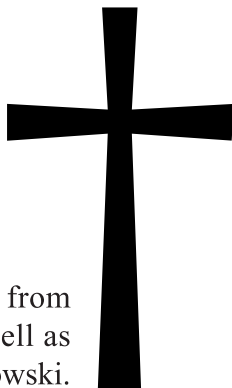


PARTICIPATIO ACTUOSA

Full, conscious, and active
participation in the sacred liturgy.



A collection of citations from
church documents, as well as
reflections, by Jeff Ostrowski.

Draft Copy

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and all hate mail to :

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ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

“Participatio actuosa”

1st Article

“Celebrant’s Printed Homily”

I firmly reject the idea that **unless** every member of the congregation recites the homily along with the priest during Mass, true “active participation” is lacking. Archbishop Bugnini mocked¹ as absurd the notion that “active listening” counted as participation at Mass. In his view, listening (sans busy, external, physical activity) can never constitute active participation; therefore, the faithful must recite the homily along with the priest—otherwise they don’t truly participate “as desired by the liturgical constitution.”

Bugnini’s view contradicts MUSICAM SACRAM (5 March 1967), which says participation at Mass must be **“above all internal”** (§15), adding that:

“The faithful should also be taught to unite themselves interiorly to what the ministers or choir sing, so that by listening to them they may raise their minds to God.”

Father Heinrich Flatten, Apostolic Protonotary, professor of Canon Law at the University of Bonn, and canonist for the German Bishops’ Conference **strongly disagrees** with Bugnini, writing in April of 1971:

“There is a genuine, indeed a very high level of activity, which can exist even when there are no signs of external activity. Who would deny that the scholar at his desk, totally sunk in contemplation of a problem without putting even one sentence on paper, is engaged in a very intense activity? Yes, even in stillness, in silence, in the absorption of meditation it is possible for a man to rise to the heights of spiritual activity. Who has not experienced this when listening to J. S. Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* in the concert hall? The listener does nothing externally, and yet in his attentive listening there takes place a very active experience at first hand. The same thing happens when a *Benedictus* of, for example, an Anton Bruckner grips the listener at holy Mass, disposes him for the *elevatio mentis ad Deum*, and conducts him into the very heart of the Eucharistic Mystery. Absolutely no external motion: and nonetheless a supremely effective participation in spirit and mind, in heart and affections. Without a doubt, a genuine and living *actuosa participatio*.”

1 *La riforma liturgica* (1983), English transl. by Matthew J. O’Connell (1990): p. 904.

2nd Article

“Discriminatory Practice”

Hannibal Bugnini famously declared² that “the people must truly *sing* in order to participate actively” (emphasis by Bugnini). But thoughtful people realize it’s impossible for the entire congregation to sing: many of us are tone-deaf; many are hearing-impaired; some have breathing issues; others have damage to the lungs or suffer from throat problems; some are aphonic and/or deaf; some suffer from down syndrome or a genetic condition; some are occupied holding babies; and so forth. This is not even addressing the issue of musical competence; e.g. the Mass responses may have only two (2) pitches, whereas a GRADUAL, ALLELUIA, or TRACT may each contain more than 500 notes. Most hymn melodies in the **Saint John Brébeuf Hymnal** are within a congregation’s reach—but even some of those are too advanced.

No sane person would say: “the entire congregation will play the orchestra.” Similarly, only a lunatic would claim the entire congregation can sing. But Bugnini said³ that “the full and active participation of *all* the people” [my emphasis] only takes place when the people “truly *sing*” (as quoted above). This is such a crucial point, I will provide Bugnini’s quotation for the 3rd time (and the emphasis is Bugnini’s):

“The people must truly *sing* in order to participate actively as desired by the liturgical constitution.”

Bugnini’s definition **excludes** (“discriminates against”) a large percentage of the People of God—perhaps 45% or higher. Hundreds of millions of Catholics (in his view) are unworthy of being taken into consideration.

3rd Article

“Grunting occurs nowhere”

For the reasons listed above, many cannot sing. But some insist that: “Even if they cannot sing, everyone is at least capable of grunting along.” Leaving aside the fact that not everyone can grunt along (e.g. deaf people cannot grunt along), the documents **nowhere mention** “grunting along.”

The Second Vatican Council said: “The musical tradition of the universal

² *La riforma liturgica* (1983), English transl. by Matthew J. O’Connell (1990): p. 904.

³ *La riforma liturgica* (1983), English transl. by Matthew J. O’Connell (1990): p. 41.

Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art” (SC §112). **Vatican II did not say:** “And this inestimable treasure is preserved when people grunt along with it.”

The Second Vatican Council said: “The treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with very great care” (SC §114) **Vatican II did not say:** “Grunting along with these masterworks is sufficient to foster and preserve them with very great care.”

The Second Vatican Council said: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, under normal circumstances it should be given first place [*principem locum*] in liturgical services” (SC §116). **Vatican II did not add:** “And we consider grunting along with *Carmen Gregorianum* all that’s necessary for its performance.”

4th Article

“Kýrie Eléison forbidden by traditionalist musician”

I personally know a music director who works at a large parish run by what we formerly called an *Ecclesia Dei* society. Before I go on, readers must become familiar with the following statement (issued under the authority of Pope Pius XII on 3 September 1958):

14a. In sung Masses, the Latin language must be used not only by the priest celebrant and the ministers, but also by the choir and the faithful.

Notice “the Greek language” is not mentioned. That’s why this choir director [who shall remain nameless] insists the KYRIE ELEISON is “forbidden” (his word). His opinion is clearly bonkers, but it illustrates something important: viz. Church documents are to be interpreted in a reasonable manner.

Therefore, when Vatican II says: “The treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with very great care” (SC §114), **those words mean something**. It would be imbecilic to assert that the TREASURY (*thesaurus musicae sacrae*) must be “preserved and fostered with very great care” by having congregations grunt along with its components. Rational people realize those words mean that the TREASURY is to be preserved the same way it has been for the last millennium: viz. it is ordinarily to be sung by choirs.⁴

4 Needless to say, if the composition in question is **capable** of being sung by a congregation, nothing prevents that method of performance, but the vast majority of the *thesaurus musicae sacrae* is choral music intended to be sung by choirs. Not even Hannibal Bugnini denies this.

5th Article

“The same document”

The Bible says: “There is no God.” But it’s necessary to consider the full context, which is: “The fool saith in his heart: *there is no God.*” The Second Vatican Council said (SC §14):

“Quæ totius populi plena et actiosa participatio, in instauranda
et fovenda sacra Liturgia, summopere est attendenda...”

Translated into English: “In restoring and nurturing the sacred Liturgy this full and active participation of all the people is very much to be considered...” Earlier, we pointed out a music director who ludicrously believes the 1962 *Missale Romanum* forbids singing the KYRIE ELEISON. When it comes to the above quotation, we must carefully avoid a similar error. We must take into consideration the other paragraphs of that same document.

That same document says: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, under normal circumstances it should be given first place [*principem locum*] in liturgical services” (SC §116).

Clearly, then, in the mind of those who voted on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, **no contradiction exists** between giving “first place” to Gregorian Chant while at the same time “very much considering” the people’s full and active participation.

The same point could be made vis-à-vis numerous conciliar statements: e.g. the strong recommendation for the pipe organ (SC §120); the special exhortation for polyphony (SC §116b); the mandate that the treasury of sacred music be “preserved and fostered with very great care” (SC §114); the ordinance saying congregations must “sing together in Latin” the Ordinary of the Mass; and so forth.

6th Article

“A dirty trick”

Those who hold the Church’s traditions in contempt were forced to use dirty tricks to promote their views. For instance, Vatican II clearly said (SC §36. iii) that the local bishops must:

“decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular language is to be used.” ⁵

That phrase (“whether, and to what extent”) is hardly something inscrutable; a child understands it easily.

But some perverted what the council mandated: e.g. in a memorandum dated 18 March 1966, Bugnini’s cadre brazenly added words which are not contained in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

114. The treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with very great care. ... **“solely [during] celebrations in Latin.”**

In that same memorandum, Bugnini’s cadre made this statement:

“There are two forms of celebration, one in Latin, the other in the vernacular.”

Bugnini’s assertion is a direct contradiction of countless Vatican II declarations. Indeed, CARDINAL ANTONELLI, appointed *Secretary of the Conciliar Commission on the Liturgy* by Pope Saint Paul VI on 4 October 1962, explained what Vatican II wanted regarding Latin:

“Certain parts of the Mass, such as the Canon, remain in Latin, while others, especially those directed to the people, such as the readings and the restored *Oratio fidelium*, can take place in the vernacular.”

To reiterate: Vatican II said the *thesaurus musicae sacrae* must be “preserved and fostered with very great care.” **It nowhere says** this mandate applies “solely to celebrations in Latin.”

5 If anyone doubts the meaning of “whether,” let him read more of the same document, taking note (SC §54) of how the word “may” is used: “In Masses which are celebrated with the people, a suitable place **may** be allotted to their mother tongue.” The council fathers then suggested that the readings and the “prayer of the faithful” might be fine spots to allow the vernacular. The *Congregation of Rites* made the situation crystal clear on 23 July 1964: “The great majority of the Fathers approved the various dispositions concerning a wider use of the vernacular **precisely because of** the existence of that first paragraph [SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM §36.i.] which ensured substantial preservation of the Latin, apart from a few particular cases (*salvo jure particulari*), such as the concession made to China.”

Alfons Cardinal Stickler, who served as a *peritus* (“expert”) for Vatican II, said during a 1999 interview: “I still remember very well how after several radical proposals a Sicilian bishop rose and implored the fathers to allow caution and reason to reign on this point, because otherwise there would be the danger that the entire Mass might be held in the language of the people—whereupon the entire hall burst into **uproarious laughter**.”

Archbishop Robert J. Dwyer, took part in Vatican II, wrote as follows on 26 October 1973: “Who dreamed on that day that within a few years, far less than a decade, the Latin past of the Church would be all but expunged, that it would be reduced to a memory fading in the middle distance? The thought of it would have horrified us, but it seemed so far beyond the realm of the possible as to be ridiculous. **So we laughed it off.**”

Just a year after SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM, the *Congregation of Rites* protested against those who would overpower Latin by too much vernacular at Mass. They said (on 23 July 1964) this would create an undesirable “paradox,” lamenting that if such were to occur: “Latin imposed as a basis would become an exception, and the vernacular, **which must be given a secondary place**, would occupy the main position.”

7th Article

“Both and—not either or”

Most Rev’d Archbishop Miguel Dario Mirando y Gómez participated in the Second Vatican Council. He was primate of Mexico, which (at that time) was the world’s largest archdiocese. It would be difficult to state the true situation better than he did on 26 August 1966:

“No one can reasonably find in the Council’s dispositions anything out of order, or any extreme opinions or tendencies, which restrict the function of sacred music exclusively to the congregational singing of the faithful or, on the other hand, which replace or eliminate the singing of the congregation entirely by the singing of the choir.”

8th Article

“Attaching one’s bottom lip to one’s top lip”

Saint Paul reminds us in Romans 10:17 that **fides ex auditu** (“faith comes by hearing”). If we’re speaking all the time, are we really thinking? If we’re talking all the time, are we really listening? If we’re chattering without ceasing, are we really praying? We must push back on the idea that everyone in the congregation—**at all times**—must be furiously busy with external activity. Although I am someone who loves congregational singing (and have dedicated my life to it), we should all carefully consider following words of the *International Association of Sacred Music* (founded by Pope Saint Paul VI on 22 November 1963):

“Saint Augustine tells us it was by hearing the Church’s sacred music that he was moved to sorrow for his sins. [...] A true and sincere listening to sacred music within the liturgy is a legitimate form of *actuosa participatio*, and we have a pastoral duty to guide the faithful to a genuine listening to such musical art. To eliminate the great music of centuries from our liturgy would be to set aside a pastoral tool of the greatest value.”

In this world of ours, it is often essential to *listen* first. A child who doesn’t listen for a long time cannot learn to speak properly. Indeed, MARY (but not MARTHA) *listened* at our Savior’s feet! In a particular way, our society eschews silence, and seems obsessed with talking, talking, talking—especially into machines. The ability to *listen* seems particularly vital at this moment.

We saw an example of this during *Sacred Music Symposium 2025*. The choir sang an 8-part setting of “Lead, Kindly Light” by Cardinal Newman, and it had a certain power. Nobody who attended would say it would have been

better to recite the lyrics, rather than have the choir sing that moving hymn.

9th Article

“A gentle suggestion about the memorial acclamation”

In 1967, when the bishops were asked⁶ whether to suppress the phrase “Mystérium fidei” in the Consecration formula, they overwhelmingly voted to **retain** it. Somehow this phrase was later changed into the MEMORIAL ACCLAMATION, but conflicting⁷ reasons are given for why this change was made.

The ENTRANCE CHANT for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time famously says: *plorémus ante eum qui fecit nos* (“let us **weep** before the God who made us”). Many Catholics—and I am no exception—become very emotional at the Consecration. They are also (rightly) very deep in prayer at that moment. To force congregations, at this solemn moment, to immediately ‘hop’ to external, physical activity by singing the MEMORIAL ACCLAMATION seems wrong. I hope that someday this can be changed, especially since our tradition for 1,600+ years has been the silent Canon. It’s worth remembering that when the ‘dialogue’ Mass was approved, the *Congregation of Rites* (in a 1935 answer to a *dubium*) said local bishops must decide whether to allow it, since “the proposed practice, though in itself praiseworthy, [may] cause disturbance rather than further devotion.” That shows not every human being prays the same way, as we will discuss below.

10th Article

“The pendulum swings”

Throughout church history, the ‘pendulum’ swings back-and-forth. What I’m suggesting is a moderate approach to *participatio actiosa*. I’m against a fanatical insistence that congregations mindlessly sing **everything**, as if the Holy Mass were a vocal concert.

Please notice I’m not suggesting that we return to the days when POPE LEO XIII ordered the Rosary to be said during Holy Mass. In spite of whatever

6 Yves Chiron, *Reformateur de la liturgie* (2016) English transl. by John Pepino (2018) p. 131.

7 *La riforma liturgica* (1983), English transl. by Matthew J. O’Connell (1990): p. 455. Bugnini justifies this change because “the practice is native to the Eastern Churches”—but seems not to realize we aren’t Eastern Catholics: we are Latin Catholics.

personal preferences we may have, it can't be denied that POPE PIUS XI wrote on 20 December 1928 (in a document called *Divini Cultus*):

“It is most important that when the faithful assist at the sacred ceremonies ...

they should not be merely detached and silent spectators.”

No serious person would argue we should return to certain customs that existed before Vatican II. Consider the following, published in *Caecilia Magazine of Catholic Church Music*, 64: 4 (1937):

“During a Low Mass, there is usually time for four hymns—one from the beginning of Mass up to or through the Gospel, but certainly to be finished by or before the end of the Gospel Reading, so as not to interfere with or delay the making of announcements or the preaching of the sermon. A second hymn can be started at the Credo; another after the Elevation, and the last one during Communion, to end with the last Gospel for the prayers after Mass.”

11th Article

“Not everyone is the same”

I've made clear what I'm not saying. I'm **not** saying we should go back to singing vernacular hymns while the priest reads Mass *sotto voce* at the altar (which was an incredibly prominent practice in the United States, as countless books attest). The church wants us to be more involved in the Mass.

On the other hand, consider the words of POPE PIUS XII in his famous encyclical (*Mediator Dei* §108):

Many of the faithful are unable to use the Roman missal even though it is written in the vernacular; nor are all capable of understanding correctly the liturgical rites and formulas. So varied and diverse are men's talents and characters that **it is impossible** for all to be moved and attracted to the same extent by community prayers, hymns, and liturgical services. Moreover, the needs and inclinations of all are not the same, nor are they always constant in the same individual. Who, then, would say, on account of such a prejudice, that all these Christians cannot participate in the Mass nor share its fruits? On the contrary, they can adopt **some other method** which proves easier for certain people; for instance, they can lovingly meditate on the mysteries of Jesus Christ or perform other exercises of piety or recite prayers which, though they differ from the sacred rites, are still essentially in harmony with them.

After all, do we really expect every human to pray in an identical manner during the Holy Mass? Father Adrian Fortescue earned a triple doctorate from an esteemed university when he was only 31 years old. He was also

an artist, calligrapher, composer, polyglot, amateur photographer, Byzantine scholar, adventurer, liturgist, theologian, expert on Beowulf, polyglot, and so forth. **Would any sane person** argue that Fortescue's participation during Mass will be identical to a man who dropped out of school in the 2nd grade, or a woman holding young children, or an elderly person struggling to breathe, or a teenager with a learning disability?

Throughout this pamphlet, I have argued for a **“both—and”** approach. Let the priest sing his part, let the deacon sing his, let the cantrix sing hers, let the choir sing its, and let the congregation sing theirs. But let us also make room for deep mental prayer, silence, adoration, and reflection. MUSICAM SACRAM (5 March 1967) says in §16c:

“The usage of entrusting to the choir alone the **entire** singing of the **whole** Proper and of the **whole** Ordinary, to the complete exclusion of the people's participation in the singing, is to be deprecated.”

So the documents (surprisingly) do permit the choir to sing the entire *Proprium Missae* and *Ordinarium Missae* excluding the congregation, although this is not considered the ideal.⁸

12th Article

“Feelings of guilt”

Anyone who's worked in the field of church music is all too familiar with the type of bullying that occurs constantly. We know *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was approved with 2,147 council fathers in favor and only 4 opposed. That document specifically says (§114) “choirs must be diligently promoted.” When the conscientious choirmaster attempts to form choirs, he naturally wishes to teach them **choral music**. That is to say, music directors wish to teach the choristers the “treasury of sacred music” (*thesaurus musicae sacrae*) which—according to Vatican II—must be “preserved and fostered with very great care.” Indeed, Vatican II made the following statement (SC §114), which is utterly astounding:

“The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, **greater even than that of any other art.**”

⁸ Although some would rather cut off their right arms than admit it, this is the only viable option in extremely large cathedrals and basilicas, because congregational participation—except for extremely basic responses and acclamations—would necessitate such an unbearably slow, plodding tempo the *cantus* would cease to be a real melody; it would cease to be music.

But when choirmasters attempt to take seriously the council's injunctions, they're often bullied by people who lie about church documents. For example, on 25 March 2018 MOST REV'D DOUGLAS CROSBY published a document with certain commands. He said all musicians must obey these commands **"without exception"** (his words). But Bishop Crosby's document is full of errors, contradictions, and false assertions. For instance, Bishop Crosby claims that musicians'

"principal role is to lead the assembly in song. All music selected for the Sunday Eucharist and for celebrations of the Sacraments must enable the assembly to unite their voices in praise and thanksgiving."

His statement contradicts current legislation, as we have seen. Moreover, GIRM §103 specifically says: "The *schola cantorum* or choir exercises its own liturgical function." Bishop Crosby says, with regard to the ENTRANCE CHANT: "A song sung by the choir alone is not appropriate." But his statement contradicts current legislation. Indeed, GIRM §48 specifically says the ENTRANCE CHANT "may be sung by the choir alone." Bishop Crosby says, with regard to the COMMUNION CHANT:

"A hymn sung by the choir alone, or by a soloist, does not respect the nature of the Communion Chant. Likewise, hymns which do not relate to the mystery of the Eucharist and our Communion with the Lord, are not appropriate."

Not only does Most Rev'd Crosby's assertion contradict church documents (and the GIRM), it demonstrates **total ignorance** vis-à-vis the tradition of Communion antiphons going back 1,600+ years.

No choirmaster should ever feel **guilty** for teaching choir members real choral music: *Vatican II mandates precisely that*. Nor should a choirmaster accept the notion that choirs should only be taught basic, elementary, "congregational" pieces: Vatican II mandates the *thesaurus musicae sacrae*, ordering that it be "preserved and fostered with very great care" (SC §114).

May our Savior grant each of us the wisdom to know how best to proceed in our individual circumstances; when appropriate, may He give us the grace to bravely fulfill our vocation; and (most importantly) may He help us bear our cross so we can one day enjoy the Beatific Vision for all eternity.

