

LEARNING FROM THE ROMAN MISSAL

What we do at Mass needs to correspond to what the Mass prayers say we are doing

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Abbreviations:

- SC = Second Vatican Council, Const. on the Sacred Liturgy
- GIRM = General Instruction of the Roman Missal;
- CCC = Catechism of the Catholic Church
- EP = Eucharistic Prayer
- DD = Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi*

What is offered here is not a full-scale catechesis on the liturgy. It is no more than ‘notes’ based on how the Missal itself wants us to understand what we are saying and doing at Mass. Even small misunderstandings can diminish our participation to something less than it could be.

There are some misunderstandings that matter more. For very many years, most Catholic people (lay and ordained) did not have a good understanding of the difference between liturgy and devotions. The Mass itself was thought of as one of our Catholic devotions. This situation went back to when the continuing use of Latin made it difficult for our congregations to participate in the prayers and actions of the liturgy. The priest “celebrated” the Mass; the people “attended.” Understandably, the congregations turned to various devotions for their own prayers during Mass.

It was to correct this situation that the Second Vatican Council required a reform of the liturgy to enable the congregation’s “full, conscious and active participation” in the liturgy itself. (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14) After all, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, it is the whole congregation that celebrates Eucharist, and that “rites which are meant to be celebrated in common... should be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi privately.” (CCC, 1140).

Today, our congregations include many whose faith is an inspiration to us all, but who may not have benefitted fully from the liturgy formation programmes conducted in New Zealand and other countries during the years following the Council. And so, there is a tendency on the part of some to continue to include in the Mass practices that belong more properly to devotions.

Devotions have their rightful place in Catholic life. But these ways of reaching out to God are no substitute for liturgy, in which God is reaching out to us, by making present in our lives the historic events of our salvation. Pope Francis has called the liturgy “the today of salvation history.”

The GIRM is careful not to exclude local customs and alternative practices any more than necessary. But where it explicitly allows for different options within the liturgy, it usually adds the phrase “provided that,” and what comes after that phrase is based on the need to be faithful to the *meaning* of that part of the Mass. Being ‘inclusive’ is not open-ended; *meaning* is what determines best practice. That is the surest way of doing at Mass what the prayers of the Mass say we are doing.

Pope Francis has also emphasised our need to be formed *by* the liturgy and *for* the liturgy. (DD 27-47). Formation *by* the liturgy is more than just intellectual understanding. It is more like what came over people when Jesus did something for them; the difference He made. In liturgy, it’s the same Jesus.

Jesus “eagerly desired” to celebrate with his disciples what would become the Mass; (Luke 22:15). Our desire to be there with him is always small compared with his desire to be there with us and for us. That’s worth thinking about.

Formation *for* the liturgy requires understanding. That is why it needs to be based on the Roman Missal and other official documents which explain the liturgy. *What we do at Mass needs to correspond to what the Mass prayers say we are doing.* So, my purpose here is to look at a few texts from the Missal, to highlight their meaning, and enhance our participation.

1) “HUMBLY WE PRAY THAT PARTAKING OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST, WE MAY BE GATHERED INTO ONE BY THE HOLY SPIRIT” (Eucharistic Prayer 2):

Note: a) we find it easy to think of Jesus when we think of Eucharist. Perhaps, however, we underestimate the role of the Holy Spirit. It is the mission of the Holy Spirit to bring about our union with the risen Christ, and in this way to bring about “the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting” – the work we attribute to the Holy Spirit in the Apostles Creed. (Y. Congar; *The mystery of the Temple*, p 288)

b) Being “gathered into one by the Holy Spirit” is above all through “partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ.” But the Holy Spirit is already gathering us before we leave our homes to be there. It is as a community – “one body, one spirit, in Christ” (EP. 3) – that we worship God in the Mass. Coming together is part of becoming a community. It involves the brief greetings, courtesies and enquiries that are natural when we are there for each other and not just for ourselves.

Gathering times are especially important to Māori, and should be to all of us. When the courtesies of gathering have taken place, it should not be necessary for a further turning to “greet your neighbour.” Instead, it is time for a clear transition to a period of deep silence, which should last for several minutes before the opening hymn. This kind of preparation is not to be smothered by long wordy introductions to the penitential rite.

c) “Sacred silence is also part of the celebration” (GIRM 45). (Perhaps nothing ‘kills’ the liturgy more than wordiness). What Pope Francis says about the importance of silence - what it isn’t and what it is - (DD 52) deserves to be on a printed card. The nature of the silence differs according to the different parts of the Mass where it is needed; (GIRM 45). Its purpose at the penitential rite is for recollection. After a reading or the homily, silence is for the purpose of reflecting on what has been heard. After Holy Communion, it is for personal prayer.

Silence before the celebration is for personal preparation – but it is preparation for participating in worship by the community - liturgy, not private devotion. The kind of greetings and courtesies that are natural when we gather to be a community (carried out in a subdued manner) properly belong to the occasion. General conversations do not. Liturgy is neither a private time, nor a social occasion. It is a time for communion with Christ and with one another.

d) Gathering for liturgy should not be inhibited by the reverence rightly due to the Blessed Sacrament. The reserved Sacrament is not part of the Mass. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and the celebration of Eucharist are two different activities, each requiring its own kind of space and separation between them; (Instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium* 1967, 53; GIRM, 315.) Adoration of Christ is called for, but that is not the main purpose of the Mass.

e) It is the altar that the ministers “revere with a profound bow” when they arrive, (GIRM 49), the altar being a “symbol of Christ;” (CCC, 1383). Liturgical furnishings are to be characterised by “noble simplicity” (GIRM 292), and the altar is not to be cluttered with anything that obscures the congregation’s view of what is taking place.

f) The Roman Missal affirms the ancient practice of placing statues and other sacred images within the church building for veneration – *provided* this is done in ways that do not draw attention to the statues/images and away from what is happening in the celebration of Eucharist (cf GIRM 318). Where this happens (e.g. having an illuminated statue of Mary in the sanctuary during Mass) people rightly complain that this is a distraction.

- 2) “THEREFORE, O LORD, WE PRAY: MAY THIS SAME HOLY SPIRIT GRACIOUSLY SANCTIFY THESE OFFERINGS, THAT THEY MAY BECOME THE BODY AND BLOOD OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST... “ (EP 4)

Note: a) It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that “these offerings... become the body and blood of Christ.”

b) The terms “body” and “blood” are to be understood as intended in Hebrew idiom. Briefly, “body” stands for the whole person; “blood” stands for being alive. I.e. it is the living Person of Christ who is really present to us in the Eucharist. “Body and blood” doesn’t mean flesh and blood in the way we know them in this life. They stand for the person of the risen and living Christ. Receiving him in the form of food and drink is an intimately personal way of receiving him into our lives.

c) Our commemoration of Calvary does recall, however, what He did for us in His mortal life: his body was “given;” his blood “poured out.” Through receiving him in holy communion, we commit ourselves to becoming one with him in being “given” and “poured out” for others. This is how our being “sent” carries the Mass over into our daily lives. The Mass bears fruit in all the ways that we contribute to the personal, social and economic development of others – “...salt of the earth... light of the world...” (Mat. 5:13,14)

- 3) “THE WORD OF THE LORD”

Note: a) The Second Vatican Council restored the liturgy of the word to its proper status. For years, Catholics understood that even if we miss the liturgy of the word we still “hear Mass.” In fact, the Mass is of its nature both word and sacrament.

b) Christ’s presence in the word is one of the four ways the Council said Christ is truly present in the celebration of Mass. “He is present in his word, since it is He who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the assembly” – present tense! (SC, 7).

c) We acknowledge this presence of Christ by standing when the book of gospels is carried into the assembly and when it is read – or better, when it is narrated as if happening before our eyes. Standing used to be a sign of respect for someone entering the room. In the liturgy, it still is.

d) The correct translation of what the reader is to say after each reading is “the word of the Lord!” (vocative sense) – as if to say, after a brief pause: “Hark, the Lord is saying this to us.” The sentence “*this is* the word of the Lord” is an earlier mis-translation of the Latin, and simply attributes the recorded words to the Lord; (indicative sense). Announcing “the word of the Lord” and “the Body of Christ” are two ways of proclaiming Christ’s presence, and inviting our response.

4) “WE PRAY TO THE LORD” (General Intercessions/ “Prayer of the faithful”)

Note: The role of the person leading the General Intercession is to name the intentions for which the congregation is being invited to pray. And so, after naming each intention, the person leading invites the congregation with the words: “let us pray to the Lord,” or their equivalent. In other words, the person leading the intercessory prayers is addressing the congregation – not addressing God (“dear God,” “dear Lord” etc)

5) “THROUGH YOUR GOODNESS WE RECEIVE THE BREAD WE OFFER YOU/THE WINE WE OFFER YOU...” (Preparation of the gifts)

Note: a) The rubric accompanying these words says that the priest “takes the paten with the bread and holds it *slightly* raised... saying in a *low voice*...” This description of the priest’s actions indicates a low-key moment, because what we really offer at Mass is not bread and wine, but what was offered on Calvary.

b) It is also the first stage of a three-stage crescendo: at the second stage, the consecration, the priest will “*show* the consecrated host/chalice to the people.” It is not until the Eucharistic Prayer climaxes with the doxology (third stage) that the priest “*raises* both” high.

6) “THROUGH HIM, WITH HIM, AND IN HIM, O GOD ALMIGHTY FATHER, IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, ALL GLORY AND HONOUR IS YOURS, FOREVER AND EVER” (in all the Eucharistic Prayers).

Note: a) In this prayer of praise (doxology), preferably sung, the Mass reaches its climax - *to the Father, through union with the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit*. Everything before this moment, including the consecration is, as it were, on the way to this moment. (The consecration was not the climax.)

b) The congregation joins in this act of giving glory to God by joining in the “great Amen” – preferably singing it. When the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that the whole congregation celebrates the Eucharist (1140), it bases this on the meaning of Baptism (1141):

... all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people’, have a right and an obligation by reason of their Baptism. (CCC 1141)

c) On some occasions liturgical prayer is addressed to the Son, and sometimes to the Holy Spirit. Liturgical prayer is not addressed to the saints. On all the feasts of Mary, the prayers refer to her and honour her, but are not addressed to her. To cut across the purpose of liturgy by praying the Hail Mary is an example of a devotion being brought into the liturgy. (During the intercessory prayers, an alternative could be to say “together with Mary, let us pray for...”).

7) “...GIVING THANKS THAT YOU HAVE MADE US WORTHY TO BE IN YOUR PRESENCE AND MINISTER TO YOU” (2ND Eucharistic Prayer);

Note: The Latin says: “...you have made us worthy to *stand* in your presence and serve you.”

The Latin original is significant, because standing signifies our status as a redeemed people, raised up with Christ who takes us to the Father. In the earliest centuries of the Church, writers associated our standing with Jesus' resurrection.

8) "BE MINDFUL, O LORD, OF YOUR SERVANTS AND ALL HERE PRESENT" (1ST Eucharistic Prayer)

Note: a) instead of "all here present," the Latin original says "... and *all those standing around.*"

b) These earliest Eucharistic Prayers reflect the earliest days of the Church when – before clericalism set in – all those celebrating, both lay and ordained, stood. Those who prefer the custom of kneeling should at least try to understand the reasons for standing. [In general, the most appropriate postures are those that best correspond to the meaning of each part of the liturgy. When Bishops Conferences make adaptations, these are supposed to "correspond to the meaning and the character of each part of the celebration;" (GIRM, 2002, universal edition, n 43].

c) Postures which are for times of adoration, such as at Benediction, ("down in adoration falling..."), or postures and dress that signify doing penance, have their rightful place in those devotions. But those devotions are not the main purpose of the Mass. And practices proper to devotions do not substitute for the practices proper to the liturgy.

d) The Missal provides for the congregation to kneel for the consecration, and "those who do not kneel (for whatever reasonable cause) ought to make a profound bow when the priest genuflects at the consecration" (GIRM 43).

e) The rubrics of the Missal allow for "a small bell" to be rung, "if appropriate," "as a signal to the faithful" (150). It used to be appropriate at every Mass because its purpose, as a signal, was to let the congregation know when certain moments of the Mass had arrived. They had no other way of knowing, because the priest spoke the words "quietly," in Latin, and with his back to the congregation. Often, they could not even see the elevation of host and chalice at the consecration. It was rung again to alert the congregation that it was time for Holy Communion.

Today, there may be times when the congregation, or parts of the congregation, cannot see or hear, making this signal "appropriate." It has no other purpose. It is not part of the ritual of the Mass. Nor is it an act of adoration. In fact, our adoration at the time of the consecration is best supported by deep silence as we watch and listen. A bell or gong at that time can shatter that silence.

f) "The Order of the Mass" prescribes that, at the consecration, "the words of the Lord should be pronounced clearly and distinctly." As early as the 1960's we discovered that the multiple voices of concelebrants, and even changes of voice, and especially the moving about of the concelebrants, all became a distraction for the congregation. The voice of just one of the presiding celebrants for the whole Eucharistic Prayer best ensures the intent of this rubric. (Not all rubrics are prescriptive; some are only descriptive.)

g) There is no requirement whatever for the priest to bring the bread and chalice closer to his mouth for the consecration. In fact, good hygiene requires that he *not* do so.

9) "THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST..." (At the end of prayers)

Note: a) This sentence does not say “*We ask this* through our Lord Jesus Christ...” That was an earlier mis-translation of the Latin. The correct translation is simply: “Through Our Lord Jesus Christ...” In other words, it is not our asking that is being made “through Our Lord...”; it is what we have named in the accompanying prayer that is to come about through Him.

10) “PROVIDED THAT THEY CORRESPOND TO THE SPIRIT OF LITURGICAL ACTION AND FURTHER THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL” (GIRM 41)

Note: In these words, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal approves of “other forms of sacred music” (having affirmed the importance of Gregorian chant). In 1903, Pope St Pius X had already forbidden choirs to take over the singing in ways that deprived the congregation of actively participating in parts of the Mass that belong to the whole assembly. The liturgy was not to be treated as if it were a concert. (It was Pope St Pius X who first used the phrase, which the Second Vatican Council made famous: “full, conscious and active, participation.”)