

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS REGARDING THE CURRENT GUIDELINES FOR CELEBRATING EUCHARIST

Where do find these guidelines?

Over forty years ago, after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church published a new edition of the Roman Missal (all the prayers and readings for the Mass) and instructions for using it, leading to all of the changes we have become familiar with over these years—Mass in the vernacular (English for us or whatever language is native for the people celebrating), changes in the prayers and church architecture, expanded set of readings, and so on.

During the Jubilee Year 2000 Pope John Paul II authorized a new edition of that Roman Missal. With that came a new General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM 2002) for the universal Church. The GIRM has been promulgated in its English version and so is in effect, but the new Roman Missal and its related introduction are still in the process of being translated and promulgated and so has not yet been implemented.

In addition, there are a number of other liturgical books which shed light on various actions at Eucharist—Ceremonial of Bishops, Directory for Masses with Children, Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass, Norms for Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion, RCIA, Congregation for Worship and Sacraments Instruction on the Eucharist, and more. Not all documents are of equal weight and not every detail is consistent across all of them. But together they paint a picture of the way the universal Church believes Eucharist is to be celebrated. Using these guidelines, what can we learn about how we celebrate Eucharist? [A side note: If you want to read a good attempt at trying to bring all of these guidelines into one, cohesive whole see Paul Turner's *Let Us Pray* (Liturgical Press, 2006).]

What are we doing when we celebrate Eucharist?

Before looking at some of the details of the guidelines, let's remember the most important thing—the meaning of the Eucharist. Any following of rubrics (liturgical rules) and any changes in how Eucharist is celebrated need to be evaluated in terms of how they make that meaning come alive.

The entire community of faith, fully and actively participating in the Sunday (weekly) Eucharist, is the heartbeat of Catholic life and faith. Through the Eucharistic Liturgy all that we are and believe and experience, all that we do and hope for, enters into the once-for-all saving work of Jesus Christ. Here and now we are able to connect our lives to and participate in the saving sacrifice of Christ, which we call his “Paschal Mystery”—his life, death and resurrection.

As a weekly ritual the Mass has a defined structure and flow. We come as we are this day and gather as a community; we listen; we offer ourselves and

give thanks; we remember; we eat and drink; we go forth to live the paschal mystery in our own daily lives until we come again to the Eucharistic celebration. We experience Christ as present in the people of God gathered in Christ's name around the altar as well as in and through the leadership of the ordained bishop or priest. Christ is actively present in the Word proclaimed. Christ is truly and fully present in his Body and Blood through the consecrated bread and wine we received at communion. Our linear, historical time—each changing day, week and year—is able to become part of the eternal, once-for-all time of Christ's salvation. The Sunday Eucharist is the community's weekly heartbeat that sustains us in good times and in bad.

Let us look at some of the underlying principles at work in the guidelines. Then we can assess how various ways of implementing or adapting them can deepen our experience of the Eucharist.

What are the most important underlying principles in implementing liturgical guidelines?

There are two key principles. **The first is the full, conscious and active participation of all the faithful in the Sunday Eucharist.** That principle underlies everything the Church did when it first made changes after Vatican II and can actively guide us in evaluating further changes. The Mass is meant to draw out our active and conscious participation, using the gifts and ministries of as many people as reasonable, as well as the full participation of everyone present.

The second core principle at work is that the Mass is a communal action, the action not simply of individuals but of a community of people. All that helps that community see itself as a true communion, a common union, centered on Christ, joined with the communion of saints, offering praise to God, is to be promoted. All that turns the communal action of the Mass into private prayer or personal whims or disconnected people is to be avoided. A small example here is how we pray the common responses and prayers. At times people hurriedly say "Amen" and other responses, or hurry through the Lord's Prayer, not trying to unite with the rest of the community present. That turns a common action into an individual one. This is one reason why so much of the liturgy came to be sung, because in singing the common action is easier to achieve.

Two additional, though secondary, principles influence the more recent guidelines as well. The first is that we are to experience the Mass as a sacred action, a special kind of communication, not mundane and ordinary. We are to be attentive to its sacred character in all that we say and do. The second is that in our common action, there are distinct roles and we are not to confuse these roles. The role of the priest who presides, for example, is not to be confused with the role of others. The vision is that if we all do our roles well and clearly, the common action will achieve a harmonious unity.

What do the guidelines say about periods of silence?

To participate fully in the Eucharist we need to see it as God's initiative to which we respond. One way a community both symbolizes that and helps that to happen is through greater attention to moments of silence. Moreover, when the whole assembly keeps silence it can be a profound experience of common purpose and prayer. It takes only a few moments of silence to convey a sense of relaxing, of not rushing, of being open to what God wants to do.

In addition to coming early enough to spend some time in quiet before the start of the Mass, the 2002 GIRM encourages periods of silence at five other moments: 1) before the Penitential Rite as we are invited to recall our need for God's mercy; 2) after "Let us pray", before the opening collect prayer, to have time to offer a personal prayer to God for why we are at the Eucharist; 3) after the first and second readings, before singing our responses, we are invited to pick out something from the reading or some thought connected to the reading and reflect on that; 4) after the homily to let all the words we have heard connected to the Scriptures settle in our hearts; and 5) in the time after communion, as a time of personal praise and thanksgiving.

These times do not all have to be of the same length, but they should be noticeable. It takes time for a whole community to become familiar with and practiced at entering into such silence. Children might not enter as easily into the silence or blurt something out. That is alright. Over time such silence does become a pattern into which people rather easily enter.

What do the guidelines say about what we are to sing at Mass?

The communication that is happening at Mass is not simply our usual, ordinary communication, but something special, sacred, of utmost importance. How do we show that? The liturgical guidelines suggest that singing more parts of the Mass is an important way to do so. In addition, song has the ability to naturally unite a diverse community into a harmonious whole. Currently most Sunday celebrations include a fair amount of song: hymns or refrains at the Entrance, Preparation of the Gifts, Communion, and Recessional, along with singing the Gloria, the Responsorial Psalm, the Gospel Acclamation, and the major Mass parts such as the Sanctus (Holy, Holy), Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen, and Lamb of God.

The 2002 GIRM encourages the singing of the Collect Prayers (at the Opening, Preparation of Gifts, after Communion) and the people to sing the Amen response. It even encourages the priest to sing the Eucharistic prayer. It suggests that all Catholics should know how to sing the Our Father and the Creed in both the vernacular and in Latin. In addition, it envisions that the community knows how to sing all of what are called the "dialogue" portions: Lord have mercy/Kyrie, The Word of the Lord/Thanks be to God, A reading from the holy gospel according to [N.]/Glory to you Lord, The gospel of the Lord/Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ, The Lord be with you/And also with you, Lift up your hearts/We lift them up to the Lord, Let us give thanks to the Lord our God/It is right to give him thanks and praise, Go in peace/Thanks be to

God.

Singing also shapes the communal bond at the time of communion. One of the more difficult changes for those used to time for personal prayer before and after receiving communion is that the guidelines envision all of us singing from the moment the first person has received (the priest presiding) until the last person has received communion. Then, and only then, is plenty of time for quiet, silent personal prayer to be given—after all have received communion.

Should everything be sung at all times? That is where the community needs to make some judgments. For one thing, it will partially depend on the priest who is presiding. For another, there is wisdom in being able to highlight some seasons and major feasts more than others, by adding extra sung parts at those celebrations. But keep the principles of active participation, common action and sacred communication in mind, so that the singing enhances rather than take away from the full meaning of the Eucharist.

What about the common postures and gestures during Mass?

Common gestures and posture are both a way to create a real sense of communion among all the people and for our entire bodies to be part of the prayer we do. Standing, kneeling, sitting, bowing, joining in processions, and raising hands in prayer are just some of the ways that this occurs. What do the liturgical guidelines say about some of these?

- **“Profound” Bow**

The documents make the distinction between a “profound bow” (bowing with the upper half of the body) and a “simple bow” (a nod of the head). Such bows are a way to bring out the respect and sacredness of that particular time at Mass, as well as unifying the people in a common gesture.

When liturgical ministers approach the altar, a profound bow can be made to the altar. A profound bow toward the altar is also mentioned during the praying of the Nicene Creed when the words “by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man” are said. [This turns into a genuflection at Christmas and on the feast of the Annunciation.] If the assembly is standing during the Eucharistic Prayer at the time of the institution narrative (consecration), then a profound bow by all takes place after the consecration of the bread and of the wine, when the priest usually genuflects.

It makes no sense to force such bowing or make it the focus of instruction during Mass. But the community can be encouraged to try such a gesture as a way to more consciously enter into the action(s) they are doing.

- **“Simple” Bow**

A simple bow (nod of the head) is recommended when we receive the consecrated bread or wine. A gesture done in common like this is a sign of unity. Because many people, due to age or infirmity find it awkward or impossible to genuflect, the genuflection was deliberately not chosen. Rather,

a simple bow (nod of the head) was chosen as the appropriate gesture. But please note: The most important sign of faith and reverence we do at communion is our “Amen,” spoken clearly and distinctly to the minister of communion. The minister of communion says “The Body (Blood) of Christ” and we respond “Amen,” which is shorthand for “*I believe and I will let myself be for others this body (blood) of Christ I receive.*” **This exchange of faith is an essential part of the communion ritual. Anything else we do (such as bowing) is secondary.** The simple bow is not to lessen this important exchange of faith, but rather provides for a gesture of reverence that all can do in a dignified way.

The guidelines do not say when to make the simple bow at communion. However, we should think about doing so before stepping forward for communion, as the person ahead of us is taking their step away. That gives us a chance to bow and then look at the minister of communion when we proclaim our “Amen.” In that way, the “Amen” retains its importance as the key part of the ritual.

The 2002 GIRM also invites us to use the simple bow of the head when the prayers mention the Trinity, Jesus’ or Mary’s name, or the name of the saint whose feast is being celebrated. This is part of the concern for keeping in mind the sacred nature of the liturgy. This has to be balanced against an excessive use of this gesture that might take away from the significance of its use at communion.

- **Standing/kneeling**

One change in the 2002 GIRM is asking people to stand only after the priest has prayed: “*Pray brothers and sisters that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.*” All then stand and only then do all pray “*May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands, to the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his Church.*” In practice almost no parish follows the guideline exactly. Most invite the people to stand before the priest prays the above introduction. Some leave it as it has been and the people pray the prayer seated. The main liturgical point is that the proper posture envisioned for all the collect prayers is standing, not sitting. This goal has to be balanced against allowing the flow of the liturgy to achieve a reverent, common action.

The General Instruction calls for a common posture from the time the priest receives communion until everyone else has received communion. Then all would take time in quiet prayer kneeling or sitting, whichever is more suitable for the particular church. The idea behind this change is to help us experience in a non-verbal way our communion with one another because we have received the communion of the Lord. Of course, no one is expected to stand who has difficulty standing for any length of time. However, for those who are able, standing until all receive dramatically highlights that it is not a private, individual gift we are preparing to receive or have received. It is a communal gift and action

What are the current guidelines for Communion Ministers?

Apparently in some places there was a confusion over who is the ordained priest and what is his role. As a result the 2002 GIRM asks that extraordinary ministers of communion not help the priest or deacon place the consecrated bread and wine in the vessels. Such communion ministers are not to approach the altar until after the priest has received, and the special permission (indult) in the United States to allow such ministers to help in cleansing the vessels after communion has expired. All of this has been the source of some confusion and communities need to think through communion procedures carefully in light of the underlying key principles.

It has not been the experience of most parishes that there is any confusion in who is the priest and what is his role. As a result, many have found that there is a positive symbolism in having the extra ministers of the Eucharist share in the breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup, as well helping to clean up the vessels after communion. There is no Mass without a properly ordained priest, of course. But the Mass does not belong to the priest. It is unfortunate that the 2002 GIRM and the new Roman Missal at times still read as though the lay faithful are sharing in the Mass of the priest, rather than the Eucharist being the common action of the whole people of God.

In implementing such guidelines parishes need to keep in mind the main concern: not to confuse people about who is the priest and what are the actions that belong to the priest. If that were to become an issue then closer adherence to such guidelines in parishes that don't currently implement them might help. But a few reminders to consider. The extraordinary communion ministers may come into the sanctuary area around the altar after the greeting of peace. The guidelines suggest that they not "approach the altar," that is, not help in the breaking of the bread or taking the chalice/ciborium on their own.

Some parishes have needlessly prolonged the preparation for communion by not thinking through how to smoothly, reverently and quickly get communion ministers to their stations. Also, the guidelines do have some oddities. They allow for and even encourage the extra communion ministers to consume what remains of the consecrated wine or even consume some of the leftover consecrated bread, if too much is going to be placed in the tabernacle. Yet they do not allow for such communion ministers to cleanse the vessels, which is a much less important action. Also, if many vessels are used, it takes a very insignificant part of the Mass—the clean up—and potentially prolongs it into its own quasi-ritual. Some have even added an extra hymn to cover the time of the action. This runs the danger of diminishing the flow and meaning of Eucharist and the communion rite. This is the high point of the liturgy. We have just received the most precious gift we can imagine but instead of allowing that to sink in, we are focused on the clean up going on at the tabernacle, altar and/or credence table.

What about multiple ciboria and cups (chalices) at Mass?

The new guideline to pour the wine into cups at the preparation of the gifts, rather than at its most liturgically appropriate time—the fraction rite as the Lamb of God is sung—is another odd one. It seems that concern for the potential spilling of the consecrated wine has outweighed in the guidelines what is a much more liturgically and theologically important reality—the symbol of one bread, one cup. The use of just one bread and one plate for the bread evokes Scriptural passages and more fittingly symbolizes the unity that this Eucharistic action is undertaking. From the many gathered the Lord is uniting us as one body. With that one body the Lord is offering all that we are to the Father. For that one body the Lord is giving us the gift of his own risen life in the form of the sacramental body and blood. All who partake of this one bread and one cup are intimately tied together and sent forth in mission to be a source of charity and unity to the world. For that reason many continue to use one plate for the bread and one cup for the wine until the Lamb of God. The theological points above would also discourage the practice of having a separate chalice and small paten with one host for the priest. The Eucharist is a common action which unites us all in and through the body and blood of Christ.

Along with the guidelines for pouring the wine at the time of the preparation of the gifts, before it is consecrated, comes the suggestion that if it is too difficult to distribute the cup, due to the numbers of people present, it might be better just to offer the body and blood of Christ under one form, the consecrated bread. Another odd suggestion, since elsewhere the guidelines encourage the full use of symbols and the appropriateness of receiving under both forms. Again it seems as if concerns for potential abuses at times outweighs the more important reality the liturgy is trying to help us enter into.

If extra cups are used and brought forward at the preparation of the gifts and altar, then extra corporals can be placed on the altar as needed, and one cup should clearly stand out as the main chalice.

What are some of the other guidelines we should be aware of?

Some of the other items that the General Instruction covers include the following concerns:

- Using the ambo (the lectern for readings) only for the liturgy of the Word. That means introductions to the Mass and other announcements need to use a different place. Some add a extra lectern in the sanctuary for such purposes, but that runs the danger of reducing the clear focus on the altar and ambo and presider's chair. Some do such announcements at the cantor's stand in the music area, but in some churches that is not easy to see. The particular space and environment of each church needs to be respected as decisions are made on this issue.
- The instructions ask the priest to stay at the altar and exchange the greeting of peace only with those in the sanctuary or, for pastoral reasons such as a funeral, with just a few people nearby. The thinking seems to be a worry that this portion of the Mass will go on too long and throw out of balance the major rites such as the Liturgy of the Word and Communion. At most parishes the Greeting of Peace has been happening quite well and without

any excessiveness, so many have not changed anything with the Greeting of Peace at this time. Moreover, to put this change into practice runs the danger of isolating the priest in a way that is contrary to the meaning of the Liturgy. However, the instructions do remind us of an important point. We are exchanging the **peace of Christ**, not hellos or best wishes or congratulations, but the peace of Christ.

- The use of a white cloth to cover the altar top (the mensa) at all Masses. In some parishes this runs into conflict with some of the decisions the liturgical environment people make to bring out the seasons of the liturgical year.
- Using the Apostles' Creed instead of the usual Nicene Creed. It is allowed, says the new Missal, and even appropriate during the Lent and Easter seasons, because the Apostle's Creed originated as a baptismal creed. But the active participation of the whole community needs to be kept in mind, so that the prayer can be done together, by heart, rather than uncertainly searched for and read from a worship aid.
- Are we to use more Latin in the liturgy? If possible, says the GIRM, including knowing how to sing many of the major Mass parts in Latin. But this has to be evaluated within the core principle of full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy, especially in carrying out the roles and responses that belong to the whole assembly.
- Not using glass or ceramic vessels for communion. The two main concerns seem to be dignity and breakability. Many communities have beautifully crafted vessels, and so these have great dignity, but are of more easily breakable materials. On the other hand, such communities have rarely, if ever, experienced the breaking of such vessels during communion time. And even non-breakable materials can easily spill, if someone stumbles on a step.

Parish communities need both to know the liturgical guidelines and the underlying liturgical and theological principles which shape the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharist is not something done from a book. It is the gathering, re-forming, transforming action of Christ and the Holy Spirit as we connect our lives to God. At the same time, it is the Lord's Eucharist, not ours, and so is not simply a matter of doing "what works." An openness to the spirit of the liturgical guidelines and to the awesome reality that Eucharist is allows that Sunday (weekly) Eucharist to be what it is meant to be—the heartbeat of the faith community's life. Please see the companion pamphlet, *Our Sunday Eucharist*, for an overview of the parts of the Mass and how we participate in the Eucharist. Along with this overview, it is available at the website listed below. Go to the "Site Index" and look under "Eucharist, Sunday" and "Eucharist, Guidelines."

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