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THE FAMILY AS THE FIRST SCHOOL OF LITURGICAL PARTICIPATION: PARTICIPATIO ACTUOSA, RELIGIOUS SOCIALISATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The conciliar category of *participatio actuosa* is often reduced to observable activity during worship. Such a reading overlooks the gradual formation of attention, symbolic competence, ecclesial belonging and interior participation, much of which begins in the family. **Aim:** The article interprets the family as the first environment in which a child acquires dispositions necessary for conscious, active and fruitful liturgical participation. **Materials and methods:** The study employs a historical-theological analysis of selected documents of the Catholic Magisterium and representatives of the liturgical movement, combined with a critical review of research on intergenerational religious transmission and shared family music-making. It develops the argument presented in the first chapter of the author's monograph on liturgical music as a communicative act. **Results:** A four-dimensional model of family mediation of liturgical participation is proposed: formation of pre-liturgical dispositions; symbolic and musical apprenticeship; relational legitimation through parental witness; and ecclesial transmission from domestic religious practice to the parish assembly. The analysis shows that singing, repetition, silence, explanation and participation in the liturgical year can support religious memory, but only when they remain connected with the Church's sacramental action and respect children's age, agency and diverse abilities. **Conclusions:** The family does not replace the liturgical assembly and domestic prayer is not identical with liturgy. Nevertheless, the family can prepare for liturgy, interpret it and extend it into everyday life. Pastoral practice should therefore treat parents as partners in liturgical formation and evaluate participation by interior and relational criteria, not merely by the number of functions performed.

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INTRODUCTION

The family's role in religious education is frequently described through the transmission of beliefs, moral norms and devotional practices. This account is correct but incomplete. Christian formation also concerns ways of attending, remembering, responding and belonging. Before children learn to understand sacramental theology, they encounter rhythms of feast and fasting, gestures of reverence, familiar melodies, periods of silence and the attitudes of adults they observe in church. These embodied and relational experiences influence whether liturgy is later perceived as an external obligation, a cultural performance or the action of Christ and the Church in which the baptised person truly participates. The theological category that best clarifies this educational process is *participatio actuosa*. It became a central principle of the twentieth-century liturgical renewal, although its genealogy reaches beyond the Second Vatican Council. The work of Prosper Guéranger, Lambert Beauduin, Romano Guardini, Odo Casel and Josef Andreas Jungmann helped recover liturgy as the prayer of the whole Church and participation in the Paschal Mystery(Beauduin, 2002; Casel, 1999; Guardini, 1998; Jungmann, 1986). Pius X connected the renewal of sacred music with the active participation of the faithful; Pius XII, in turn, deepened the christological and ecclesial account of worship; and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* made full, conscious and active participation a right and duty flowing from baptism (Pius X, 1903; Pius XII, 1947; Second Vatican Council, 1963, no. 14). This history matters educationally because *actuosa* does not mean incessant activity. Participation includes bodily and verbal action, but it cannot be measured by visibility alone. Listening, silence, interior assent, sacramental reception, common singing and the offering of one's life may all belong to the same integrated response. The first chapter of the book *Muzyka liturgiczna jako akt komunikacyjny* emphasises precisely this whole-person, christological, sacramental and ecclesial meaning of participation (Piotrowski, 2026c). The present article relocates that theological insight within family pedagogy. A related developmental model has previously been proposed in relation to children's liturgical musical formation (Piotrowski, 2026a). Whereas that model describes five developmental stages leading from family enculturation towards liturgical co-responsibility, the present study focuses specifically on

the family as a mediating environment and identifies four dimensions through which family practices may prepare for, interpret and support participatioactuosa. Its central claim is that the family is ordinarily the first interpretive community of liturgy: it forms dispositions, gives symbols an initial meaning and either confirms or weakens the credibility of what the child encounters in ecclesial worship.

Aim, research problem and method: The study asks: in what sense can the family be called the first school of *participatio actuosa*, and what conditions allow family practices to support rather than distort liturgical participation? Its aim is to construct an interdisciplinary model linking theology of liturgy with family religious socialisation and intergenerational formation.

The article is theoretical. It combines historical-theological analysis of Catholic teaching and selected writings associated with the liturgical movement with a critical, problem-oriented review of literature on intergenerational transmission and shared musical engagement. This is not a systematic review and makes no claim to empirical generalisation. The procedure consists of three steps: first, reconstructing the theological meaning of active participation; second, identifying family processes capable of cultivating its human and religious preconditions; and third, defining the limits of the analogy between domestic practice and ecclesial liturgy. On this basis, a four-dimensional model of family mediation is proposed. The family is understood here neither as an isolated private institution nor as an automatic transmitter of faith. It is a relational environment embedded in parish, school, culture and media. Transmission is therefore reciprocal, negotiated and vulnerable to discontinuity. Children interpret parents as much as parents instruct children, while the parish may reinforce or contradict meanings learned at home. This approach guards against both pastoral idealisation of the family and the assumption that religious continuity results from instruction alone.

From liturgical movement to integral participation: The modern liturgical movement arose partly in response to a separation between official worship and the spiritual life of the faithful. Guéranger's recovery of the liturgical year and Gregorian chant, Beauduin's pastoral programme, Guardini's reflection on the communal form of worship and Casel's theology of mystery differed in emphasis, yet converged in treating liturgy as the living action of the Church rather than clerical ceremony observed by an audience. This trajectory reached a decisive synthesis in the Second Vatican Council's description of liturgy as an exercise of Christ's priestly office and an action of Christ the Priest together with his Body (Second Vatican Council, 1963, no. 7). Such a framework changes the meaning of participation. If liturgy were principally a performance, participation could be equated with producing sounds, gestures or ministries. If it is an ecclesial participation in Christ's action, external expressions are truthful insofar as they serve an interior, communal and sacramental response. Pius XII warned against opposing exterior and interior worship, while the Council asked pastors to ensure participation that is conscious, active and fruitful (Pius XII, 1947; Second Vatican Council, 1963, nos. 11, 19, 48). The two dimensions are not competitors. Bodily forms educate attention and make common action possible; interior appropriation prevents those forms from becoming empty.

This distinction is particularly important for children. A child may sing every response without understanding the celebration, or may remain quiet while attentively following a ritual that is gradually acquiring sense and significance. Assigning a function may foster belonging, but multiplying functions does not by itself generate participation. Liturgical formation must consequently concern the whole person: body, affect, imagination, memory, intellect, relationships and faith. It is a long apprenticeship rather than a single instructional intervention. The principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* adds another educational dimension. The Church's prayer does not merely illustrate doctrines learned elsewhere; through repeated words, symbols, music and actions it forms a way of believing. Yet children do not enter this symbolic world without prior mediation. They require people who help them recognise what is happening, tolerate what is not immediately intelligible and connect celebration with life. In most cases, those first mediators are parents or other family members.

The family as an interpretive community: The Christian tradition calls the family a domestic church, but this expression must be used precisely. It identifies the family as a place of faith, prayer, love and vocation; it does not turn domestic gatherings into an alternative sacramental assembly. John Paul II described the educational task of parents as rooted in their participation in God's creative work and encouraged family prayer in relation to the Church's liturgical life (John Paul II, 1981, nos. 36, 59–61). Pope Francis similarly presents the home as a setting in which children learn prayer and encounter signs of faith, while acknowledging the fragility and diversity of contemporary families (Francis, 2016, nos. 287–290). Calling the family an interpretive community highlights three processes. First, adults select and frame experiences: they decide whether Sunday worship has a stable place in family time and how its priority is explained. Second, they translate symbols without exhausting them: a brief comment on Advent, a funeral, a baptism or the sign of peace can open a horizon of meaning. Third, they embody an evaluation: their patience, attention, singing, hospitality and conduct after worship communicate whether the rite has significance beyond compliance. Long-term research on religious transmission indicates that continuity across generations depends not only on explicit teaching but also on relationships, parental modelling, consistency and opportunities for conversation (Bengtson et al., 2013; Boyatzis, 2006). This does not mean that families can manufacture faith through correct technique. It means that religious meanings become more plausible when they are carried by trusted relationships and integrated with ordinary life. Conversely, coercion, ridicule, unresolved contradiction or treating worship solely as a test of obedience may make the ritual language opaque even when attendance remains regular. The child is not a passive recipient in this process. Questions, resistance, boredom and selective appropriation are forms of response that require discernment. Formation respecting agency neither abandons the child to preference nor suppresses every difficulty. It gives age-appropriate reasons, establishes practices with calm consistency and permits questions that may deepen the faith of adults as well. In this sense, family liturgical education is intergenerational: parents transmit a tradition, but children also reveal which signs have ceased to communicate and where explanation or renewed witness is needed.

Music, repetition and religious memory: Music occupies a distinctive place at the intersection of liturgy and family education. Melody joins text, breath, coordination of the body, emotion and memory. A refrain can be recalled before its theological content is fully conceptualised, while singing with others lets a child experience belonging through synchronized action. Research on shared musical engagement suggests associations with parent–child relational quality, mediated in part by interpersonal coordination and empathy (Wallace & Harwood, 2018). Such findings do not prove religious effects, but they help explain why common song can become a powerful carrier of family and communal memory. Liturgically, however, music is not merely an attractive pedagogical aid. In a sung celebration it belongs to the ritual action and serves the word, prayer and unity of the assembly. Therefore, the criterion for family preparation cannot be only whether children enjoy a song. Families can familiarise them with acclamations, psalm refrains, seasonal hymns and periods of attentive listening, but the repertoire should lead toward participation in the Church's actual prayer. Replacing liturgical texts with unrelated religious entertainment may increase immediate engagement while weakening symbolic continuity. Repetition has a similarly ambivalent character. It can become mechanical, yet without repetition no stable repertoire, ritual competence or intergenerational memory develops. The liturgical year offers a meaningful pattern: Advent longing, Christmas praise, Lenten restraint, Easter joy and ordinary perseverance return without being identical. At home, a small number of stable practices—an Advent song, a Christmas carol, a Lenten silence, a sung table prayer—can create anticipatory structures that help children recognise ecclesial seasons. Their value

lies less in quantity than in continuity and connection with communal worship. Silence must also be learned. A family culture saturated with sound and instant stimulation can make liturgical stillness feel as though something were missing. Short, realistic moments of quiet before prayer, after a reading or upon entering a church teach that receptivity is also action. The aim is not behavioural perfection, especially in early childhood, but the gradual discovery that participation sometimes also consists in allowing another voice to be heard.

A model of family mediation of participatio actuosa: The preceding analysis supports a four-dimensional model. The dimensions are analytically distinct but function together.

Formation of pre-liturgical dispositions: Before a child understands ritual signs, family life shapes basic capacities for participation: trust, shared attention, turn-taking, listening, gratitude, the ability to wait and readiness to join a common action. These are not yet liturgical acts, and they can develop outside religion. Nevertheless, they provide an anthropological ground on which liturgical formation can work. Regularity matters more than intensity. Predictable preparation for Sunday, sufficient time and a non-chaotic transition into worship can influence attention more effectively than admonitions given at the church door.

Symbolic and musical apprenticeship: Children learn liturgy by guided participation. They imitate gestures, recognise recurring responses and attach stories to symbols. Explanation is most effective when brief, timely and connected with experience. It should not turn the celebration into a lecture. Preparation before worship and conversation afterwards often protect the ritual itself from excessive commentary. Music strengthens this apprenticeship by making common texts repeatable and memorable, while the alternation of singing and listening teaches that the assembly has differentiated voices but one action.

Relational legitimation: Parents and caregivers lend religious practice credibility when their conduct corresponds, though never perfectly, to the values being celebrated. Clarity, accessibility, image, narrative and authentic relationship make a message communicatively effective; Piotrowski's analysis of Jesus' teaching underscores that a simple form can carry profound content when it is joined with personal encounter and transformative meaning (Piotrowski, 2023, pp. 24–30). Applied to family formation, this insight means that explanation cannot compensate for a persistent contradiction between worship and relationships. Apology, forgiveness, care for vulnerable people and gratitude at home interpret liturgical words more persuasively than promotional enthusiasm. Relational legitimation must not become a demand for flawless parents. Acknowledged weakness may be more credible than performed perfection. The relevant question is whether the child can perceive a relationship between the family's prayer and its attempts to live reconciliation, service and hope.

Ecclesial transfer: Family practice reaches its proper liturgical horizon when it opens toward the parish assembly. The family prepares for, accompanies and extends worship; it does not privatise it. Ecclesial transfer occurs when familiar domestic signs help a child enter the larger symbolic world of the Church, and when parish experience returns to family conversation and action. This movement includes relationships beyond the nuclear family: grandparents, godparents, musicians, catechists and other parishioners can become intergenerational witnesses. Transfer fails when domestic practice and parish worship remain unrelated or mutually unintelligible. It also fails when the parish treats families only as recipients of instructions. Partnership requires accessible catechesis, predictable repertoire, welcome for young children, support for parents and opportunities to understand—not merely execute—ritual roles.

Differentiated and inclusive participation: An integral account of *participatio actuosa* challenges uniform behavioural standards. Children differ in age, temperament, language, sensory processing, cognitive ability and previous experience. Some participate readily through singing; others through gesture, attentive listening, visual supports or a stable place in the assembly. A child's need for movement or reduced sensory stimulation should not be interpreted automatically as spiritual indifference. This is particularly significant for families of persons with intellectual disabilities. Forms of musical support are most valuable when adapted to the person's needs and directed toward agency, relationship and participation rather than standardised performance (Piotrowski, 2026b). In liturgical formation, the same principle requires multiple accessible pathways: repetition, concise language, predictable musical cues, visual sequences, permission for regulated movement and roles proportionate to the person. Inclusion is not achieved simply by placing everyone in the same space. It requires the community to recognise diverse forms of response as meaningful participation. At the same time, adaptation must preserve the communal and liturgical nature of the act. A separate activity that keeps a child occupied may sometimes be pastorally necessary, but it should not become the normal substitute for belonging to the assembly. The guiding question is not "How can this child be made to behave like others?" but "What support allows this person to respond with the community according to his or her real capacities?"

Pedagogical and pastoral implications: The proposed model suggests several priorities. Family catechesis should begin from practices already present rather than impose an idealised programme. A parish can help parents identify one or two sustainable habits connected with Sunday and the liturgical year. It can provide short explanations of recurring signs and music in advance, enabling adults to mediate them without turning themselves into specialists. Second, formation should address parents and children together while preserving age-appropriate approaches. Teaching only children creates a semantic gap if adults neither understand nor value the practices being introduced. Teaching only adults overlooks children's active interpretation. Intergenerational workshops around a psalm response, a season of the year or the structure of the Eucharist may link theological content with a practice that families can actually repeat. Third, music ministry should be integrated with family formation. A stable core repertoire, clear pitch and tempo, and occasional rehearsal before the liturgy can lower the threshold for common singing. Variety remains valuable, but constant novelty privileges confident musicians over families and occasional participants. The purpose is not to simplify all music, but to balance listening with genuinely communal acclamations and songs. Fourth, communities should evaluate participation qualitatively. Attendance, audible responses and ministry schedules are visible indicators, not exhaustive measures. Relevant questions include whether families understand the main action, experience belonging, connect worship with daily reconciliation and service, and can remain present without shame when a child's behaviour departs from an adult norm. Finally, parish hospitality is itself formative. When parents anticipate hostile looks, inaccessible language or embarrassment, participation becomes associated with anxiety. A welcoming community does not eliminate boundaries or the need to learn ritual conduct. It accompanies that learning and distinguishes disruption requiring support from normal developmental behaviour.

Limitations and directions for research: The model is normative and interpretive. It requires empirical testing across family structures, denominations, cultural settings and levels of religious commitment. The cited evidence on intergenerational religion and shared music cannot establish that particular domestic practices cause mature liturgical participation. Future studies could combine observation of family and parish practice with interviews of parents and children, longitudinal measures of symbolic understanding and analyses attentive to disability and socioeconomic conditions. Research should also examine negative cases: families in which compulsory worship damages trust, parishes whose musical practice excludes newcomers, and situations in which children sustain religious practice despite parental disengagement. Such cases would prevent the model from becoming unidirectional and clarify how peers, grandparents, schools and digital media interact with family mediation.

CONCLUSION

The history and theology of *participatio actuosa* show that active participation is neither passive attendance nor constant visible activity. It is the integrated response of the baptised person to Christ's action in the Church, expressed through listening, silence, word, song, gesture, sacramental communion and life. Because the capacities and meanings involved do not arise instantly, liturgical participation has an educational history. The family is ordinarily its first school, not because it can reproduce sacramental liturgy at home, but because it forms attention, introduces symbols and melodies, gives religious language relational credibility and opens the child toward a wider ecclesial community. Its mediation is strongest when domestic prayer and everyday conduct are connected with, yet clearly distinguished from, the Church's worship. The four dimensions proposed—pre-liturgical disposition, symbolic and musical apprenticeship, relational legitimation and ecclesial transfer—offer a framework for pastoral diagnosis and future research. They also correct a narrow activist interpretation of participation. A child need not perform more in order to participate more deeply. The educational task is to help each person, according to age and ability, recognise the liturgy as an action received, shared and answered—and to allow that answer to become a form of life.

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