

# Why should we participate in Mass from beginning to end?

**S**t. Paul reminds us, “You are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Thus, when baptized Christians gather for worship, they gather as members of the body of Christ alive in the world today. We unite together, prompted by the Spirit, with Christ our brother as our head, in giving praise and glory to God our Father. It is part of our Christian tradition, recalled by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, that ultimately it is Christ who, as priest, offers worship to God in the liturgy (art. 7). Thus, when the baptized unite together in the liturgy, no one can ever be a passive spectator watching a priest do something for us, since all are parts of Christ’s body, the Church, and it is Christ, head and members, who is actively giving praise and glory to our God.

Scripture narrates various instances of God’s holy people actively participating in worshipping God. For example, at the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem, the scribe Ezra read the book of the law to the people gathered for worship and, afterwards, “all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’ ” (Neh 8:6). The Acts of the Apostles recalls that the early Christian community gathered for prayer in the temple and celebrated the “breaking of bread” in their homes (Acts 2:46). Psalm 103 begins, “Bless the Lord, O my soul. All my being, bless his holy name.” Worshipping God is more than being physically present in a church—it involves listening, speaking, singing, standing, kneeling, sitting—that is, using all our being to praise our God.

God’s holy people, gathered for worship, are not spectators at a sport’s event, watching others perform for them. The worship of our God is something that all Christians participate in as a response to the love they feel for the God who is love (1 Jn 4:16). As the statement of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, Music in Catholic Wor-

ship, says: “People in love make signs of love, not only to express their love but also to deepen it” (no. 4). When we gather at Mass, we deepen our love for God and for each other, and this demands participation rather than passivity.

At least twelve paragraphs of the revised General Instruction of the Roman Missal refer to “active participation” or “active celebration” by those gathered at Mass. Several of these paragraphs (e.g., GIRM 18, 386) include a more extended quotation taken from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy which refers to the “full, active, and conscious participation” of all the faithful and states that such participation is both a “right” and a “duty” (art. 14).

In most human organizations, whether it be a nation or a social club, citizenship or membership not only confers certain rights but also involves certain obligations. By baptism, an individual is united to Christ and his Church and enjoys the blessings of God’s salvific graces, particularly through the sacraments. Yet baptism also commits an individual to live a life modeled on Christ’s life, a life of love and service. Christ did not passively stand by when people sought him. He reached out to those who needed him and healed, nourished, and forgave.

The way we participate at Sunday Mass is a symbol of the way we should live out our Christian commitment the rest of the week. There are always unexpected traffic jams that may cause us on occasion to be late for Mass.

Nevertheless, our love for Christ and desire to celebrate with our sisters and brothers in Christ as fully as possible should impel us to arrive at church early, to recollect ourselves for the great mystery of the Eucharist we celebrate, and to hear all of God’s nourishing word. Similarly, time conflicts (or sud-



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den illness) may be a reason why, on occasion, someone may need to leave Mass early, but our unity as the body of Christ is imperfectly symbolized when anyone departs before the words of the formal dismissal are spoken. One would find it odd if someone invited to a formal dinner arrived after the other guests had already begun the first course or left before the dessert and words of thanks offered by the host. Yet, too often the individualism of our society so influences some Catholics that they see nothing wrong in arriving late for Mass or leaving the community's celebration early, often for trivial reasons.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds all Chris-

tians that the liturgy is the "summit" and "font" of Christian life (art. 10). It also enjoins bishops and parish priests to help the faithful participate fully in the liturgy, actively engaged in the liturgical rites (art. 11). St. John reminds us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). As a people of faith, it is our privilege and duty to participate as fully as possible with Christ our brother in giving thanks to our loving God for the gift of his son. Such active participation during the liturgy is far from being an optional "add-on" during Mass, for it is at the core of what being a Christian is all about.

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