

Sacrosanctum concilium, **Liturgical Music and the Call to** **Active Participation**

Participation: Liturgy, Life, Mission

I've developed a bad habit at baseball games in Kansas City. I grade the national anthem. I sit there with my friend Mike Mathews, who shares a package of Royals tickets with me. I know we're supposed to be reverent during the national anthem. We're supposed to feel patriotic. We should join our minds and hearts in the performance of the song. But we can't help ourselves. We've heard hundreds of renditions of the anthem over the years. Some we liked. Many we didn't. We started grading the performances. Last year in a desire to be more objective about our grades, we developed a system to avoid any appearance of subjective assessment of what we are about to witness. Everything is totally objective. On a spreadsheet each performance gets one column. We start with the date of the game and then the name of the person performing. Getting the name is harder than you think. The announcer asks fans to stand as the colors are marched onto the field. Then we are to remove our hats and place our right hands over our hearts, while veterans render a salute. Then, when we're in patriotic position, the name of the singer sounds forth from the speakers and appears in print on the scoreboard. Then it disappears. We have to remember this name while taking note of the nuances of the performance that follows. And, by the way, what we witness at each game is a performance. That's how it's announced. We are instructed not to join in, but to listen to a performance of the national anthem.

When the song ends, we sit down, enter the singer's name on the spreadsheet, and the grading begins. We spot each singer 10 points. After that, points come off. The highest hurdle comes first: ornamentation. The fundamental question we ask is, "Did the singer draw more attention to the singer or to the flag?" Almost everyone ornaments the anthem. We prefer to hear it straight, like a hymn, with respect. Singers can lose 1, 2 or 3 points on ornamentation alone. Next comes pace. If it's too slow, another point comes off. Most do all right for our next criterion: tone. But sometimes the *a capella* anthem begins solidly in one key and boldly goes where even Charles Ives has never gone before. Singers can lose up to two points if they forget the words. Sadly, this does happen. The singer will lose one point each for the incorrect pronunciation of "perilous" and "rocket's". Almost everyone sings "perulous" instead of "perilous", and many in the midwest sing not "rocket's" but "rockit's". We're on the verge of deducting another point for singing "hell" instead of "hail," but for the moment, we are tolerant. Singers can lose another point for appearance. We're not that picky about dress, but sometimes the sartorial selection pays no attention to the home team or the flag. In the space of a minute and half it's possible for a singer to plummet from ten to zero. No one has yet. Most end up between 6 and 8. One of

the best last year was the Oak Park High School Band, which performed the anthem as an instrumental. We deducted only one point for omitting all the words.

It's a bad habit, I know. We should be in the moment as everyone behind the anthem intends. Perhaps we've fallen into the grading system out of frustration. We are missing out on something important when we stand to listen to the anthem's performance: the full, conscious, active participation of the people.

The Second Vatican Council did not coin that expression. It came first from Pope Pius X's 1903 *Motu proprio* on Sacred Music, *Tra le sollecitudini*. Michael Joncas pointed out to me three different aspects of participating evidenced by this early salvo in the liturgical renewal. Let me give you the quote first, starting with the introduction:

Filled as We are with a most ardent desire to see the true Christian spirit flourish in every respect and be preserved by all the faithful, We deem it necessary to provide before anything else for the sanctity and dignity of the temple, in which the faithful assemble for no other object than that of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable font, which is the active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.

Later (3), Pope Pius X sounds the theme again in reference to singing chant:

Special efforts are to be made to restore the use of the Gregorian Chant by the people, so that the faithful may again take a more active part in the ecclesiastical offices, as was the case in ancient times.

Here are three different types of active participation. First Pius mentions "the most holy mysteries," where he probably means nothing more than receiving communion. If you want to participate actively at mass, come to communion. He developed this theme in 1905 by promoting the frequent reception of communion, and in 1910 by lowering the age of first communion from twelve to seven. Second, he called for active participation "in the public and solemn prayer of the Church," which includes a broad array of dispositions, words and actions that would be elaborated after the Second Vatican Council. Third, people can take "a more active part" in the liturgy by singing chant. From the beginning, one of the most important ways to achieve the participation of the people was through music.

Pope Pius XI restated his predecessor's theme in the 1928 papal bull *Divini cultus*:

In order that the faithful may more actively participate in divine worship, let them be made once more to sing the Gregorian Chant, so far as it belongs to them to take part in it. It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies, or when pious sodalities take part with the clergy in a procession, they should not

be merely detached and silent spectators, but, filled with a deep sense of the beauty of the Liturgy, they should sing alternately with the clergy or the choir, as it is prescribed. If this is done, then it will no longer happen that the people either make no answer at all to the public prayers -- whether in the language of the Liturgy or in the vernacular -- or at best utter the responses in a low and subdued manner.

Pope Pius XII also stressed the importance of music in his 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei* (145):

when in prayer the voice repeats those hymns written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and extols God's infinite perfections, it is necessary that the interior sentiment of our souls should accompany the voice so as to make those sentiments our own in which we are elevated to heaven, adoring and giving due praise and thanks to the Blessed Trinity; "so let us chant in choir that mind and voice may accord together" [*citing St. Benedict*]. It is not merely a question of recitation or of singing which, however perfect according to norms of music and the sacred rites, only reaches the ear, but it is especially a question of the ascent of the mind and heart to God so that, united with Christ, we may completely dedicate ourselves and all our actions to Him.

Thus, the notation on the page, the very means by which music is preserved and taught, sung and played, remains empty if the result does not fulfill the purpose of liturgical music, which is prayer. Priests apply the same principles today if they wish to develop a good presidential style when declaiming the scripted texts of liturgical prayer. Back to the encyclical of Pius XII, he later encouraged the faithful to participate in singing chant (191):

As regards music, let the clear and guiding norms of the Apostolic See be scrupulously observed. Gregorian chant, which the Roman Church considers her own as handed down from antiquity and kept under her close tutelage, is proposed to the faithful as belonging to them also.

However, he conceded that participation is not as easy as one might think (80):

all the faithful should be aware that to participate in the eucharistic sacrifice is their chief duty and supreme dignity, and that not in an inert and negligent fashion, giving way to distractions and day-dreaming, but with such earnestness and concentration that they may be united as closely as possible with the High Priest, according to the Apostle, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." [Phil 2:5] And together with Him and through Him let them make their oblation, and in union with Him let them offer up themselves.

This backdrop framed the new liturgical guidelines of the Second Vatican Council, articulated in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*. With regard to participation, the key citation is perhaps paragraph 14, which our entire conference this week has adopted under the title Participation: Liturgy, Life, Mission.

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the nature of the liturgy itself, and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people” (1 Peter 2:9; cf. 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.

Participation is “the aim to be considered before all else.” Paragraph 30 of the Constitution tells of the many ways that this is achieved. Later paragraphs twice refer back to this one because of its concrete examples:

To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes. And at the proper time a reverent silence should be observed.

Sung and spoken words, postures and silence all form means of active participation. The results should be palpable, according to paragraph 48, which predicted great spiritual benefits.

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration.

Music remains linked to participation. One of the reasons was paragraph 19, which promoted the participation of the entire person:

With zeal and patience, pastors of souls must promote the liturgical instruction of the faithful, and also their active participation in the liturgy both internally and externally, taking into account their age and condition, their way of life, and standard of religious culture. By so doing, pastors will be fulfilling one of the chief duties of a faithful dispenser of the mysteries of God; and in this matter they must lead their flock not only in word but also by example.

This paragraph promotes both internal and external participation, but does not define them. Four years later, 1967, the Sacred Congregation of Rites distinguished internal and external participation in its instruction *Musicam sacram* (15), citing two distinct paragraphs from Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

The faithful fulfill their liturgical role by making that full, conscious and active participation which is demanded by the nature of the Liturgy itself and which is, by reason of baptism, the right and duty of the Christian people (SC 14). This participation

(a) Should be above all internal, in the sense that by it the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear, and cooperate with heavenly grace (SC 11),

(b) Must be, on the other hand, external also, that is, such as to show the internal participation by gestures and bodily attitudes, by the acclamations, responses and singing (SC 30).

Vatican II's Constitution did not use the terms "internal" and "external" in paragraphs 11 and 30, not even in the earliest drafts. *Musicam sacram* set up a distinction that the Constitution itself had not made explicit. Influences for this came from Pre-Vatican II sources. In 1958, the same congregation had drawn a distinction between internal and external participation in its instruction *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia*.

Interior participation is the most important; this consists in paying devout attention, and in lifting up the heart to God in prayer (22a).

The participation of the congregation becomes more complete, however, when, in addition to this interior disposition, exterior participation is manifested by external acts, such as bodily position (kneeling, standing, sitting), ceremonial signs, and especially responses, prayers, and singing...

When the papal documents treat of 'active participation' they are speaking of this general participation, of which the outstanding example is the priest, and his ministers who serve at the altar with the proper interior dispositions, and carefully observe the rubrics and ceremonies (22b).

Active participation is perfect when "sacramental" participation is included (22c).

So, a postconciliar document on liturgical music from 1967 turned to a preconciliar document on liturgical music from 1958 to draw out a distinction between internal and external participation that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy did not make so explicit. The 1958 source called interior participation "the most important" kind. It said that the outstanding example of active participation is the service of the priest and the ministers, and that the perfect expression of active participation is receiving the sacraments.

Vatican II's Constitution avoided any hierarchy of the modes of participation. As the liturgical books were published, they promoted active participation in specific ways that engaged all the faithful spiritually and physically.

Chapter VI of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was devoted to sacred music. It further explored the ways that music would play a role in the participation of the people. To understand the principle, it helps to remember that prior to the council, people may have prayed rosaries in the pews while mass was happening in the sanctuary. As the dialogues were meant to bridge this gap and unite the entire assembly in the same sacred action, music was also intended to perform the same function (SC 112):

sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites.

Thus, the best music is the music that unites seamlessly with the liturgy, especially the dialogues and processions. Sacred music is a treasure precisely because it shares the same DNA as the liturgy (SC 112).

The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.

The Constitution needed to balance two values - the treasury of sacred music handed down through tradition, and the participation of the people through song (SC 114). This was a difficult balance because so much of the musical tradition is not congregational by nature.

The treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care. Choirs must be diligently promoted, especially in cathedral churches; but bishops and other pastors of souls must be at pains to ensure that, whenever the sacred action is to be celebrated with song, the whole body of the faithful may be able to contribute that active participation which is rightly theirs, as laid down in Art. 28 and 30.

This same balance was to be struck between Gregorian chant and polyphony on one hand, and the call for the participation of the people on the other (SC 116). Gregorian chant has "pride of place in liturgical services." However, all liturgical music had to answer to article 30 on the people's participation.

Regarding musical instruments, "the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem" (SC 120) because it "adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up [the] mind to God and to higher things." However, the Constitution admitted other instruments with the consent of the competent territorial authority.

Chapter VI also reached out to composers, who “filled with the Christian spirit, should feel that their vocation is to cultivate sacred music and increase its store of treasure” (SC 121). This paragraph presumes that new compositions would accompany the revised liturgy. Then, sounding the theme yet again, the Constitution asked composers to write music “for the active participation of the entire assembly of the faithful.”

Thus the Constitution mapped out a program that supported music both old and new, in a variety of styles, by choir and congregation, with various instruments, that all contributed to the internal integrity of the liturgy and gathered the voices of the full assembly in song. It was a tall order, but the Catholic Church throughout the world embraced it with vigor.

So, fifty years later, how’s it going? Well, it depends on where you go. The possibilities for liturgical music are more numerous than ever the Constitution envisioned. But here is what the landscape reveals:

Music is expected. When you show up for Sunday mass at a Catholic Church, you can expect that congregational singing will be on the menu. If you don’t like that, you have to look for an early morning mass without music, the quiet mass. Such services exist, but they are rare, which indicates that Catholics have nearly all welcomed the vision of liturgical music offered them by the Second Vatican Council. The General Instruction put flesh onto the bones of this ideal when it described the Entrance Chant (47): “The purpose of this chant is to open the celebration, foster the unity of those who have been gathered, introduce their thoughts to the mystery of the liturgical season or festivity, and accompany the procession of the priest and ministers.” People get this and they welcome it. Even at funerals, people expect congregational singing. Weddings are another story, but they are subject to cultural influences far greater than even the Vatican seems fully to comprehend. Surprising is that baptisms outside of mass typically have no congregational singing. The Rite of Baptism for Children envisioned it and promoted it, but you usually hear the congregation sing at baptisms only if they take place during mass. When baptisms take place after mass, the musicians who just led the singing are tired and have probably gone home; the family gathering at the font probably won’t sing on its own, nor even know what music to choose and when it should happen. Still, overall, your parish church is one of the few locations where the average person will hear live music or sing music in the course of the week. It’s expected. On the whole, we have successfully preserved this ideal.

Not everyone sings. Even though we offer music at nearly every mass, not every Catholic sings. Enough do, so we carry on. But we still encounter people who will not even pick up the participation aid, preferring to stand as mute and immobile as Lot’s wife peeking at the destruction of Sodom. Asking people to sing, especially in America, is asking a lot. Perhaps people realize what is implied: Singing involves commitment. It offers a gift of the person. It means taking the risk of ridicule. It means showing the depth of one’s faith. It means overcoming the sting of a long-standing memory when someone told you, you can’t sing. Not singing at church means you can be present for something live,

but watch it as you are accustomed to watching events on screens at home. Not everyone sings. It isn't entirely the musicians' fault. But we who are committed to our beliefs and who have the strength and gifts to encourage and promote song - we must carry on.

Choirs are scarce. Not every church has a choir. And those that do may gather only for Christmas and Easter. In one sense, the Constitution changed the ones responsible for the music. In the past, the choir handled nearly all of it. Now the people do. It's not a bad tradeoff, but choirs should not have been lost in the process. Still, not every parish has enough members or enough musical leadership to form a choir. This also is not entirely the fault of Catholic musicians. As a country we have pushed music education to the sidelines of our schools, and we haven't developed the very human gifts in the arts that other nations still treasure.

Pipe organs are scarce. The organist shortage is worse than the priest shortage. The treasury of organ music for the liturgy is vast, and we're hearing very little of it - partly because musical tastes have changed, and partly because we don't have enough people skilled enough to play these pieces. Pipe organs are expensive, even though they are long-lasting. To invest in them implies making a commitment to the kind of music they produce. But musical tastes change as rapidly as pastors, and this is not an age and a place where the organ is flourishing as well as it could. In fairness, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council could not have foreseen the dramatic changes in musical styles and accompaniments that multiplied in the last five decades. Still, if a treasury is worth retaining, then pipe organs and organ music deserve another look.

Chant is scarce. You don't hear much live Gregorian chant any more. There are many reasons for this, including unfamiliarity with Latin, the scarcity of chants in participation aids, shifting musical tastes, and the musical literacy of choirs and congregations. However, the sung dialogues that appear in the missal are examples of chants that have endured and are still quite usable. In the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the paragraph that cites the Constitution's endorsement of Gregorian chant comes right after the paragraph that calls the dialogues "of greater importance" than other parts of the mass that could be sung. The Instruction thus frames the argument in favor of chant in a way that makes the goal achievable: sing the dialogues. We have a golden opportunity now that the principal dialogues have a common musical setting in all English language Roman Missals throughout the world. We also have a common setting of the chant refrains and antiphons for many parts of Holy Week. But try to find a participation aid with all those chants in an American pew. Publishers could help us by making available to the people in every aid the music for the preface dialogue, the blessing of Palm Branches, the adoration of the cross, and the Easter Vigil's alleluia. These basic chants are surprisingly hard to find, and it is frustrating a very obvious way that the Church can preserve the treasure of chant. When you add up the chant, polyphonic, and instrumental literature that exists in the Church's treasury and that often seems locked there,

all we can hope is that sometime, somehow, someone is going to find the key to restore some of the beautiful music that is rarely heard live.

New compositions are rife. We have more new music than we can sing. Anyone can write it. Anyone can publish it. Anyone can record it. Anyone can post it on the internet. This is wonderful and awful all at the same time. The same is true with words: There is available now a great quantity of written material that would never have survived the pre-internet publishing process and with good reason. Much of it isn't very good. But the gateways to publication have tumbled like the walls of Jericho. In time, this should sort itself out, but like kids when school is over, we do not often handle our freedoms responsibly. At the least we can resist the temptation to think that any new composition is better than any old one. Like homeowners with too much closet space, it's easier to go out and buy a new item than to look for the one we bought last year. If the publishing world is losing its foothold as an authority on taste, the same democratization over the choice of music confronts every parish, and the battleground has shifted from weddings to funerals. These events draw people who have some faith, little experience in liturgical planning, and strong ideas about how the ceremony should go. In the past, and the present, musicians who permitted only liturgical music at weddings have had to overcome a couple's objections that they found another Catholic parish that does permit pop music. Some headway has been gained, but the same musicians are being ambushed by requests for peculiar music at funerals. Families often appeal to the deceased, whose wishes - real or imagined - are meant to supply the final arbiter. "We have to do it," the bereaved may say, "because it's what our mother wanted." Could it be that the unstable nature of good liturgical music in Catholic parishes has so weakened the standards that the unchurched are claiming equal authority whenever they get their chance?

In general, the musical contributions of the Catholic Church are indeed living up to the hopes of the Second Vatican Council. People are participating through song. Yet we can always do better. Leadership is key. But before we bewail the lack of good musicians in many of our parishes, we should pause to be grateful for the presence of good faith in nearly all of our musicians. Not every organist can read music. Not every cantor can count. Not every guitarist can tune the instrument. But virtually all church musicians come to mass for one reason: to praise God with the skill they received as a gift. From this foundation, much can grow. Music can sincerely express one's faith, and that is a fine expression of full, conscious and active participation. Even those who sing the national anthem at the ballpark are doing it because they love their country. Who am I to criticize their style, when their heart is in their throats?

Robert S. Hovda wrote, "In liturgy, the numinous, the holy must be almost tangible. It must be evident in the presider's attitude toward the other person's [*sic*] in the assembly, as well as everyone's attitude toward everyone else. If we do not feel in liturgy that there is more to us than meets the eye, that we are dwelling places of the Most High, that beneath our masks and roles and camouflage and superficial categories we come to a common dignity as well as to

a common creatureliness, then one of the most important functions of liturgy and ritual experience is unfulfilled” (*Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy*, Washington DC: The Liturgical Conference, 1976, p. 67).

Hovda would surely be pleased with what he sees here in Washington: a whole city of musicians gathered for lofty goals - the refining of musical skills, the singing of praise to God, and the search for spiritual depth from which our active participation is conscious and full.

This talk was a Hovda Lecture for the annual meeting of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, July 30, 2013, Washington DC.