

MEMORANDUM

To: The Priests and Lay Pastoral Co-ordinators, Dicoese of Palmerston North

From: Bishop Peter Cullinane

Date: 24 November 2008

Re: Posture during Eucharistic Prayer

Each Bishops' Conference has had to submit its own adaptation of the GIRM. The New Zealand bishops did this some time ago, but then in a letter dated 29 July 2008, the Congregation for Divine Worship apologised to the New Zealand bishops for losing sight of the New Zealand submission, and suggesting that at this stage, we might adopt the Australian adaptation of the GIRM as an interim measure.

The Australian GIRM gives kneeling as the posture for the Eucharistic Prayer, and so at our recent meeting the NZ Bishops had to decide whether to adopt this section of the Australian GIRM, or follow the advice of the National Liturgy Commission and omit it.

The decision of the NZ Bishops (by majority vote) to adopt kneeling as the posture throughout the Eucharistic Prayer makes it necessary to recall how our practice of standing came about, in the hope of minimising any confusion this decision might cause.

Kneeling during the Eucharistic Prayer is a practice that developed in some countries when people's involvement in the Mass focussed more on devotion to the Blessed Sacrament than on the meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer. The Second Vatican Council wanted to redress this. Even after the practice of kneeling developed, the liturgical books (the General Instruction for the Roman Missal) always continued to name the ancient practice of standing as the posture for the Eucharistic Prayer.

When the Diocese of Palmerston North carried out its liturgical catechesis down the years, that catechesis was based – as it should have been – on the General Instruction for the Roman Missal. It was also based on a national catechesis endorsed by the NZ Bishops in 1986 (*Exploring the Liturgy*), which said that standing was “the posture of the Easter people”.

At their meeting in May 2001 the Bishops reaffirmed their commitment to promoting an intensive liturgical catechesis based on the liturgical books, especially the GIRM, and on the underlying principles on which the Second Vatican Council based its liturgical renewal. They said that insofar as this involved the postures appropriate to different parts of the liturgy, they must always be in accordance with “the meaning and character of each part of the celebration” (GIRM). That is what we did.

It was not until 2002 that the Holy See revised the GIRM to allow kneeling to be retained where that had become the custom. By that time, many of our parishes had got used to what the GIRM taught before 2002. [The reason why (in 1970) the US bishops sought and were given a dispensation allowing their people to remain kneeling during the

Eucharistic Prayer, was because kneeling was still a departure from the norm given in the GIRM. At that time, the New Zealand bishops noted that kneeling was the practice in New Zealand but they did not seek any dispensation to authorise this departure from the norm.]

The main reason given at the recent bishops' meeting for retaining the custom of kneeling was the desirability of uniformity between the dioceses of New Zealand, (and Australia).

The bishops' decision does not mean that liturgical catechesis should no longer be based on the theology of the Mass and the "meaning" and character of each part of the celebration. And an honest catechesis cannot avoid explaining why the ancient tradition regarded standing as "the posture of the Easter people". The focus of the Mass does not stop at the *Real Presence*. It looks to our *real union with Christ* who shares with us his risen life.

It is good for us to remember both that we have fallen in sin and that we have risen by the grace of Christ. We therefore kneel on six days for prayer, as a sign of our fallen state. But on the Lord's day we do not kneel, as a sign of the resurrection through which by the grace of Christ we have been freed from sin and from death.

This custom had its origin in apostolic times as the blessed Irenaeus bishop and martyr of Lyons says in his book *De Paschate*, in which he reminds us that we are not to kneel during Pentecost since it is of the same importance as the Lord's day". (Pseudo-Justin, *Quaestiones ad Orthodoxos*, q.115) [This is dealt with more fully in my Memo of 20 July 2003; cf Diocesan Website.]

In those dioceses where kneeling has continued, the decision to endorse kneeling throughout the Eucharistic Prayer will only involve telling people why they should not sit (unless they need to) during the Eucharistic Prayer, as many have been doing in all our dioceses.

It was accepted that our diocese is, by now, in a different situation. If we remain true to the Catholic moral tradition, we will have to take into account *both* the norm *and* the circumstances we find ourselves in. For example, we will have to ask ourselves how this decision could affect those Catholics who have already understood the connection between the meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer and the ancient posture of standing; how a U turn on a previous catechesis will affect people's attitudes to future catecheses; what is best for the common good, and best for the long term; how necessary uniformity between dioceses actually is; (unlike the need for uniformity of posture during one and the same celebration of Mass, uniformity between dioceses is not a *liturgical* requirement; there are a few parishes in Australia in the same position as ourselves, and the bishops concerned don't intend to make any big deal out of it;) and above all, what is best for nurturing the faith life of the people.

These are not insignificant questions, and they need to be discussed by the priests and parish liturgy committees.