

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - March 26, 2006 B

FULL AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE MASS IS THE AIM TO BE CONSIDERED BEFORE ALL ELSE.”

The above quote is from the Vatican II document on the liturgy. The same document states that the “*liturgical life of a people is the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed and the fount from which all her power flows.*”

So for us Catholics our whole Christian life *moves towards* the Eucharist. There we receive the divine energy to continue the mission of Christ here on earth. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* also stressed that it is the responsibility of pastors to help the faithful to enter into Mass “knowingly”, “actively” and “fruitfully” (#14). My hope is that this column will help you in some small way to become “full and active participants” in the Mass and help you to enter into the Mass knowingly, actively and fruitfully.

Our Behavior Towards Mass is Contagious

It is important for us to remember that our attitude and behavior towards the Mass and during the Mass is *contagious*. When we rarely or never miss Mass others, especially our children and neighbors know it and are probably edified by our fidelity to the Eucharist. When we are *hospitable* in church to those around us, *sing* enthusiastically, *pray* devoutly, *listen actively* to the readings and homily, place our *money offering* in the basket, receive the Body and Blood of Christ with *love* and *faith*, move with a sense of *reverence* that reflects awareness that we are on holy ground—when we do all these things at Mass, our behavior will be contagious and have a positive impact on those around us. On the other hand, when we miss Mass for no good reason, we give poor example to our family and others. When we come rushing into Mass, show no hospitality to those around us, behave in a distracted and uninvolved way at Mass and leave early, we diminish the whole worship atmosphere for those around us. We communicate: “This is not important, I’m bored and not mentally here.”

As we wait for Mass to begin, we should try to orientate our minds and hearts to the Lord. Presently, all too many people are talking to each other *before* Mass. The *attitude* called for before Mass is one of *quiet meditation*.

Entrance Song: When the Mass begins the first thing we are invited to do is to *participate* in the *Entrance Song*, which accompanies the entrance procession. St. Augustine said in one of his sermons: “*Singing is for one who loves.*” Someone else has said “*He who sings well prays twice.*” So the action of picking up the hymnal and joining in the entrance song is the first way we are invited to “full and active participation” in the Mass. Ideally, we don’t just sing the songs at Mass. We *pray* the songs. To *pray* the songs, we pay attention to the words which are usually very beautiful and we seek to raise our minds and heart to God. Anyone can sing songs, but only those who developed an inner spiritual sense can *pray* the songs. When we *prayerfully sing* the songs at Mass, our singing truly becomes an act of worship. *Praying* the hymns is what makes our singing at Mass different from our singing at a party.

Praising God for his Mercy. During the *Act of Penitence* we are not so much focused on our sins as on the wonder of God’s mercy. Our chanting of “Lord Have Mercy” and “Christ Have Mercy” is our way of saying: “thank you God”, for your wonderful mercy.” It is good for us to remember that participation in the Eucharist cleanses us from all venial sins (The *Catechism* #1393)

Active Listening During the Liturgy of the Word.

In an “age of noise and frantic busyness”, it is challenging for most of us to tune out the barrage of other voices coming at us so that we can tune into the Word of God. Active listening is not easy. It demands that we put aside our own thoughts and concerns and try hard to tune into what *God* is seeking to say to us individually and as a community in the readings. Active listening may be especially challenging when the readings are difficult to understand or when they are poorly proclaimed. We need to pray for a “Mary-heart”, a heart that is receptive and responsive to God. We might pray: “*Lord, cleanse my heart of all obstacles, that block me from hearing your Word. Make my heart rich soil where your Word can bear fruit a hundred fold.*” On a practical note, if you come in late for the Liturgy of the Word, consider waiting at the back until we stand for the Gospel acclamation prior to the Gospel. In this way you will not be a disruption to those who are trying to listen to God’s Word.

French liturgist, Fr. Lucien Deiss, beautifully describes the task of the homilist in these words: *“The homilist must show this particular congregation how the word they have just heard is relevant to their lives. He helps them to hear Christ’s voice and see Christ’s face in the sacred text. The homilist leads the assembly to look at itself, its joys, its sorrows, its problems, and judge them in the light of God’s Word.”* I encourage you to often pray for your priests and deacons that they may be able to do this when they homilize on the readings.

The Role of Silence at Mass

At the different times during the Mass, we are invited to be silent. One such time is right after the homily. In *Introduction to the Order of Mass*, the *United States Bishop’s Committee on Liturgy* states:

Silence is, as in all communication, a most important element in the communication between God and the community of faith. Its purpose is to allow the voice of the Holy spirit to be heard in the hearts of the People of God and to enable them to unite personal prayer more closely with the word of God and the public voice of the Church. During liturgical silence, all respond in their own way: recollecting themselves, pondering what has been heard, petitioning and praising God in their inmost spirit.

Liturgical silence is not merely an absence of words, a pause, or an interlude. Rather, it is a stillness, a quieting of spirits, a taking of time and leisure to hear, assimilate and respond. Any haste that hinders reflectiveness should be avoided. The dialogue between God and the community of faith taking place through the Holy Spirit requires intervals of silence, suited to the congregation, so that all can take to heart the word of God and respond to it in prayer. (#47-48)

You can see from the above beautiful quote that the *attitude of quiet reflection* is very important to all who seek to be “fully and actively” engaged in the Mass.

The Profession of Faith (Creed)

In the Creed, we recall key and central truths of our faith. With the revision of the *General Introduction to the Roman Missal*, all are asked to make a profound bow (head and shoulders) during the words: *“By the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.”* We bow as we recall the Incarnation—that awesome moment in time when God became man.

Prayers of the Faithful

In the Prayers of the Faithful we pray for the universal church, public authorities, the salvation of the whole world, those burdened by any kind of difficulty and for the local community. Our *sung response* to these prayers helps us to be more “fully and actively” engaged in this prayer. The Liturgy of the Word comes to an end with the concluding prayer of the Prayers of the Faithful. Now we are ready to move into the Liturgy of the Eucharist and move our focus from the ambo to the altar-table. The Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with:

Preparation of the Altar/Presentation of the Gifts.

At this time, the altar-table is prepared for our celebration of the Lord’s banquet. Cups to hold the Precious Blood and ciboria to hold the Body of the Lord are placed on the altar. A large flagon of wine and a large bowl of hosts are brought forward with the money offering. The *one* flagon of wine and the *one* bowl with many breads is a sign of the *one* loaf broken into many and the *one* cup poured out for the many. Also food for the poor may be brought forward (GIRM #73), Concerning this *third procession* during Mass (the previous two being the entrance procession and the gospel procession), the *U.S. Bishops Pastoral on the Liturgy* states:

The procession with the gifts is a powerful expression of the participation of all present in the Eucharist and in the social mission of the Church. It is an expression of the humble and contrite heart, the dispossession of self that is necessary for making the true offering, which the Lord Jesus gave his people to make with him. The procession with the gifts expresses also our eager willingness to enter into the “holy exchange” with God: “accept the offerings you have given us, that we in turn may receive the gift of yourself.” (#104)

Once a month you are invited to bring forward food for the poor. The simple act of bringing forward food for the poor to the sanctuary is a symbolic way of connecting the Eucharist and our call to feed the poor. The *Catechism* in #1397 reminds us that *“participation in the Eucharist commits us to caring for the poor”*. Quoting one of the early church Father’s. St. John Chrysostom, the *Catechism* states: that we dishonor the table of the Lord when we fail to share our food for the poor. Those are pretty strong words.

The Eucharistic Prayer

“Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: namely, the Eucharistic Prayer, that is, the

prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification.” (GIRM #78). The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in a prayer of thanksgiving and offering. We thank God especially for his great deeds of creation and salvation. We remember and bring the Lord’s supper into our midst asking the Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord and to change us more fully into his Mystical Body.

The *attitude* demanded of us during the *Eucharistic Prayer*, is one of *gratitude*. If we have nothing to be grateful for, we will have a hard time entering into this prayer. Even when things are not going so well for us we usually can find some things to be grateful for. Also, one way for us to be “actively and fruitfully” engaged in this part of the Mass is to sing heartfully the *Holy, Holy*, the *Memorial Acclamation*, and the *Great Amen*, which concludes the Eucharist Prayer.

Communion Rite

The banquet of the Lord is ready. Now we prepare ourselves to receive the paschal meal—the Lord’s Body and Blood. We especially prepare by praying the *Lord’s Prayer* and participating in the *Rite Of Peace*. “*Because of the themes of daily bread and mutual forgiveness, the Lord’s Prayer has been used in all liturgical traditions as a most appropriate preparation for Holy Communion*” (U.S. Bishops Pastoral #126).

In the *Sign Of Peace* that we exchange with those around us, we express our desire to be at peace not only with God but also with our neighbor and all of creation. The U.S. Bishop’s Pastoral states: “*The exchange of peace before the reception of Holy Communion acknowledges that Christ, whom we receive in the Sacrament, is already present in our neighbor* (#129).”

The Breaking of the Bread

At the Last Supper, Jesus broke bread as a sign of his willingness to have his body broken and his life poured out so that all could live in him. The large host broken into many pieces is a powerful sign of our unity in Christ. St. Paul reminds us of this unity when he writes: *Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we partake of one loaf* (1 Cor. 10:17).

Communion

The priest holds up the Body and Blood of Christ and says: “*This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.*” Reflecting on this action of the priest, catechist Marie McIntyre writes:

When the priest takes the bread and wine into his hands and elevates them for all to see, it is as if Christ is calling out to us and saying;

“Here I am present in your midst under forms of life—bread and wine—to remind you that I am your life and you will have life forever if you come to me and learn from me to love the Father as I do.

Here I am bread and wine to be shared—eaten—consumed so that I may become part of you, enter into your life and sustain you...

Here I am as a total gift—as a sign that to be like me, you have to be ready to give yourselves for others. Here I am sharing symbols of life and joy because I want you to live my life and share my joy....

Here I am as a sign of life freely given, freely shared so that all might come and none be turned away. Here I am for you because I love you.”

After the ordained ministers and lay ministers receive the Body and Blood of Christ and move to their assigned stations, the **communion procession** begins accompanied by appropriate music and song. Commenting on the communion procession the U.S. Bishops in their Pastoral statement very beautifully draw out for us the *meaning* of the procession and the *attitude* we should bring to it:

The Communion Procession expresses the humble patience of the poor moving forward to be fed, the alert expectancy of God’s people sharing the paschal meal in readiness for their journey, the joyful confidence of God’s people on the march toward the promised land. (#135)

Regarding Communion, the following are some things that we need to be mindful of.

- Before we receive the Body and the Blood of the Lord, we make a *simple* bow as an act of reverence for our Lord. A *simple* bow is a bow of the head as opposed to a *profound* bow (head and shoulders), which is the gesture made during the Creed.
- If receiving in the hand, it is not permitted to *take* the host from the minister. Rather one stretches out one’s hands, one under the other, and *receives* the host as a gift.
- It is very desirable that all receive not only the Body of the Lord but also, the Blood of the Lord. By receiving the Blood of the Lord we participate more fully in the sacrifice in which we are celebrating (GIRM #85).
- Intinction — (dipping of the host in the cup) is not allowed as people normally understand it. *We are not allowed to self-communicate* the sacred species, which is what happens when people seek to dip the host in the cup.

• Ideally, “full and active participation” in this part of the Mass should be expressed by participating in the communion song as opposed to private devotional prayer, which is reserved for the period of silence after all have received holy communion and the communion songs end. The U.S. Bishops pastoral states that participation in the communion song “*expresses the spiritual unity of the communicants, shows joy of all and makes the communion procession an act of union of brothers and sisters in Christ.*” (#137)

When we return from Holy Communion and enter into our *private* devotion, we are making a counter sign. We are, as it were, tuning out the *community’s* sung prayer to engage in our own *private* prayer. If we were participating in a meal at someone’s home, we would not dream of bowing our heads to engage in our private thoughts (however much we might sometimes feel like doing this). Rather, we would do our best to engage ourselves in the conversation taking place. Banquet time is community time—intended to both *express and deepen* our unity with the Lord and each other. Shifting from a *private devotion* posture to a *community centered* one may be a big move for some of us.

In case you are wondering, we are still asked to *fast one hour* from all solid foods and drinks (other than water) prior to receiving Holy Communion. Also, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #139-1402 outlines for us several fruits that come to us as a result of receiving Holy Communion.

Concluding Rites

Regarding the Concluding Rite, the US. Bishops Pastoral states: *After the communion rite, the Mass closes with a brief concluding rite. Its purpose is to send the people forth to put into effect in their daily lives the Paschal Mystery and unity in Christ that they have celebrated. They are given a sense of abiding mission that calls them to witness to Christ in the world and to bring the Gospel to the poor.*

The *Concluding Rites* consists of a *blessing and dismissal* of the assembly. We are sent forth to *live* the Good News that we have proclaimed. We are sent forth to be the we become the bread of life for all who are hungry in one way or another.

At Mass, we celebrate the dying and rising of Christ, his passage back to the Father. But, it is in our homes, work place, neighborhoods, shopping malls, etc., that we seek to *live* the Paschal Mystery. We enter into the *dying of Christ* when we experience and grieve the losses in our lives, when we die to our selfish desires so that our relationships can mature when we experience rejection and misunderstanding, when we are treated unjustly, when we deal with our own health problems or the health

problems of loved ones. We experience and enter into the *victory of Christ over sin and suffering* when we are able to forgive and let go of life’s hurts, overcome our addictions, successfully grieve a loss, accept what we cannot change, move forward after some failure, etc. Our daily lives offer us a multitude of opportunities to enter into and live the Paschal Mystery of Christ—his dying and rising. The more we experience and enter into the joys and sorrows of life, the more we conform our lives to the dying and rising of Christ. His light will shine through us to a world desperately in need of witnesses to the message of Christ.

In Summary . . .

If we are to be fully engaged in the sacred liturgy in a way that is pleasing to our Lord and that will transform our lives we must do everything possible to foster the following seven attitudes:

Attitude #1—Quiet Reflection. Prior to Mass, we refrain from talking to those around us and quietly prepare our minds and hearts to enter into this most wonderful mystery of our faith. We also need the attitude of quiet reflection during the silent moments of the Mass.

Attitude #2—Hospitality. Churches and celebrations that show forth warmth and hospitality *attract* people. Cold congregations and celebrations *drive* people away. Each of us in our simple unique way can create an atmosphere that says: “I am glad to see you and be with you today.”

Attitude #3—Praying Our Songs and Prayers. We can recite prayers and sing in an absent-minded kind of way or seek to *pray* our prayers and *pray* our songs. Of course, to do this we must have an active prayer life *outside* of Mass.

Attitude #4—Active Listening. We are called to actively listen to the cantor who invites us to sing, to the reader and homilist who invites us to listen to God’s word.

Attitude #5—Thanksgiving. Eucharist=thanksgiving. We don’t come primarily to receive, but to give—to give thanks to God for his blessings. Usually, in giving we receive.

Attitude #6—Fostering A Sense of the Communal Dimension of the Mass During our Communal Procession. During the communion procession, we should join in the communion songs. In this way we contribute to the *community’s* song of praise to God. When the singing is finished, we can have private, quiet time with our Divine Guest.

Attitude #7—Generosity. We come to Mass on time and remain until the priest leaves and generously give of ourselves to the whole Mass.

Have a great week,

