Rethinking ‘active participation’ after a pandemic

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Abstract
This article argues that the reimagining of Christian worship during the coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2020 calls for a consequent repositioning of the term ‘active participation’ in worship. It argues that the various gifts and capacities of a dispersed worshipping community point to kinds of participation in typical ‘in-person’ worship that are often overlooked. Reference is made to Paul’s theology of the members of the body of Christ and to the practice of music.

Keywords
digital, liturgy, music, participation, worship

The Church of England’s contemporary-language liturgical book Common Worship notes that Holy Communion is:

celebrated by the whole people of God gathered for worship. The ministry of the members of the congregation is expressed through active participation in the words and actions of the service.¹

The use of the term ‘active participation’ here echoes its use in Sacrosanctum Concilium,² the first document to be promulgated by the Second Vatican Council and arguably the most influential text on Christian worship of the last century. The Council argued that:

all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation . . . which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy . . . [Such participation] is the aim to be

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considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.

Eliciting active participation of this sort should be the goal of those with the cure of souls in ‘all their pastoral work’, with the assumption that the pastors themselves, appropriately prepared for the task by good liturgical education during their formation, ‘thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, [would] undertake to give instruction about it’.

But what should ‘active participation’ really signify? The Church of England Liturgical Commission, glossing the description of the Eucharist cited above in its landmark document *Transforming Worship: living the new creation*, helpfully observed that active participation refers not only to the particular actions by lay and ordained ministers, nor merely to the actions and vocalizations made by the faithful, but also ‘to the whole-hearted prayerful engagement of each worshipper with the worship that is taking place’.3 This is a helpful rejoinder to some of the prevailing narratives about active participation: namely, that it is most helpfully manifested by vocalization, kinaesthetic responses and collective acts by the faithful.

Whatever our definition of active participation, but especially if physical and sensory experience and contribution are seen as important, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised some specific issues to prominence. This article makes an appeal to re-think and expand our typical assumptions about participation in the liturgy, preferring to avoid for the moment significant issues such as the valid consecration of the Eucharist mediated by technology. Others are engaged in that particular task.4 In what follows, I suggest that a radical reconsideration of ‘active participation’ is invited by the current situation, in which the traditional shape of most worshipping communities has been arrested by enforced dispersion and also by a new openness to expanded kinds of ‘realized ecclesiology’. This need to re-evaluate the late twentieth-century discourse of liturgical participation has long been felt, but it is carried forward in the light of a continuation of ‘blended’ worshipping communities, whose members may relate to one another in different physical and temporal ways.

What have we learned about liturgical participation (in general) from worship during the pandemic? This article reads the current state of affairs alongside familiar insights from Scripture as well as from the particular context of music (notable as the origin of the term ‘active participation’ in liturgical discourse), before renewing the plea of the Council Fathers for a revival of catechesis on worship addressed to the entire Christian people.

It is interesting that the history of the term ‘active participation’ as applied to worship does not begin with Vatican II, but with the 1903 *motu proprio* of Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini* (On Sacred Music), which states that the ‘first and indispensable source’ of the ‘true Christian spirit’ is ‘active participation [*la partecipazione attiva]*
in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church'.

Far from encouraging what later voices would term ‘creativity’ or ‘innovation’, *Tra le sollecitudini* encouraged the rediscovery and preservation of the Church’s historic musical tradition in the face of perceived Romantic decadence. The Council Fathers were not ignorant of this first use of ‘active participation’ (one that privileged a restoration of congregational familiarity with the rites and their music in an era when the faithful were normally to be found at their private, personal devotions during Mass) when they chose to employ the term to refer to the restoration of the liturgy in general. Yet some persistent critics have noted that in the working out of the Council’s intentions, the concept of participation experiences a complete volte face. As Joseph Ratzinger writes:

> The system of values that sociological language has formed constructs a new view of the past and the present, the one negative, the other positive. Thus, traditional concepts (also conciliar ones!) now appear as ‘mystifications’ for the purpose of ‘preserving a particular form of power’... [Thus it is seen that] the ‘primary value’ of a renewed liturgy is, we are told, ‘the full and authentic action of all persons’... Music proves to be the power that effects the cohesion of the group; the familiar songs are the identifying marks of a community, so to speak.

In a similar manner, Robert Sarah has observed that, since the realization of the conciliar reforms, the shape of the liturgy can easily tolerate, and sometimes perpetuate:

> an air of misplaced, noisy familiarity. Under the pretext of seeking to make access to God easy and approachable, some have wanted everything in the liturgy to be immediately intelligible... Under the pretext of pedagogy, some priests indulge in endless flat, horizontal commentaries. These pastors are afraid that silence in the presence of the Most High might disconcert the faithful.

Indeed, Ratzinger notes that ‘even some bishops think they are not being faithful to the Council if they pray everything just the way it is found... [A]t least one “creative” formulation must be inserted, regardless of how trite it may be.’ These criticisms, coming as they do from relatively conservative Roman Catholic voices, one of whom is credited with the term ‘the hermeneutic of continuity/rupture’, are strong-willed, but they represent a significant and unavoidable criticism of what has been described as a misinterpretation of the Council’s intentions.

The initial cessation of public worship in many countries as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic that began in early 2020 forced a wholesale cessation of typical Christian practices of gathering together to worship God, a ‘rupture’ in quite a fundamental way (see Matt. 18.20; Acts 2.42–47; Hebrews 10.24–25, etc.). Yet there were determined efforts to use technology to sustain or reforge the connections between members of Christian communities who would otherwise have been together. As these practices evolved in many cases from hasty
contingency arrangements to reasoned plans sensitive to local needs, various significant questions emerged that required more than a merely rapid response. Among them:

- Does it matter that we are physically present to one another when we gather to worship and pray? Is it important, when this is impossible, to be ‘present’ to one another in other ways?
- Is it important that our participation in the gathering happen ‘synchronously’ or can one speak of participating ‘asynchronously’ (for instance, by watching a recorded service)?

**The digital medium**

Marshall McLuhan, pioneer of media studies, famously coined the aphorism ‘the medium is the message’: it is so, ‘because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action… it is only too typical that the “content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium’.\(^{11}\) The classic example he gives, electric light, has no apparent meaning until it is used for a purpose: illuminating the darkness of the night to make possible various human activities, for instance. The internet, in the present situation, is the medium that makes gathering for worship possible, but in itself it is not neutral to proceedings. The medium here, as always, is not without its own function. McLuhan further suggested that, in contrast to the factionalism of print, ‘might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?’\(^ {12}\) This is a prescient suggestion with real significance at the present time.

Does the internet, then, impose a set of circumstances on worship as might the practice of worship in different cultures? Liturgical scholars are familiar with the principle of the ‘inculturation’ of worship – that is, the ‘creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures’.\(^ {13}\) This relationship takes many different forms. For instance, the Filipino ‘concept and value of leadership and solicitude’ indicates, for Filipino Catholic scholar Anscar Chupungco, that the president ought to receive Communion after all in the assembly have partaken, for ‘to eat last is not only a sign of urbanity and social grace … it represents service’.\(^ {14}\) There are certain limits, however, on the inculturation of worship. ‘If the theological content or the liturgical form is of divine institution, it may not be replaced with another content or form that will modify the meaning originally intended by Christ.’\(^ {15}\)

In a compelling thesis, Katherine G. Schmidt argues, through de Lubac and Chauvet, that ‘theologies of the Internet can provide means by which to critique the challenges facing the Church, such as suburbanization… [and] determine the importance of ancillary spaces for symbolic exchange crucial to the social life of
the Church’. In de Lubac, the social nature of the Church has implications for its ecclesiology as well as the discipline of the sacraments: the universal and timeless are subject to the exigencies of the present, and the Church ought to explore the truths of being social in a particular time and situation. In general, the establishment of the assembly is the model for social life. The ancillary spaces (including those constituted by the internet) ‘stretch out from the Church in concentric circles, made of the same “living stones” which are . . . most fully alive at the Eucharistic table’. They allow for the social practice of ‘that which is learnt in the liturgy’, in a ‘dense, extra-ecclesial social context for liturgical participation’. Schmidt argues that, in a similar way to the aspects of the parish neighbourhood that exist near to or at a distance from Christian life, these spaces (which can exist online) can ‘foster social relationships that incarnate the unity effected by the Eucharist in the liturgy’, where Christians can practise being members of the body. The Eucharist itself represents a sort of virtual communion, a ‘presence of absence’, uniting not only those who are physically present, but joined virtually with the whole of the body of Christ (all Christians in the world) and with the communion of saints (absence with respect to space and with respect to time).

For Teresa Berger, it seems a natural if perhaps misguided reaction to suppose that the active participation imagined in Sacrosanctum Concilium is not possible in an online context. Such an assumption exposes an unsatisfactory understanding of active participation:

Even in a technologically basic example such as online eucharistic adoration, the worshipper is not purely and passively receiving the image of a monstrance through a webcam on a screen . . . The more technologically sophisticated the online worship site is, the more varied and rich are the possibilities of participation.

For Berger, ‘[c]ontemporary theorizing of how people “view” and “receive” has moved away from a notion of passive reception to an appreciation of the active negotiation that happens in reception. A receiver is now seen as an active participant, and the range of active participation is magnified in computer-based interactivity.’ Berger also points out the fact that ‘traditional loci of authority’ either do not exist or are substantially diminished in their influence on the internet, and this is probably true for the basis of liturgical practice as well.

Online expectations may expose the ‘privileged norm or ideal person behind the conventional understanding’: the abstract self is seen to be ‘fixed, clearly definable, able-bodied, self-determining, neuro-typical, healthy, unencumbered’ and probably also male. It is important to note that ‘the physical presence of co-worshippers in and of itself does not guarantee liturgical community . . . [and] the Christian tradition certainly knows forms of liturgical belonging not shackled to physical co-presence’. But from what source come the differences between the ‘abstract self’ and real individuals?
The diverse properties of the body of Christ

The Apostle Paul uses the rich symbolism of the body to explain the relationship of the members of the Church with one another and with Christ, which is both an opportunity and a challenge. The analogy is at the heart of his thinking about Christian community and how it is constituted. The double sense of ‘body’ (translating σῶμα23) is used here to emphasize the connection between the bread that is actually shared and the community that partakes of it. James Dunn shows that this σῶμα is ‘a relational concept’, in that “bodiness”...enables individuals as bodies to interact with each other, to cooperate with one another’. It is this which allows Paul in Romans to beseech the brethren parastēsai ta σώμata hymŏn, to present (their) bodies – not their limbs or corpses, but themselves in their corporeality, ‘in the concrete relationships which constituted their everyday living’.24 The use of a metaphor involving parts of the body is long attested in pre-Christian texts. But Paul is distinct in saying that God is the cause of the diversity of the members and their particular relationships to one another, and also to say that they are all/each to use their gifts for the common good, rather than subordinating some of them ‘for the good of the whole’.25 A similar trope, comparable to 1 Corinthians 12, may be found in Romans 12:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12.4–6)

The Christian community, then, is characterized as possessing a relationality between its various members that emphasizes their oneness in spite of their differences – differences that include the geographical location of each member of the body. It should be clear from the Pauline account (delivered, of course, at a distance from the communities to which it was addressed) that God is the reason for the diversity of their gifts and capacities.

In the Eucharist, the epitome of Christian community action (writes John Zizioulas), ‘otherness of a natural or social kind can be transcended’.26 In fact, ‘otherness is inconceivable apart from relationship’ – the communion modelled by the persons of the Trinity ‘does not threaten otherness; it generates it’.27 The Church, famously, is the place where otherness is communion.28 In a wide-reaching and passionate argument that the Eucharist must ultimately be rediscovered at the heart of all Christian theology, Ralph McMichael shows that it is through the body of Christ gathered ‘that we are able to see the face of Christ in others; knowledge of the one Christ in the variety of members of his Body’.29 The location of the Eucharist ‘cannot be determined by geography, culture, institutions, language’.30
Listening as participation

One popular form of ‘active participation’ is, of course, music-making. Although public worship was permitted to resume in 2020, congregational singing at indoor services has remained impossible throughout the pandemic. For many Christians this has been a striking loss to their typical experience of worship (particularly where ‘worship’ means a set of songs), as a recent survey-based study of perceptions of congregational singing has confirmed. Even though some music-making of different types (mainly small choral forces and small worship groups) has been permitted as of Holy Week 2021, one key component is still seen to be missing: the congregational response in song to God’s word and sacraments. Vatican II saw music as superseding the other liturgical arts because the words themselves form part of the worshipping act, without which the act itself is impeded.

Yet in some worshipping communities, particularly cathedrals and other places where professional musicians work, there is also an established pattern of congregational participation through listening to music. This may often take the form of choral services (particularly Evensong) or, in other traditions, sets of songs with a strong emphasis on the affective experience, where the verbal contributions of worshippers are few indeed. Sometimes this kind of participation is explicitly signalled to worshippers. As a service sheet from Westminster Abbey puts it: ‘At Choral Evensong most of the service is sung by the choir on our behalf. We participate through our presence and our listening, that the words and the music might become a prayer within us and lift us to contemplate God’s beauty and glory.’

Within this model of participation, knowing the right words to say in the right places does not matter. The affective experience of the worshipper and their bodily and intellectual responses are not predetermined by conventions. Such participation does not require vocalization, movement or affirmation, or any of the other ‘normal’ forms of activity that many expect of ‘active participation’. Listening (which can be just as active and engaged as making a noise) should be the second challenge to traditional expectations of active participation, in concert with different modes of presence. Cathedrals and other churches that specialize in offering this kind of experience to worshippers can help us find the space and time to commend their merits, and to lead us to a fresh reading of ‘participation’ that includes all types of engagement.

An appeal for renewed catechesis

This article, reflecting on the experience of the coronavirus pandemic, has challenged commonly received understandings of ‘active participation’ in three perhaps obvious ways:

- The medium (which in the pandemic has been the ‘digital medium’, but might be the ‘physical world’ in other circumstances) is not a neutral actor in worship.
Care needs to be taken to offer types of worship that are sensitive to the capacities of the medium. Notwithstanding this fact, those who are simply ‘receiving’ a broadcast, apparently passively in terms of their outward contribution, have the capacity to be ‘active participants’ in it.

- The analogy of the members of the body of Christ, each with their own capacities, gifts and differences, is worth remembering: it is worth thinking carefully about the involvement of such members whose capacity to participate and means of participation are loci of considerable differences. Differences among Christians are God-given and point to their relationality.
- Music reminds us that a worshipper’s engagement with God through listening can be just as powerful as contributing to the making of noise.

If these insights are not perfectly clear to those who plan and enact acts of worship, it is worth remembering the desire of Vatican II in 1963 addressed to both clergy and laity that the faithful should be led to active participation. The importance of teaching about the worship of the Church, both to and by the clergy, is underlined throughout Sacrosanctum Concilium and in the Church of England’s own document Transforming Worship. Both the 1983 Code of Canon Law and the Canons of the Church of England require clerics to have an understanding of the forms of service they use, and for that understanding to be adequately developed before ordination.35 Yet the appeals for liturgical formation of clergy and laity have been largely unheeded, with the task in both cases usually delegated to overworked, under-formed parish priests. Merely presenting the Church’s rites in a vernacular language, or indeed in a contemporary idiom, or providing variety without consistency in the choice of liturgical text is not sufficient to enable ‘active participation’ in any form other than decoding and repetition of textual formulae. A much deeper and more varied understanding of engagement is desirable, one that will help the faithful who find themselves in challenging circumstances, and that will allow people with all kinds of gifts (those of all ages, those who are neurodivergent, and those with different intellectual and physical capacities) to contribute as equal partners in the enterprise of praise and thanksgiving that all owe to God.36

Notes

1. Church of England, Common Worship: services and prayers for the Church of England (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), p. 158.
2. Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), 4 December 1963, <www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html> (accessed 8 April 2021).
3. Church of England Liturgical Commission, Transforming Worship: living the new creation, GS 1651 (London: General Synod, 2007), s.2.20, <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/gs1651-transforming%20worship%3A%20living%20the%20new%20creation.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2021).
4. For instance, see D. Delap, ‘How we shared the bread and wine on Zoom’, Church Times, 14 April 2020, <www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/comment/opinion/how-we-shared-the-bread-and-wine-on-zoom> (accessed 8 April 2021). Pierre Whalon summarizes the arguments of two forthcoming books on the subject, by C. Andrew Doyle (Embodied Liturgy) and Richard Burridge (Holy Communion in Contagious Times). P. Whalon, ‘Digital or physical? The debate around the celebration of the Holy Communion online’, December 2020, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27726.48965>.

5. A valuable introduction to this discussion may be found in J. M. Huels, ‘Participation by the faithful in the liturgy, 1903–1962’, Jurist, Vol. 48 (1988), pp. 608–37. Quotation taken from the translation by Jennifer Rushworth in M. Salisbury, Hear My Voice, O God (Collegeville PA: Liturgical Press, 2014). The Italian text is at <www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-x_motu-proprio_19031122_sollecitu din.html>.

6. Such as, for instance, the prevalence of ‘concert music’ in the Mass.

7. J. Ratzinger, ‘The image of the world and of man in the liturgy and its expression in church music’ in G. L. Muller (ed.), Joseph Ratzinger Collected Works. Volume 11: Theology of the liturgy (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2014), pp. 443–60, here p. 446.

8. R. Sarah, The Power of Silence: against the dictatorship of noise (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2017), p. 123.

9. Ratzinger, ‘The image of the world’, p. 447.

10. See the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis, 22 February 2007, <www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html>.

11. M. McLuhan, Understanding Media: the extensions of man (New York NY: Signet Books, 1964), p. 9.

12. McLuhan, Understanding Media, p. 61.

13. A. J. Chupungco, Liturgical Inculturation: sacraments, religiosity, and catechesis (Collegeville PA: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 28.

14. Chupungco, Liturgical Inculturation, p. 41.

15. Chupungco, Liturgical Inculturation, p. 42.

16. K. G. Schmidt, ‘Virtual communion: theology of the internet and the Catholic imagination’, PhD thesis, University of Dayton (2016), p. 174.

17. Schmidt, ‘Virtual communion’, pp. 178–9.

18. Schmidt, ‘Virtual communion’, p. 189.

19. Schmidt, ‘Virtual communion’, p. 207.

20. T. Berger, ‘Participatio actuosa in cyberspace? Vatican II’s liturgical vision in a digital world’, Worship, Vol. 87 (2013), pp. 533–47, here p. 516.

21. Berger, ‘Participatio actuosa in cyberspace?’, p. 46.

22. Berger, ‘Participatio actuosa in cyberspace?’, p. 537.

23. See R. Gundry, Soma in Biblical Theology with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); J. D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

24. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, p. 56.

25. R. Collins, First Corinthians (Collegeville PA: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 460.

26. J. Zizioulas, Being as Communion: studies in personhood and the Church (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 7.
27. J. Zizioulas, Otherness and Communion: further studies in personhood and the Church (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 5.
28. Zizioulas, Otherness and Communion, p. 75.
29. R. McMichael, The Eucharistic Faith (London: SCM Press, 2019), pp. 55–6.
30. McMichael, The Eucharistic Faith, p. 93.
31. Church of England ordinand Gemma Birt has recently collected over 700 responses to a survey on perceptions of congregational singing, to be published in due course.
32. Kathryn King (Oxford) is currently undertaking doctoral work exploring the experience of Choral Evensong in the twenty-first century.
33. See, for instance, <www.westminster-abbey.org/media/6994/ecumenical-patriarch-even-song-service.pdf>.
34. Eric Clarke argues that music listening is inseparable from other forms of auditory perception in an ‘ecological’ model of listening. E. Clarke, Ways of Listening: an ecological approach to the perception of musical meaning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
35. Canon 256 of the Code of Canon Law 1983 (<http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#CHAPTER_I.>); Canon C 7 of the Church of England (<http://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/canons-church-england/section-c>).
36. As I have written elsewhere, ‘when we gather in community, we have the opportunity to see every kind of clay jar, each one fragile and not up to the complete task’. See M. Salisbury, ‘A theology of worshipping with dementia’ in M. Salisbury (ed.), God in Fragments: worshipping with those living with dementia (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), p. 59.

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