

GENE PLAISTED, O.S.C./THE CROSIERS

CHANGES IN THE MASS



THE NEW GENERAL INSTRUCTION

A number of changes in the celebration of the Mass are being introduced in Catholic parishes. The reason is a new edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, published in Latin in 2001. Now translated into English and other languages, it has been slightly adapted for various cultures and is now working its way into our parishes.

This document, which forms the preface to the Roman Missal, contains the rules and rubrics for the celebration of the Eucharist. Beyond listing the rules, however, the *General Instruction* also expresses an understanding of the Mass. The directions given reflect various theological perspectives. Because the document was created by several different committees at different times, it contains perspectives that sometimes seem to conflict with one another.

The *General Instruction* was first issued in the late 1960s and has been revised several times since then. In addition to the revisions made at the Vatican, the document is also adapted by the bishops of each country. Recent decisions made by the U. S. bishops are included in the version of the *General Instruction* that is now in use in the United States.

Recent revisions to the *General Instruction* often reflect different perspectives from those that shaped the original text itself. A good way to understand the revised document is to look at it as a search for balance. No single viewpoint can adequately express the full mystery of the Eucharist,

BY LAWRENCE E. MICK



SINGING SIGN OF THE HEART'S JOY

so varying viewpoints can give us a broader and deeper understanding of the Mass.

The implementation of this latest version of the *General Instruction* offers all Catholics a good opportunity to deepen their understanding of the Mass. It also offers parishes an impetus to evaluate their usual patterns of worship and to improve areas that do not reflect the basic vision of the *General Instruction*.

Take Your Places, Everyone

One of the concerns reflected in the recent revisions is a desire to clarify the roles of various participants in the liturgy. Some actions that have commonly been done by extraordinary ministers of Communion, for example, are now designated as tasks proper to the priest or a deacon. If you look only at these changes, they seem to be an attempt to highlight the differences between ordained ministers (bishops, priests and deacons) and non-ordained liturgical ministers (lectors, Communion ministers, servers, etc.)

It is important to view these revisions, however, in the context of the whole document. The *General Instruction* takes great pains to encourage the full participation of the whole assembly in the celebration of the liturgy. While some rubrics stress the role of the clergy, others strongly emphasize the proper and

indispensable role of the whole body of Christ gathered for worship.

Therefore, it is of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass, the Lord's Supper, be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful who take their own proper part in it may more abundantly gain its fruits.... This will best be accomplished if, after due regard for the nature and circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration be planned in such a way that it brings about in the faithful a participation in body and mind that is conscious, active, full, and burning with faith, hope, and charity. The Church desires this kind of participation, the nature of the celebration demands it, and for the Christian people it is a right and duty they have by reason of their baptism.

(*GIRM*, # 17-18)

The goal is not, then, to return to the era when we thought of the Mass as something the priest did while everyone else watched and prayed their own prayers. The Mass is the action of the whole body of Christ, which is formed by all the members of the assembly, including the priest and other special liturgical ministers. Only when everyone does his or her part fully will we create liturgy that is truly worthy of the God we worship.

The implementation of these latest changes, then, is a good time for all of us to deepen our understanding of the importance of our own roles in the liturgy. The balance we seek does not exalt any one role above the others but values the diversity of roles in the liturgy and treasures each as an irreplaceable part of the community at worship.

Sing Out and Be Quiet

Another emphasis that recurs frequently in the revised text of the *General Instruction* is the importance of singing in the liturgy. Many Catholics remember a time when singing by the assembly was not part of our Sunday experience, and many still see such musical prayer as an optional element for those who like to sing.

The *General Instruction* reveals a very different view of things:

Singing is a sign of the heart's joy (cf. Acts 2:46). Thus Saint Augustine says rightly: "Singing is for lovers." There is also the ancient proverb: "One who sings well prays twice."

For this reason and with due consideration for the culture of the people and abilities of each liturgical assembly, great importance should be attached to the use of singing in the celebration of the Mass. Although it is not always necessary to sing all the texts that are of themselves meant to be sung (e.g., in weekday Masses), every care must be taken that singing by the ministers and the people is not absent in celebrations that occur on Sundays and holy days of obligation. (# 39-40)

Notice that this passage assumes that some parts of the Mass are meant to be sung by their very nature. Just as reciting "Happy Birthday" at a party rather than singing it makes little sense, so, too with reciting elements like the Holy, Holy or the Great Amen. Some things are just meant to be sung. Notice, too, that the text recognizes that the assembly at a weekday Mass might not sing all the parts that are normally sung, but it presumes that some singing will be part of every Mass. On Sundays and holy days,

this is really obligatory. Notice finally that the text speaks of singing rather than of instrumental music. Even when a trained musician is not present, the assembly of the faithful can and should sing some parts of the Mass. All it takes is one person with some sense of music to start the singing (or perhaps to strike one key on a piano or organ to get the right note on which to start).

Singing is important for a sense of celebration. As the document notes, it expresses the heart's joy. Singing lifts up the words we use and gives them a heightened dignity and beauty, often making them more memorable in the process. Singing also expresses and fosters the sense of unity among those gathered for worship, since all sing the same words at the same time on (at least roughly) the same notes. Singing is the primary way that a group of people can speak with one voice.

A balance to this emphasis on singing in the *General Instruction* is found in the document's attention to silence in the liturgy.

Sacred silence, as part of the celebration, must be observed at the designated times. Its purpose, however, depends on the time it occurs in each part of the celebration. Thus at the act of penitence and again after the invitation to pray, all recollect themselves; but at the conclusion of a reading or the homily, all meditate briefly on what has been heard; then after Communion, they praise and pray to God in their hearts. (# 45)

The rite calls for silence during the penitential rite, before the opening prayer, before the first reading, after the first and second reading, after the homily and after all have received Communion. Taking these directives seriously and allowing enough time for real silence to take hold would do much to help the assembly experience a deeper sense of prayer and a greater awareness of the divine mystery. The *General Instruction* stresses this goal in speaking of the Liturgy of the Word:

The Liturgy of the Word must be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation. For this reason, any sort of haste that

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SILENCE PRAYER AND AWARENESS

hinders recollection must be clearly avoided. (# 56)

The *General Instruction* also encourages silence before Mass begins, which may seem at odds with the need to foster hospitality at worship and to connect with those who are assembling to worship together. Both values can be preserved if hospitality is encouraged as people gather, with a few moments set aside before the opening hymn during which people are invited to enter into reflection as the liturgy begins.

The liturgy described by the *General Instruction* maintains a balance between singing and other verbal participation and times of silence and reflection. For too long, many Catholics have seen these components of the liturgy as opposed to one another. Properly celebrated, silence complements and supports the other elements of worship. The need for some silence within the liturgy should not lead to less active participation. Singing is essential at its proper times, spoken responses are integral to the liturgy, and silence also deserves its place.

The Body of Christ for the Body of Christ

Some of the more obvious changes in the revised *General Instruction* concern the Communion rite. Extraordinary ministers are no longer supposed to help break the bread or

our the cups for distribution. Communion under both species of bread and wine is strongly encouraged. The document also strengthens the long-standing insistence that Communion is to be shared from the altar of sacrifice rather than from the tabernacle. Obviously exceptions can be made if distributors run short of bread, but normally the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle is intended for the sick and for other occasions where Communion may be distributed outside of Mass. During Mass all are supposed to receive the Lord's Body and Blood from the actual celebration,

so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated. (# 85)

All communicants are now supposed to make a bow of the head as a sign of reverence before receiving the Body and the Blood of Christ. In the past, our bishops decided that no special act of reverence would be used at the reception of Communion. Now they have specified that this simple bow will be the proper gesture of reverence. Those who have been kneeling, genuflecting or making the sign of the cross should now join the rest of the assembly in expressing reverence in the same way.

Another dimension of the Communion rite is not new to the *General Instruction*,



EUCHARIST UNITY IN CHRIST

but it has often been ignored in practice. The ritual indicates that the assembly is to remain standing throughout the Communion procession. Once everyone has received, then all sit (or kneel, if that is parish policy) together for the time of silence.

Our bishops have called for kneeling after the Lamb of God (i.e., for the “Lord, I am not worthy”) just before Communion, but then all should stand as the Communion procession forms. Maintaining a common posture while the whole assembly shares in Communion expresses with our bodies the unity that Communion creates among us. For the same reason, the *General Instruction* notes that the Communion song should begin when the priest receives Communion and continue until all have received. Here again singing expresses and fosters our unity at this moment of our deepest communion with one another in Christ.

These changes in the Communion rite provide a balance in our awareness of the Body of Christ. Some of them remind us of the reverence that is appropriate toward the sacramental elements of bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Others remind us that Communion unites us not only with Christ but also with all the members of his mystical body, the Church. Some people want to concentrate only on Communion as a time of connection between the individual and Christ.

Others may focus too exclusively on their union with other members of the worshipping assembly. It is never adequate to focus on only one of these dual dimensions of Communion. Proper understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist maintains the clear connection between our union with Christ and our union with the other members of his body, between the sacramental Body of Christ and his mystical body.

be absent from Church life. Every family has its arguments and varying perspectives. There is no reason to think the Church family should be any different. The challenge is for us to find a way to worship together and embrace our unity in Christ despite our differences and disagreements.

When we come to worship, we are all required to put aside our own preferences and wishes in order to enter into the worship that Christ himself offers to the Father. Every one of us must surrender to the requirements of the liturgy itself. Here Christ invites us to set aside whatever divides us in order to unite with him in offering his sacrifice to the Father. Here those who hold opposing viewpoints must rediscover what they hold in common if they are to take part in this sacred action.

The Catholic Church has always sought to be broad enough to encompass people of “every race, language and way of life” (see Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation, II). It is a Church that embraces a wide variety of styles and spiritualities and customs and opinions. No matter what our background or preferences, the liturgy is the place where we must be able to embrace one another. If we keep our focus on the real meaning of the Eucharist, no matter what differing perspectives may exist among us, we will find the way to be one body. ■

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Finding Balance in the Parish

The balance of complementary emphases in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* suggests a healthy approach for all members of the church who gather to worship together. It is no secret that there are many different opinions and attitudes toward the liturgy in the Church today. Often disagreements over parish liturgy lead to harsh words and alienation among parishioners or even splits in the parish membership.

The liturgy should be the place where all come together rather than a cause of disunity. Differing opinions and attitudes are not likely to disappear soon, nor is it reasonable to assume that they will ever

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Question Box

- 1) How do you participate fully at Mass?
- 2) What role does silence play?
- 3) Why is singing important?

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