

Tridentine Community News

March 19, 2006

“Active Participation”

One of the most frequently heard comments about the Tridentine Mass, especially from those who do not regularly attend it, is that the congregation is not as involved as they are in the new rite of Holy Mass. Today we will examine the understanding of participation in liturgy.

External Participation

We all know that the congregation makes the responses to the priest in the new rite of Mass. In the Traditional Mass, this is not always the case.

In a Low Mass, that is, a Mass without music, it is possible to have a Mass in which the altar server(s), and not the congregation, make(s) all of the responses. This is the case at the weekday Tridentine Mass at St. Margaret Mary Church in Oakland, California; and at the daily Tridentine Mass at the Brompton Oratory in London, England.

In a sung Mass, or Missa Cantata, it is possible for the server(s) to make all of the spoken responses, and for the choir to do all of the singing.

In an elaborate Mass, such as a Solemn High Mass or a Pontifical High Mass, there is extensive musical accompaniment, which makes it impractical, and indeed inappropriate, for the congregation to sing along. Of course, this can also be said about elaborate Novus Ordo Masses, such as the orchestral Masses celebrated at St. Joseph. You cannot expect, and do not want, the congregation to sing along with a polyphonic Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, or Agnus Dei.

The Dialogue Mass

In 1958, the Sacred Congregation of Rites permitted, and indeed encouraged, the congregation to recite the responses along with the altar servers. In our day, when most people are accustomed to the new rite of Mass, it has become quite common for the congregation to recite or sing the responses at a Tridentine Mass. Especially in our region, where several churches offer Novus Ordo Latin Masses in which the congregation does make responses, people are accustomed to this form of participation.

The Windsor Tridentine Mass has always been a Dialogue Mass, even before it had a music program. At St. Josaphat, the Archdiocese of Detroit wants us to encourage congregational responses and singing, and we do, as it is absolutely fitting under Vatican guidelines.

Interior Participation

On page 127 of the 1985 book, “The Ratzinger Report,” our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, made the following statement:

“The [Second Vatican] Council rightly reminded us that liturgy also means ‘actio’ something done and it demanded that the faithful be guaranteed an ‘actuosa participatio’, an active participation...But the way it has been applied following the Council has exhibited a fatal narrowing of perspective. The impression arose that there was only ‘active participation’ when there was discernible exterior activity - speaking, singing, preaching, reading, shaking hands. It was forgotten that the Council also included silence under ‘actuosa participatio’, for silence facilitates a really deep personal participation, allowing us to listen inwardly to the Lord’s word. Many liturgies now lack all trace of this silence.”

In other words, interior activity, that is, silent, focused prayer, constitutes participation as much as vocal involvement. Praying along at Mass with a missal; and at the Tridentine Mass, reading the translated Proper prayers as they are sung or read silently, can help one concentrate. Arguably, this manner of participation may be freer from distraction or drifting of mind than mechanical vocalization of memorized responses.

Perhaps the best example of this concept is at the consecration in the Tridentine Mass. Between the conclusion of the sung Sanctus and the consecration, there is silence. The bell is rung at the Hanc Igitur in the Canon to warn the faithful that the moment of consecration is about to take place. The acolytes ascend the altar platform to raise the priest’s chasuble for the elevation. There is absolute focus on the sacred action at the altar on the part of everyone present, and yet there is complete silence.

Note that it is not appropriate for the faithful to pray private devotions such as the Rosary during Mass. Pope Pius X instructed us not to “pray at Mass, but pray the Mass.” Silent prayer must be focused on the Holy Sacrifice.

Maintaining sacred silence is a part of our Catholic tradition. “Grand silence” during certain hours in seminaries and monasteries; silence during Eucharistic Adoration; and silent prayer before Holy Mass begins are but a few examples. While vocal participation does have its place, it is not the only criterion for determining the level of involvement of the faithful.