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PARTICIPATION IN THE SINGING AT MASS

This month we start a series of letters dedicated to the relationship between liturgical music and the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite. Maestro Aurelio Porfiri, editor of this series, has long experience in liturgical music at many levels and in many cultural contexts (including at St. Peter's Basilica and then in Asia for the last seven years). This collection of articles will cover liturgical music in its foundations, valid for every rite and liturgical form, as well as in the "new" liturgical sphere created by Benedict XVI's *Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum*.

We are pleased and honored that Maestro Porfiri has chosen *Paix Liturgique* as one of the outlets for his work, which we believe should offer a chance not only for experts to exchange ideas, but also for the faithful to consider their personal relationship with liturgical music and its significance in participation in the sacred act of the liturgy.

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Participation in the Singing at Mass

Aurelio Porfiri

There have been few topics which have so captured the attention of liturgical experts like that of participation. This term has been impugned by one after another faction as if each one possessed its secret meaning, discovered by and revealed to only a chosen few, who thus turned even legitimate debates on the issue into Gnostic liturgists' meetings. Gnostic because, especially after the Council, participation has become a battle issue in which lurks every sort of political, sociological, and psychological element.

For some, "participate" means that everyone does everything. However, this interpretation goes against the true meaning of participation which lies not in the mode of doing but in that of being. This mode does not exclude doing, but rather contains it in a broader, more articulated process. Doing presupposes being and all that goes along with it, but it is not an end in itself. Now this must be better clarified.

Two Symmetrical Errors

Sacrosanctum Concilium defines liturgy as "sacred action." Such a definition would make one think that the element of doing is more important than that of being, but it must be read in its entirety, insofar as the "sacred" qualifies the action so that the doing of the action unites itself to the being of the sacred element. Just as in a cross, the element of being is already at our origin, already united to Calvary, while that of doing comes to us along the "via dolorosa" of our life. Therefore, even though *actio*, this is ordered to the sacred, which gives meaning to the action, making it flee from a purely vitalistic sort of motion. Singing for the sake of singing does not make sense. It does not make sense to tell the congregation to sing if this song (the doing) is not united in the only real presence (we say with Divo Barsotti) which founds the category of being. St. Augustine has taught us that *in interiore homine habitat veritas* ("truth dwells in the inner man").

Unfortunately, while the abovementioned error was made by some of the reformers after the Council, some of those who felt attached to what later would be called the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite have often had an equally inappropriate reaction, on the opposite extreme. For them it was a sign of fidelity to "tradition" to simply and passively attend Mass without worrying about singing in this or that part of the celebration, but only enjoying what the choir or organist was able to offer. Now, it seems that both these attitudes hide a basic impropriety, and that recovering a more authentic sense of participation will also clarify important facts about the Mass itself, which otherwise risk being pushed to the background, picked apart by "liturgical wars" that, in the end, lead to no victory.

Participation as Convocation

To participate, as the word itself says (*pars + capere*), means "to take part". Now, several important consequences come from the way in which we read this

word. Unfortunately, in recent times much emphasis has been placed on “the one who takes part,” rather than “take part in what.” This slipping of the subject has also caused a slipping in value, as if the guests invited to a birthday celebration were more important than the one being celebrated. Actually, as we all know, the one being celebrated is certainly more important, and all the efforts of the guests at the “celebration” (another term widely used and abused in recent decades) are directed to the one celebrated. Otherwise, one runs the risk of what the Servite liturgist Silvano Maggiani calls “participationism”—the insistence on making everyone do everything—with the consequent loss of the center of the *actio liturgica*, which is not “the one who participates,” but rather that in which one participates. In the liturgy, it is not we who act, but we who are acted upon. I think this thought is well expressed by the monk Pierre Miquel (1920-2003), abbot of the Benedictine abbey of St. Martin of Ligugé: “For a long time people have thought of liturgy above all, if not exclusively, as an expression of religious sentiment. Today we are discovering that the liturgy, before being an ‘expression,’ that is, the sum of the emotions of a human group, it is an ‘impression,’ that is a welcoming of a Word that convokes the liturgical assembly, that gathers it together with a unifying force and sends it out to disseminate that which it has received during the celebration.” (Miquel, 1981).

The perspective introduced in the Fr. Miquel’s interesting text and brought out again in many writings of Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is that of the liturgy as a gift to which we are called to participate. This pope said it well in a speech to the bishops of Switzerland on November 7, 2006: “I believe that subsequent to all this it will slowly become clear that the Liturgy is not a ‘self-manifestation’ of the community through which, as people say, it makes its entrance onto the scene; rather, it is the exit of the community from merely ‘being-its-self,’ its access to the great banquet of the poor and its entry into the vast living community in which God himself nourishes us. This universal character of the Liturgy must once again penetrate the awareness of one and all. In the Eucharist we receive something that we cannot do, but instead enter something greater that becomes our own, precisely when we give ourselves to this thing that is greater, truly seeking to celebrate the Liturgy as the Church’s Liturgy.” But this participation, I repeat, is necessarily hierarchical and ordered to the principal subject of the celebration, that *per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso* which the celebrant proclaims in every Mass. This is active in the sense that it is a voluntary response of the people of God to the convocation to the celebration, and not active in the sense of activism.

Music is Art, Art is Elite

The slogan of Cecilian memory “Let the people sing” is bandied about without remembering that this meant “Let the people sing what pertains to them,” not that this could take the upper hand over all professionalism deemed necessary to make the liturgy resplendent with that beauty that recalled the Beauty of God. This is also what is sought by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which established in number 28: “In liturgical celebrations each person, minister or layman, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy.”

This obvious impropriety is followed, or perhaps preceded, by the one concerning the concept of art and music in liturgy. One fears to declare an evident fact: art, including liturgical art, is elite. Now, we must certainly understand each other regarding this elitism. It does not mean that it is exclusive, like Gnostic knowledge reserved only to a few. No, that is not the case. However, it is elite in that, for its creation and production, it requires a preparation and technical study reserved to those who choose to dedicate themselves to music, painting, sculpture with serious commitment and study.

The idea that art must come from below does not work. Art is not from the people, but for the people. If we accept that art must come from below, we expose ourselves to productions which are not really of the people, but which the people create “impressed” by cultural fads. These cultural fashions are often in open contrast with the Christian message to which the people cannot react, not having the artistic, cultural, and esthetic tools to discern. If I have certain symptoms, I can guess what illness I have, based on some experience; but for a certain diagnosis, I must trust a physician who has a broader vision of the behavior of particular symptoms. The educated musician knows how to shield himself from commercial drifts (or at least ought to know; here I am generalizing) and knows how to protect that sacred element in the music which is apt to raise the spirit to celestial things. The people, left to their own devices without the help of those who have the technical and artistic means to work within the liturgy, cannot but fall back on the elementary, lowering and not raising the level of the liturgy and exposing themselves to a sort of short circuit celebratory action. In this case, what finally happens, as said by Benedict XVI above, is that the Mass is self-celebrated and becomes a self-manifestation of the community in a horizontal sense, without considering the fact that the celebration is directed to God and not to our own, even necessary, self-expression.

Already Romano Guardini observed that “the liturgy is not celebrated by the individual, but by the body of the faithful... The entity which performs the liturgical actions is not merely the sum total of all individual Catholics. It does consist of all these united in one body, but only in so far as this unity is of itself something, apart from the millions which compose it. And that something is the Church” (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 1937, pp. 37-38). One must be careful not to have too horizontal a concept of participation in order to avoid the dangers mentioned earlier. Remember that the horizontal only makes sense when joined to the vertical. I like to cite here a very apt provocation by Robert Poulet, who says: “One of the greatest crimes committed against the people was to abandon them to their own taste, which is detestable. It is true that bourgeois taste is worthless. Beauty, when it reigned, was an object of hard discipline, imposed by a minority on the majority, and this majority, once master of its own pleasures and preferences, freed itself from it with relief” (Poulet, 1969).

It is not the people’s fault their taste is detestable, but because it is often at the mercy of fashions, and of economic and commercial potentates who have all the means to direct it, exploiting the people’s lowest and most immediate sentimentalisms. So, what can one say about popular hymns? Popular hymns, often a noble

expression of the best of really popular sensibility, in the past were always held in consideration in the liturgy, reserving it to appropriate places and carefully distinguishing them from liturgical chant, which is a different thing. Therefore, having understood what we participate in, we must look at what we participate with.

Full Participation

How should we understand participation then? Must we consider it so important to participate in the singing? This issue requires careful and precise attention.

As just noted, participation in singing is certainly important, but first we must understand what we mean by “participate,” keeping a balanced position between various contending factions. It is easy to see that the “participationism” mentioned above was fed by a completely mistaken idea of participation, in which everyone must do everything insofar as participate means “to do something.” Participation as “physical act” offers a pointless view of this concept, as the good Romano Amerio would say. If we were to accept this, we would have to agree that whoever goes to a concert does not participate as he does not directly play an instrument or sing, that when we watch a movie we do not participate as we are not the ones reciting the lines, etc. This is because participation certainly involves the interior of those who participate, which is not difficult to understand. But there is an error on the opposite extreme. This error is committed by those who enclose the entirety of participation in an exclusively interior act that is understandable for those going to a concert or a movie (where it is clearly understood that the spectator participates in the performance of the musicians or actors), but is less understandable and desirable in an act of the whole Mystical Body, like the Mass.

We are not spectators who voluntarily decide to assist and “participate” in the manner appropriate to this or that sort of show. At Mass we are called, I would say that we are convoked as members of the Mystical Body that is the Church. Our participation here is full, and requires interior assent and the act of participation of the whole man (interior-exterior). No one can doubt that interior participation precedes exterior participation: “To those who insisted on more ‘participation’ in the Mass, Evelyn Waugh answered: “Participation” in the Mass does not mean hearing your own voice. It means God hearing our own voices. Only He knows who is “participating” in the Mass” (Thomas E. Woods, *Sacred Then and Sacred now. The return of the Old Latin Mass*, 2008, p. 77). However, this precedence is temporal, rather than qualitative, as both are important for correct participation at the liturgy.

Participation According to the Twentieth Century Popes

Having said this, and using good common sense, in line with what the popes have asked, we must agree that even exterior participation must be cultivated. Regarding the exterior act, this means answering the priest, but also participating in certain parts of the singing. This requirement is not simply a result of the liturgical reform following Vatican II, but was also solemnly requested by the pre-Conciliar popes. The call to actively drink from the fount of the liturgy came already from St. Pius X, who affirmed the following in his *Motu Proprio* on sacred music on November 22, 1903: “Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, 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”.

Pius XI is even more explicit on this point in his *Divini Cultus Sanctitatem* of December 20, 1928, where he solemnly affirmed: “In order that the faithful may more actively participate in divine worship, let them be made once more to sing the Gregorian Chant, so far as it belongs to them to take part in it. It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies, or when pious sodalities take part with the clergy in a procession, they should not be merely detached and silent spectators, but, filled with a deep sense of the beauty of the Liturgy, they should sing alternately with the clergy or the choir, as it is prescribed. If this is done, then it will no longer happen that the people either make no answer at all to the public prayers -- whether in the language of the Liturgy or in the vernacular -- or at best utter the responses in a low and subdued manner.” (IX). The ways in which this participation is strongly requested by the popes shall be delineated better in following documents, like those from Pius XII.

In *Mediator Dei* (1947), Pius XII tells us, and this bears re-reading, that worship demands this internal and external dimension, while giving greater importance to the interior dimension: “It is exterior because the nature of man as a composite of body and soul requires it to be so. Likewise, because divine Providence has disposed that ‘while we recognize God visibly, we may be drawn by Him to love of things unseen.’ [Roman Missal, Preface for Christmas]. Every impulse of the human heart, besides, expresses itself naturally through the senses; and the worship of God, being the concern not merely of individuals but of the whole community of mankind, must therefore be social as well. This obviously it cannot be unless religious activity is also organized and manifested outwardly. Exterior worship, finally, reveals and emphasizes the unity of the mystical Body, feeds new fuel to its holy zeal, fortifies its energy, intensifies its action day by day” (23). This external element was treated and encouraged by the liturgical movement for the whole 20th century, even before the liturgical reform of Vatican II.

Let us not forget that Pius XII again, in his *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* of December 25, 1955, encouraged the use of even popular hymns in the liturgy if this could aid in the participation of the faithful, though always distinguishing liturgical from popular singing: “As We have said before, besides those things that are intimately associated with the Church’s sacred liturgy, there are also popular religious hymns which derive their origin from the liturgical chant itself. Most of

these are written in the language of the people. Since these are closely related to the mentality and temperament of individual national groups, they differ considerably among themselves according to the character of different races and localities. If hymns of this sort are to bring spiritual fruit and advantage to the Christian people, they must be in full conformity with the doctrine of the Catholic faith. They must also express and explain that doctrine accurately. Likewise they must use plain language and simple melody and must be free from violent and vain excess of words. Despite the fact that they are short and easy, they should manifest a religious dignity and seriousness. When they are fashioned in this way these sacred canticles, born as they are from the most profound depths of the people's soul, deeply move the emotions and spirit and stir up pious sentiments. When they are sung at religious rites by a great crowd of people singing as with one voice, they are powerful in raising the minds of the faithful to higher things. As we have written above, such hymns cannot be used in Solemn High Masses without the express permission of the Holy See. Nevertheless at Masses that are not sung solemnly these hymns can be a powerful aid in keeping the faithful from attending the Holy Sacrifice like dumb and idle spectators. They can help to make the faithful accompany the sacred services both mentally and vocally and to join their own piety to the prayers of the priest. This happens when these hymns are properly adapted to the individual parts of the Mass, as We rejoice to know is being done in many parts of the Catholic world" (63-64).

External participation, including that in the singing, is certainly not a post-conciliar emblem, even though it is often used in an inappropriate and subversive manner as such. Now, it cannot be denied that there are authors who decry the differences in the concept of participation between the pre-conciliar and post-conciliar documents (Grillo, *Beyond Pius V. Conflicting Interpretations of the Liturgical Reform*, 2013), but I believe that, even if these are admissible differences, they do not invalidate the main point of this statement: the concept of participation, even in singing, was solemnly encouraged even by the pre-conciliar popes.

Proposals for Greater Musical Participation in the Extraordinary Form

Now, how is it possible to participate in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite? Even here there are ways and there is a rule valid for both the Ordinary and Extraordinary forms: participation is to be cultivated, taught, and encouraged. The people, especially in those countries with less tradition of congregational singing, do not automatically sing. Serious liturgical formation is necessary for everyone, and is in fact demanded by all the pontifical documents of the last hundred years. Many think that making the people sing could put the great traditional repertoire in danger, but this is a false dilemma. There is so much space for singing in the celebration that there is plenty of room for choral polyphony or Gregorian chant and for congregational singing.

One of the least-developed resources among those attached to the Extraordinary Form is, unfortunately, precisely that of encouraging new creativity at the service of the old Mass. Sometimes one gets the impression that many, well-intentioned groups wish simply to water the seedling, seeing that it not die, but that it always remain exactly the same. Actually the objective ought to be for this seedling to be able to bear new blossoms, including new musical blooms. It is possible to absorb the assembly's singing into the choir's polyphony, alternating or singing together. It belongs to the composers' genius to make these new forms spring organically from the traditional musical wisdom.

I could give many examples, but I think that using traditional forms to allow new creations to spring forth is something that has always been in line with the way in which the Church has conceived liturgical art. Let us consider, for example, the Ordinarium Missae. I repeat that to do this in no way opposes the traditional repertoire which can and ought always to have its place in the celebration, but which should also be fruitful in bearing forth new experiences, as has always happened throughout the entire liturgical history of the Church. There are many different Masses with Gregorian chant, composed both before and after the Council. Some of these are of excellent craftsmanship and of the highest artistic level. The idea of alternating between choir and assembly could be one way of saving the demands of polyphony and absorb the people's singing. It would require much discussion on how to conceive this alternation while yet safeguarding the exigencies of the text. Even recent attempts have been made, and some of these are of excellent quality.

Many of the Masses *in alternatim* make use of the *Missa de Angelis*, insofar as it is the most widely known. However, one could use the other Ordinaries to compose new works, showing other treasures of the repertoire, and one could also compose completely new Masses (which do not start from pre-existing melodies) which would provide for singing on the part of the assembly alongside choral polyphony and the playing of musical instruments, especially the organ. This was done even before the Council and can now be accomplished with more resources and awareness.

All that remains is to entrust ourselves to this *actio sacra* and allow ourselves be led by the ever ancient and ever new wisdom of the millennia.

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