

Cardinal Roger Mahony

# Participating Fully at Sunday Mass

An Adaptation of  
*Gather Faithfully  
Together: A Guide  
for Sunday Mass*

**A**s bishop of the Church of Los Angeles, I exhort you to enter into reflection with me on the Eucharist we celebrate each Sunday in our parishes. Pope John Paul II, in calling us to the Jubilee Year, praises the Second Vatican

individual and the whole Church” (*The Coming Third Millennium*, #20).

My hope is that we can fulfill this mandate by a singular and concentrated effort to strengthen Sunday liturgy.

Lacking that effort, we have no center, no

identity as the Body of Christ. With that effort, the renewal of every aspect of our Church life becomes possible.

It seems to me that only now are we getting glimpses of that wondrous experience when a parish lives by that full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy by all the faithful. The situation is unfortunately uneven. Only in some parishes have we seen the sustained effort from well-prepared leaders to work over many years toward a Sunday liturgy that is for the people of that



GENE PLAISTED, OSC

Council and says this: “The best preparation for the new millennium can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every

parish the nourishment they need, the deeds of word and Eucharist they cherish. But there are beginnings here, and these cause us both to rejoice and to focus on what can be learned.

The Jubilee Year calls out to us to take those gifts the Spirit raised up in the Church at Vatican II. Take them with the wisdom gained these last three decades. Come into the new millennium doing gospel deeds throughout all realms of human life because a compelling and contemplative celebrating of Eucharist is our doing and God's, Sunday after Sunday.

To fulfill the vision of Vatican II regarding participating in the Eucharist, I challenge all baptized Catholics to think of our own involvement in the following ways.



BILL WITTMAN

### Participation at Mass: Full, conscious, active

Come on Sunday knowing your dignity: In Baptism, you put on Christ. You are the Body of Christ. Vatican II, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, said that “full, conscious and active participation by all the faithful” is the “right and the duty” of all the faithful because of their Baptism (#14).

It has taken more than three decades for those profound insights to take hold. Most of us were satisfied to look for something less than what was intended: We were happy when a parish had good singing, and when lector and Commu-

nion ministries were done well.

But good singing and good ministry are not enough. You who are baptized have duties that are wrapped up in that kind of participation the Council called “full, conscious and active.”

**☀ Full participation.** This attitude brings us to the liturgy, body and soul, with all our might. It begins long before the liturgy in making sure that Sunday Mass is not just one more thing on our “must do” list. Catholics let the time of liturgy be first. They do not just keep the time of Mass from disruptions; they give it room

in their lives. They have some good habits: perhaps looking over the Scriptures, or fasting until Mass, or not distracting themselves in the early hours of Sunday. They come to Mass mindful of their responsibility—to themselves, one another and God. Just as they want the priest, choir and lector to prepare, they know that they too must prepare to be good members of the assembly.

Full participation also means that a baptized person does not mentally weave in and out of the liturgy. Our duty is not just to be present; our duty is to be fully present. The songs are for singing, the Scriptures for listening, the silence for reflecting, the intercessions for pleading, the eucharistic prayer for immense

thanksgiving, the Communion for every kind of hunger and thirst satisfied in partaking together of the Body and Blood of Christ and the dismissal for going out to love the world the way God does.

**☀ Conscious participation.** In addition, our participation is to be “conscious.” We must enter with great openness into the chant and song, the processions and gestures, the words and silences of the liturgy. “Conscious” participation is opening every part of ourselves—body, mind and spirit—to what we do at the liturgy. We stand consciously and with attention. If we reach out our hands to the Body and Blood of Christ, we do so with grace, mindful of our hunger and the world's hunger, and of God's goodness.

Another way to be “conscious” at the liturgy is to be aware of our Baptism. We come on the Lord's Day to the table of the Eucharist because we have been through the waters of Baptism. Because we died to our old selves and became alive in Christ, we gather on Sunday, not as isolated persons, but as the Church, with its diversity of cultures, languages and races. This is difficult for those accustomed to think of themselves as autonomous individuals—workers, taxpayers, citizens. But here, the liturgy is celebrated by the assembled Church.

Cultivate, then, your deep awareness that it is not so many individuals who are standing here singing, but the Church. It is not individuals who are coming forward to the table, but the Church. It is not even individuals who are going forth to live by the word they have listened to and the Body and Blood of Christ they have eaten and tasted. It is the Church going forth as a leaven in the midst of the world God loves. This is perhaps the most difficult part of the whole renewal.

**☀ Active participation.** “Active” is the third quality of the baptized person's participation. Please do not see “active” as the opposite of “contemplative.” Some of our activity at liturgy is contemplation. Part of the genius of the Roman rite is that it presumes a beauty on which our spirits can feast. If we have too often seen “active” as “busy,” consider the liturgy and see the wealth of silence, as well as the powerful reading of Scripture, and preaching and singing of psalms to engage our contemplation.



“Active” participation also calls us to attend to others, to a kind of presence. This is crucial to what Catholic liturgy is all about. Such attention to others has at least two manifestations.

First, we are here not to make our own prayer while each other person in the church at the same time makes his or her own prayer. We are baptized people standing with other baptized people. Our thanksgiving is in the Church’s thanksgiving. Our attention to God’s word is in the assembly’s attention. Our intercession is in the Church’s intercession. The mystery of our transfiguration in Christ is in the whole body of baptized people transfigured (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1136-1141).

To create solidarity, be attentive to where you take your place and set a good example. Go as close as possible to the eucharistic table. Go to the middle of the pew and sit next to somebody and make room for others next to you. The Body of Christ has to be visible, audible, tangible. Pope John Paul II recently called for bishops to attend to the quality of the signs by which the liturgy takes place, and he stressed that “the first sign is that of the assembly itself. . . . Everyone’s attitude counts, for the liturgical assembly is the first image the Church gives” (March 8, 1997 address to the French bishops).

Second, “active” participation means the awareness that at liturgy we never close out the larger world. The liturgy shows us gospel living and how to be in the world. Catholic morality, how we deal in justice and charity day by day with great and small matters, is to be encountered and uncovered from our active participation in the liturgy.



### Ministering to the assembly

Ministry is an area where the Churches in our country have taken the renewal of Vatican II to heart. It is clear that many ministries are best done by members of the assembly who have the talents and training to do them well.

The core of ministry is the *assembly*: Ideal ministers have been and continue to be exemplary assembly members in their full, conscious and active participation.

These people understand what it means to step forward and proclaim a reading, minister holy Communion or sing in the choir. Parishes might set a limit on the number of years a person serves in a ministry, asking that each person take off a year after four or five years in a single ministry. This limit would refresh people in their primary role as assembly members.

The best floor plans manifest the entire assembly as the body enacting this liturgy, so that the ministers come from the assembly rather than sit as a separate group. Many of us remember living with an understanding that the liturgy was simply the work of a priest. Now we have begun to grasp in what way the assembled Church, the Body of Christ, celebrates the liturgy together with the presider. What, then,

is the ministry of the ordained priest at Sunday Mass?

In our Catholic tradition, the one who is called by the Church to the order of priest is to be in the local parish community as the presence of the bishop. The bishop remains always for us in a direct relationship with every parish of the diocese. He is also our bond with the Catholic Church through the world and the Church of all the ages. But the bishop, since the early centuries of the Church, has laid hands on other worthy

# Sunday

## The Lord's Day

At the head of our calendar stands Sunday, still called by us the Lord’s Day, the First Day of creation, the Day when Christ defeated death and the Spirit blew upon the disciples (*Catechism*, #2174-2175). It is above all the day when we assemble. St. Justin tried to explain to the non-Christians in Rome what Christians were all about:

“On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writing of the prophets are read as long as time permits.

“Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution and reception of the consecrated elements by each one takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. . . .

“We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead on the same day.” (St. Justin, *Apology*, 2nd century, 67:3-5, 7. Selection from *Gather Faithfully Together*, #19)

members of the Church and sent them to be his presence with the scattered communities.

On Sunday, the one who presides, the ordained priest, comes not only as other ministers do, from the assembly, but also comes as the one who “orders” this assembly, who relates this assembly to the bishop and to the larger Church. True to our Catholic soul, we understand our Church bonds to be more flesh and blood than theory and theology. Here, in this human being, is our bond with the bishop and with the other communities throughout the world and the centuries.

## Steps you can take

**I** will be asking priests and others in leadership in my archdiocese to begin preparing themselves and the parishes to make much progress by the year 2000 in our Sunday liturgy. Here are several habits that each churchgoing Catholic can begin to cultivate that will bring us together into a life-giving liturgical practice Sunday after Sunday.

**1. Become people who worship in the midst of the Sunday liturgy.** Know which Gospel and New Testament letters we are currently reading on Sundays, and use these for daily reading. Bring to the prayer of intercession on Sunday all that you pray for; take from it persons to be remembered daily by you; when you hear the news of the community and the world, hear it as a Christian who must in prayer lift up the world’s needs.

Mark with prayer your morning rising and your evening going to bed: the Lord’s Prayer certainly, but also some song or psalm from the songs and psalms of Sunday liturgy in your parish.

**2. Become people who prepare themselves for Sunday liturgy and people for whom Sunday liturgy is preparation for the week.** Seek little ways that can help you make the Lord’s Day as much as possible a day when liturgy has room. Find some habit for Sunday morning that helps you anticipate being together as a Church to do the liturgy. Find just one steady practice that makes you stretch toward the Reign of God we glimpse at Mass: It might be a way to make more real the collection that happens on Sunday for the Church and the

## UPDATE

### Question Box

- 1. What makes Sunday Mass special for you?**
- 2. How do you try to participate more fully at Mass?**
- 3. How can we carry the Mass with us into the world?**

poor; extending the peace of Christ that you receive each Sunday to others in need of that peace; or fasting from food or distractions and so becoming thoroughly hungry for God’s word and the eucharistic banquet.

In ethnic communities we find many examples of practices that resonate with the Sunday liturgy, such as the blessing of children that is so much to be praised in Hispanic families.

**3. At the liturgy, be the Church.** Know the awesome responsibility you share for making this liturgy! Do not hide; do your private praying in the other hours of the week. Welcome one another, be at peace with one another. Sit together. Sing songs from your heart. Do not be afraid to show in your eager attention that you are hungry for God’s word when the readers read, hungry for Christ’s Body and Blood when you come forward in holy Communion. Give thanks and praise to God by your great attention in the eucharistic prayer. Keep your eyes open to one another and do everything you can to build up the Church, the Body of Christ. If the presider or homilist needs help, do not criticize—help.

**4. Apart from the liturgy, be the Church.** Remember we are always the Body of Christ, always in communion with one another. Know that you can ask for help from one another. Let others know that. In the simplest deeds of daily life at work or at home, be conscious of this life we share in Christ, of its joy and its hope. Do not set yourself as separate from others, but understand that we who are the Church are one with others. In us, God is calling and blessing and sanctifying the world God loves. Look at the liturgy as a remote preparation for your

week. Listening to God’s word on Sunday morning is preparation for the listening we do for God’s word in our lives all week. The thanks we proclaim at the eucharistic prayer is a preparation for thanks over all tables and all meals, and also over all. The common table of holy Communion is a preparation for looking at the whole world.

**5. Give thanks always.** Pray grace at meals even when you are alone in the traditional prayer of “Bless us, O Lord;” or a phrase as simple as “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God; it is right to give thanks and praise!” Sing when you are with others at table. If your morning and night prayer is not permeated with praise and thanks to God, enrich it with verses of psalms and prayers from our tradition. (For example, “We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory;” “*Te bendecimos, te adoramos, te glorificamos, te damos gracias por tu santa gloria.*” Or, “Blessed be God for ever!” “*Bendito seas por siempre, Señor,*” or any or all of Psalm 148.) Cultivate moments of contemplation even during the busiest day, when gratitude can flow from the goodness of a person, any element of creation or any good work of human making. ■

*Cardinal Roger Mahony is archbishop of Los Angeles, named cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 1991. Although he wrote this pastoral for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, it has been received widely as a gift to the universal Church. We encourage you to read the entire text of Gather Faithfully Together, available in English and Spanish both on the Web at [la-archdiocese.org](http://la-archdiocese.org) or in an attractive booklet from Liturgy Training Publications, 1800 N. Hermitage Ave., Chicago, IL 60622-1101, (800) 933-1800.*

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