei* alla *Sacrosanctum Concilium*”, *Ecclesia orans* 30 (2013) 327.

by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all (SC 48).

Thus, the Council shows the Church's wish for her sons to not be reduced to mere silent spectators or strangers. "Strangers or silent spectators" is certainly a quite harsh expression to define those believers passively looking at the altar where the sacred action takes place, like they watched a theatre play. The solution indicated by the Council Fathers in order to avoid such a situation is to give the faithful the possibility to better understand the "mystery of faith". The object of their understanding, and therefore of their participation, are therefore the rites not in their exteriority but in their objective content, which is the mystery of faith. The text presents us with two elements: on the one hand, it speaks about understanding the mystery of faith through rites and prayers (*per ritus et preces*) and, on the other hand, it affirms the need for the faithful to participate in the sacred action¹². However, the locution "sacred action" refers to the liturgical celebration as it contains and manifests the mystery of faith. It has the same meaning as "sacred realities" (*sancta*) at no. 21. Therefore, the participation desired by the Second Vatican Council has as ultimate object not a total of ritual elements that make up a celebration, but the mystery of faith through rituals and prayers. Through the liturgy, its rites and prayers, the faithful participate in the mystery of faith: "We proclaim your death, oh Lord, and profess your resurrection until you come again". In conclusion, it is more accurate to speak of active participation in the mystery of faith through the liturgical celebration than of a pure and simple participation in the Church's liturgical actions.

2.4. How does the conciliar text describe participation in the mystery of faith through the Church's celebration?

We will try to answer this question by developing the characteristics that the conciliar text has assigned to the notion of participation (active, conscious, both internal and external, and full) and then listing the specific ways to update this principle.

"Active". The first characteristic is the one indicated by the title of the second section of the first chapter of the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Constitution, "active participation" (*actuosa participatio*). The constitution text mentions this thirteen times (at numbers 11, 14, 19, 27, 30, 41, 48, 50, 79,

¹² Cf. E. MAZZA, „La partecipazione attiva alla liturgia. Dalla *Mediator Dei* alla *Sacrosanctum Concilium*”, 330.

113, 114, 121 and 124). It refers to everything that is accomplished during the celebration, both related to the mystery of faith, the sacred realities and to the rites and prayers. Since they are united with Christ in the Church, all the people participating in the liturgical action have a mission to accomplish (they are not spectators, but actors). The liturgist A.M. Triacca explains the concept of active participation as follows: believers must “become present to the intervention of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit in the best way possible and work with it”¹³. The Benedictine liturgist, B. Capelle, also shared the same vision during the interwar period, when he defined active participation as “a presence supported by an intention”¹⁴. For Capelle, liturgical action is inseparable from the intention associated to it, and this intention can be expressed by the presence category, or, better said, by the “placing, positioning in the presence”. Placing the presence before the action, the definition of “presence supported by an intention” wants to eliminate the potential risk of activism. At the same time, understanding active participation through the category of the “placing in the presence” linked to the notion of intention, means taking into account the essence of Christian worship expressed in John’s Gospel: “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (*John* 4,24). The notion of “presence” represents far much more than physically being in a place and doing a particular thing. It suggests a personal commitment in order to live an important moment. And it is the notion of “intention” which supports in fact this personal commitment, involving the process of “understanding” as well as the purpose of such understanding¹⁵.

The principle of active participation does not allow anyone of those present at the service to close itself in a purely passive attitude, as if no collaboration was needed in order to receive the divine grace. On the other hand, understanding participation as “a presence supported by an intention”, one does not deviate into liturgical activism in the name of which all participants should also carry out a specific external action. Liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it; but they concern the individual members of the Church “in different ways, according to their differing rank, office, and actual participation” (*SC* 26).

¹³ A.M. TRIACCA, „Partecipazione”, in *Nuovo Dizionario di Liturgia*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1998, 1028.

¹⁴ B. CAPELLE, „Que faut-il entendre par participation active?”, in *La participation active des fidèles au culte*, Cours et conférences des Semaines liturgiques, Louvain, Abbaye du Mont-César, 1933, 8.

¹⁵ Cf. P. PRÉTOT, „Retrouver la participation active: une tâche pour aujourd’hui”, *La Maison-Dieu* 241 (2005) 157-158.

Regarding lay people, the Council recommends promoting their active participation; the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes (cf. *SC* 30).

“Conscious”. This characteristic is mentioned four times in the *Sacro-sanctum Concilium* Constitution (at numbers 11, 14, 48, 79) and is always related to the active participation. Believers must be conscious of their mission in the liturgical assembly, which is also manifesting their sacramental identity. Their conscious participation therefore requires conscious assimilation of the content of rites and prayers in order for them to know what is accomplished by the given celebration, why it is celebrated, for what purpose and how it is celebrated. But the conscious participation does not want to be confined to a rational type of knowledge only, or a school-type one. The liturgical experience enables the participant to acquire a knowledge involving his being with all its sensory, affective, emotional, artistic and intellectual capabilities. This way, from the knowledge offered in different ways by the rites and prayers of the celebration itself, one can move to the knowledge of God’s salvation as updated by liturgical actions.

“Both internal and external”. True participation should include the entire human being with all its dimensions (cf. *SC* 19). An authentic experience of the mystery celebrated requires the full participation of the faithful, avoiding the artificial separation between what is internal and what is external. A pure internal participation would lead to a detachment from the authentic spirit of the history of salvation and of the sacraments instituted by Christ, where grace is communicated through gestures and words, through physical elements and concrete actions. On the other side, a participation focused only on what is external would deviate into a ritual formalism, or into a form of liturgical activism, according to which the one who truly participates is the one who does several things¹⁶.

In this respect it is very important to discover and build a climate of faith in which to integrate the liturgical celebration through which God sanctifies us and we worship Him in the Church. Watching over the spiritual climate of the celebration means creating that interior space that favours the receipt of God’s gifts and our growth observing the theological and moral virtues. The fundamental principle for this integration was formulated by Saint Benedict and assimilated by the Council at number 90, when talking about the Divine Office: “therefore priests and all others who take

¹⁶ Cf. J. M. SIERRA LÓPEZ, „A los 50 años de la *Sacro-sanctum Concilium*. Dimensión pastoral de la liturgia renovada”, *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 128 (2014) 9-10.

part in the divine office are earnestly exhorted in the Lord to attune their minds to their voices when praying it” (*mens concordet voci*).

Number 30 of the conciliar constitution describes the specific ways of expressing active participation externally:

To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.

The purpose of this is to involve all people of God in the liturgical services through well-defined actions. But to indicate that this does not refer to a purely external activity, the text mentions the sacred silence in the end. And this is an element of active participation as it also expresses a presence supported by intention and leads to the contemplation of the mystery celebrated.

Active participation does not establish any kind of counterbalance or dichotomy between internal and external participation. Ritual action, as a whole, is therefore the meeting place with the mystery of faith. Such an understanding of active participation gives value to all the elements of rite, including those that do not seem related to the substance, but only to the accidents. But accidents are not accidental within the liturgy, which means that they do not occur accidentally, but have the role of the manifestation of the mystery celebrated. In this sense one cannot talk about active participation when the celebration is reduced to the minimum, to its essential skeleton. In fact, the liturgical action does not listen to “the logics of the required minimum, but to that of the maximum free”¹⁷.

“Fully”. This characteristic appears at number 14 in the Constitution and wants to emphasize the previous characteristic, internal and external. Full participation, meaning of the whole person enables the whole being of each participant to be involved in the liturgical action, thus obtaining its effects: the sanctification of one’s person and the glorification of God. Thus the spirit and power of the liturgy cover the person’s entire reality and, at the same time, orient it towards the concrete attitudes of life that spring from the gift received. Number 50 of the constitution presents a kind of version of the full participation in the superlative form: “That more perfect form of participation in the Mass whereby the faithful, after the priest’s communion, receive the Lord’s body from the same sacrifice, is strongly commended”. The highest level of full participation in the Holy

¹⁷ A. GRILLO, „A partire da Sacrosanctum Concilium”, in *La riforma della Liturgia. Introduzione a Sacrosanctum Concilium*, ed. A. GRILLO – M. RONCONI, 84.

Mass is therefore the communion with the Body of Christ, which communicates the mystery of our faith in the most profound and sublime way.

A fully conscious, internal and external active participation in the rites and prayers of the Church becomes thus a participation in the mystery of faith and its effect: the salvation and its concrete living in the Church through the gift of self and communion with our brothers. Effective participation indicates a quality by which all others acquire the fullness of their significance. In fact a celebration that would not be effective, would be virtually insignificant.

The Constitution also indicates some of the ways for reaching such participation. The first and most important way is undoubtedly the liturgical formation (SC 14-19). If we want for the liturgy to be understood and lived, the formation of shepherds is needed first of all and, through them, that of the entire people of God. Then, the following are mentioned: mystagogical catechesis (SC 35,3), the sermon (SC 35,2; 52), and acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes (SC 30).

3. Conclusion: active participation – a timeless right/ duty.

In his book titled “Introduction to the spirit of the liturgy”, cardinal J. Ratzinger noted that “the term *participatio actuosa* was understood fast enough in the external and superficial sense of a necessary activity, generalized, as if it was needed for an increasingly larger number of people, and as often as possible, to be visibly active”¹⁸. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI stresses, however, that the intention of the conciliar text when speaking about active participation is to penetrate the mystery of faith and not simply a way to celebrate the liturgical act.

We must recognize that there still is the risk of an understanding of the active participation that forgets the internal dimension of participation. Too often we associate the idea of active participation with the need to “give something to do” to as many people as possible in the rite. But the integral subject of active participation is the liturgical assembly as such, and the contribution to the rite conducting of one or another of its members is always secondary. This personal contribution is otherwise always limited, since it is subject to an action that always surpasses and envelops him, even though he does nothing else than to be present and supported by personal intention. However, taking a step further, can we not say that the major difficulty nowadays is precisely that of becoming present in the cel-

¹⁸ J. RATZINGER, *Introduzione allo spirito della liturgia*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, 167.

eboration of the sacraments? In our frenetic world, does active participation not become increasingly more difficult, being simply reduced to living in the liturgical space and time trying to make ourselves present to the liturgical action of Christ? The role of liturgical formation is, therefore, to help Christians live the liturgical action as such, remain in it, take ownership of it, tasting its gestures, words and moments of silence.

A second risk would be that of understanding active participation as a kind of roles distribution in the liturgy. This can lead to the practice of conferring a ministry or liturgical role to someone as he represents a certain category of persons. Thus, we no longer intervene in order to participate in the work of God, but to signify the existence of a group of persons or activities within a community. The ideal would become then for each member of the assembly to somehow feel represented, made visible during the celebration. In a world in which one must be seen either on TV or on the Internet in order to exist, it is essential not to let liturgy become the stage for an exaggerated self-assertion. Thus, we risk losing sight of the fact that the sole protagonist whom we must let become visible in the liturgy is Christ, our Lord, and His salvation.

Active participation in the mystery of faith with all its characteristics and ways to be updated creates therefore a horizon of liturgical living of faith. Speaking of life and living, the liturgical participation is not intended to be a principle to be applied only at the regulatory level, or through recipes ready to be used. Liturgical norms are only the first step, a prerequisite to move forward towards this horizon involving the acquisition of the art of celebrating. Active participation corresponds in fact to a spirit, which is the spirit and power of the liturgy. And the spirit of the liturgy leads to a lifestyle that demonstrates the grateful memory of the salvation received, the offering of the self as an offering of praise in the present of the history, as well as the personal and community aspiration for the “blessed hope” of the Lord’s coming in glory.