

Active Participation in Liturgy, An Unfinished Agenda of Vatican II: A Historical Survey

Dr S. Joseph Lionel

At the Second Vatican Council the phrase *Active Participation* became so popular that the media wanted to know the meaning of it. The media persons asked Cardinal Ottaviani, one of the conservative cardinals of that time to explain the meaning of the phrase. He said sarcastically, "Active participation means participation of the laity in the confusion of the clergy." He said that in the background of uncontrolled explosion of liturgical innovations and abuses by priests during and after the Council and that bewildered the laity. However, the concept of 'active participation' in liturgy deserves more profound reflection than this sarcastic comment. As theologians we would like to reflect deeper on this most important phrase from Vatican II. Hence, I would like to write a series of articles on this topic in three parts: 1) the Historical context in which the phrase emerged, 2) the Council and the phrase, and 3) Contemporary reflections on accomplishing this unfinished agenda of the Council. To begin this venture, I shall briefly sketch in this article the context prior to the Council in which the phrase 'active participation' emerged. After this short presentation on the historical

context in the first part of my series of articles on 'active participation' I shall write about the Council and contemporary theological reflection on promoting 'active participation' in the liturgy.

1. The Historical Context

Vatican II's insight on 'Active participation' cannot be fully understood if we disassociate ourselves from the post-Tridentine context. The Council of Trent deserves appreciation for its contribution during those troublesome years. When the opposition by the protestant reformers was mounting against the traditional doctrines of the Church, the Council defended those doctrines of the Church enshrined in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. Although the Council of Trent defended the orthodoxy of the teachings on sacraments, in practice on the account of the rigidity the post-Tridentine situation led to stagnation or liturgical immobility to some extent. It only led to strict observation of the rituals, often without knowing the meaning of gestures and prayers during the liturgy. Consequently, for many, it seemed empty. It was in this context that the liturgical movement was initiated towards the end of the nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth century before Vatican II. Its aim was liturgical renewal by proper understanding of the unity of the content and the ritual of liturgy. In other words, the longing for reform that surfaced in a humble way in the previous centuries reached its maturity during the twentieth century. A strong theological and pastoral motif that emerged during this period assisted the liturgical reform to take proper shape at Vatican II. The twentieth century was marked with so many significant events in the world such as for example, the two world wars; great scientific inventions in mass media and

sociological changes of freedom from colonization, and liberation from racial and gender discriminations.

1.1. The Twentieth Century Liturgical Movement

The nineteenth century witnessed a new movement, which, in the providence of God was to make a very strong impact on the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church in the subsequent years. That was the liturgical movement, which began, in the early years of the 19th century. That work was completed at the Vatican II with the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Council's constitution on Sacred Liturgy. It was the result of patient and painstaking labour of scholars and pastors who, perhaps, never knew that their efforts would have such far reaching consequences. We can distinguish three stages in this movement in the following three paragraphs: the monastic beginning, pastoral dimension, and papal authority.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed renewed attention to the Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and ancient liturgical texts due to the rejuvenation of monasticism. It paved way for liturgical movement. The Liturgical Movement was an effort to reunite rites and content, for its aim was to restore as fully as possible the expressiveness and sanctifying power of the liturgy and to bring the faithful back to full participation and understanding. The name Abbot Prosper Gueranger (1805-1870) is closely associated with the modern liturgical movement. He spread his love of the liturgy in the Benedictine monasteries he founded, while his publications disseminated the spirituality of the liturgy among more alert and receptive Christians. The revival of Benedictine monastic life in France, Belgium and Germany with the stress on the liturgical life

and spirituality gave a new vision of worship of the Church which was being celebrated in the splendour of the Baroque churches. The liturgy thus began to make its appearance in the modern world, not only as a means for glorifying God for fulfilling an obligation connected with the virtue of religion, but as a source of spiritual vitality for the Christians. The two historical works of Gueranger, namely *Institutions Liturgiques* and *Annee Liturgique* were meant to lead the Christian back to the original sources of Christian worship in order to find true significance and relevance of worship for life. Whatever be the defect of Gueranger from the point of view of scientific exactness or theological mentality, we have to admit that Gueranger was a true pioneer in the liturgical movement.

Gueranger's work was restricted to monasteries. It acquired its pastoral dimension with the Benedictine monk of Mont-Cesar, Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873-1960). The significant moment for the beginning of the liturgical movement was the speech by Beauduin at Catholic Lay Congress in Malines during September 1909. He made the following historical statement: *Il faudrait démocratiser la liturgie*, that is, 'the Liturgy must be democratized.' While Gueranger concentrated on the discovery of the past, Beauduin looked more towards the future. This insight received more scientific and theological approach from monks of the monastery of Maria-Laach in Germany. From this monastery, great figures like Abbot Ildefonsus Herwegen and Dom Odo Casel emerged to the forefront. Similarly, in Austria, the liturgical movement was led by Pius Parsch of Klosterneuberg (1884-1954).

The Liturgical movement that originated in the 19th century received its weight of papal authority only during the reign of Pius X through the motuproprio *Tra le sollicitudini* (22nd November 1903). His motuproprio viewed the active

participation of the faithful in the liturgy as “the foremost and indispensable fount” of “the true Christian spirit,” and therefore of interior renewal in the Church. This insight of Pius X was welcomed by Lambert Beauduin at the Benedictine Abbey of Mont-Cesar where he started the organized liturgical movement. This motuproprio restored Gregorian chant to its traditional place in the liturgy. The phrase *active participation* was used for the first time in this document, especially by encouraging the faithful to participate in singing. However, during this time vernacular singing was still forbidden. Consequently, there was a great obstacle to popular participation in the liturgy. In 1905, with the decree *Sacra Tridentina* he recommended daily communion and in 1910 the decree *Quam Singulari* permitted first Holy Communion to children who had reached the age of reason. All these give an understanding that his pontificate was more oriented towards active participation of the faithful in the liturgy. The initiative of Beauduin backed by the insight of Pius X was followed by the Benedictines of Maria Laach in Germany. The monks of Maria Laach went deeper into theological, biblical, and patristic aspects of liturgy, although they maintained pastoral effectiveness as the goal.¹

Between the two world wars the movement grew stronger and went beyond the circles of intellectuals and university students. In other words, what started as a monastic liturgical renewal spread to the parishes where faithful were longing to learn the deeper meaning of the liturgical celebrations. Liturgical associations, periodicals, weeks, and congresses multiplied everywhere at the diocesan, national, and international levels.² It was certainly a quest to come out of empty ritualism to make it meaningful celebration of the liturgy. It was not a smooth ride. The liturgical movement

faced tough resistance at the beginning as complaints of abuses made themselves heard in Rome. It was gradually overcome by liturgical study groups established by the German and French bishops' conferences. The 1940s witnessed more international study meetings where scholars came together to discuss the scholarly works and share the fruits of their experiences. It encouraged more studies and discussions and elicited debates of concrete aims of a possible reform. Finally, the Holy See gave the movement its support and favour, and then took it under its own direction. The initiatives taken by Pius X were moved a step ahead by Pius XII. The monastic and pastoral initiatives through the twentieth century liturgical movement received papal authority through two encyclicals of Pope Pius XII: *Mystici Corporis* (29th June 1943) and *Mediator Dei* (20th November 1947). The two documents contain the seeds of the theology of worship which was set forth clearly by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Liturgical Constitution of Vatican II. Many principles and norms given in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, have been either inspired by the liturgical pronouncements in the *magisterium* of Pope Pius XII or directly cited from the document. For example, prior to the Council, the Eucharistic fast was reduced to three hours and the celebration of the Mass in the evening was permitted.³ The encyclical letter on Sacred Music, *Musicae Sacrae disciplina* (23rd December 1955) and the Instruction on the Liturgy (3rd September 1958) brought the principle of active participation to a more concrete realization. The Pontificate of John XXIII was a period of immediate preparation for the great liturgical reform. The most important initiatives of John XXIII regarding sacramental celebrations were the publication of the new Code of Rubrics on 26th July 1960, and of the revival of the celebration of adult Baptism in stages in 1962.

Considering all these we come to understand that the liturgical movement was not the work of a few experts in liturgy and theology, but the entire Church in action. The Vatican II's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy is the flowering of these efforts which the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was making in order to give to the world a new effusion of the power of the Gospel through the re-enactment of the presence of the Risen Christ in its midst. It indeed brought forth tangible fruit within three years through the reform of the Easter liturgy in 1951. Through this initiative to start the reform, Pius XII himself brought to fulfilment what Pius X already thought about during the early years of the liturgical movement.

1.2. The Initiatives towards Deeper Understanding of Liturgy

Subsequent to the reform of Easter vigil, the Congregation of Rites sponsored a Pastoral-Liturgical Congress in Assisi in 1956 which was attended by large number of bishops from different parts of the world. In fact, the Assisi Congress was prepared by two more initiatives prior to the event; they are: 1) the working of 'Pian' commission (1948-1960) and 2) liturgical publications such as *Ephemerides Liturgicae*. In the Assisi Congress the idea of liturgical reform took mature expression. The theme of the congress was the pastoral nature of liturgy which gives the Sacred Liturgy a determining role in the Church's life and promoting encounter of souls with God. Cardinal Gaetano Cicogani, Prefect of the Congregation of Sacred Rites, presided over that historic assembly, and despite his various attempts to squelch the groundswell for greater liturgical participation and vernacular worship, congress delegates would not diminish their

enthusiasm for liturgical change. Every major speaker spoke in favour of the vernacular to thunderous applause by the participants and the disapproval of Cicognani. Two lectures at the congress received greater attention: 1) the lecture by Joseph Jungmann who spoke on the topic, "The Pastoral idea in the History of Liturgy"; and 2) lecture by Augustin Bea on the topic, "The Pastoral Value of the Word of God in the Sacred Liturgy." At that time nobody predicted that the decisions of the Liturgical Congress at Assisi, especially the ideas expressed in these two lectures would be fulfilled in the great ecclesial event of the century, namely the Second Vatican Council. Two subjects witnessed intense debate at the Congress: 1) the use of vernacular in the liturgy, and 2) reform of Divine Office. It is also interesting to recall that at the beginning of the congress, Cardinal Cicognani, Prefect of the Congregation of Rites addressed the assembly where he emphasized the use of Latin in liturgy. At the end of the week, the Assisi delegates travelled to Rome for an audience with Pope Pius XII. The pope addressed the audience where he said, "The liturgical movement is... a sign of the providential dispositions of God for the present time [and] of the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church."⁴ However, he reaffirmed Latin as the language of the Church and especially of the Sacred Liturgy. Earlier, rumours had been circulating that the Pope would actually announce major vernacular concessions so there was widespread disappointment as delegates left the audience hall.

Shortly after the Assisi Congress, Pius XII died on the 9th of October 1958 and Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, the Patriarch of Venice was elected Pope choosing the name John XXIII. Elected at age 78, he was to have a transitional papacy and

little change was expected. Within just a few months however, the aged, newly elected pope announced the Second Vatican Council on 25 January 1959, and a preparatory commission on the liturgy was established with the same Cardinal Cicognani as President and Annibale Bugnini, C.M. (+1982) as Secretary. The major players at the Assisi Congress soon received letters inviting their collaboration. Work in the various sub-commissions led to the preparation of a schema that, with very few changes, was presented to the bishops at the Council as the proposed Constitution on the Liturgy. All these examples indicate how the liturgical movement turned to be a revival directed by the ecclesial authorities. Hence, it was not sporadic innovations that crept into the liturgical reform but changes that were necessary to make the content of the faith more intelligible to the faithful through the liturgy. Such a move for reform was backed by strong theological and pastoral foundations as a result of scholarly studies and guided by ecclesial authorities subsequent to study and discussions.

2. Indian Bishops and Vernacular in Liturgy for Active Participation

The use of vernacular in liturgy drew the interest of many bishops from India. They emphasized that liturgy should be celebrated in vernacular if we have to promote active participation. In this they joined the wishes of some American bishops (e.g. Morrow). For example, Bishop L. Morrow gave an important reason for supporting the use of vernacular in liturgy. He said if liturgy was intended for "an active and conscious participation," one ought to use the vernacular. The bishops also expressed difficulties in the mission fields. For example, the missionaries in northern India spent more time in learning language than doing mission work since they

had to master English, Hindi and their own vernacular besides Latin. They supported the idea that Bishops' Conferences may decide on the suitability of using the vernacular in the various regions. Many bishops argued that following the example of the first century Christianity, when Latin replaced Greek, now the vernacular must replace Latin. Internuncio Knox was the only one who was totally opposed to the introduction of vernacular.⁵ He said that in matters of giving reverence to God one liturgical language, Latin, may be used and if the people were well instructed, their participation would be intimate and fruitful.⁶

3. Balancing Between Conservative and Progressive Opinions

At the inauguration of the Council on 11th October 1962 the grand volume of the text for the liturgical constitution was in the hands of the Council Fathers occupying the fifth place in the agenda at the First session of the Council. Although the substance of the draft was unchanged there were intense preliminary discussions on three points: use of vernacular in liturgy, freedom given to Episcopal Conferences to decide on number of issues, concelebration, allowing vernacular in sacred music, and concern over some general norms. After a prolonged discussion a Liturgical Commission was constituted. It was composed of sixteen elected members from among the Council Fathers, eight nominated members by the Pope, and twenty five *periti* (experts in Liturgy). Several theologians and canonists were also added to the commission who worked together with the liturgists. There was a change among the office bearers as well. The Secretary for the Congregation of Rites, Fr Annibale Bugnini was replaced with Fr Ferdinando Antonelli, O.F.M.⁷ The observers are of the

opinion that Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith influenced the removal of Bugnini from the office since he viewed him to be more progressive.⁸ It also came as a surprise that Antonelli who was never involved in the preparatory work of the liturgical commission was appointed as the secretary. However, it is very interesting to observe that Fr. Antonelli who replaced Bugnini due to his conservative stand mentioned in his introduction that Christians had gradually become silent spectators instead of active participants. The renewal and nourishment of Christian life would profit greatly from a return to the sources of grace present in the liturgy and by the active and personal participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Antonelli himself referred to the wishes of two popes concerning the need for liturgical reform: Pius X and Pius XII. Antonelli's statement is significant because it really manifests the working of the Holy Spirit, that is, persons of conflicting opinions felt together the need for liturgical reform by Vatican II, especially in their emphasis on promoting active participation in liturgy.

Nevertheless, we need to take note of the negative reaction towards the idea of active participation. Some were annoyed at too much emphasis on the active participation of the faithful. Adding to these drastic criticisms some claimed that the liturgical schema is only poetical with words with no theological or liturgical substance in it and recommended that it should be submitted to the Doctrinal Commission before voting. Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith argued for complete revision of the entire liturgical constitution since he was worried to learn that too much importance was given to liturgy. On the other

hand, the participants also praised the biblical character of the schema which they hoped will help to promote active participation of the faithful in the liturgy.

The above explanation on the historical context offers background for us to understand the content of the Constitution on Liturgy regarding 'active participation' and the contemporary theological reflections concerning this unfinished agenda of the Council. In the next two articles I shall write brief explanations on these two subjects.

Dr S. Joseph Lionel

St James Church

Padaregudi Post, Ponbethi Via

A. V. Koil Taluka

Podukkottai – 614 629

Endnotes

¹A. Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*, trans. M. J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 6.

² S. J. Lionel, "History and Theology of Sacraments," *Life of Grace*, vol. 1 (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2012), 82-86.

³ Apostolic Constitution, *Christus Dominus*, 6th January 1953.

⁴ In *The Assisi Papers: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Pastoral Liturgy*, Assisi-Rome, September 18-22, 1956 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1957), 18-31.

⁵ *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, Praeparatoria*, IV/4, p. 223.

⁶ P. Pulikkan, *Indian Church at Vatican II: A Historico-Theological Study of the Indian Participation in the Second Vatican Council* (Trichur, India: Marymadha Publications, 2001), 75, 104-107.

⁷ His views were generally considered by theologians as more traditionalistic rather than progressive.

⁸ G. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, 107-108.