

THE PROPER PARTICIPATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITHFUL IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRED LITURGY

Rev. Prof. Dr. habil. Mirosław Sitarz

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: mpsitarz@kul.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7596-8508>

Rev. Dr. Bartosz Zygmunt

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
e-mail: bartosz.zygmunt@us.edu.pl; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8939-9737>

Abstract. According to the Constitution of the sacred liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people [...], is their right and duty by reason of their baptism” (no. 14). The aim of the article is to analyse the juridical and liturgical norms governing the participation of the lay Christian faithful and the role of the choir in liturgical celebrations.

Keywords: liturgy; *participatio actuosa*; canon law; Christian faithful; Second Vatican Council.

INTRODUCTION

The liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council placed particular emphasis on the full, conscious, and active participation of the Christian faithful in the sacred liturgy. It was the earnest desire of Mother Church that all the faithful be led to that fully conscious and active participation (*participatio actuosa*) – both internal and external – which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy¹ (no. 14). This vision entails a decisive shift away from the passive reception of sacred rites toward the involvement of the entire People of God in celebrating the mysteries of faith. Such active participation,

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio de sacra liturgia Sacrosanctum Concilium* (04.12.1963), *AAS* 56 (1964), pp. 97-138 [hereinafter: SC].

however, must proceed within a proper juridical framework and with due regard for assigned liturgical roles.

This article examines the juridical and liturgical norms governing the participation of the lay Christian faithful and the role of the choir in liturgical celebrations. The analysis draws upon Canons 834-839, 846, and 928 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law,² alongside the relevant teaching of the Magisterium, specifically: the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; the Instruction *Musicam Sacram*,³ the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*,⁴ the General Instruction of the Roman Missal,⁵ and the Instruction of the Polish Episcopal Conference on Music in the Liturgy.⁶

1. JURIDICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION

1.1. The 1983 Code of Canon Law

In the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the ecclesiastical legislator addresses the question of liturgical participation within the Church's sanctifying office (*munus sanctificandi*). The Church discharges this sanctifying mission in a particular way through the sacred liturgy, which is an exercise of the priestly function of Christ. In the sacred liturgy, the sanctification of humanity is signified through sensible signs and effected in a manner proper to each sign, and the whole public worship of God is carried out by the mystical Body of Christ, the Head and the members alike (Cano. 834 § 1). This norm recalls conciliar teaching (cf. SC 7) and underscores that the liturgy is, by its very nature, the public act of the Church as a communion ordered toward salvation. The author of the CIC/83 specifies that such worship takes place when it is celebrated in the name of the Church by persons lawfully designated and through acts approved by the authority of the Church (Cano. 834 § 2).⁷ Liturgical law therefore safeguards the authenticity and unity of worship by defining who conducts liturgical actions and how they are

² *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (25.01.1983), AAS 75 (1983), pars II, pp. 1-317 [hereinafter: CIC/83].

³ *Sacra Congregatio Rituum, Instructio de musica in sacra liturgia Musicam Sacram* (05.03.1967), AAS 59 (1967), pp. 300-20 [hereinafter: MS].

⁴ *Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, Instructio de quibusdam observandis et vitandis circa sanctissimam Eucharistiam Redemptionis sacramentum* (25.03.2004), AAS 96 (2004) 549-601 [hereinafter: RS].

⁵ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [hereinafter: GIRM], https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cddes/documents/rc_con_cddes_doc_20030317_ordinamento-messale_en.html [accessed: 12.11.2025].

⁶ See *Instrukcja Konferencji Episkopatu Polski o muzyce kościelnej* (14.10.2017), "Akta Konferencji Episkopatu Polski" 29 (2017), pp. 137-51 [hereinafter: Instruction of 2017].

⁷ See also Krzywda 2011, 15-16.

to be performed. This ordered distribution of responsibilities permits the genuine participation of all the faithful.

The CIC/83 sets out the hierarchy of those who exercise the sanctifying office: first bishops as the high priests, the principal dispensers of the mysteries of Gods, but at the same time, the promoters and guardians of the liturgical life in their entrusted churches (Cano. 835 § 1); next presbyters under the authority of the bishop; they are consecrated to celebrate divine worship and to sanctify the people (Cano. 835 § 2); there are also deacons who have a part in the celebration of divine worship according to the norm of the prescripts of the law (Cano. 835 § 3). Particularly relevant is Cano. 835 § 4 CIC/83, according to which, “The other members of the Christian faithful also have their own part in the function of sanctifying by participating actively in their own way in liturgical celebrations, especially the Eucharist. Parents share in a particular way in this function by leading a conjugal life in a Christian spirit and by seeing to the Christian education of their children.” This provision gives juridical expression to the common priesthood of the faithful⁸ within the liturgical context, obliging every baptized person to take an active part in divine worship.

The legislator of the CIC/83 expands on this idea by emphasizing the communal character of the liturgy. Cano. 837 § 1 reiterates the fundamental principle of the Second Vatican Council, “Liturgical actions are not private actions but celebrations of the Church itself which is the sacrament of unity, that is, a holy people gathered and ordered under the bishops” (cf. SC 26). This signifies that every liturgical celebration constitutes a manifestation of the Church as a communion; even when conducted within a small assembly, it remains an act of the entire body of the Church (SC 26) [Green 1979, 610]. The liturgy exposes and simultaneously edifies the Church, rendering her unity present and engaging all members in distinct ways according to their sacred orders, assigned functions, and concrete ways of participation. Consequently, each person – cleric, consecrated religious, or lay – has a role that is properly his or her own, rooted in the Church’s ordered structure. The legislator further introduces a significant practical norm in Cano. 837 § 2 CIC/83: inasmuch as liturgical actions by their nature entail a common celebration, they should be celebrated with the presence and active participation of the Christian faithful where possible. In doing so, it reaffirms that the liturgy is a public and communal act, not the private prayer of the priest; therefore, whenever circumstances allow, care should be taken to ensure the presence of the faithful and their active engagement, for example, in Holy Mass through responses, chants, and gestures. All the faithful enjoy the right to a liturgy celebrated

⁸ *Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio dogmatica de Ecclesia Lumen gentium* (11.11.1964), AAS 57 (1965), pp. 5-71 [hereinafter: LG], no. 10.

in conformity with the Church's prescriptions; also, for the good of the community of the Church, some of the lay faithful are allowed to exercise ministries in the celebration of the sacred liturgy (RS 43) [Celary 2006, 258]. The communal character of the liturgy is thus intrinsically linked to participation, for the liturgy, by its very nature, requires the cooperative engagement of all who take part in it (cf. RS 44; SC 28) [Celary 2006, 258-59].

In the CIC/83, the ecclesiastical legislator clarifies matters related to worship. The Church legislator provides that the ordering and guidance of the sacred liturgy depends solely upon the Church authorities: the Apostolic See and the diocesan Bishop (Cano. 838 § 1). The ordering of the sacred liturgy across the entire Church, the publishing of liturgical books, and the exercise of vigilance that liturgical regulations are observed faithfully everywhere falls within the competence of the Apostolic See (Cano. 838 § 2). The Episcopal Conferences oversee the preparation and approval of translations and permitted adaptations of the rites within defined limits (Cano. 838 § 3). Within the limits of his competence, it is the diocesan Bishop who lays down liturgical regulations, which are binding on all, in the Church entrusted to his care (Cano. 838 § 4). These competence norms safeguard the unity of the celebration from arbitrariness – no one other than the competent authorities may establish new rites or alter long-established customs (SC 22). This principle is further elaborated in Cano. 846 § 1: "In celebrating the sacraments the liturgical books approved by competent authority are to be observed faithfully; accordingly, no one is to add, omit, or alter anything in them on one's own authority." This fundamental principle of adhering faithfully to the approved rites embraces not only the sacraments but the whole of public worship. It forbids celebrants or other participants from introducing private "adjustments" to the liturgical proceedings. The principle safeguards the liturgy from abuses and ensures that the faithful take part in the celebrations as the Church intends and has established (cf. RS 11) [Celary 2006, 259]. The faithful possess the right to an authentic liturgy, one that accords with the Church's norms and tradition, and any unauthorized alterations infringe upon this right and compromise the unity of divine worship⁹ (RS 11).

In Cano. 839 CIC/83, the ecclesiastical legislator sets out that the Church carries out the function of sanctifying also by other means, both by prayers and by works of penance and charity, all of which greatly help to strengthen the kingdom of Christ in souls (§ 1). Furthermore, ecclesiastical law requires local ordinaries to take care that the prayers and pious and sacred exercises of the faithful be fully conforming to the teaching of the Church (§ 2). Popular devotions are highly commended, provided they do not replace the sacred liturgy and are conducive to full participation therein (cf. SC 13).

⁹ Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Litterae encyclicae de Eucharistia eiusque necessitudine cum Ecclesia Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17.04.2003), AAS 95 (2003), 433-75, no. 52.

In conclusion, Canons 834-839 CIC/83 underscore the central place of the liturgy in the sanctification of the faithful and the active participation of all members of the Church in divine worship, while at the same time preserving the hierarchy of ministries and fidelity to liturgical norms.

1.2. The Second Vatican Council and Post-Conciliar Instructions

The liturgical provisions of the CIC/83 rest upon the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the later prescriptive documents on music and liturgy. The Council Fathers recalled the principles that were subsequently incorporated into the CIC/83. As in Cano. 837 § 1, they find that liturgical actions are not private actions but those of the Church itself as “the sacrament of unity,” with the entire holy people gathered under the bishops (SC 26). In liturgical celebrations “each person, minister or layman...should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to his office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy” (SC 28). This principle serves to avert the clericalization of the laity (e.g. their undertaking functions reserved to the ordained), as well as the displacement of the clergy from their proper duties (such as abstaining from the homily or from presiding over prayer in favour of lay individuals). The Church desires that pastors of souls zealously foster the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful, which is meant to be the first and indispensable source of genuine piety, and that they introduce the faithful into the liturgy through “necessary instruction” (SC 14). In nos. 113-116 SC, the Council Fathers address sacred music, recommending that Gregorian chant hold “pride of place” in the liturgy, while also urging the cultivation of the *schola cantorum* and the active participation of the whole body of the faithful in singing (SC 114). Bishops and other pastors of souls must ensure that all the present faithful may be able to contribute the portions of liturgical song which is rightly theirs; even in the presence of a well-performing choir, the people may not remain completely silent (SC 114). In other words, the *schola cantorum* should support the singing of the people and not replace them [Filipczak 2017, 193].

These conciliar directives were further developed in the Sacred Congregation of Rites’ Instruction *Musicam Sacram*, which provided a comprehensive framework for the place of music and song in the liturgy. The congregation introduced, among other things, the concept of “degrees of participation” in liturgical singing, indicating which parts are to be sung by the faithful and which may be performed by the choir or a cantor (MS 28-36). The dialogues and responses of the faithful, alongside the common acclamations, should always be sung or recited by the assembly; this is the minimum expression of active participation (MS 16). Although certain portions of the liturgical song may occasionally be entrusted solely to the choir, for instance,

more complex elements of the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass, such delegation must never be carried out in a manner that excludes the people from the participation that is rightfully theirs (cf. MS 14-15). The instruction states explicitly that careful listening to the chant likewise constitutes a form of participation on the part of the faithful; participation need not invariably be vocal, provided that the people pray interiorly together with the choir (MS 15; Instruction of 2017, 11). The liturgy, by its nature, is given “a noble form” and acquires greater dignity when celebrated in song and with the ministers of each degree fulfilling their ministry and the people participating (MS 5; cf. Instruction of 2017, 8). The instruction further mandates due care for appropriate liturgical music – music that is sacred, beautiful, and adequate, and never secular or trivial (MS 4; Instruction of 2017, 7, 9). The document further recommends the formation of parish choirs and *scholae*, stipulating that “the choir should be placed in such a way that each of its members may be able to participate easily in the Mass” (MS 23c). Members of singing ensembles are themselves part of the liturgical assembly; they should therefore be able to hear the Word of God and take part in prayers and rites (Instruction of 2017, 11a). The same recommendation is to be found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal which reads, “the choir should be positioned...so as to make clearly evident its character as a part of the gathered community of the faithful...The location should also assist the choir to exercise its function more easily and conveniently allow each choir member full, sacramental participation in the Mass (GIRM 2013, 312).

In the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments addresses the issue of liturgical abuses, stressing the need to conform with the norms outlined above. It reiterates that no liturgical celebration may be considered the possession of the celebrant or of the community. It further stresses that the faithful have the right to a liturgy celebrated in conformity with the Church’s norms (RS 11-12). Active participation by the laity is not merely a right but also a duty derived from baptism. The lay faithful “rightly and laudably” carry out certain ministries within the liturgy, distributing these among themselves (RS 43) [Celary 2006, 258]. The congregation, after SC 28, reminds that “whether ordained ministers or lay faithful, in exercising their own office or ministry should do exclusively and fully that which pertains to them” (RS 44). It reprobates instances in which roles are confused, such as when laypersons assume functions reserved to the clergy, notably the homily (RS 64-66), or when the celebrant entrusts parts of Holy Mass, for example, the Eucharistic Prayer, to be sung by the people or the choir, a practice deemed impermissible. The congregation mandates the elimination of such abuses in order to uphold the faithful’s right to authentic participation, untainted by the celebrant’s personal innovations (RS 18).

The liturgy is the common work of the whole Church, governed by law to safeguard unity and to facilitate the full participation of all the faithful in accordance with the proper ecclesiastical order [Green 1979, 610].

2. THE THEOLOGY OF LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION

Underlying these juridical provisions is a substantive theology of participation, grounded in the Church's doctrinal understanding of herself and liturgy. A central concept of the Second Vatican Council is *actuosa participatio*, that is, active participation. This term should not be reduced to outward activity such as singing, responding, or making gestures; above all, it signifies an internal engagement, a conscious and devout entering into the liturgical action with both heart and mind (SC 11). Pope Benedict XVI taught that genuinely fruitful participation presupposes an interior spirit of prayer and the offering of oneself with Christ, and that external activity devoid of spiritual attention does not accomplish the purpose of the liturgy.¹⁰ Accordingly, full participation is simultaneously external and internal: the faithful are to carry out the actions prescribed by the rites – singing, responding, kneeling – while also comprehending the significance of the signs and uniting themselves to Christ who is present and operative within the liturgy.

Liturgical theology explains that the basis of the lay faithful's dignity and obligation to participate is the common priesthood of the faithful. Through baptism, each person is incorporated into Christ – the High Priest – and has a share in His common priesthood, distinct in essence yet collaborating with the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood (LG 10). The faithful, as “living stones” of the spiritual temple, are called to offer spiritual sacrifices to God and, above all, to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice (1 Pet 2:5; LG 11). Participation in Holy Mass does not mean merely watching the priest's actions; it means offering oneself together with Christ. Hence the call for the faithful not to be passive spectators but partners in the dialogue of salvation enacted in the liturgy. The liturgy is the “source and summit” of the Church's life (SC 10), and the faithful are meant to take an active part in it (SC 14). Active participation is therefore both a right and a duty of all the baptized (cf. Cano. 214 CIC/83).

It is worth noting that the notion of *participatio actuosa* surfaced in papal teaching well before Vatican II – Pius X, for instance, in his 1903 Motu Proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, urged the faithful to take an active part in liturgical song and worship. Yet it was only with the Council Fathers that the term assumed its central significance. Post-conciliar liturgical theology expanded this idea: active

¹⁰ Benedictus PP. XVI, Adhortatio apostolica postsynodal de Eucharistia vitae missionisque Ecclesiae fonte et culmine *Sacramentum caritatis* (22.02.2007) AAS 99 (2007), pp. 105-80, no. 52.

participation means the engagement of the whole person – not only their voice, but also their intellect and will – in the liturgical action (SC 7). In the liturgy, Christ draws the Church together and leads her in offering worship to the Father, while the faithful take part as members of His Mystical Body. The liturgical assembly constitutes a theological sign, manifesting the mystery of the Church praying and acting together [Nadolski 1989, 221].

The engagement of the faithful in the liturgy manifests itself in a variety of forms: the recitation of acclamations and responses, the singing of major parts of Holy Mass, such as the Gloria or the Creed, the performance of ritual gestures, including the sign of the cross, genuflections, or the processional approach to Communion, and at times the exercise of entrusted ministries, such as the proclamation of the readings, the chanting of the psalm, or service at the altar. These external expressions of participation are ordered toward fostering an interior union with the content of the liturgy. The Council Fathers interpret “active” participation in conjunction with what is “conscious,” implying an understanding of the rites, and with what is “full,” namely, participation that encompasses the entire assembly and excludes no one (SC 14). Consequently, the liturgical reform emphasized the introduction of vernacular languages, the simplification of the rites, and the liturgical formation of the faithful, with a view to promoting such conscious participation. The introduction of the Polish language into the post-conciliar liturgy was sanctioned by the ecclesiastical legislator in, but not only, Cano. 928 CIC/83, “The eucharistic celebration is to be carried out in the Latin language or in another language provided that the liturgical texts have been legitimately approved.” This norm permits the use of the language of the faithful, thereby significantly promoting their active participation; for participation to be genuinely conscious, the faithful must comprehend the words of the prayers and chants (SC 36).

In sum, from a theological standpoint, the active participation of the faithful is both a sign and a prerequisite for the Church to form a communion. It is a sign, insofar as the liturgical assembly manifests the Church united in worship; and it is a prerequisite, for only a living liturgy can build a genuine community of faith. The Church’s sanctifying mission is realized not in the isolation of individuals but in the communal celebration of the mystery of Christ. Through canon law and liturgical regulations, the Church seeks to preserve and uphold this ideal.

3. THE CHOIR AND THE SCHOLA CANTORUM AS INTEGRAL COMPONENTS OF THE LITURGICAL ASSEMBLY

The church choir holds a distinctive role in the liturgy: it enriches the celebration with song, leads and supports the singing of the faithful, and performs

those parts of Holy Mass that demand greater musical expertise (Instruction of 2017, 11). Both the Church's tradition and post-conciliar documents emphasize the choir's significance – *Musicam Sacram* recommends that every cathedral and major church foster a *schola*, and that parishes form and maintain their own singing ensembles (MS 19, 23). The choir acts as a custodian of the beauty proper to liturgical music and assists the faithful in lifting their hearts to God through chant. At the same time, the Church teaches unequivocally that the *schola* is not to replace the assembly but to serve its participation. The choir is to perform the parts assigned to it, whereas the faithful are to be given the opportunity to sing the other sections of divine worship (Instruction of 2017, 10, 11).

The Polish Episcopal Conference indicated that, "A proper proportion between the singing of the *schola*, the choir, and the people must always be maintained" (Instruction of 2017, 11). What follows, the liturgy ought neither to devolve into a choral performance with a silent congregation nor to consist solely of joint acclamations without space for musical artistry. The Polish bishops noted that the faithful's full participation is not limited to singing along – "listening is also a form of participation," and at certain moments "a silence filled with reverence should be observed" (Instruction of 2017, 11). Thus, when the choir performs the offertory chant or the Communion song, the faithful participate by listening and contemplating – an engagement that is far from passive, insofar as they understand such moments to be prayer expressed through attentive listening.

The placement of the choir is no less important. The choir should be positioned so as to clearly be part of the gathered community and not apart from it (GIRM 312). Historically, choirs were often located in lofts or galleries high above the nave – arrangements that offered acoustic advantages yet were likely to create a sense of separation. Contemporary directives recommend that, wherever feasible, the choir be positioned in a visible place within the assembly, enabling its members to participate in the rites, e.g. to kneel during the consecration, or to have an unobstructed view of the altar (Instruction of 2017, 11a). Choir members must also be afforded the possibility of full sacramental participation; for example, choir singers are themselves to receive Holy Communion during Mass (MS 23c; Instruction of 2017, 11a). The choir is not to function as an autonomous body, detached from the rest of the faithful; it constitutes a liturgical ministry, comparable to that of altar boys. The Instruction of the Polish Episcopal Conference on Music in Liturgy further stipulates that every parish singing ensemble is to have a spiritual guardian, either the pastor or another priest designated for this purpose, who oversees the liturgical and spiritual formation of its members (Instruction of 2017, 11b). Singing in a choir is thus a form of liturgical engagement, not merely an artistic pursuit.

CONCLUSIONS

The liturgical reform and the post-conciliar canonical legislation have integrated the theological and normative aspects of the faithful's participation in divine worship, thereby forming a unified vision of the full, conscious, and active involvement of the whole People of God in liturgical celebrations. A closer look at Canons 834-839, 846, and 928 CIC/83 reveals that the ecclesiastical legislator rigorously implements the principles of the Second Vatican Council: the liturgy constitutes the act of the Church as a hierarchical communion, within which each person, cleric or lay, fulfils a ministry proper to his or her status; lay members of the faithful are both obligated and entitled to active participation in the liturgy, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist; and no one may introduce changes to the liturgy on personal authority, since it is to serve the entire Church. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, along with the Instruction *Musicam Sacram* and the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and the 2017 Instruction of the Polish Episcopal Conference on Music in the Liturgy, collectively elaborate these principles, offering practical means for their application and cautioning against deviations.

The choir and liturgical music do not supplant the participation of the faithful; rather, they sustain and complement it. The beauty of choral chant does not stand in opposition to active participation but enhances it, so long as the appropriate balance is preserved. An ideal liturgical celebration is one in which the whole community at times raise their voices to sing God's praise, at other moments keeps a reverent silence, and at still others listens to the choir's masterly chant elevating hearts toward heaven. Liturgical abuses disrupt this ordered harmony and must accordingly be addressed both with charity and due firmness by those charged with the oversight of the liturgy.

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