

Participation in the Holy Liturgy

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The concept of participation in the liturgy is based on doctrinal principles, which in turn are founded on Catholic ecclesiology. However, whilst ecclesial activities are organised, according to the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25; *Christus Dominus*, 12–16; *Presbyterium ordinis*, 4–6) around the proclamation of the Word of God, the liturgical celebration and the actions pertaining to the pastoral governance of the People of God, it would be erroneous to regard the active aspect of these same activities as dependent solely on ordained ministers, whilst, for its part, the participation of the faithful would remain purely passive. The ‘giving-receiving’ model does not exactly correspond to the profound nature of Catholic ecclesiology, but constitutes an excessive simplification of a reality that is far richer. Admittedly, the aim here is not to deny the necessary and irreplaceable role of the ministry of bishops and priests, but to give an account of sound Catholic theology, as set out by the Second Vatican Council.

Here, then, are a few texts intended to illustrate this point:

Liturgical actions are not private acts, but celebrations of the Church, which is ‘the sacrament of unity’, that is to say, the holy people gathered and organised under the authority of the bishops. This is why they belong to the whole Body of the Church, manifest it and affect it; yet they touch each of its members in different ways, according to the diversity of orders, functions, and actual participation (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26).

The logical conclusion of the preceding statements is that “whenever the rites, in accordance with their own nature, involve a communal celebration with the attendance and active participation of the faithful, it should be emphasised that this, as far as possible, must take precedence over their individual and quasi-private celebration” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 27).

And, more specifically, “in liturgical celebrations, everyone, whether minister or faithful, in discharging their function, shall perform only and entirely that which is required of them by the nature of the matter and by liturgical norms” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 28).

It is important to note that the vocabulary used by the Council shows a preference for the word “celebration”, an expression which emphasises the ecclesial and communal dimension of liturgical actions. In the new Code of Canon Law, the word “celebration” is also used very frequently, without, however, excluding the term “administration” of the sacraments, an expression which also conveys concepts of theological importance for a proper understanding of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments. Thus, no one

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should be surprised that the word “celebration” has acquired particular significance in liturgical catechesis and in the everyday vocabulary of both priests and the faithful.

Let us continue our reflection by quoting further from the Second Vatican Council:

It is therefore rightly that the Liturgy is regarded as the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ, an exercise in which the sanctification of man is signified by sensible signs, is realised in a manner proper to each of them, and in which the integral public worship is exercised by the mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is to say, by the Head and by the members (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7, 2).

Indeed, for the fulfilment of this great work through which God is perfectly glorified and men sanctified, Christ always associates the Church, his beloved Bride, who invokes him as her Lord and who, through him, offers her worship to the eternal Father (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7, 1).

Consequently, every liturgical celebration, as the work of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is the sacred action par excellence, the efficacy of which no other action of the Church can match in the same way or to the same degree (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7, 3).

Having referred to various complementary aspects of the teaching of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it is necessary to mention the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council on the common priesthood of the faithful, which, by taking up a very ancient theme, explains in an excellent manner the basis of the faithful’s participation in the liturgical celebration. Here is the quotation from this key text from the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*:

Christ the Lord, the High Priest taken from among men (cf. Heb 5:1–5), has made the new people “a kingdom and priests to his God and Father” (cf. Rev 1:6; 5:9–10). The baptised, indeed, through regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, to offer, through all the activities of the Christian, spiritual sacrifices, and to proclaim the wonders of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (cf. 1 Pet 2:4–10). That is why all Christ’s disciples, persevering in prayer and the praise of God (cf. Acts 2: 42–47), must offer themselves as living, holy and acceptable sacrifices to God (cf. Rom 12:1), bear witness to Christ throughout the earth, and give an account, to anyone who asks, of the hope that is within them of eternal life (cf. 1 Pet 3:15).

The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, although there is between them an essential difference and not merely one of degree, are nevertheless ordered to one another: for both, each in its own way, share in the one priesthood of Christ. He who has received the ministerial priesthood enjoys a sacred power to form and guide the priestly people, to perform, in the person of Christ, the Eucharistic sacrifice and to offer it to God on behalf of the whole people; the faithful, for their part, by virtue of the royal priesthood which is theirs, cooperate in the offering of the Eucharist and exercise

their priesthood through the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and through their self-denial and active charity" (*Lumen Gentium* 10).

Christian life must therefore be seen as a hymn of "praise to the glory of God's grace" (Eph 1:6; 12; 14), as an offering of ourselves to God, as living and holy sacrifices, knowing what is pleasing to Him, what is perfect (cf. Rom 12:1ff). Now, this praise derives its value from the fact that we have been incorporated into Christ since our baptism and that the perfect praise which He offers on the Cross draws forth our own, or, in other words, that our praise is incorporated into that of Christ precisely through the renewed presence of his Sacrifice, accomplished once and for all (Heb 7:27; 9:12–28; 10:12–14) on Calvary. We may therefore affirm that, in this sense, the Christian life is a priestly life, that is to say, a life consecrated to the glory of God, or indeed a 'liturgical life', and this not only during the celebration of the liturgical worship proper, but also, and starting from that worship, and by living it as its summit (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10), a life that shines through in all our actions, including those that fall directly within the realm of temporal responsibilities or that bear the mark of what is provisional or unfinished.

II. Participation

It is certainly very important to bear in mind the preceding reflections in order to continue to explore this theme of participation within the context of the Liturgy.

The most explicit text of the Second Vatican Council on the participation of the faithful in the Liturgy states the following:

'However, in order to achieve this full effectiveness, it is necessary for the faithful to approach the liturgy with a sincere heart, to harmonise their hearts with their voices, and to cooperate with the grace from above so as not to receive it in vain. This is why pastors must ensure that, in the liturgical action, not only are the laws of a valid and lawful celebration observed, but also that the faithful participate in it in a conscious, active and fruitful manner" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11).

The three adjectives by which the conciliar text describes participation are therefore: "conscious", "active", and "fruitful", but the text affirms that these three characteristics go beyond the mere observance of a valid and lawful celebration, for they must be the consequences of the "dispositions of a right soul" and of "cooperation with grace from above".

Thus, "taking part", "being part of a whole", "acting", "incorporating oneself" and "sharing in common" are expressions that refer not only to external aspects, but above all to internal and spiritual attitudes. If this is not the case, it is inevitable that the liturgical celebration will become a sort of spectacle, or, if you will, a , or even empty ritualism, and even a gymnastic or choreography!

The inner dispositions required for fruitful participation in the celebration of the Liturgy correspond fundamentally to the theological virtues: faith, hope and charity.

If it is true, as Saint Paul affirms three times, that “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17; Heb 10:28; Gal 3:11), it is evident that the summit of Christian life, which is the Liturgy, cannot exist apart from the light of faith and without a spirit of faith.

It is also true that the Christian faith, which is the virtue proper to our condition as pilgrims, is necessarily accompanied by hope. Faith shows us the meaning of our existence here on earth, and the means we must adopt in this world to reach the ultimate goal of our life. Hope, for its part, fully aware of our weaknesses and the wounds that sin has left

in our souls, looks with confidence towards the ultimate goal of our pilgrimage with the assurance that being able to reach it through the help of God, who alone can bring us into a relationship of ‘connaturality’ with God, the source of being, of salvation and of blessed life.

Faith and hope must normally lead to charity, which has as its object, inseparably, on the one hand, God in himself, and, on the other hand, our neighbour for the sake of God. This obviously involves both the love of God with all our heart, all our strength and all our being, and the love of our brothers and sisters, in accordance with the moving characteristics described by Saint Paul (1 Cor 13:1-13).

Another essential inner disposition for fruitful participation in the Liturgy may be added to the three theological virtues: the virtue of religion. This expression, “the virtue of religion”, signifies profound respect and humble adoration of Him who is thrice Holy, and whom we are not worthy to approach (Ex 3:1–6; 1 Kgs 19:9–13). It may be said that the virtue of religion is like the “soul” of the Liturgy; indeed, even though we must never forget that God is our Father, He is nonetheless a Father of immense majesty; He is the almighty Lord; He is the King of eternal glory.

1) Faith

Let us now return to the theological virtue of faith to explore its various aspects in greater depth. It is true that, since divine realities belong to the mystery of faith, we can only gain access to realities invisible to our physical eyes through faith (Heb 11:1), nor can we, without faith, come to the conviction that all that we see comes from what we do not see (cf. Heb 11:3). Indeed, faith reveals what is invisible through what is visible; faith transcends sensory experience and enables us to enter into the mystery; ultimately, it is faith that enables us to perceive the effective significance of liturgical gestures throughout the history of salvation, for the Liturgy is not an abstract and timeless construct, but is indeed a celebration rooted in the events that form the fabric of the fulfilment of the eternal plan of salvation, as willed by the Father, as revealed by the Incarnate Word, and as

continues to be realised through the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

2) *The signs*

Let us now turn to the specific question of liturgical signs. It can be said without doubt that the *raison d'être* of the signs proper to the Liturgy stems from human nature, considered in its bodily and spiritual reality; it also stems from the mystery of the Incarnation, through which access to the invisible God becomes possible via the real humanity of Jesus Christ. Indeed, just as the humanity of Christ is the instrument of the Word's salvific action, so liturgical signs contain and convey God's saving power; through them, God's grace is thus communicated or intensified in all those who have already received justification, divine adoption and incorporation into the Church.

It is certain that an understanding of the liturgical signs is part of conscious and fruitful participation in the Liturgy; however, even though these signs, by their very presence, play an educational role for those who nevertheless perceive them with a limited awareness of their content, they nonetheless require the presence of a permanent mystagogy and formation, based on liturgical catechesis, enabling both the faithful and ministers alike to deepen their understanding of the mystery being celebrated. This point is particularly important when dealing with a rite that is not usually celebrated, such as ordinations or the dedication of a new church. Nothing is more detrimental to the faithful's spiritual participation in a liturgical celebration than the celebrant's overly hurried or distracted attitude, as well as the mechanical performance of liturgical gestures on their part.

There are three words, taken from a traditional prayer, which sum up well the attitude every celebrant should have: "dignified", "attentive", "devout", for it is true that the celebrant is himself a sign. As a consecrated person and an instrument of the action of the glorious Christ, who is the principal agent of sacramental actions, the ordained minister, just as the lay faithful appointed in accordance with the norms of law, must allow the mystery being celebrated to shine through, in such a way that the community may be able to perceive that the minister in question is neither a theatre actor nor a civil servant, but a believer seized by the ineffable presence of the One who cannot be seen with the eyes of the flesh, yet who is more real than anything belonging to the realm of sensory experience.

A 'worthy' liturgical celebration must first and foremost be imbued with the beauty of the place where it takes place, and of the liturgical objects used, even if this beauty is simple and essential. It also involves the cleanliness of the liturgical vestments and the quality of the sacred vessels. On the other hand, if such a celebration takes on a theatrical aspect, it cannot be considered truly "dignified"; indeed, far from being a spectacle, a liturgical celebration is primarily religious and spiritual dimension. Finally, this notion of dignity includes the need to accompany

the celebrations with movements appropriate to the Liturgy, that is to say, performed without haste, with a certain slowness and elegance, but without affectation.

Furthermore, a liturgical celebration must be “mindful”, which requires a particular effort on the part of the celebrant so that, as far as possible, he avoids distractions, especially those that are deliberate. This adjective: “mindful” serves to emphasise the resolve to focus one’s mind, which demands discipline of the senses in order to avoid being drawn away by the many objects that catch the eye and disturb one’s attention. Music is obviously not in itself an obstacle to this attentiveness, as it is an integral part of the participation of the choir and the faithful; nevertheless, it is regrettable that some musical pieces accompanying certain liturgical celebrations do not foster the attentiveness of the celebrant and the participants. Indeed, there are musical genres, overly marked by a theatrical style, which excessively highlight the artistic qualities of the performers, thereby causing regrettable distractions among those taking part in the liturgical celebration. It is therefore deeply regrettable that, in some cases, the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist is perceived, as it were, as secondary to the performance of a famous piece of music, which highlights the composer’s skill and the performers’ virtuosity. It is certain that practices of this kind do not help to strengthen religious meaning and contemplation, and it should be noted, in this regard, that, on the contrary, the use of Gregorian chant and high-quality polyphony, which are at the service of the Liturgy, do not entail such particularly harmful consequences.

“Attention” also requires silence; that is to say, of course and above all, “inner silence”, or, if you will, a peaceful and calm heart, which naturally implies external silence. Chatter and comments among the concelebrants, or with other ministers seated nearby, are a sign of an undisciplined spirit, and they set a bad example to the faithful. On the contrary, the attention required during a liturgical celebration requires, as a prerequisite, careful preparation for that celebration, so that it may proceed in an orderly manner, without giving the impression that its various elements are left to improvisation.

Finally, the celebration must be “devout”, which implies an attitude marked by respect, love of God, religious sensibility, and attention to what is “the one thing needed” (Lk 10:42). In English, the adjective "devout" can be illustrated by the word "pious". It is possible to define the term "devout" as follows: "a devout person is someone who is aware that their life has no meaning unless it is intimately connected to God”, or, in other terms, it is the attitude of one who wishes to live in a manner entirely consistent with their baptismal consecration, and by following the programme that Saint Paul summarised in a few words: “Whether we live, we live for the Lord; whether we die, we die for the Lord. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom 14:8). This therefore means that a devout person is “totally devoted to the Lord”.

Anyone taking part in a liturgical service should not enter the sacred celebration abruptly, moving straight from their secular activities—however respectable and good they may be—to communal prayer. It is necessary to observe a certain period of time, however brief, which must be marked by silence, recollection and prayer. A striking example of this subject, is that of the monks who, before entering the monastery church to celebrate the Divine Office—also known as the Liturgy of the Hours—stand in silence in the cloister to collect their thoughts before engaging in psalmody. It is this same purpose that is served by the prayers the celebrant recites whilst putting on the liturgical vestments, just before the start of the celebration.

In conclusion, it may be said that the reflections just set out stem from the first of the dispositions required for authentic participation in the liturgical celebration: this is faith, which itself reveals the various, rich meanings of the liturgical signs; faith, which alone enables the ordained minister to fulfil his sacred role as an instrument of Christ and a servant of his Body, which is the Holy Church.

3) *The grace of God*

It is now essential to examine another essential element of full participation in the liturgical celebration: this is the grace of God or, more precisely, the state of grace.

The purpose of participation in liturgical actions is either to obtain grace that one does not yet possess (as is the case with the baptism of infants, and with access to the sacrament of penance for those in a state of sin), or to strengthen grace in those who are already justified. Grace is the concrete expression of salvation, the fruit of redemption and the pledge of the glory that awaits us in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Being present at a liturgical celebration whilst in a state of mortal sin, and without at least a desire for conversion, does not constitute true participation, even if the person in question takes part in the movements, hymns, acclamations or other acts during the celebration; for, in this case, that person lacks the fundamental orientation towards God and

His glory, which constitutes the very soul of the Liturgy. This does not, however, mean that those who do not possess the required inner disposition should be excluded from the

celebration, for it may be that a presence, which does not nevertheless possess all the conditions to be described as true participation, may nevertheless constitute an instrument of grace, which will lead the person in question to conversion. Nevertheless, persons whose public state of sin is known must be excluded from the ministries that take part during the celebration, for otherwise they would be counter-examples causing scandal and confusion amongst the faithful. Certainly, the assessment of individual cases requires great pastoral prudence, as well as a delicate approach, but one must never relax the requirements set out in the principles

by the Church's moral teaching and law.

4) External acts of participation

Nowadays, in certain unenlightened circles—and even more so in those not trained in the school of sound theology—‘participation’ is regarded as amounting solely to the expression of certain bodily gestures. It is true that these do indeed constitute expressions of participation, but one must never forget that they are external expressions of internal participation. In other words, one might say that these elements are the “material” and visible aspect of participation, whilst the “formal” element—in the strict sense of the word, that is to say, the essential and invisible aspect—is constituted by the theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—by the virtue of religion and by the state of grace; and it is this latter element alone that establishes the human creature in a state of consecration to the glory of God, on the basis of the coherence between faith, which is professed, and love of God and neighbour, which is lived out in a concrete way in all the choices of life.

The Second Vatican Council identifies a number of elements intended to promote active participation; here is the list. However, before listing them, it is worth making this very important point: these elements do not, on their own and in themselves, constitute liturgical participation; they merely express it and foster it. Indeed, one must always remember that the participation that can be described as ‘substantial’ stems from those elements presented in the preceding discussion, as ‘formal elements’.

Here is the text from the Second Vatican Council:

To promote active participation, the acclamations of the people, the responses, the singing of the psalms, the antiphons, the hymns, and also the actions or gestures and bodily postures should be encouraged. Sacred silence should also be observed at the appropriate times.

In the revision of the liturgical books, care is to be taken to ensure that the rubrics also provide for the role of the faithful. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 30 and 31).

Certainly, the external elements of participation, which are mentioned in the conciliar text, should not be disregarded, for the human person, whose nature is both spiritual and bodily, needs tangible expressions. Moreover, external elements help to reinforce inner attitudes. Finally, since human nature leads man to live in society, he has needs tangible expressions to help him live this experience of community life and to manifest worship as a social reality, and not merely an individual one. This is why it is absolutely impossible to imagine Catholic worship devoid of sensory elements. Moreover, if, by any chance, one were to attempt to eliminate from this worship expressions so inherent to human nature, this would have the effect of depriving it of an essential part of what it is by nature. Nor is it right to impose certain external expressions in an excessive and disproportionate manner, at the risk of turning the liturgical celebration into a succession of gestures performed in a

mechanically, and thus, in a sense, soullessly. It must be understood, in this regard, that different subjective circumstances may lead some people not to adopt a strictly uniform attitude at a specific moment, but this does not amount to a departure from what has been described above as ‘formal participation’. It would therefore be a mistake to think that, simply because a particular external act is not strictly observed, the person in question lacks the dispositions required for real and authentic participation. In fact, it may unfortunately happen that certain participants in the Liturgy, who perform the external acts required by the rubrics with great meticulousness and rigorous discipline, remain in reality quite far removed from true inner participation.

5) *The ministries*

No. 30 of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, cited in the previous paragraph, refers to the forms of participation “common” to the whole People of God. However, there are also special forms of participation, in the sense that these are not a necessity for all the faithful, and do not entail the exercise of a “right” proper; on the other hand, they presuppose certain qualities, or even an explicit call from the person responsible for the proper order of the liturgical celebration. The general principle established by the Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is that “in liturgical celebrations, everyone, whether minister or faithful, in discharging their function, shall do only and entirely what is proper to them by virtue of the nature of the matter and the liturgical norms” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 28).

Among the various liturgical ministries, mention must first be made of the functions proper to those who, through sacramental ordination, belong to the clergy: bishops, priests and deacons. The distinctive feature of these ordained ministries is to “structure” the Church, the visible Body of Christ, in which the sacred hierarchy is both the sign of salvation, which comes from on High, as a free gift, and also the instrument of salvific action, the primary source of which is the Lord Jesus, the sole High Priest of the New Covenant, who exercises his mediatorial role through the agency of ordained ministers. These ministries are so essential that Saint Ignatius of Antioch declares that without a Bishop, priests or deacons, one cannot speak of the Church (cf. *ad Trall.*).

There are, however, other non-ordained ministries that contribute to the dignity of the liturgical celebration.

These include the lectors, who are responsible for reading the readings from Sacred Scripture, with the exception of the Gospel. The reader may be “instituted” (in which case, it must necessarily be a man, *vir*: can. 230 § 1), or merely “blessed”, or simply called upon for a specific celebration. The office of reader is not a mark of honour, nor does it constitute a kind of official recognition of a person’s presumed merits, but is first and foremost a service that takes into account the good of the People of God, who

take part in the celebrations. It is important that the reader be a person of good standing, who demonstrates an irreproachable ecclesial status, enjoys a good reputation and, moreover, is capable of reading well, that is to say, distinctly and with clear elocution, enabling the people to understand the structure of the sentences in the sacred text. Thus, a very pious and respectable person who is unable to read—that is, to make themselves understood by the people taking part in the celebration—must not be called to the ministry of reader.

“Altar servers” (or “choirboys”), also known as “acolytes”, may also be “instituted” (in which case they are adults and men, can. 230 § 1), “blessed”, or simply called upon to perform this service on an occasional or more or less permanent basis. They need to receive adequate training to be able to carry out their duties with dignity, that is to say

without committing those errors which would necessarily detract from the quality and harmony of the celebration. It is the responsibility of the diocesan Bishop to authorise, for particular reasons, women to exercise this ministry on an exceptional basis, whilst taking into account the preference traditionally accorded by the Church to men and boys.

The Circular Letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences, dated 15 March 1994 (*Notitiae* 39 (1994) 333–335), in accordance with the Response of the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts regarding the authentic interpretation of can. 230 § 2 (the liturgical functions which lay men and women, may perform in accordance with can. 230 § 2, do they also include service at the altar?

Affirmative and in accordance with the instructions to be issued by the Apostolic See. Cf. AAS 86 (1994) 541), which establishes in particular that it is the responsibility of each Bishop in his diocese, after consulting the Bishops’ Conference, to make a prudent judgement on what is appropriate for the harmonious development of liturgical life in his own diocese. Furthermore, the obligation to continue to encourage the service of the altar entrusted to young boys, which has led to an encouraging growth in priestly vocations, will always remain. In a Letter of 27 July 2001 (*Notitiae* 421-422 (2001) 397-399), the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments specifies, on the one hand, that the freedom of the diocesan Bishop cannot be conditioned by any decisions of neighbouring Bishops in favour of women serving at the altar, and, on the other hand, that any authorisation granted by the Bishop must always allow the priests of the diocese the option of using only groups of altar servers composed exclusively of boys, in view of the obligation contained in the aforementioned Letter of 1994 regarding the promotion of priestly vocations.

Music is an integral part of liturgical celebrations; this is why, for centuries, the role of the ‘*schola cantorum*’ has been recognised by the Church; it is responsible for performing certain pieces of liturgical music. However, it must be noted in this regard that it would be an abuse to grant the *schola cantorum* such a prominent role that it would preclude the participation of the people in singing during the liturgical celebration. It would be even worse if the members of the *schola*

were to act in such a way as to draw attention to themselves at the expense of the liturgical action, instead of remaining within their proper role, which is to serve as an aid designed to strengthen the religious spirit of those taking part in liturgical celebrations. Nevertheless, the specific role of the *schola cantorum* has been recognised by the Constitution on the Liturgy as a true liturgical ministry (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 29).

The lack of ordained ministers for the distribution of Holy Communion justifies the service of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. These ministers may be appointed on a permanent basis, or called upon in unforeseen circumstances. This is a ministry of substitution, and in no way a form of ‘promotion’ of the laity.

A shortage of priests or deacons for the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism may lead the Bishop to authorise lay people to act as extraordinary ministers of this sacrament (cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 230 § 3). The Interdicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de mysterio*, of 15 August 1997 (Practical Provisions, art. 11) specifies that care must be taken to avoid

overly broad interpretations and avoid granting this faculty on a regular basis. Thus, for example, the absence or impediment that makes it lawful to appoint non-ordained laypeople to administer Baptism cannot be equated with the excessive workload of the ordinary minister, nor with the fact that he does not reside within the parish territory, nor with his unavailability on the day chosen by the family. None of these reasons constitutes a sufficient ground (AAS 89 (1997) 874).

For this same reason, the Bishop may designate laypeople as qualified witnesses for the canonical celebration of marriage (can. 1112); can. 1112 requires a favourable opinion from the Bishops’ Conference and the authorisation of the Holy See. In France, such a possibility of delegating laypeople does not exist.

He may also authorise laypeople to preside over Sunday worship in the absence of a priest (can. 1248 § 2; Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of Priests *Christi Ecclesia*, 10 June 1988, Preliminaries, cf. *Notitiae* 263 (1988) 366–378). The interdicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de mysterio*, dated 15 August 1997

(Practical Provisions, art. 7) specifies that the non-ordained member of the faithful who leads such celebrations must have a special mandate from the Bishop, who shall ensure that appropriate guidelines are provided regarding their duration, location, conditions and the priest responsible for them. Furthermore, these celebrations, whose texts must always be those approved by ecclesiastical authority, are always temporary solutions. It is forbidden to include elements specific to the liturgy of the sacrifice, especially the “Eucharistic Prayer”, even in narrative form. Participants must also always be reminded that these celebrations do not replace the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and that the precept to sanctify the feasts is fulfilled only by attending Mass, even if this means taking part in a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, when participation in the Holy Sacrifice is not possible. In cases where distance and physical conditions

, the faithful should be encouraged and assisted to do their utmost to fulfil the precept (AAS 89 (1997) 869-870).

Finally, it may permit laypeople to preside at funerals (cf. *Ordo Exsequiarum, prae-notanda*, n. 19). The Inter-Dicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de mysterio*, of 15 August 1997 (Practical Provisions, art. 12), recalls that such a possibility exists only in the event of a genuine shortage of ordained ministers. Furthermore, given that, due to the current circumstances of increasing secularisation and a drift away from religious practice, funerals can sometimes become one of the most opportune pastoral occasions for ordained ministers to meet directly with the faithful who do not usually practise their faith, it is desirable, even at the cost of some sacrifice (*cum magna deditio*), that priests and deacons personally preside over funeral rites (AAS 89 (1997) 874).

Among the ministries that assist ordained ministers during the liturgical celebration, especially that of the Most Holy Eucharist, mention should be made of the ‘master of ceremonies’, who is responsible for ensuring that the celebration proceeds in an orderly manner and that each minister fulfils their role precisely. This office is not strictly reserved for an ordained minister, whether a priest or deacon, although it is appropriate to choose the master of ceremonies from among them.

Finally, we must not forget the ‘commentator’, who, through very brief and discreet remarks, helps the community to understand the various parts of the liturgical celebration. It goes without saying that the commentator must have a thorough understanding of the meaning of the liturgical texts, which presupposes that he has received high-quality training, for he must not offer arbitrary or fantastical interpretations of the rites being celebrated, but must refer solely to the texts and liturgical gestures approved by the Church. The place where the commentator carries out his ministry is not the ambo, or the place where the Word is proclaimed, but another discreet and appropriate location.

It is clear that all those who take part in the liturgical celebration by exercising a ‘ministry’ of this kind must prepare themselves carefully, both spiritually and liturgically, both in terms of their actual knowledge of the norms governing the ceremonies and in terms of the knowledge required to conduct a celebration that is orderly and imbued with a religious spirit.

It is worth emphasising once again that substitute ministries may only be exercised in the absence of ordained ministers, or when there are not enough of them to carry out a celebration within a reasonable time. It is therefore essential to bear firmly in mind the Inter-Dicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de mysterio* on the collaboration of the lay faithful in the ministry of priests, dated 15 August 1997 (AAS 89 (1997) 852–877; English translation: cf. *La Documentation Catholique* 2171 (1997) 1009–1020).

III. Conclusion

The Liturgy has an “ascending” dimension, for it truly raises up to the Majesty of God the praise due to Him as Creator and Redeemer. This praise of the whole Church, Head and Body, is both personal and communal: certainly, it involves every member of the faithful, but, at the same time, every member of the faithful is part of the mystical Body of Christ, and since the Body of Christ, which is the Church, has a structure established by Christ himself, its divine Founder, liturgical praise is presided over by those who, being incorporated into the apostolic succession through sacramental ordination, can act *in persona Christi*. Now, the summit of this ascending dimension lies in the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. However, it is also true that the Liturgy has a ‘descending’ dimension as well, since it is through the celebrations, and in a special way through the sacraments, that salvation reaches humanity through sanctifying grace and all the gifts that accompany it. God, in his eternal plan of salvation for humanity, willed that visible acts should be bearers of invisible grace. These acts, even though they are intended for the sanctification of the person, take the form of liturgical celebrations within the community of believers, which expresses the concrete ecclesial reality.

Having reached the end of this reflection, it seems to me very appropriate to return to the opening text of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Here is the text:

... the Liturgy, through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, the work of our redemption is accomplished, contributes in the highest degree to the faithful expressing and manifesting to others, through their lives, the mystery of Christ and the authentic nature of the true Church. For it is the very nature of the Church to be at once human and divine, visible and rich in invisible realities, active in action and engaged in contemplation, present in the world and yet a pilgrim. But in such a way that within her, what is human is ordered and subordinated to the divine; what is visible to the invisible; what pertains to action, to contemplation; and what is present, to the future city which we seek.” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2).

The subject of participation in the liturgical celebration brings us truly within touching distance of the mystery of salvation, the marvellous plan through which the merciful Father, by his Incarnate Word, reveals his design to us and brings it to fulfilment through the power of the Holy Spirit who renews all things.