



"We, the People of God, are invited to share in Christ's prayer, in His offering of Himself to the Father in the power of the Spirit."

In her classic primer on prayer, *The Way of Perfection* (WP), Saint Teresa of Avila provides very practical advice on Christian formation, on living life in a faith community, on how to pray, and on growing in relationship with God. Her advice may be especially helpful to us as we continue to reflect on our recent diocesan Synod, particularly when it comes to our participation in the sacrifice of the Mass, Eucharistic adoration, Benediction, and general Eucharistic living.

Our participation begins by remembering that all liturgies are first and foremost the action of Christ, and the Synod reminded us that we need to be reminded of His primary action often. We, the People of God, are invited to share in Christ's prayer, in His offering of Himself to the Father in the power of the Spirit. Our liturgical prayer is effective and transformative because we are participating in Christ's saving action as His Body, the Church. This means that the Church's liturgies, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, are an act of the whole assembly, an act of the whole Body of Christ, Head and members. We are united to the divine and saving activity of the Lord Jesus by virtue of our Baptism, our incorporation into His Body as Church.

With this realization, we recognize that the Church's liturgy "is arranged in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful, namely in body and in mind, a participation fervent with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and which is required by the very nature of the celebration and to which the Christian people have a right and duty in virtue of their Baptism" (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 18). To the degree that we participate in this way in the liturgy and consequently in Christ's own saving activity revealed in our midst, the grace of redemption becomes effective in us, personally and communally. Full, conscious, and active participation, internally and externally, enables us to make the ritual prayers and actions of the liturgy our own in communion with Christ and all the members of His Body.

Teresa of Jesus knew this in the sixteenth century. She advised her sisters to strive to unite vocal and mental prayer in their liturgical praying of the Divine Office and the Mass. This meant uniting their hearts and minds – that is, their affective desires and reflective ponderings – to that which they were voicing. Teresa instructed them to “refuse to be satisfied with merely pronouncing the words” (WP 24, 2). For example, regarding the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, she wrote: “For when I say, “I believe,” it seems to me right that I should know and understand what I believe. And when I say, “Our Father,” it will be an act of love to understand who this Father of ours is and who the Master is who taught us this prayer” (WP 24, 2). Praying well vocally at liturgy includes some understanding of what one is saying, singing, thinking, or doing. It seeks to grasp and express the meaning, the heart and soul, of the liturgy in which we participate. The same can be said of good preaching, which the Synod recognized as of great importance in the life of our local church.

When engaged in vocal and ritual prayer, Teresa taught that we should remember who is being addressed, who we are before so great a God who loves us, and how we must strive to fix our attention on God present in Word, sacrament, and people. By doing so, those praying discover the union of vocal and mental prayer, as meditation or a simple loving awareness of God-with-us as we participate in the Church’s prayer. Synod participants repeatedly stated that these fundamental principles of liturgical life need to be explicated, as many active Catholics reported not always knowing why they are doing what they are doing at liturgy. This intentional focus can result in significant growth and transformation for individuals and communities. It also prepares us to receive God’s gift of “perfect contemplation” (WP 25, 1), which Teresa often experienced during the celebration of the liturgy. This gift does not disconnect the one praying from the community’s liturgical prayer. Rather, it draws the pray-er deeper into the community’s communion with the Paschal Mystery of Christ in which the Church’s liturgy participates. Inevitably, this is not only for the benefit of the individual but impacts the life of the community. Teresa of Jesus is proof.

*Bishop Michael G. Woost, Auxiliary Bishop of the
Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.*

