

# PRAYERFULLY PRAYING THE MASS WITHOUT A CONGREGATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 Pandemic necessarily introduced many and varied responses on the part of everyone to stem the spread of the virus. The practical shutdown of countries and cities required the public worship of God, in many cases, to become virtual and left many priests with the new normal of celebrating Mass without a congregation as part of their daily routine. For a great many priests the absence of the in person congregation raised personal, pastoral, liturgical and theological questions without the time for sufficient reflection and resources for solid and helpful answers.

## MASS WITHOUT A CONGREGATION

Before looking at prayerfully praying the Mass, it is important to look at the topic of Mass without a congregation itself. This topic lacks some theological and liturgical clarity among many today yet the Church has been consistent in affirming its value. Its evident value is linked to the inestimable value of the Eucharist itself. Mass without a congregation is often presented along with the urging of the Church for priests to celebrate daily.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the ministry and life of the priest was discussed by the Council Fathers at length. This resulted in the still excellent and timely document, *Presbyterorum ordinis*. This conciliar decree looks at every aspect of the priest's vocation and way of life. It recalls the tradition and anchors the priest's work and life in the Church in the Eucharistic Sacrifice with the celebration of Mass as his greatest task. Thus, the priest should celebrate Mass daily.

Priests act especially in the person of Christ as ministers of holy things, particularly in the Sacrifice of the Mass, the sacrifice of Christ who gave himself for the sanctification of men. [...] In the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which priests fulfill their greatest task, the work of our redemption is being constantly carried on; and hence the daily celebration of Mass is strongly urged, since even if there cannot be present a number of

the faithful, it is still an act of Christ and of the Church. Thus when priests join in the act of Christ the Priest, they offer themselves entirely to God, and when they are nourished with the body of Christ they profoundly share in the love of him who gives himself as food to the faithful. (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 13).

In fact, the decree further illustrates how the celebration of the Eucharist is what unites the priest to the actual work of Christ in the world, our redemption and salvation accomplished by Christ, and forms the basis for his pastoral service to the members of the Church and his ongoing holiness of life.

In order to continue doing the will of his Father in the world, Christ works unceasingly through the Church. He operates through his ministers, and hence he remains always the source and wellspring of the unity of their lives. Priests, then, can achieve this coordination and unity of life by joining themselves with Christ to acknowledge the will of the Father. For them this means a complete gift of themselves to the flock committed to them. Hence, as they fulfill the role of the Good Shepherd, in the very exercise of their pastoral charity they will discover a bond of priestly perfection which draws their life and activity to unity and coordination. This pastoral charity flows out in a very special way from the Eucharistic sacrifice. This stands as the root and center of the whole life of a priest. What takes place on the altar of sacrifice, the priestly heart must make his own. This cannot be done unless priests through prayer continue to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of Christ. (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 14)

The inexplicable relationship of the work of Christ and the work of the Church centers on the Eucharist and its celebration by priests each and every day. The norm of course is Mass with a congregation. Yet, these days of the COVID 19 Pandemic have us looking at Mass without a congregation as perhaps never before and for a more complete sense of its importance in the life and ministry of priests.

Although we commonly speak of Mass without a congregation, we must keep in mind that the nature of the Eucharist is always an ecclesial act of communion, an act of the whole Christ, of the sacramental head and members of the Church, of the priest and the baptized. So, even in a Mass without a congregation, the expectation is that at least one or more members of the faithful participate. As the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* indicates, even without a congregation, the Eucharist is an “act of Christ and of the Church.”

Even though it is on occasion not possible to have the presence and active participation of the faithful, which manifest more clearly the ecclesial nature of the celebration, the Celebration of the Eucharist is always endowed with its own efficacy and dignity, since it is the act of Christ and of the Church, in which the Priest fulfils his own principal function and always acts for the sake of the people's salvation.

Hence the Priest is recommended to celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in so far he can, even daily. (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 19).

Additionally, the current edition of the *Roman Missal* provides for the *Order of Mass with the Participation of a Single Minister*. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* describes this form of celebration as well (see *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nn. 252-272). The current 1983 *Code of Canon Law* affirms the "efficacy and dignity" of the Eucharist in every form of celebration and how the priest "fulfills his own principal function...for the sake of the people's salvation as well in every form of the celebration (see *Code of Canon Law*, canon 904)." So significant is this theological reality, that for a just and reasonable cause, a priest may celebrate Mass without anyone present (see *Code of Canon Law*, canon 906).

## **PRAYERFULLY PRAYING THE MASS WITHOUT A CONGREGATION**

For a great many priests the typical celebration on Sundays and weekdays is with a congregation. Not only with a congregation present but often with the assistance of a deacon and the expected liturgical ministers. Ordinarily the Eucharist is sung. Priests, by their usual pattern of celebrating Mass with a congregation, have been formed to preside over the prayer of the people, listening with them to the Word of God, and reflecting on it with the people in silence. They have become accustomed to be united with the people in the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, lifting up hearts together to the Father for the great event of the Eucharistic Prayer and inviting them to feed with him on the holy Body and Blood of the Lord. The chants throughout the Eucharist guide their prayerful praying of the Mass with the people.

When a priest offers Mass without a congregation due to the circumstances of the celebration, with perhaps only one person present and maybe even no one present, there is the temptation to be perfunctory and hurried, even with the sound theology given above well in place in the mind and heart of the priest.

Given the new situation of priests celebrating more regularly Masses without a congregation, several things should be in place to insure the prayerful praying of the

Mass. The habit of spiritual preparation for Mass and thanksgiving after Mass deserves renewed attention. This time honored practice allows the priest to focus on the Mass, his role in the Mass as united to the salvific and redemptive work of Christ in the Eucharist on behalf of the whole Church.

The *Order of Mass with the Participation of a Single Minister*, perhaps unknown to many priests, should be reviewed and observed. The pertinent directions found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* for this Order also should be studied. The Church recognizes that for a priest to celebrate in such a manner is not the norm yet provides specific liturgical directions to accommodate the situation, especially for a meaningful celebration for the priest, a celebration with its own *ars celebrandi*.

If possible, a deacon should be asked to assist, along with a reader and server. The presence and participation of a deacon, a reader and a server enhances the liturgical dimensions of the Eucharist and manifests the ecclesial nature of the action. The participation of these additional ministers likewise promotes a dignified celebration.

An attentiveness to the liturgical setting and furnishings, the sacred vestments and sacred vessels, the manner of prayer and proclamation, all combine to support a reverent and thoughtful celebration of the mysteries of Christ during Mass without a congregation.

Finally, following the prescribed times for silence in the celebration of the Eucharist without a congregation will allow for a deeply prayerful encounter with Christ the Priest by the priest. Silence in the celebration of the liturgy is a conscious act (*see General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, n. 45 and n. 56). It is the unspoken participation and grasping of what just occurred. It allows for the Holy Spirit to lead the priest, especially in this circumstance, to be more aware of the event of Christ that unfolds in the Eucharist for the glory of the Father and the salvation of all.

## CONCLUSION

The celebration of Mass without a congregation which has become a part of many of our lives over the last few weeks, although far from the ordinary for us priests, is not without its theological and spiritual benefit. It gives us the occasion to be renewed in an understanding of the priesthood, our personal share in the ministerial priesthood of Christ, that has an irreplaceable function in the Church all the time. A function that becomes our privileged duty as priests, a daily duty, in the pastoral service of God's holy people, for his praise and glory. Our prayerful praying of Mass without a congregation

can only enrich our own gratitude for the gift of our priestly vocation and lead us to a deeper appreciation for the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist.