



Celebrating the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass: A Review of New Diocesan Norms—Part I

We begin today a series of bulletin inserts regarding the new “General Norms for the Celebration of the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass in the *Forma Ordinaria*” which was promulgated by the Most Reverend Michael F. Burbidge on August 4, 2008, and will take effect in the Diocese of Raleigh on Sunday, October 19, 2008.* What is this document and why has Bishop Burbidge written it?

Since Christ first gave the gift of his Body and Blood to the apostles, the importance of the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist to the life of the Church, and to each member of the Church, has led to much discussion and the development of many important documents. This has been particularly true over the past 45 years—beginning with the Vatican II document on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctam Concilium*.

Revised Roman Missal

With the start of the third millennium, Pope John Paul II approved a revised Roman Missal (January 11, 2000) and later a revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (April 20, 2000). The *General Instruction*, commonly referred to by the initials GIRM, provides for the Church some historical and theological background on the Eucharist, information about the structure of the Sacred Liturgy of the Mass, and specific information about how the Mass is to be celebrated.

More recently there have been documents from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Church’s Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and from Pope Benedict XVI. While each document has safe-guarded the essential aspects of the Sacred Liturgy, some of the words and actions that form part of the celebration have changed over the years.

Diocesan Norms

Bishop Burbidge has taken all of the recent documents into consideration and has provided new diocesan norms which will assist parishes

in doing what the Church asks and will continue to ensure that each celebration of the Sacred Liturgy be in full conformity with the universal Church, be an expression of our unity as members of the Body of Christ, and be the source of abundant spiritual riches for all of the faithful who join together at Holy Mass. Indeed, it is the Bishop’s responsibility to guard and guide the liturgical life of the Diocese and see to it that the celebration of the sacraments and prayers of the Church aid each of us as we strive to answer God’s call to holiness.

The Bishop must teach and lead, but we are also mindful, from its Greek roots, that the word *liturgy* means “work of the people,” and the Sacred Liturgy truly is the work of all of the People of God. Good liturgy calls for the participation of the whole Body of Christ: the priest, deacon, installed ministers, lay ministers, and all of the faithful.

Liturgical Ministers

By virtue of his ordination, the priest acts in the person of Christ as he celebrates with reverence the sacred mystery of the Eucharist. He not only leads the community and presides over the faithful; he also joins them to himself in offering the sacrifice of Christ. The priest does not add, remove, or change any part of the Mass, although the Church does provide some options in the rubrics for the priest to use his own words or to select among prayers or readings for the day.

At Sunday liturgy the priest is often assisted by a deacon. When a deacon is present, he carries the Book of the Gospels in the opening procession, reads the Gospel and sometimes delivers the homily, announces the petitions of the Prayer of the Faithful, assists the priest at the altar, and helps with the distribution of Holy Communion.

Among the various ministries called for in the celebration of the Eucharist, there are two

* The complete text of the new “Norms “ is available at www.dioceseofraleigh.org.

“instituted ministries,” that of lector and acolyte (usually seminarians preparing for ordination to the priesthood or men preparing for service in the permanent diaconate). However, the Church has encouraged the lay faithful to fulfill some of the roles of instituted lectors and acolytes. The function of the lector is frequently carried out by readers while the duties of the acolyte may be performed by altar servers and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Other liturgical ministries usually at the service of the Sunday celebration of the Mass include the psalmist, cantor, other musicians, and ushers.

In responding to the call to serve in any of these ministries, we should keep in mind that our baptism into the Body of Christ requires us to put the gifts the Holy Spirit has given us at the service of the community. We should, of course, have the gifts which satisfy the needs of the ministry. Our pastors can often help us discern the gifts we have been given and how God is calling us to use them, whether in service to the Sacred Liturgy, to other work within our parish, or to the greater community. If we are lacking particular gifts for one ministry, we are probably called to serve in a different way.

Before serving in a ministry, we are also called to take part in the spiritual formation and the development of the skills necessary to use our gifts well. The Sacred Liturgy requires the very best we have to offer, not just what we can do easily. And finally, once liturgical ministers have been called forth and trained, they should be ready to serve the assembly even when they may not have been scheduled.

Preparing Ourselves

Each of us must prepare for the celebration of the Mass just as the ordained and other ministers do. Following a few steps each week can prepare us for the full, conscious, and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy that the Church asks of us. First, we can develop the habit of daily prayer. If we

regularly place ourselves in God’s presence in personal prayer, we will be better prepared to take part in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Included among our regular spiritual practices should be a daily examination of conscience. This may simply be a bedtime review of our words and actions in light of the teachings of Jesus and of the Church. Such a practice helps us identify our failings and urges us to seek forgiveness through the Sacrament of Penance for both mortal and venial sin. If we make this effort to free ourselves from sin and better conform our lives to Christ, we will be better disposed to enter into Christ’s presence in the celebration of the Eucharist and to receive the Lord’s Sacred Body and Precious Blood in Holy Communion.

Encountering God

Reading Sacred Scripture should also be part of our daily life. Some people choose to read through the Bible systematically and with in-depth study, while others would find this burdensome. However, each of us should be able to find a few minutes during the week to read the Scriptures for the coming Sunday. (They are often printed in parish bulletins and can also be found through the “Catholic Links” on the Diocese of Raleigh home page www.dioceseofraleigh.org.) Spending time with the Scriptures before going to Mass prepares us to better hear God’s word proclaimed in the readings and explained in the homily.

Finally, we should strive to lead a Christian life daily, to make a habit of holiness. If we try to pattern our lives after Christ by practicing works of mercy and charity, we can more readily encounter God in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy and be better prepared to receive the real presence of Christ into our lives through the reception of Holy Communion, the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ.