

The Liturgy as Communal Prayer

Many of us who remember the Mass prior to the Second Vatican Council remember it fondly. We came to Mass, not only out of sense of obligation, but because it was the time each week that was set aside for “God and me.”

While we came to the Church in large numbers, we came and left as individuals. We did not speak or interact with one another during the liturgy. Each one was left to his/her own prayer. Some prayed the rosary or other special devotional prayers. Some read from religious books. Some tried to follow the Mass which was being said in Latin, by following along in a “people’s missal.” Some prayed silently from their heart. The Mass celebrated prior to Vatican II was one that Catholics attended, but one in which they seldom prayed together.

This was not the Eucharistic liturgy of the early church. From liturgical and scriptural scholarship of the early 20th century, we learn that the early church celebrated the liturgy as a community, as a people of God, devoted to God and one another in the Lord Jesus Christ. They fully, consciously, and actively participated in the sacrifice of the Mass as the right and duty of their baptism into Christ.

Over the centuries for a number of reasons, the Mass became less and less the celebration of all God’s people under the leadership of the bishop or priest. The Mass instead became the prayer of the clergy. Since its language continued to be in Latin far after Latin ceased to be the tongue of the people, Mass became more and more

unintelligible to the average person. It is no wonder that people developed their own prayers and devotions at Mass since their participation was no longer needed or desired.

Aware of these historical shifts, the Council Fathers wished to restore parts of the liturgy as it had been celebrated in the early church. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. “And so the church devotes careful efforts to prevent Christian believers from attending this mystery of faith as though they were outsiders or silent onlookers: rather, having a good understanding of this mystery, though the ritual and the prayers, they should share in the worshipping event, aware of what is happening and devoutly involved” (CSL #48).

So when we come to Mass, whether on Sunday or weekdays, the Church calls us to actively participate as a community of baptized believers. This active participation takes many forms – common song and silence, common gestures and postures, common listening and responding. Above all, the Church calls us to “pay attention” to what God is doing within us and among us as we celebrate the sacred liturgy.

In fact, the Council Fathers remind us that participation is never successful unless it is prepared for “with the disposition of a suitable heart and mind. What [worshippers] think and feel must be at one with what they say; they must do their part in the working of grace that comes from above if they are not to have received it in vain” (CSL, #11).