

Active Participation in Liturgy, An Unfinished Agenda of Vatican II: The Constitution on Liturgy

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One of the most influential ecclesiastical event of the twentieth century was the Second Vatican Council. That is why even today fifty years after the council we still explore the content of the conciliar documents. There are more post-conciliar documents after Vatican II than any other council in the entire history of the Church. In the previous issue of *Vaiharai*, I began to write on one of the most mind capturing expressions at Vatican II, namely 'active participation' in the celebration of liturgy. Since this expression at the Council received such a profound attention, I mentioned my intention to write about it 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, in my previous article I explained the context prior to the Council in which the phrase 'active participation' emerged. Therefore in this second part of this series of articles I shall write about *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the Constitution on Liturgy), the first document of Vatican II and the meaning of the phrase 'active participation.'

1. The Constitution and the Active Participation

The constitution on sacred liturgy was the product of long and intense discussions that reflected many different perspectives. As the Benedictine liturgist, Anscar Chupungco records the council deliberations, the discussion of the proposed Constitution continued through fifteen general meetings in the first session alone from the 22nd of October to the 13th of November 1962 with 297 written proposals and 328 oral interventions, and a series of amendments before it was finally approved.¹ Fundamentally, it represented a balance between 'sound tradition' and 'legitimate progress' (SC, 23). Thus, it is accurate to say that the Constitution is a compromise document, attempting to appease both conservative and progressive camps.

2. The Pastoral Aim of the Council

The phrase 'active participation' is introduced in the very first chapter of the Constitution. The constitution says, "all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy" (SC, 14). The first chapter, while stating the theological principles, overflows with its pastoral aim in a number of articles. One of the dearest aims of the constitution is to promote active participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Furthermore, the general norms laid down in the first chapter promotes liturgical life in the parishes, collaboration of clergy and faithful in promoting active and conscious participation in the liturgy, and sacred music. From articles 41 to 46 it speaks about promotion of liturgical life in dioceses and parishes and pastoral liturgical action. It

clearly articulates the conciliar aim to promote liturgical renewal at the grass root level. In order to effectively do this the constitution encourages "every diocese is to have a commission on the sacred liturgy, under the direction of the bishop, for promoting the liturgical apostolate" (SC, 46).

The second chapter of the constitution after giving a brief theological background of the Mass in three articles (47-49), goes directly to give precise directions by way of decrees for the liturgical reform. Among these directives the first one is about the order of the mass. The constitution says,

The rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them, may be more clearly manifested, and that *devout and active participation* by the faithful may be more easily achieved. For this purpose the rites are to be simplified, due care being taken to preserve their substance. Parts which with the passage of time came to be duplicated, or were added with little advantage, are to be omitted. Other parts which suffered loss through accidents of history are to be restored to the vigor they had in the days of the holy Fathers, as may seem useful or necessary (SC, 50).

The revision of the order of the mass was intended to show the connection between the various parts of the mass in order to encourage devout and active participation by the faithful.

3. Liturgical Formation in Seminaries

Since many of us teach in the seminaries / Institutes of Theology / and Formation house either permanent or visiting professors, I thought perhaps it is also good to reflect on the conciliar directives on the liturgical formation in the seminaries and active participation. From numbers 14

to 19 the constitution speaks about the liturgical formation of seminarians, priests, religious and laity. The Church is always concerned about formation of candidates to priesthood and religious life. For example, the Lateran Council (1215) said,

To guide souls is a supreme art. We therefore strictly order bishops carefully to prepare those who are to be promoted to the priesthood and to instruct them, either by themselves or through other suitable persons, in the divine services and the sacraments of the church, so that they may be able to celebrate them correctly. But if they presume henceforth to ordain the ignorant and uninformed, which can easily be detected, we decree that both the ordainers and those ordained are to be subject to severe punishment. For it is preferable, especially in the ordination of priests, to have a few good ministers than many bad ones, for if a blind man leads another blind man, both will fall into the pit (Constitution 27).²

Similarly, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) dealt with several points concerning formation. For example, it spoke about religious practice from early age and orderly church life (Canon 18), promoting vocations among the rich and the poor, dividing the boys into number of classes according to age and capacity to learn in order to give proper training, assigning them to the service of the church when the time is ripe, educating them in Scripture, Sacraments, and writings of the Fathers of the Church, and appointing qualified teachers to instruct. Canon 18 of the council said:

...they [candidates to priesthood] should study grammar, singing, keeping church accounts, and other useful skills; and they should be versed in holy scripture, church writers, homilies of the saints, and the practice of rites and ceremonies and of the administering the

sacraments, particularly all that seems appropriate to hearing confessions. The bishop should ensure that they attend mass every day, confess their sins at least every month.... They will punish the difficult and incorrigible and those who spread bad habits with severity, and expel them if need be.... (Session 23; Canon 18).³

Following the same trajectory Vatican II articulates well the importance of liturgical formation in seminaries and novitiates. It is one of the important decisions by Vatican II. The council deliberated on the topic of liturgical formation in the seminaries in the context of the goal set by the council to promote active and conscious participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Unless the priests and future priests receive proper liturgical formation the goal of active participation would never be achieved.

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 (SC, 16).

The council was also concerned about the liturgical formation of men and women religious already during their formation period.

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 (SC, 17).

These words of the Constitution clearly indicate the serious intention of the Church towards liturgical formation in the seminaries in order to promote active participation.

4. Making Room for Adaptations

One of the significant contributions of the council is making provisions for cultural adaptations in liturgy so that the Gospel may take firm roots in every nation. The council acknowledged that if the renewal had to be effective it was important to include cultural adaptations. Considering the goal to reform, although the Councils of Trent and Vatican II were separated by four centuries they had the same aim while promoting liturgical reform. That is, both the councils aimed to restore liturgy to the pristine beauty during the time of the Fathers of the Church. However, the scholars after Trent had many obstacles to fulfill the objectives. For example, there were no sufficient studies available on the writings of the Fathers of the Church or ancient liturgical documents. On the contrary, the context after Vatican II had the advantage of numerous discoveries, studies and critical editions of ancient sacramentaries published during the period between the two councils. These studies informed the methods followed by the Church during the early and patristic periods. Hence, the realization of this vision for liturgical renewal differed between these two councils. Let

us briefly walk through history of Christianity to see evidences of adaptations.

The early church adapted herself to the Greco-Roman culture even in the structure of her public worship and the use of bilingualism was in practice. For example, when Egeria reports of the liturgy in Jerusalem at the turn of fourth to fifth century, she mentions that after the Greek text, the Syriac was given for those who did not understand the former. There were interpreters for Syriac and Latin. These general procedures were not uncommon in other regions and in other centuries.⁴ Furthermore, we notice several signs of an organic development of liturgy. For example, during the period of patristic creativity, the Fathers of the Church allowed adaptations in liturgy to facilitate faith to take firm roots in every culture. The Fathers of the Church allowed adaptations in liturgical rites as long as the cultural elements were not based on superstition or contrary to the Christian faith.⁵ During the later period, there are evidences of translations of liturgical texts into local languages. It is attested by Friar John of Montecorvino, later Archbishop of Khanbalik or Beijing (+1328) that he celebrated Mass according to the Roman Rite among the Mongols of Southern Siberia in their language. Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605), authorized the preparation of a Chinese translation of the Bible, the Roman Missal, the canonical hours and the rites of sacraments. As a result, in 1670 the Chinese Missal was printed in Beijing. However, in 1755 it was reprovved. In the subsequent years, requests for vernacular translations from missionaries in various parts of the world began to reach the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (*Propaganda*

Fide). The Holy See found itself examining these petitions. Consequently, there were some permissions given for vernacular translations. For example, in 1910 the *Propaganda* published Roman Ritual in Ethiopian which was earlier translated by the Vincentian bishop St Justin de Jacobis (+1860) and on 9th March 1927, the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a decree approving the publication in Roman characters of the Roman Missal in Old Slavonic. On the basis of instructions and faculties granted in 1941 to Nuncios by *Propaganda Fide*, the Internuncio in India, citing the model of the Roman Ritual in German, approved on 8th July 1949 a Ritual which used in part the *lingua indica* (Hindi).⁶ In 1953 and 1955 the rituals in Italian and English were approved for the use in Italy, United States of America, Australia and Canada. In 1962, bilingual ritual using Spanish for Latin America was approved.⁷ All these initiatives and approvals indicate the Church's intention that in every culture the Gospel has to take its roots. For the evangelization to be successful, cultural adaptations were not merely optional but necessary.

The need for cultural adaptations was already highlighted by Pius XII in his encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* in 1939 in the context of proliferation of instances of liturgy being celebrated in the vernacular with the approval of the Holy See. It was this phenomenon that informed the decisions of Vatican II and the measures to implement them taken by the Roman Curia.⁸ It is in the same spirit of the patristic age that Vatican II opened itself to allow adaptations in liturgy with caution. While clearly articulating the council's intention not to impose rigid uniformity the

constitution emphasizes the substantial unity which is not modified by legitimate variations. Article 38 says, "Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved, provision shall be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in mission countries." These adaptations concern, "the administration of the sacraments, sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music and the arts, according, however, to the fundamental norms laid down in this Constitution" (SC, 39). In article 40 the constitution opens the door for 'radical adaptation of the liturgy' under the supervision of the Episcopal conferences which are subject to the approval of the Apostolic See. The same article offers utmost caution that it should be done with the help of experts under the strict supervision. Even when it speaks about experiments it clearly mentions that it should be only for a fixed period of time. Among the points mentioned in this section, "norms for adapting the liturgy to the genius and traditions of peoples" received much attention and was subject of prolonged debate with the final approval of 2083 votes in favour and only 21 votes against it. The consensus was possible because of the presence of bishops from mission countries especially from Africa and Asia. Although the spirit of the council in its openness to the pastoral motif is very clear in this article the practice or implementation of it sometimes offer uncomfortable results due to uncontrolled on-going experimentations in liturgy to this day. This is one of the issues that need attention during this post-conciliar context.

What I have explained in this brief article are only examples of the intention of the Council to promote active and conscious participation in liturgy. Has the Council achieved its good intention to promote active participation? Today fifty years after Vatican II the question still remains as the most debated one. In the third part of my series of articles on active participation and Vatican II, I shall explain the contemporary theological reflections on this unfinished agenda of the Council, namely to promote active and conscious participation in liturgy.

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Endnotes

¹ A. Chupungco, ed., "Introduction to the Liturgy," *Handbook For Liturgical Studies* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 176.

² N. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 248.

³ *Ibid*, vol. 2, 750.

⁴ *Egeria, Itinerarium*, cap 47, *Corpus christianorum series latina* 175 (Brepols, Turnholt, 1965), 28-90.

⁵ S. J. Lionel, "Liturgical Inculturation in India: Methods from the Tradition of the Church," *Journal of Indian Theology* (December 2011): 55-56.

⁶ S.J. Lionel, *Vatican II and Liturgical Renewal: Historical and Theological Study of the Conciliar Constitution on Liturgy and Its Implementation* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2013), 64.

⁷ A. Ward, "The Western Experience of the Vernacular before the Second Vatican Council,"

Notitiae (October 2011): 549-568.

⁸ *Ibid*, 548.