

THE EUCHARIST AS OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE PASCHAL MYSTERY THROUGH THE LITURGICAL SIGNS: Main Elements of Vatican II's Renewal Need Further Implementation

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Abstract: This article underscores certain historical and pastoral weaknesses regarding “participation” in Christ’s Paschal Mystery by the faithful at the celebration of the Eucharist. It offers a historical description of the value of the paschal signs and their key role in “active participation”. The analysis of the “paschal” understanding of the sacramental signs reveals the need for a renewed definition of “active participation” which goes beyond the external reforms, requires the biblical, kerygmatic and liturgical formation of all the faithful, and entails the conversion of the entire person into the Body of Christ.

Key Words: Liturgical reform, Vatican II, active participation, liturgical signs, Paschal Mystery, *Sacrosanctum concilium*

1. Introduction: Problems in Understanding the Centrality of Vatican II's Liturgical Teachings

As a pastor of US urban Catholic parishes for almost twenty years, I have observed the Church’s struggles in implementing the Eucharistic revival launched by Vatican II. Most of the difficulties and controversies in actuating the conciliar teachings stem from the fact that pastors, liturgists and faithful in general have focused on relevant but secondary issues of the liturgical reform like language, music styles, aesthetics, current societal issues, new liturgical books or personal preferences, instead of remaining centered on the foundational teachings of Vatican II, like Christ’s Paschal Mystery, the missionary nature of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), liturgical theology, or the essential role of Sacred Scriptures. More than sixty years after *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963; hereafter as *SC*), some of the most fundamental teachings of the liturgical constitution still remain foreign to the liturgical life of most of the faithful and almost unexplored by

academia. “The Paschal Mystery,” however, “is without a doubt the central theological concept of the liturgical renewal advanced at Vatican II” and “the interpretative key that unlocks the meaning of the whole reform.”¹ Vatican II was a pastoral council which did not present any new doctrinal teachings, but it definitely “contributed to the understanding of the Paschal Mystery in a number of ways,”² which guided and enlightened the path to the entire post-conciliar liturgical reform. The definition of the Eucharist as the “memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us”³ is a groundbreaking theological development which still today has not received enough attention in the fields of biblical, liturgical and pastoral theology. Thus Pope Leo XIV in one of the first liturgical teachings of his pontificate requested “a Christian and liturgical initiation that helps the faithful to understand, through rites, prayers and visible signs, the mystery of faith that is celebrated”.⁴

In this sense, Pope Francis has encouraged the rediscovery of the “theological sense” of the liturgy by “each one of the faithful”⁵ in order to withstand two “poisons” of “spiritual worldliness,”⁶ which in effect cripple the liturgical renewal fostered by Vatican II: “Gnosticism,” which “intoxicates us with the poison of subjectivism,”⁷ individualism, a search for satisfying one’s own feelings and aesthetic preferences; and “neo-Pelagianism,” which “intoxicates us with the presumption of a salvation earned through our own efforts,”⁸ just by following all the rules written in the liturgical books. The late pontiff underlines that authentic participation in the liturgical rites is not merely interior and spiritual, but also bodily, exterior, spatial, sensitive, ecclesial, and in time.⁹ In this sense, *SC* already emphasized the role of the sacramental signs in achieving such

¹ Rita Ferrone, *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium* (New York, NY/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 23.

² Jeffrey M. Kemper, “Theology of the Paschal Mystery in the Documents of Vatican II; Liturgy Notes”, *Liturgical Ministry*, 8, Winter 1999, 47.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on Divine Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), 47.

⁴ Pope Leo XIV, “Address to Participants in the Course for Diocesan Liturgical Pastoral Workers Promoted by the Liturgical Pontifical Institute ‘Saint Anselm’”, November 17, 2025 at <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/november/documents/20251117-pastorale-liturgica.html> [Accessed May 2, 2026]

⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter “Motu Proprio” *Desiderio Desideravi* on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God (June 29, 2022), 35. Hereafter as *DD*.

⁶ *DD*, 17.

⁷ *DD*, 19.

⁸ *DD*, 20.

⁹ Andrea Grillo, “Teologia Sacramentaria e Teologica Liturgica: Il Sorgere e L’affermarsi di un Nuovo Rapporto,” *Salesianum* 81 (2019), 640-1.

participation: “In the liturgy man’s sanctification is signified by signs perceptible to the senses.”¹⁰

The central link between the Paschal Mystery, the liturgical signs, and “active participation” of all the faithful needs to be rediscovered. Both the liturgical abuses and lack of reverence on the one hand, and the return of many Catholics to the Traditional Latin Mass on the other, denote a clear misunderstanding of the meaning of these three foundational elements of the Council’s liturgical reform by many in our pews. To address these concerns, in this article, I first study how the Church has viewed the “making present” of Christ’s Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist throughout history. The first Christians until the early Middle Ages kept the manifestation of Christ’s death and resurrection (the Christian Passover) through the sacramental signs as the vital sap for the entire assembly’s participation in the Eucharist. While preserving the same faith, the medieval and modern periods witnessed a decline in the “paschal” or “resurrection” expressions of the Eucharist, and their rediscovery by Vatican II was meant to lead the faithful to authentic immersion in the sacred mysteries. Secondly, I outline the early Church’s approach to the Easter signs in the Eucharist, the different view of them during the medieval period, and the Council’s renewed perspective on the theological sense of the sacramental signs, especially as it is expressed in the current *Roman Missal*. Given the widespread misunderstandings of the meaning of the term “active participation,” I then offer a historical overview of such a central element, which drove the entire liturgical renewal of the 20th century concluding in SC. I will then offer some conclusions that may assist us to obtain an updated understanding of “active participation” towards a more fruitful and meaningful experience of the Eucharist.

2. Main Historical Approaches to the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist

To recover the theological sense of the liturgy, Christ’s Paschal Mystery, the fullness of God’s revelation in salvation history needs to become the focal point of our celebrations. St. Leo the Great defined the liturgy in these very same theological terms: “What was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries (*sacramenta*).”¹¹ Our immersion in Christ’s salvific mystery, in his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven at the Eucharist is Vatican II’s greatest gift. The theologians of the *ressourcement*

¹⁰ SC, 7.

¹¹ Leo the Great, Sermo 74.2 [*De Ascensione*] in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, ed. J.P. Migne, Series Latin [Paris, 1844–1864] vol. 54, 398.

in the first half of the twentieth century were interested in retrieving the “sources” of the Catholic Tradition, especially those of the Church Fathers. However, their primary concern was not to do archeology, to find ancient texts and practices, but to apprehend anew and “convert” to the true source of the Church’s faith: Jesus Christ himself. And the first Christian source was the Scriptures, that is, encountering Jesus Christ in the proclamation of the Word of God in the Mass. The risen Christ announces the mystery of his Passover in his Eucharistic meal with the disciples on the road to Emmaus: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Lk 24:26).¹² We see Peter preaching the Good News of Christ’s death and resurrection in the Cenacle on Pentecost day: “This Jesus, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up” (Acts 2:23b-24a). “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (2:36). This “kerygma” constitutes the core teaching, life and liturgy of the apostles and the Early Church. St. Paul interprets the Eucharist in terms of Christ’s Paschal mystery as well: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above” (Col 3:1). The first Christians did not go out to preach a doctrine or belief in “immortal life,” but what they had experienced in themselves, “that in Christ the new life has already begun, that he is Life Eternal, the Fulfillment, the Resurrection and the Joy of the world.”¹³

The term “Paschal Mystery” refers to “[Christ’s] blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension,”¹⁴ and derives from two realities intrinsically linked to the celebration of the liturgy: in Greek, *pascha* and *mysterion*. *Pascha* comes from the Hebrew *pesach*, Israel’s liberation from the slavery of Egypt. It carries profound existential and dynamic connotations within it: the angel of God “passed over” the Israelites who had marked their houses with the blood of the lamb, and sacrificed the lamb and ate the unleavened bread of haste (see Ex 12:1-14); the “passing through” the Red Sea out of Egypt (see 14:15-31) and into the Sinai, the place of the Covenant with God; and the “crossing” of the Jordan from the desert into their own land (see Jos 3:14-17). The *pesach* “was a sign of victory over physical death and the act by which God would set the Israelites free.” and also the night of liberation, which they celebrate

¹² The US Mass Lectionary uses the translation of the *Revised Edition of the New American Bible* (NABRE, 2011). All subsequent scripture quotes will be taken from this source.

¹³ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2018), 128.

¹⁴ SC, 5.

¹⁵ Kemper, “Theology of the Paschal Mystery,” 46.

“commemorating the *pesach* with the *pesach*.”¹⁵ This commemoration is the “memorial” of God’s works of salvation, which both in the Hebrew *zikkaron* and in the Greek *anamnesis*, renders the faithful contemporaries of the divine salvation, because the same saving events of the past are brought to the here and now of the liturgy as a guarantee of God’s action in the future. The second element is the *mysterion*, which could be translated into Latin as *sacramentum*. Hence the “Paschal Mystery” can be translated as the “paschal sacraments” or the “paschal signs” which give us Christ’s salvific actions. Christ’s saving event have “been made accessible to the faithful through the liturgy,”¹⁶ that is, through the liturgical signs. St. Paul uses the term to denote God’s plan, once hidden, but now fully revealed to all in Jesus Christ. God “has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time” (Eph 1:9-10). The early Christians did not understand the “mystery” as something hidden or unfathomable, or to be solved upon investigation, but as God’s will, revealed and made accessible through faith in Christ’s death and resurrection. The Paschal Mystery is the inexhaustible riches of Christ’s fulfillment of the Jewish *pesach*. Odo Casel (1886-1948) wrote extensively about the concept of the Paschal Mystery, in the first half of the 20th century¹⁷ arguing that the “mystery that Christians enter through the liturgy” is not just Christ’s death on the cross, but “the whole of his death, resurrection, and glorification.”¹⁸

The Paschal Mystery is central for the understanding of the Eucharist present in the Fathers of the Church – an understanding that requires the integration of liturgy, theology, and Christian life.¹⁹ Around 160 AD, Melito of Sardis’ homily at the Easter vigil is the first one to use the term *Mysterium Paschale*, recognizing in Jesus’ life and death the final and eternal fulfillment of the sacrifice of the Jewish Passover lamb:

Come all families of people, adulterated with sin, and receive forgiveness of sins. For I am your freedom. I am the Passover of salvation, I am the lamb slaughtered for you, I am your ransom, I am your life, I am your light, I am your salvation, I am your resurrection, I am your King.²⁰

¹⁶ Daniel Eusterman, “The Paschal Mystery: ‘Truly Right and Just’ – a Study of the Central Sacramental Reality of the Liturgy - Adoremus.” *The Paschal Mystery Truly Right and Just: A Study of the Central Sacramental Reality of the Liturgy*, Adoremus, March 9, 2024, adoremus.org/2024/03/the-paschal-mystery-truly-right-and-just-a-study-of-the-central-sacramental-reality-of-the-liturgy/. [accessed June 4, 2025]

¹⁷ Cf. Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship: And Other Writings*. Burkhard Neunheuser, ed. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962).

¹⁸ Ferrone, *Liturgy*, 23-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ Cf. Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, 103, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, in *Popular Patristics Series*, Number 20, ed. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 65-6.

Christ's Passover is the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover and the entire Bible. His victory over death and sin is the heart of the Roman Eucharistic prayer in *The Apostolic Tradition*, dating from the end of the third century or the very beginning of the fourth:

When Jesus Christ was handed over to voluntary suffering, in order to dissolve death and break the chains of the devil and harrow hell and illuminate the just and fix a boundary and manifest the resurrection, he took bread, and, giving thanks to you, he said: take, eat, this is my body which will be broken for you. Likewise with the cup saying: this is my blood, which is poured out for you. Whenever you do this, you perform my commemoration. Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer you bread and cup, giving thanks to you because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you as priest.²¹

At Antioch in 387, St. John Chrysostom preached that “the Pasch (Easter) is one thing; the Forty Days (Lent) another. Whereas the Forty Days are celebrated only once a year; the Pasch is celebrated three times a week, sometimes four times, or even as often as we wish.”²² St. Ambrose of Milan says in his *De sacramentis* (ca. 390) to the recently baptized: “You hear it said that as often as the sacrifice is offered, the Lord's death, resurrection, and ascension are signified, as well as the forgiveness of sins.”²³ And St. Leo the Great sets the imprint of the Paschal Mystery, Christ's death and resurrection, at the center of the Eucharistic celebration. In his homily on March 19, 452 (Wednesday of Holy Week), he says: “Sharing in the Lord's Body and Blood does nothing else but that we become what we receive, and we carry everywhere, in body and in spirit, him in whom and with whom we have died, have been buried, and have risen.”²⁴ The oldest preserved Mass lectionary in the West is the *Lectionary of Wolfenbüttel* (c. 500), which starts the liturgical year with the Easter Vigil and ends with Holy Saturday morning.²⁵ We are before the vestige of the most primitive understanding of liturgical time: everything originates with

²¹ *Apostolic Tradition*, 4:8-11, in *On the Apostolic Tradition: Hippolytus*, ed. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, 2nd edition (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015), 78.

²² John Chrysostom, *Homilies Against the Jews*, 3, 4, in *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, ed. Lawrence J. Johnson, vol. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 193.

²³ Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*, V, IV, 25, in *Worship in the Early Church*, ed. Johnson, vol. 2, p. 63.

²⁴ Leo the Great, *Sermon 12 on the Passion*, VI, in Johnson (ed.), *Worship in the Early Church*, vol. 3, p. 138. See Juan Antonio Pascual de Aguilar, “El misterio pascual según San León Magno,” *Revista Española de Teología*, 24, 3 (1964), 306: For St. Leo, the Eucharist makes present “incorporation into Christ in the mystery of his death and resurrection in order to have a new and regenerated humanity ‘speaking of the Lord.’”

²⁵ Germain Morin, “Le Lectionnaire Palimpseste de Wolfenbüttel”, *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 51 (1937), 10.

Christ's death and resurrection. The second oldest known lectionary in the West is the *Epistolarity of Capua* written c. 545 in which the liturgical year begins with Advent instead.²⁶

Different historical and cultural factors will determine a progressive obscuring of both the "paschal" and "mystery" elements along the course of history in favor of the representation or dramatization of Christ's physical Passion. The Carolingian liturgists of the 9th century speak of the Eucharist as the repetition of Christ's Passion, to highlight its sacrificial nature, without much mention of the resurrection. Paschasius Radbertus affirms: "Daily is Christ mystically offered on our behalf, and the passion of Christ is daily presented in the mystery".²⁷ We clearly see this "obscuring" in the artistic expressions of the crucified Christ within the liturgical context. From a lack of representation of Christ on the cross until the 5th century, we witness a shift from the representation of a living Christ reigning victorious on the cross in the early Middle Ages, to a focus on Christ's sacrifice as the sinless Victim, as the expiation of human guilt, during the Late Middle Ages.²⁸ Such an emphasis on Christ's sufferings corresponds to the liturgical emphasis on dramatization and penitential devotions during the later medieval period.

In the first half of the 20th century, the works of Odo Casel, Lambert Beauduin²⁹ and Louis Bouyer³⁰ advanced the centrality of the Paschal Mystery and the Sacred Triduum. Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* (1947) pointed out that Christ's "bitter sufferings constitute the principal mystery of our redemption."³¹ In his treatment of the sacraments, "the accent remained singularly and solely upon the Passion of Christ."³² Though in 1951, Pius XII restored the Easter Vigil, celebrated on Saturday morning since the 10th century, he still considered it as part of Lent, and not as the beginning of Easter. *SC* is the first appearance of the term "Paschal Mystery" so relevant in the Church Fathers as the Magisterium of the Church:

²⁶ Adrien Nocent, "The Roman Lectionary of the Mass", in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, ed. by Anscar J. Chupungco (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), iii, *The Eucharist*, 178.

²⁷ Paschasius Radbertus, *De corpore et sanguine Domini*, 9, 1, 2, in Donald L. Ehresmann, "Medieval Theology of the Mass and the Iconography of the Oberwesel Altarpiece", *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 60, no. 2 (1997), 220.

²⁸ Robin M. Jensen, "Crux Abscondita: The Late-Emerging Crucifix," in *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 72-96.

²⁹ See Patrick Regan, "The Centrality of the Paschal Mystery in the Missal of Paul VI", *Worship*, 90 (March 2016), 131. In 1923, Lambert Beauduin anticipated the necessary correspondence between the Paschal Mystery and the Sacred Triduum in his "Le mystère pascal vécu" ("Experiencing the Paschal Mystery").

³⁰ Louis Bouyer, *The Paschal Mystery: Meditations on the Last Three Days of Holy Week* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951).

³¹ Pope Pius XII, *Encyclical Letter Mediator Dei* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1947), 151 and 164.

³² Dominic M. Langevin, *From Passion to Paschal Mystery* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2015), 370.

The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved His task principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life.”³³ For it was from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth “the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.”³⁴

The notion of Christ’s passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and even the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church “is used countless times” in the conciliar³⁵ and post-conciliar liturgical texts.³⁶ Paul VI’s *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the New General Calendar* (1969) affirm that “the Paschal Mystery and its celebration constitutes the essence of Christian worship in its daily, weekly and yearly unfolding.”³⁷ He changed the days of the Triduum, from Thursday, Friday and Saturday of Holy Week, to beginning with the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, having its center in the Easter Vigil, and ending with Vespers on Easter Sunday,³⁸ renamed it as “the Sacred Paschal Triduum of the passion and resurrection of the Lord”; and declared it “the high point of the entire liturgical year.”³⁹ The Triduum is no longer part of Lent, but Lent prepares the faithful “to celebrate the paschal mystery.”⁴⁰ “In the Missal of Paul VI the word paschal in various of its forms occurs in 120 texts, many of which are repeated numerous times. In the pre-conciliar Missal of 1962 it occurs in 17 texts.”⁴¹ The Easter season is the second greatest novelty of the reform of the liturgical year. The 1969 *Universal Norms* declare that “the fifty days from Sunday of the Resurrection to Pentecost Sunday are celebrated in joy and exultation as one feast day, indeed as one ‘great Sunday.’”⁴² Easter is no longer one day, but fifty days. The Sundays *of* Easter are no longer called

³³ *The Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition*, “Preface I of Easter: The Paschal Mystery”, 2011. Equally kept in the 1570 *Missale Romanum*, in its *Praefatio Paschalis*: “Qui mortem nostram moriendo destruxit, et vitam resurgendo reparavit”.

³⁴ SC, 5.

³⁵ See *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 6, 12, 61, 81, 102, 106, 107, 109; *Dei Verbum* 4; *Lumen Gentium*, 7, 48; *Gaudium et spes*, 18, 21, 22, 37, 38, 48, 52, 78; *Ad Gentes* 5.

³⁶ Regan, “The Centrality of the Paschal Mystery,” 130.

³⁷ Paul VI, *Apostolic Letter “Motu Proprio” Mysteriorum Paschalis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1969), I.

³⁸ Paul VI, *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the New General Calendar* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1969), 19. Hereafter, UN.

³⁹ UN, 18.

⁴⁰ SC, 109.

⁴¹ Jeremy Driscoll, “Reviewing and Recovering Sacrosanctum Concilium,” *Origins*, 43, 29 (December 19, 2013), 483.

⁴² UN, 22.

⁴³ UN, 23.

Sundays *after* Easter, as in the 1962 *Roman Missal*.⁴³ In fact, expressions such as “paschal festival, paschal solemnity, paschal mysteries, or paschal joys,” so frequent in Paul VI’s *Missal*, are never used in the Tridentine *Missal* in the weeks after Easter, and it is because all those prayers come from a section of the 7th-century Old Gelasian Sacramentary under the title, *post clausum Paschae*.⁴⁴

The Paschal Mystery is both the culmination of Christ’s work and the beginning of our new life. The entire liturgical reform needs to be interpreted as the result of this christological re-centering of the Church. The Eucharist according to Vatican II is a true conversion to Christ’s Paschal life of total love to the point of death, raising us to the Father and his kingdom through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The eschatological aspect of the Eucharist is essential to Vatican II’s *Missal* and has not been sufficiently emphasized. “In church today, we so often find we meet only the same old world, not Christ and his Kingdom. We do not realize that we never get anywhere because we never leave any place behind us.”⁴⁵ The Eucharist implies “a real separation from the world,” a “conversion to another reality,” an ascension to “the fullness of the Church, as she gathers to meet the Lord and to share in his risen life.” “The early Christians realized that after this ‘liturgy of ascension’” they could be true witnesses of the Kingdom.⁴⁶

3. The Paschal Signs of the Eucharist

3.1. Why the liturgical signs?

Paraphrasing Leo the Great, Christ’s life and actions have passed into the liturgical signs.⁴⁷ His Paschal Mystery continues its saving activity in the Church in the liturgical assembly. The passage from our death into eternal life is given to us through our encounter with the risen Christ in the material elements of the Eucharist (assembly, words, listening, water, anointing, feeding, drinking, etc.). The liturgy is not an escape from this

⁴⁴ Regan, “The Centrality of the Paschal Mystery,” 136.

⁴⁵ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 37.

⁴⁶ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 35-7. See Robert Imbelli, “Remembering and Misremembering Vatican II”, *Church Life Journal: A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life* (December 9, 2021) in https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/remembering-and-misremembering-vatican-ii/?fbclid=IwAR1XRI8qQ9Dv31xxSwK42qxnt0aNhfq847xV8KdfcmRkSI3MwxFcfwTkNs#_ftnref16 [Accessed February 16, 2023]. Imbelli underlines the central effect of the transfiguring Paschal presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

⁴⁷ Leo the Great, *Sermo* 74.2.

⁴⁸ Kevin W. Irwin, “A Sacramental World—Sacramentality As the Primary Language for Sacraments”, *Worship* (2002), 76, 3, 198.

world, but a deepening of our experience of God's salvation in this world.⁴⁸ God has chosen to continue the history of salvation and to reveal himself through the sacramental signs instituted by Christ. The liturgical signs consecrate the world to God. After the Incarnation, time and space are in God's hands as means of his saving work. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

Sacramental signs. Since Pentecost, it is through the sacramental signs of his Church that the Holy Spirit carries on the work of sanctification. The sacraments of the Church do not abolish but purify and integrate all the richness of the signs and symbols of the cosmos and of social life. Further, they fulfill the types and figures of the Old Covenant, signify and make actively present the salvation wrought by Christ, and prefigure and anticipate the glory of heaven.⁴⁹

3.2. Historical developments of the value of the Eucharistic signs

The early Church evidenced great regard for the powerful role of the sacramental language to transmit divine grace. This approach was inherited from the liturgical tradition of the Jewish people, who in New Testament times already enjoyed a rich liturgical year, with liturgical assemblies at the Temple, the synagogue or the home. I point out two examples of the function of the Eucharistic signs, first in the *Letters* of Ignatius of Antioch from c. 90 AD, and secondly, in the synagogal Torah proclamation as it came to be formalized in the *Talmud* towards the beginning of the 6th century. In his *Letter to the Ephesians*, Ignatius says: "Gather more frequently in order to thank God and give praise. For when you gather often Satan's powers are overthrown, and his destructive work is destroyed by the unity of your faith."⁵⁰ The assembly is an essential sign which creates unity and exorcizes the Devil. He insists on this liturgical visible element: "Gather ... in perfect unity, breaking the same bread which is the medicine of immortality, and antidote so that one does not die but lives forever in Jesus Christ."⁵¹ The Eucharistic assembly is called "the breaking of the bread" representing Christ's death which gives us eternal life, that is, "perfect unity." *To the Magnesians*, he points out the importance of the altar as a sign of unity in Christ: "Come together, all of you, as one temple of God, around one altar, around one Jesus Christ."⁵² The visible sign of the altar effects God's salvation in the people. Together with the assembly, the

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), No. 1152.

⁵⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians*, XIII, in Johnson, ed., *Worship in the Early Church*, 49.

⁵¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians*, XX, in Johnson, 49.

⁵² Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Magnesians*, VI, in Johnson, 50.

bread, and the altar, Ignatius considers the importance of the cup in Eucharistic participation: “Take care, then, to participate in the one Eucharist, for there is only one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and only one cup to unite us with his blood, and one altar.”⁵³ The sacramental signs in Ignatius express God’s action passing his people from death into new life.

The Church inherited the biblical proclamation in the Eucharist from the synagogal morning liturgy on the Sabbath. It is interesting to study the parallels between synagogal and Eucharistic scriptural reading during the first three centuries of Christianity.⁵⁴ The rite of proclamation presents the reading as “making present” God’s revelation on Mt. Sinai during the people’s journey in the desert, concluding in the Covenant.⁵⁵ The reading begins with a procession and the “lifting of the Torah scroll” at the shrine in which it is kept, which is called “sacred ark”, like the Ark of the Covenant which carried the Ten Commandments, to the *bimah*. Just as the Ark of the Covenant was lifted up, so now the Torah scroll is carried in procession, “making present” the Exodus and God’s revelation to his people. During the procession, the faithful touch the Torah scroll with the fringe of the *tallit*, and kiss it, as a sign that they have a share in the Torah. The procession is immediately followed by the “Shema Yisrael,” prayed in common.⁵⁶ The *bimah* is elevated to signify Moses’ ascent to Mt. Sinai. The text is always chanted and a praise of God for the gift of Torah (*berakhot*) is said at the end of the reading. At the end of the proclamation, the scroll is lifted up again and displayed so that everyone may see the text. After some intercessory prayers, the cantor takes the Torah scroll into his arms again and bears it in procession back to the “sacred ark.” More is involved here “than reading an ancient text aloud.”⁵⁷ The liturgical signs continue God’s revelation on Mt. Sinai as the only true God and bring his salvation to our “today.”

The sacramental signs saw their function diminished when many factors, like the decline in the homily, biblical proclamation and the catechumenate, the lack of understanding of the liturgical language, and the loss of the communal sense of the Eucharist, led to a certain distancing of the faithful from the sacred actions and to a concentration of the rites around

⁵³ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Philadelphians*, IV, in Johnson, 50-1.

⁵⁴ See Felix P. Medina-Algaba, “‘The Treasures of the Bible Opened Up More Lavishly’ (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 51): An Historical Investigation into the Validity and Value of the Old Testament Mass Reading in the Roman Rite”, Unpublished PhD Thesis (Liverpool Hope University, 2025), 28-50.

⁵⁵ Ruth Langer, “From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai: The Emergence of the Synagogue Torah Service,” *Worship* 72, 1 (1998), 43-67. The Torah scroll is “clothed” with several ritual objects to show its royal dignity. These include a fabric cover (mantle), a belt, a breastplate, and a crown.

⁵⁶ Marco Benini, *Liturgical Hermeneutics of Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 200.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

the priest. By the 8th century, the Eucharist was considered more as an exercise of individual piety to obtain one's salvation than as an action of the entire Body of Christ.⁵⁸ This new form evolved into the multiplication and generalization of "private Masses" for individual needs in the 9th century, said in low voice, which prescinded from emphasizing the liturgical signs.⁵⁹ Ratramnus (800-868), in order to defend Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic species, argued that the sacraments act, not to reveal the saving mystery within them, but to hide it.⁶⁰ God wants to cover and veil his mystery through the sacramental signs.⁶¹ The separation between the faithful and the sacramental language moved them to search for their relationship with God in more individualistic religious practices symptomatic of our modern mentality.

The reemphasis on the sacramental signs to authentically participate in the Paschal Mystery came through the seminal studies of Romano Guardini (1885-1968), *Sacred Signs* (1911) and *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (1918). In *Sacred Signs*, Guardini perceived that modern man is not capable of the liturgical signs and called for liturgical formation on the symbolic language of the liturgy: "We need to be shown how, or by some means incited, to see and feel and make the sacred signs ourselves."⁶² For Guardini, the physical signs communicate spiritual realities to the soul and need to be understood by everyone. They are "capable of expressing a truth far more strongly and convincingly than can the mere word of mouth."⁶³ Paolo Tomatis has described Vatican II's acceptance of the human, corporeal, and sensitive dimensions of the rites and prayers as "the definitive rescue of sensibility" in the divine horizon of the celebrated mystery.⁶⁴ Though he observes a synesthetic link between word (to be heard) and gesture (to be seen, be touched, anointed and nourished), he also laments that the auditive code is privileged over the visible one (*signa sensibilia*) in *SC*. The bond of visible signs and words in the sacraments result fundamentally in Christian living:

⁵⁸ Xabier Basurko, *Historia de la Liturgia*. Biblioteca Litúrgica 28 (Barcelona: Centre de Pastoral Litúrgica, 2006), 223-5.

⁵⁹ See excellent Excursus in Cyrille Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources* (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 1986), 156-9.

⁶⁰ John D. Laurance, "The Assembly as Liturgical Symbol", *Louvain Studies* 22 (1997), 128.

⁶¹ Ratramnus, *De corpore et sanguine Domini*, ed. J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1954), VII, 34.

⁶² Romano Guardini, *Sacred Signs*, trans. Grace Branham (St. Louis: Pio Decimo Press, 1956), 10.

⁶³ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. A Herder & Herder Book (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 57.

⁶⁴ Paolo Tomatis, *Accende Lumen Sensibus: La Liturgia e i Sensi del Corpo* (Rome: CLV-Edizioni Liturgiche, 2010), 345. My translation.

Because they are signs, they certainly also belong under the heading of teaching. They not only presuppose faith; they also nourish it, strengthen it, and express it, both through words and through objects. This is why they are called sacraments of faith. It is true that they confer grace; but while they are being celebrated, they also are very powerful in opening people up to receive this same grace fruitfully, so that they can express properly their relationship to God and enact divine love.⁶⁵

Vatican II requested that “both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify.”⁶⁶ The Lord’s words and gestures “instruct,” nourish, strengthen, and express the faith of the assembly and immerse us into Christ’s Paschal Mystery who handed himself over to death for us. Thus the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* requests that the faithful may have access to the theological power of the signs:

299. The altar should be built separate from the wall, in such a way that it is possible to walk around it easily and that Mass can be celebrated at it facing the people, which is desirable wherever possible. Moreover, the altar should occupy a place where it is truly the center toward which the attention of the whole congregation of the faithful naturally turns.

321. By reason of the sign, it is required that the material for the Eucharistic Celebration truly have the appearance of food. ... The gesture of the fraction or breaking of bread, which was quite simply the term by which the Eucharist was known in apostolic times, will bring out more clearly the force and importance of the sign of the unity of all in the one bread, and of the sign of charity by the fact that the one bread is distributed among the brothers and sisters.

281. Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clearer expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the connection between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father.⁶⁷

In Pope Francis’ words:

The Liturgy is the priesthood of Christ, revealed to us and given in his Paschal Mystery, rendered present and active by means of signs addressed to the senses (water, oil, bread, wine, gestures, words), so that the Spirit, plunging us into the paschal mystery, might transform every dimension of our life, conforming us more and more to Christ.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *SC*, 59.

⁶⁶ *SC*, 21.

⁶⁷ *GIRM*, 3rd typical edition (2012), in <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/girm-chapter-5> [Accessed June 19, 2025]

⁶⁸ *DD*, 21.

4. Active Participation

4.1. *The need for active participation*

Achieving the “full, conscious and active”⁶⁹ participation of all the faithful was the goal of Vatican II’s liturgical reforms. At the end of the 19th century, the Church’s liturgy clearly needed renewal. For many Catholics, attending Mass was often understood as the fulfillment of an obligation that had little to do with their everyday lives. In the words of young Joseph Ratzinger, “the liturgy had become a rigid, fixed and firmly encrusted system ... out of touch with genuine piety ... [Where the people] were united to the priest only by being in the same church with him and by consigning themselves to the sacred powers of the eucharistic sacrifice.”⁷⁰ Shortly before retiring, Benedict XVI offered a good description of the situation before Vatican II and praised the advances of the liturgical renewal in achieving liturgical active participation of the faithful:

Until the First World War, the liturgy had remained, as it were, locked within the priest’s Roman Missal, while the people prayed with their own prayer books. ... But now there was a rediscovery of the beauty, the profundity, the historical, human, and spiritual riches of the Missal and it became clear that it should not be merely a representative of the people, a young altar-server, saying “Et cum spiritu tuo”, and so on, but that there should truly be a dialogue between priest and people: truly the liturgy of the altar and the liturgy of the people should form one single liturgy, an active participation, such that the riches reach the people. And in this way, the liturgy was rediscovered and renewed. ... Then there were the principles: intelligibility, instead of being locked up in an unknown language that is no longer spoken, and also active participation. Unfortunately, these principles have also been misunderstood. ... Only ongoing formation of hearts and minds can truly create intelligibility and participation that is something more than external activity, but rather the entry of the person, of my being, into the communion of the Church and thus into communion with Christ.⁷¹

⁶⁹ SC, 14.

⁷⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966, new edition 2009), 131-132.

⁷¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Parish Priests and the Clergy of Rome”, Paul VI Audience Hall (February 13, 2013). See https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130214_clero-roma.html [Accessed on March 6, 2023].

4.2. *Reintroducing Active Participation*

Such a renewal of “communion” between the liturgical actions and the entire lives of the faithful was prepared by the Liturgical Movement. St. Pius X (1835-1914) published the *Motu Proprio Tra le sollecitudini* (1903), in which for the first time in a magisterial document it was declared that the faithful should not be in the liturgy as mute spectators, but encouraged to “active participation”: “The faithful assemble for the object of acquiring this spirit from its foremost and indispensable fount, which is the active participation in the holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.”⁷² In the following years, Pius X favored frequent communion of the laity, who were used to attending Mass and not receiving Communion, and lowered the age of admission to Communion to seven years of age. In 1914, Lambert Beauduin (1873-1960) explained how the Church shapes us through the liturgy, which constitutes “the primary and indispensable source of true Catholic piety.”⁷³ In 1918, Guardini affirmed: “The liturgy does not say ‘I,’ but ‘We.’ ... The liturgy is not celebrated by the individual, but by the body of the faithful.”⁷⁴ “The faithful are actively united by a vital and fundamental principle common to them all. That principle is Christ Himself; His life is ours; we are incorporated in Him; we are His Body.”⁷⁵ Until this point, it was difficult for the faithful to follow the Mass, given that it was celebrated inaudibly, in Latin, and with the back of the priest towards them.⁷⁶ In 1921, Gaspar Lefebvre (1880-1966) published his *Missel Quotidien et Vespéral*, with the Latin text of the Roman Missal translated into French. Vernacular hand missals were consequently produced in all languages so that the faithful could follow what was happening during the Eucharist.⁷⁷ After World War II, Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) reduced the requirements of the Eucharistic fast to three hours, giving more access to the celebration of evening Masses with distribution of Communion, since it was no longer needed to fast since the day before. His encyclical *Mediator Dei*

⁷² Pope Pius X, *Motu Proprio Tra le sollecitudini* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1903), 1.

⁷³ Lambert Beauduin, *Liturgy the Life of the Church*, Virgil Michel, trans. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1926; 3rd ed. Farnborough: St. Michael's Press, 2002), 18.

⁷⁴ Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 36.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁶ Bernard Botte, *From Silence to Participation: An Insider's View of Liturgical Renewal* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1988), 2.

⁷⁷ Cf. Pope Alexander VII condemned Joseph De Voisin's 1660 Roman Missal according to the Norms of the Council of Trent, translated in French, with the explanation of all the Masses and their ceremonies: “They have come to degrade the most sacred rites, lowering the majesty of their Latin language, and exposing to the eyes of the people the dignity of the divine mysteries.” (Bull *Ad aures nostras*, January 12, 1661).

(1947) underlined that the Mass is not simply “celebrated” by the priest, but the whole people is properly the “celebrant” of the Mass:

The sacred liturgy is the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father, as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members.⁷⁸

In this sense, Pius XII offered a general permission for the so-called “Dialogue Masses,” in which “all who are present” at Mass, and not just the altar server and the choir, answered the liturgical responses and sang the hymns.⁷⁹ In 1951, the rubrics for the renewed Easter Vigil mention “the people” for the first time in the Roman Missal: “The ministers with the cross and holy water and incense stand either at the entrance or in front of the church or the vestibule, wherever *the people* can best follow the sacred rite (*ubi populus ritum sacrum melius sicut possit*).”⁸⁰ Another novelty is that now, after the deacon finishes the *Exsultet*, “*celebrans et ministri, clerus et populus, sedentes auscultant*” (“celebrant and ministers, clerics and people, sit and listen”)⁸¹, instead of having the celebrant read the readings in a low voice at the altar. One of the main principles that guided Pius XII’s revision of the Holy Week in 1955, which moved the celebration of the Sacred Triduum to the afternoon, was to “allow the Christian people, as far as possible, to attend, understand, and take an active part in the rites so that the liturgy may be, in a real sense, the center of their Christian life.” In addition, the instruction that accompanied the revised rites stressed, for the first time, that the priests should not only comply with the rubrics, but actually *understand* the meaning of the revised rites.⁸²

⁷⁸ Pius XII, *Encyclical Letter Mediator Dei*. November 20, 1947 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1947), 20. Hereafter as *MD*. This concept is masterfully developed in Yves Congar, “The Ecclesia or Christian Community as a Whole Celebrates the Liturgy”, in Yves Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar*. Paul Philibert, trans. And ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 15-67.

⁷⁹ These celebrations with a strong liturgical piety fostered by the Liturgical Movement including dialogue Masses and vibrant congregational singing formed the spirituality of young Joseph Ratzinger. See his reminiscences in Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 18-20.

⁸⁰ *Missale Romanum Ex Decreto Sacrosancti Concilii Tridentini Restitutum Summorum Pontificum Cura Recognitum. Editio juxta typicam* (Novi Eboracum: Benziger Brothers, 1961), 184 in Rubric, No. 3. My own translation.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 196. Rubric, No. 15.

⁸² Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Decree Maxima Redemptionis Nostrae Mysteria* (November 16, 1955), AAS 47 (1955): 838-847, in Thomas Richstatter, *Liturgical Law: New Style, New Spirit* (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 36.

4.3. *Towards a deeper meaning of active participation*

Those major developments towards “participation” allowed Vatican II to call Catholics to move beyond the previous emphasis on sacramental validity, which was necessary during the post-Tridentine period, due to the liturgical errors fostered by the Protestant Reformation,⁸³ by stating that “something more is required than the mere observances of the laws governing valid and lawful celebration.”⁸⁴ This “something more” is undoubtedly the faithful’s “taking part,” “being fully immersed” in the sacred mysteries, mentioned twenty-five times in *SC*.

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” (1 Pe 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.

In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.⁸⁵

After Vatican II, the liturgical reform placed most of its emphasis on the external dimensions of “participation,” whereas ongoing catechetical formation on its deeper paschal, theological, biblical and ecclesiological effects was generally missing. The general norms of the reform, heavily centered around the principle of “active participation”: “Communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private.”⁸⁶ “People should be encouraged to take part using acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes.”⁸⁷ “The rites should be clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people's powers of comprehension.”⁸⁸ “Since the use of the vernacular frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended.”⁸⁹ “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened more

⁸³ See Marcel Metzger, *History of the Liturgy: The Major Stages*. Madeline Beaumont, trans. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 122-38.

⁸⁴ *SC*, 11.

⁸⁵ *SC*, 14.

⁸⁶ *SC*, 27.

⁸⁷ *SC*, 30.

⁸⁸ *SC*, 34.

⁸⁹ *SC*, 36. 2.

lavishly.”⁹⁰ “The homily is to be highly esteemed as part of the liturgy itself and not be omitted.”⁹¹ “The prayer of the faithful is to be restored.”⁹² The faithful’s Communion “from the same sacrifice is strongly commended,” “Communion under both kinds may be granted, not only to clerics and religious, but also to the laity.”⁹³ But these external reforms were meant to lead Catholics to an authentic offering of themselves to the Father through Christ’s Paschal Mystery

“Active participation” does not entail giving Catholics more things to do in the liturgy, or having women and laity as “ministers,” or democratizing the Church, or keeping Catholics externally occupied and superficially involved. For the council, active participation was more than carrying out a liturgical role or office:

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body; they should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all.⁹⁴

The liturgical assembly as a sign of “union with Christ and with each other” is the true goal of Eucharistic “participation” according to Vatican II. The faithful at Mass are gathered and united together by God’s Word to make present Christ’s Paschal Mystery, not only individually, but also as the Church, as “the visible sacrament of Christ’s saving unity.”⁹⁵ “Participation” entails that Christ’s love to the point of death manifests his resurrection in the Eucharistic community and renders visible the gift of his Church as the first fruits of his Paschal Mystery.

⁹⁰ SC, 51.

⁹¹ SC, 52.

⁹² SC, 53.

⁹³ SC, 55.

⁹⁴ SC, 48.

⁹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*. November 21, 1964 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), 9. For an example of the renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II, see Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit*. Charles Underhill Quinn, trans. (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982); and A. G. Martimort, “The Assembly”, in A. G. Martimort, ed., *The Church at Prayer, vol. 1, Principles of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 89–111.

5. Conclusions

A quick reflection on the vitality of the three essential elements explored in this article within our Eucharistic assemblies points out three major factors currently depriving Catholics from a greater experience of “active participation”: 1) A notable lack of liturgical-“kerygmatic” catechesis accompanying the liturgical reform; 2) a minimalist and pragmatic approach to the bountiful richness of the liturgical signs; 3) the rampant individualism and subjectivism with which we, post-modern Catholics, approach the Mass. The integrative nature of Christ’s Paschal Mystery has emerged in these reflections on the liturgical renewal. Its existential, anthropological, biblical and theological meanings exercise a transformative dynamism in the Eucharist, which results in an assembly imbued in Christ’s salvation. The liturgical reform needs to be interpreted in greater depth as a Christological re-centering of the Church, especially in Christ’s Paschal Mystery, the kerygma of the early Church. The Eucharist, according to Vatican II is a true conversion to Christ’s Paschal life of total love to the point of death, raising us to the Father and his eternal kingdom through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the historical coexistence of these liturgical elements has also been pointed out. It is not possible to separate our immersion in Christ’s Passover from its rich signs through which the entire person is buried and risen with him (see Rom 6:4). The witness of the early Church has evidenced an abundance of references to the faithful’s access to the liturgical signs, especially its sacramental view of the Eucharistic assembly that makes present the risen Body of Christ. In the Patristic times, the Body of Christ, in continuity with St. Paul, was understood to be primarily present in the assembly gathered and nourished by the Eucharist. Through the liturgy, the Paschal Mystery is *accomplished* in us: we suffer with Christ, rise with Him, and even experience his ascent into glory.⁹⁶ But in the Middle Ages, the Body of Christ began to be equated with the Eucharistic species themselves, not with those participating in the Eucharist.

Third, such a liturgical ecclesiology implies a deeper “paschal” understanding of our “active participation” in the Eucharist. “Participation” finds its roots in the New Testament use of the term “*koinonia*,” often translated as communion. St. Paul says in 1 Cor 10:16-17: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *koinonia* (communion) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a *koinonia* in the body of Christ?”

⁹⁶ Odo Casel, “Glaube, Gnosis und Mysterium,” *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 15 (1941), 251. My translation.

As there is one bread, so we, though many, are one body, for we all share in the one bread.” For Benedict XVI, “the renewal of the external forms, desired by the Council Fathers, was intended to make it easier to enter into the inner depth of the mystery ... so that through contact with Christ’s love, the love of his brothers and sisters for one another might also grow.”⁹⁷ For St. John Paul II, “this demands both a systematic catechesis of young people and adults and a great spirit of fraternity among all who gather to worship the Lord. It may be that this would be better done in smaller communities.”⁹⁸

“Active participation” requires a transfiguration of our entire lives into Christ’s visible signs according to God’s grace. We become what we receive: holy water that purifies the sins of the world, anointed ones who consecrate humanity to God the Father, Christ’s bread broken to nourish hungry souls, and his precious blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Christian participation in the “sacred actions” involves our true and total immersion into Christ’s cross, death, resurrection, and our ascension into heaven, through the power of his Holy Spirit. Such an appropriation of grace has been recently termed by David Fagerberg as “liturgical asceticism.”⁹⁹ In his view, participation in the liturgy is essentially *meta-noia*, “moving beyond our current mentality”: “the Trinity’s circulation of love turns itself outward, and in humility the Son and the Spirit work the Father’s good pleasure for all creation, which is to invite our ascent to participate in the very life of God.”¹⁰⁰

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⁹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Video Message for the Closing of the Fiftieth International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin* (2012), available at www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120617_50cong-euc-dublino.html [Accessed 7 March, 2023]

⁹⁸ John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Ontario (Canada) on their Ad Limina Visit*, May 4, 1999. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1999/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19990504_ad-limina-canada-ontario.html [Accessed 8 March, 2023]

⁹⁹ Fagerberg’s project of “liturgical asceticism” is a development of the work of Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) and Aidan Kavanaugh (1929-2006). See Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Portland, Maine: The American Orthodox Press, 1966); Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

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