ON PARTICIPATION IN THE LITURGY

We participate in the Liturgy by virtue of our baptismal dignity, as members of a common Priesthood. We are made for the worship of God and to offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice to him. (cf. Rom 12:1) Participation in the Sacred Liturgy starts deep within the heart of each one of the baptized as faith makes us ever more one with Christ. In the Liturgy, joining our hearts and minds to the rites, words, and songs of the gathered assembly, we are drawn ever more deeply into Christ’s perfect sacrifice of praise.

Participation in the Mass also involves actions, gestures, postures, prayers, acclamations, and song. Such external participation in the Liturgy both expresses and reinforces our internal unity with Christ and with his Church.

Still we participate in the Mass “in different ways, according to [our] different orders, offices, and actual participation.” (SC, no. 36) There are lectors who read the word of God and altar servers (acolytes) who carry candles and crosses and incense and help with other practicalities in the sanctuary. There are cantors and choirs and other music ministers and ushers, collectors, and ministers of hospitality. Sometimes there are extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion who help with the distribution of the Body and Blood of the Lord. All of these ministries, however, serve the gathered liturgical assembly, the holy people whom God has made his own—including you.

This community of the baptized forms one body at Mass. They “shun any appearance of individualism or division,” (Cf. GIRM, no. 95) focusing only on giving thanks to God and offering the spotless Victim “not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves.” (Cf. GIRM, no. 95)

This unity is most clearly seen in the common posture they observe. They stand when all are gathered for the Introductory Rites. They sit to hear the word of God, and stand again to hear the Holy Gospel proclaimed. They sit for the Homily, and stand again for the Creed and the Prayer of the Faithful. Having been seated for the Preparation of the Gifts, they stand as one body to pray that “the Lord accept this sacrifice at your hands” (the Suscipiat) and then, kneel throughout the Eucharistic Prayer, the holiest part of the Mass. Standing to pray the Lord’s Prayer and to exchange a Sign of Peace, they then prepare to receive Communion. In the Diocese of Worcester the people kneel when the Priest holds up the Blessed Sacrament and says “Behold the Lamb of God” (Ecce Agnus Dei). Likewise, for the reception of Holy Communion they stand, return to their places to pray, and then stand again for the final rites of the Mass.

Why is it important that all who are present at Mass assume the same posture? Because we are called to be “one body, whether by hearing the word of God, or by joining in the prayers and the singing, or above all by the common offering of Sacrifice and by a common partaking at the Lord’s table.” (GIRM, no. 96) So we outwardly manifest a deep internal unity of that body by our common posture. And by this external sign of our unity, we strengthen the internal will to die to ourselves and be one in this place. (Cf. GIRM, no. 42)

When I see the old man in front of me painfully struggling to stand for the Gospel with me, I feel one with him in a common joy that the Lord Jesus is about to speak to us. And when the little kid beside me struggles to stay on the kneeler, his head barely clearing the pew, I know that he is learning to be a part of something much larger than himself. What matters to them and what should matter to me at Mass is not so much my personal dispositions or likes or dislikes. What matters is that I have been called to be part of God’s people and to be one with them in perfect praise.