Our Call to Participation

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A colleague spoke recently of showing up for class to discuss one of his favorite authors. His class was to start with students discussing the book in small groups. As my friend made his way from one group to another, he noticed that the material had not been read. He then invited the students to return to their original places to discuss their critical analysis of the literary work. He asked his first question. Dead silence. He waited. No response. He rephrased the question. Once again, no one spoke. The awkward silence was now too much. He waited until someone answered. Finally, one student hesitantly ventured an answer. No one challenged the student's vague answer. So, the professor asked how many students read the required material. Only two hands went up. The lack of participation in the course led to a lack of learning.

This story is very apropos to our participation within the liturgical event. Pope Benedict XVI noted occasionally that the liturgy is a "school." In other words, liturgy trains us to grow in discipleship. We can understand the liturgy as a "school" in two ways. First, liturgy catechizes or educates us. Various parts of the liturgy relay information to us. Our intellects grow as we take in the meaning of the Homily, the proclamation of the readings, the hearing of the prayers, and so forth. In this sense, our minds are nourished.

Second, the liturgy concerns our bodies. Liturgy not only uses words, but also "the works of our hands" or elements from nature, that is, material objects. Liturgy makes use of water, fire, oil, bread, and wine. These material objects touch bodies (though in the case of fire, it touches us through its heat and light). From a theological perspective, God's work of sanctifying these elements imparts more than intellectual knowledge; they mediate, or we might say, make tangible, God's loving touch to and within us.

The healing anointing by the priest with the oil of the sick touches us physically. Likewise, in the use of holy water, whether during Baptisms or when we bless ourselves upon entering the worship space, our body is touched by God's purifying, cleansing, and life-giving Spirit. Therefore, the liturgy "schools" us to shape our minds, bodies, souls, and hearts into a deeper living out of God's desires for us. But to achieve the holiness that God offers us, and indeed calls us to, we must be open to the power of God's transforming "touch."

How does liturgy as a "school" help us to understand our call to participation? In the story of the professor, the students' education suffered because they were neither prepared nor engaged with the topic. In liturgy, we are called to participate. Participation requires our investment in the liturgy. It requires our openness to God's acting through words, gestures, music, prayers, and material objects.

Participation is not, however, utilitarian, that is, it is not only about *showing up* or *doing* things; rather, participation leads to transformation. Though participation requires showing up and doing things, another level allows what happens (the actions of liturgy or the actions of the Triune God) to shape us. Our participation in liturgy may allow us to grow in our knowledge of and union with God, who seeks and desires our growth in holiness.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* says we are called to "full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations" (14). As students of the liturgy, our schooling is shaped by our level of participation. The effect of that participation is the active living out—through our minds and bodies—of God's healing and loving touch in, to, and through us.

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