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**AVOIDING INAPPROPRIATE PRACTICES AT EUCHARISTIC  
CELEBRATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST**

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**Introduction:**

In Advent this year, 2011, the New Translation of the Mass in English, better put, the Revised Mass Texts, will be used by Catholics in Ghana and other English Catholic world. Some of the words we are familiar with when priests and the lay faithful pray each time we participate at Mass will change. Even the book which contains the prayers the priests use for Mass--the *Sacramentary*—will now be called *The Roman Missal*. I must be quick to add that the Mass will not see any significant change. It will not be a contradiction to say that it will, by and large, remain the same. What the new translation brings on board is a deeper meaning of the prayers and texts.

Ever since the Revised Translation was published, many dioceses in the English-speaking Catholic world have held study sessions for their priests, religious and laity on *The Roman Missal* with a view to understanding the wisdom behind the revision. The preparations which are being made to “welcome” the revised Mass Text have reached their crescendo in many of these places. There are great expectations and sometimes anxiety among priests and lay faithful as we await November 27, 2011, the date the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference has chosen as take off date.

This write-up is not about *The Roman Missal* which will soon be implemented, neither is it a criticism of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist by a particular priest nor in any particular diocese in Ghana.

My intention is to offer a sober reflection and make humble suggestions to fellow priests on how we can improve upon our celebrations by avoiding some practices which are liturgically inappropriate in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. A few of us, over the years, have unconsciously introduced certain practices into the celebration of the Mass. Some others are just not observing the norms laid down to guide the celebration of the Mass, despite the several publications which are aimed at educating the clergy on the subject.

The past ten years have seen competent Church authorities come out with relevant publications for our guidance. For example, Blessed John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* as well as the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) are very educative. These and other useful materials can guide us to avoid pitfalls, and help in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist according to the mind of the church.

It is my hope that as dioceses take all concerned through final preparations to introduce us to the new English translation of the Mass through workshops, seminars, group discussions, rehearsals, translations into vernacular, publications of missalettes and concelebration booklets, they will remember to draw attention to, if any, some creeping inappropriate liturgical practices, especially those regarding the Eucharist, as observed and discussed in the following paragraphs. In this way the Church's on-going liturgical renewal will not only be seen to be successful but holistic.

### **Silence Before Holy Mass.**

The entire celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice which is the action of Christ and the people of God is a mystery in itself. In the celebration humans encounter the divine. The celebration of the Mass therefore requires that *sacred silence* is observed at designated times of the entire celebration. For instance, the church demands that *silence* is observed after the invitation to pray and at the end of the homily.

The first *silence*, however, is ***before the celebration begins*** (GIRM # 45). This *silence* is what appears to be lost on many of us. In order that everyone-- clergy and layfaithful-- be better prepared and thus take full, active and conscious part in the Eucharistic celebration, we are all called upon to recollect and keep the *silence* at least moments before the celebration commences, not forgetting to observe the other silence as well.

Silence before Mass is therefore demanded of the Priest celebrant, Knights and Ladies of the Altar (Mass Servers), Lectors, Sacristans, and any other person who may be in the sacristy during the final minutes before the commencement of Holy Mass. Similarly, all other persons who come to church at any day must remember that silence is one of the important liturgical requirements.

Admittedly, some form of noise-making may take place. While greeting and talking are not prohibited, they could be toned down in favour of the requirement to observe *silence* before Mass. It is therefore highly commended that members of our parishes are educated on the importance of observing silence before and during the periods designated in the Mass.

This is where the ministers of ushering and possibly the commentator can help every one---priests and layfaithful--- maintain as much as possible silence in the environs of the church before Mass begins. The usual loud greetings, laughing and ‘teasing’ can wait until after the Eucharistic celebration.

### **Lateness to Concelebrated Eucharistic Celebration:**

According to the Church’s instruction any priest who arrives when Mass has begun **should not be allowed** to concelebrate (GIRM # 206).

A priest may arrive late for Mass for no fault of his. The reason for the lateness may be because of the distance from his parish/rectory or institution to the celebration venue. Another reason may be due to unexpected pastoral exigencies and issues that confronted

him just at the time he was about to set off to the celebration. Whatever genuine reasons we may have for our lateness, the church says it is unacceptable for us to come to Mass late and quietly “sneak” in. While the layfaithful are encouraged to be present before every Eucharistic celebration commences, much more is expected from the priest who acts *in persona Christi*.

### **Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water**

A liturgical practice which may be called a “repetition of rite” and therefore inappropriate is the use of both the *Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water* and any of the other alternate Penitential Rites in the same celebration.

The two rites are different but achieve the same purpose. Both are penitential in essence. According to the rubrics, they are not meant to be used sequentially, but alternatively. The celebrant is to choose either the Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling Holy Water, which may be used at Sunday Masses, or any of the other Penitential Rites (GIRM # 51).

Despite the fact that these rites are alternatives to one another there have been instances when on Sundays, the Holy Water was used in addition to the Confiteor. Is it a case of “the more, the better?”

### **What is the Appropriate Ending of the Readings?**

Almost ten years after the revision of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM), one still hears at Eucharistic celebrations some Lectors ending First and Second Readings as *This is the word of the Lord*, while some Deacons and Priests after proclaiming the Gospel end as *This is the Gospel of the Lord*.

The current acclamation at the end of the First and Second Readings is *The word of the Lord*. The Gospel Reading should end *The Gospel of the Lord* (GIRM ## 128, 134).

These acclamations are translations nearest to the Latin. Hence in all liturgical celebrations, the phrase “*This is*” is omitted.

### **“Pray Brethren That Our Sacrifice”**

Another change in the Mass, no matter how insignificant this may seem, is when the people stand for the *Prayers over the Gifts*.

After the priest has washed his hands, he invites the people to pray by saying: “*Pray, brethren (brothers and sisters)*”. By this everybody is expected to **begin to stand** and ready to respond “*May the Lord accept.*” The emphasis is that at the invitation to pray the people begin to rise and make their response.

### **Moment Before The Eucharistic Prayer Begins**

Often times at Eucharistic celebration, one sees a Deacon or a Priest raise his finger or fingers to signal to concelebrating priests of the particular Eucharistic Prayer that will be used. This signal is sometimes picked up by a few others and passed on to other concelebrants to alert them of the same purpose. This practice distracts one’s attention. The moment such hands and fingers go up, they send another signal, this time about the lack of basic preparation that should have been carried out before the commencement of Mass.

The most appropriate procedure to adopt is that at the sacristy, and just before the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, the deacon or the principal celebrant himself must tell the concelebrants of the particular Eucharistic prayers that would be used.

### **The Epiclesis: Stretching Out One Hand or Both Hands?**

At the Epiclesis the priest calls upon God to send down his Spirit from heaven to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. For example, currently the Epiclesis of Eucharistic Prayer II says:

*“Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”*

In the new translation, we shall pray:

*“Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall,*

*so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.”*

These prayers are accompanied by a gesture of the hand. What has been noticed is that there is no uniformity in the gesture with the hand among priests. One notices these differences, especially between Ghanaian priests and their Francophone counterparts from countries like Togo, Benin and Cote D’Ivoire. While priests from these countries stretch out **both** hands at the epiclesis, majority of us who had our seminary formation here in Ghana extend only one, even when we are not holding the missal or concelebrating booklet. The obvious question is: “Why the difference in the gestures?”

Liturgically speaking, the kind of posture adopted does not invalidate the celebration. Nonetheless, people will be right to argue that there should not be differences among priests in their gestures during an important action as the epiclesis, when we have all received the same formation in liturgical discipline.

*The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM ## 222a, 227a, 230a and 233a), in referring to the four Eucharistic prayers, indicate that the principal celebrant and the concelebrants extend their hands toward the offering at the epiclesis. Is the phrase “extend their hands” to be interpreted as one hand of each of the celebrants, presuming that none of the priests is having in his hand any prayer book, or it means both hands? Should a concelebrant who is standing at the Altar extend only a hand or both hands?

If we are to go by ancient tradition, then concelebrants should extend **both** their hands towards the offering during the epiclesis just as the principal celebrant. In arguing for both hands, the document *Guideline for Concelebration of the Eucharist* by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, explains that “The full impact of this gesture can be achieved if the concelebrants adopt the same gesture as the principal celebrant.”

### **Elevation of Many Hosts, Ciboria and Chalice**

One characteristic of a good liturgy is to stick as much as possible to the rubrics. In this way we shall celebrate according to the norm and mind of the church. Over elaboration can distort meanings and send wrong signals.

According to GIRM # 151, “At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest takes the paten with the host and the chalice and elevates them both while alone (and with concelebrants, if any) singing or saying the doxology, ... *’Through him.....’*”.

At a concelebrated Mass, because there may be a number of priests around the Altar, some priests consciously or unconsciously give other chalices and ciboria to a number of priests to elevate during the final doxology. This practice should be avoided. It is good to remember that no matter the number of sacred vessels holding the consecrated bread and wine, only **one** consecrated host and **one** chalice are to be elevated.

### **Lay Faithful Reciting Eucharistic Prayers?**

It is known that some priest presiders ask their lay parishioners to join them in saying or singing:

*“Through him,  
with him,  
in him,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all glory and honour is yours,  
almighty Father,  
for ever and ever.”*

( In the new translation, the prayer would be  
“Through him, and with him, and in him,  
O God, almighty Father,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all glory and honour is yours,  
for ever and ever).

The above prayer is the concluding doxology of the Eucharistic Prayers through which the glorification of God is expressed. It is a part of the Eucharistic Prayers and it can be recited or sung only by the priest. It is therefore an abuse to ask the lay people to either recite or sing the final doxology together with the priest. What the people are rather called to do is to respond at the end of the prayer by affirming with the acclamation, *Amen*.

### **Double Hand Washing?**

Originally the washing of the hands was the result of the touching of the gifts brought by the faithful in procession to the sanctuary. In the process the priest was believed to have touched some dirt as well. It was therefore for hygienic purposes that the hands were washed in those days.

In the course of time this rite became known as *lavabo* due to the accompanying recitation of Psalm 25,6ff. It was an expression and resolve of the priest to offer to God a sacrifice with the greatest possible purity and devotion.

According to a much older practice, a Bishop in a Pontifical Mass washed his hands twice. The first washing took place immediately after saying *Oremus* (“Let us pray”), and the second after offering the bread and wine.

The current rite of washing of hands occurs only once in the entire Eucharistic celebration. This is when the priest, praying inaudibly, stands at the side altar washes his hands and prays “*Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin.*” Explaining the relevance of the rite, GIRM # 76 says it “is an expression of his <priest’s> desire for interior purification.” The rite is to remind the priest of the inner cleansing that is necessary as he prepares to enter into the sacred mystery he is celebrating.

Unfortunately, it is now becoming the norm that the priest celebrant washes his hands two or three times during the celebration. The first of the multiple washing takes place after receiving the offertory gifts from the layfaithful and the third after returning from an exchange of peace “tour” which sometimes takes him outside the sanctuary. These multiple hand washing “rites” can confuse the faithful and blur its spiritual meaning.

Since extensive rounds of exchange of peace contribute to the “multiple” hand washing, it may be appropriate to revisit the norms of the church. According to GIRM # # 82 and 154 and the Instruction, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* # 72, “*The Priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration. He does likewise if for a just reason he wishes to extend the sign of peace to some few of the faithful.*”

However at celebrations where religious leaders of other denominations, faith and civil authorities are present, and even at a wedding or a funeral, the priest may for a “just reason” offer the sign of peace to others near the sanctuary. After the offer of peace, must the priest wash his hands because he shook hands with many people? Could he not have “gathered dirt” that warrant the washing of hands?

My personal opinion is no, he should not wash his hands. To be seen to be washing hands after greeting someone is an affront to our cherished custom. It would demean those whose hands we have touched. The best the priest should do if he thinks the hands were too dirty to handle the sacred host, is in my view, to discreetly wipe the hands while he

remains at the centre of the altar. In that way, he would have removed the dirt any way, and at the same time not be seen to be disrespecting traditions.

### **Breaking of The Bread**

The significance of this liturgical action, a gesture which Christ himself performed at the Last Supper, is that even though the faithful are many, they are made one Body in the communion of the one Bread of Life---Christ himself. It is this same Christ who suffered, died and rose again that the whole world may receive salvation. Because of this, the church teaches that the rite of the Breaking of Bread, even though brief, should be done with utmost reverence.

The rite is done immediately after the Sign of Peace **while the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) is being sung or recited**. What this norm means is that the *Agnus Dei* should begin only after the Sign of Peace has ended. Unfortunately this is not the case in some places. What one sometimes sees is that immediately after the Priest has exchanged peace with the concelebrating priests (if any) and the other ministers, the rite of the Breaking of the Bread is begun without waiting for the Sign of Peace to be completed, let alone for the *Agnus Dei* to be sung or said.

Similarly, in other places a more serious mistake is made during the celebration of the Eucharist by breaking the host at the time of the **consecration**. This, like many others being discussed in this article, is considered by the church as “abuse” and should therefore be corrected.

A third practice that should be corrected with haste, is how Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion( wrongly called *Eucharistic Ministers* by some people) are asked to help in the breaking of the bread, even though it is only the priest celebrant, and if necessity demands a concelebrant or a Deacon are allowed by law to do so.

A final area which needs to be looked at is how the rite of the *Breaking of the Bread*, though a very important one, is accorded undue emphasis and sometimes unnecessarily prolonged.

### **The Use of a Common Language**

It sometimes happens that a priest in Ghana who goes to concelebrate Mass in another part of the country may be rendered mute throughout the entire celebration, including the recitation of the Eucharistic Prayers. The decision to use the language of the area, i.e. the vernacular for the celebration, is left to the pastoral judgment of the Parish Priest or Priest-in-charge. The vernacular may exactly be suitable for full, active and conscious participation by the people. That indeed is what a good liturgy demands.

Nevertheless, the church's norms demand that when it comes to pronouncing the Eucharistic Prayer at a concelebrated Mass, a common language known to all the concelebrating priests and the people should be used. Therefore, all priests who have come for the celebration should be made aware before the commencement of the Mass of the language that would be used throughout the celebration. When the priests are aware, they will then take the decision whether or not to concelebrate. This piece of information is essential because a priest, who does not know the language to be used in the celebration and therefore is unable to recite the part of the Eucharistic prayer proper to him, is advised not to concelebrate. Such a priest should rather attend in choral dress (*Redemptionis Sacramentum* # 113).

The exhortation of the Instruction on the use of a language common to all priests who are concelebrating at Mass and to the people of God is a welcome one.

### **Recommendations/Conclusion**

The mystery of the Eucharist is too great a gift to allow for experimentation and ambiguity and for its sacredness and universal ordering to be obscured. To do any of

these is to cause injury to the substantial unity of the Roman Rite, which ought to be preserved by all. In the words of Blessed John Paul II, liturgical practices which go contrary to the norms of the church prevent the faithful from “re-living in a certain way the experience of the two disciples of Emmaus” whose eyes were opened and there and then recognized the Lord. Therefore no one should be allowed to treat this mystery according to how he wants. This calls for correction of excesses in the celebration of this wonderful sacrament.

In any case, Christ’s faithful have the right that the Holy Mass, as any other Sacrament and Sacramental, be celebrated according to the entire doctrine of the magisterium and the wishes of the church as prescribed in liturgical books and laws.

It is the opinion of this humble writer that we take a serious look at what we do during the liturgy and, especially how we do them, and take courage to correct those things that we do without following the Church’s norms.

The regulation of liturgical life in every diocese is in the hands of the bishop. Being endowed with the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the bishop is the first steward of the mysteries of God in the particular church entrusted to him. He is also the moderator, promoter and guardian of the whole liturgical life of the diocese. Individually he exercises these functions in his diocese and collectively they play similar roles for the country.

In Ghana, at the national level, the Bishops Conference following church norms has put in place a national commission to help in the regulation of the Sacred Liturgy. This body--National Liturgical Commission--- has been in existence for several years. It is composed of at least a bishop, and priests and layfaithful from all the dioceses in the country.

The Commission has over the years produced liturgical materials which do not only inform, but educate the clergy and the lay faithful. I would like to commend the National

Liturgical Commission for their work. At the same time, I would like to recommend that the bishops, as a conference, do their best to strengthen this national organ to function more effectively; and, on the individual diocesan level, each bishop helps his Diocesan Liturgical Committee to also play its role in fostering stronger liturgical formation and practice. I make this recommendation on the knowledge and strength that the liturgy is the source from which all the power of the Church flows, and the summit toward which all her activity is directed (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, # 10).

When the Second Vatican Council was convened, the liturgy was the first item on its agenda. I would like to recommend that we do the same for the Church in our dioceses and in our dear country Ghana as a whole, because the Church is essentially a liturgical body, more than anything else.

I have in this exposition tried to highlight some liturgical rites and practices especially those pertaining to the celebration of the Holy Mass which are contrary to the intention of the church. I have raised pertinent questions and made a few recommendations. It is my prayer that this article would prompt further discussions and more importantly initiate practical ways of addressing these concerns. As the church begins to use the new English translation of the Mass, we will also take the necessary measures to eliminate or at worse reduce to the barest minimum liturgical practices that are foreign to the church.

