

Changes in the Mass since 2003

American Catholics are concerned about changes that are happening in the Mass. This guide covers the principal changes.

One of the key documents governing the way in which the Mass is celebrated is the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. It contains basic directives instructing priests and other ministers in how the Mass is to be celebrated. The previous edition of the GIRM was released in 1975, but in 2000 Pope John Paul II released a new edition, which was slightly modified in 2002. This new edition of the GIRM was substantially the same as the prior one but had many small changes made to improve the quality of liturgical celebrations and clarify matters that previously were ambiguous.

Most national conferences of bishops petition Rome for local “adaptations” of the liturgy to be used in their countries. Rome must approve these adaptations before they have force of law. The United States had such a set of adaptations under the 1975 GIRM, but they needed to be redrafted and resubmitted with the release of the new GIRM. Consequently, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops proposed and submitted to Rome a set of national adaptations for use in the Latin-rite dioceses of the United States. These adaptations were approved and incorporated into the American translation of the GIRM.

This translation was approved and went into force on March 17, 2003. It is now

liturgical law in the United States and is presently being implemented in dioceses across the nation. The following represent some of the most often asked about changes in liturgical law.

PLACEMENT OF THE TABERNACLE

The basic provision made for the placement of the tabernacle is as follows: “In accordance with the structure of each church and legitimate local customs, the Most Blessed Sacrament should be reserved in a tabernacle in a part of the church that is truly noble, prominent, readily visible, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer” (314).

More specifically: “It is more in keeping with the meaning of the sign that the tabernacle in which the Most Holy Eucharist is reserved not be on an altar on which Mass is celebrated. Consequently, it is preferable that the tabernacle be located, according to the judgment of the diocesan bishop, (a) either in the sanctuary, apart from the altar of celebration, in a form and place more appropriate, not excluding on an old altar no longer used for celebration; (b) or even in some chapel suitable for the faithful’s private adoration and prayer and that is organically connected to the church and readily visible to the Christian faithful” (315).

While not providing a single placement for the tabernacle in all churches, this clarifies a point that previously had been ambiguous in the law: who gets to decide upon the placement of the tabernacle. The answer is that the diocesan bishop does, within the limits specified above.

SILENCE IN CHURCH

Some have questioned whether the custom of observing silence in churches is to be retained, particularly before Mass. The new GIRM commends this practice:

“Even before the celebration itself, it is commendable that silence be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred action in a devout and fitting manner” (45).

THE SIGN OF PEACE

In many places the faithful have been perplexed about the priest being able to shake hands, hug, or otherwise exchange a sign of peace with numerous individuals in the congregation. To prevent this from happening, the new GIRM specifies:

“The priest may give the sign of peace to the ministers but always remains within the sanctuary, so as not to disturb the celebration. In the dioceses of the United States of America, for a good reason, on special occasions (for example, in the case of a funeral, a wedding, or when civic leaders are present) the priest may offer the sign of peace to a few of the faithful near the sanctuary” (154).

EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

For some time the Holy See has been concerned about the overuse in America and other countries of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. These are individuals other than bishops, priests, and deacons who distribute Communion to the faithful. In many places extraordinary ministers have been

used in ordinary circumstances. To facilitate this they are sometimes referred to simply as “Eucharistic ministers” (not a title used for them in Church documents) or as “special ministers” rather than “extraordinary ministers.”

To prevent the overuse of extraordinary ministers, the new GIRM provides that “the priest may be assisted in the distribution of Communion by other priests who happen to be present. If such priests are not present and there is a very large number of communicants, the priest may call upon extraordinary ministers to assist him, e.g., duly instituted acolytes or even other faithful who have been deputed for this purpose. In case of necessity, the priest may depute suitable faithful for this single occasion” (162).

In some places extraordinary ministers have been encouraged to gather around the altar before the distribution of Communion and even to receive Communion before the priest does. To prevent this, the new GIRM provides that “these ministers should not approach the altar before the priest has received Communion, and they are always to receive from the hands of the priest celebrant the vessel containing either species of the Most Holy Eucharist for distribution to the faithful” (162).

UNIFORMITY OF POSTURE

The 1975 GIRM contained a directive stressing the congregation’s uniformity of posture and directing the faithful to follow the instructions they were given at Mass regarding what posture to assume. This directive was intended to help implement the changes in posture that accompanied the reform of the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council.

However, numerous ministers at Mass took it as an opportunity to mandate their own preferences for the congregation's posture and instructed the faithful to adopt postures contrary to those provided for in the law. To rectify this problem, the new GIRM specifies that the faithful should follow directions if they are in accord with the law. The revised directive reads:

“With a view to a uniformity in gestures and postures during one and the same celebration, the faithful should follow the directions that the deacon, lay minister, or priest gives *according to whatever is indicated in the Missal*” (43, emphasis added).

STANDING AT THE *ORATE, FRATRES*

In many parishes implementing the new GIRM, the faithful have been advised to begin standing slightly earlier in the liturgy of the Eucharist than had previously been the case. Under the prior law, the faithful were directed to stand “from the prayer over the gifts to the end of the Mass, except at the places indicated later in this paragraph” (1975 GIRM 21).

The new GIRM gives the appearance of directing them to stand slightly earlier, “from the invitation, *Orate, fratres (Pray, brethren)*, before the prayer over the offerings until the end of Mass, except at the places indicated below” (2000 GIRM 43).

The *Orate, fratres* is the prayer at the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist where the priest says, “Pray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to

God the Almighty Father.” From the way the relevant paragraph in the new GIRM is written (this is not an American adaptation but what is in the original GIRM itself), it appears that the faithful are directed to stand at the beginning of the *Orate, fratres*.

This is usual in that the faithful do not normally change posture in the middle of such a prayer. Whether it was Rome’s intent to have them do so is unclear. It is possible that future clarifications from Rome will establish whether the new GIRM intends the faithful to stand at the beginning or just after the *Orate, fratres* and its response (which was the designated point under the prior law). Until such clarifications are made, parishes seem within their rights to ask the faithful to stand at this earlier point.

KNEELING DURING MASS

The 1975 GIRM provided for the faithful to kneel from after the Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, Holy”) to after the Great Amen. Though it was the American custom to kneel also after the Agnus Dei (“Lamb of God”), this was not provided for in the law, though Rome indicated that it did not object to the practice.

The new American adaptations now expressly provide for kneeling after the Agnus Dei, though the local bishop may choose to suspend this practice. The current law regarding when the faithful should kneel is as follows:

“In the dioceses of the United States of America, [the faithful] should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the Sanctus until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by reasons of health,

lack of space, the large number of people present, or some other good reason. Those who do not kneel ought to make a profound bow when the priest genuflects after the consecration. The faithful kneel after the Agnus Dei unless the diocesan bishop determines otherwise” (43).

POSTURE AT COMMUNION

One of the most controversial American adaptations concerned the posture of the faithful when receiving Communion. Traditional practice allowed for communicants to receive either kneeling or standing. If they received Communion standing, they should show another sign of reverence for Christ in the Eucharist. The new GIRM specified the following:

“The norm for reception of Holy Communion in the dioceses of the United States is standing. Communicants should not be denied Holy Communion because they kneel. Rather, such instances should be addressed pastorally, by providing the faithful with proper catechesis on the reasons for this norm. When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the body of the Lord from the minister” (160).

When the U.S. bishops proposed this adaptation, the Holy See insisted on the provision that the faithful who choose to kneel not be denied Communion.

Following the release of the old GIRM, many faithful who chose to kneel were denied Communion or otherwise harassed regarding the practice, and Rome received numerous complaints.

In response the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published in the November-December 2002 issue of its official journal, *Notitiae*, a notification that it “considers any refusal of Holy Communion to a member of the faithful on the basis of his or her kneeling posture to be a grave violation of one of the most basic rights of the Christian faithful, namely that of being assisted by their pastors by means of the Sacraments.”

The CDWDS further stipulated that “there should be no such refusal to any Catholic who presents himself for Holy Communion at Mass, except in cases presenting a danger of grave scandal to other believers arising out of the person’s unrepented public sin or obstinate heresy or schism, publicly professed or declared.”

Finally, the notice declared that “priests should understand that the congregation will regard future complaints of this nature with great seriousness, and if they are verified, it intends to seek disciplinary action consonant with the gravity of the pastoral abuse” (letter of Jorge Cardinal Medina Estévez, July 1, 2002 [Prot. n. 1322/02/L]).

MANNER OF RECEIVING COMMUNION

Although liturgical law in the United States for decades has provided that the faithful may receive the host on the tongue or in the hand (at the communicant’s discretion), in many places the faithful report being denied Communion on the tongue.

The new GIRM specifically provides that “the consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each

communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the precious blood” (160).

POSTURE AFTER COMMUNION

The new GIRM provides that the faithful should “sit while the readings before the Gospel and the responsorial psalm are proclaimed and for the homily and while the Preparation of the Gifts at the Offertory is taking place; and, as circumstances allow, they may sit or kneel while the period of sacred silence after Communion is observed” (43).

Regarding sitting or kneeling during the silence after Communion, some interpreted this as meaning that the faithful should stand until the last communicant had received Communion, which was contrary to the traditional practice of the faithful assuming their preferred postures immediately upon returning to the pews.

A controversy ensued, in which Francis Cardinal George, chairman of the Bishops’ Committee on Liturgy, queried the CDWDS: “In many places, the faithful are accustomed to kneeling or sitting in personal prayer upon returning to their places after having individually received Holy Communion during Mass. Is it the intention of the [new Roman Missal] to forbid this practice?”

The response was as follows: “*Negative, et ad mentem* [No, and for this reason].

The *mens* [reason] is that the prescription of [GIRM] no. 43 is intended, on the

one hand, to ensure within broad limits a certain uniformity of posture within the congregation for the various parts of the celebration of Holy Mass, and on the other, to not regulate posture rigidly in such a way that those who wish to kneel or sit would no longer be free” (*responsum* of Francis Cardinal Arinze, June 5, 2003 [Prot. 855/03/L], as published in the July 2003 BCL newsletter).

PURIFICATION OF VESSELS

Regarding the cleansing of the chalice and other vessels used at Mass, the new GIRM provides that “the sacred vessels are purified by the priest, the deacon, or an instituted acolyte after Communion or after Mass, insofar as possible at the credence table” (279). This would exclude the use of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion from purifying the vessels.

However, since the initial release of the GIRM the USCCB has received an indult from the CDWDS that allows extraordinary ministers to purify the vessels in some circumstances. According to the indult: “For grave pastoral reasons, the faculty may be given by the diocesan bishop to the priest celebrant to use the assistance, when necessary, even of extraordinary ministers in the cleansing of sacred vessels after the distribution of Communion has been completed in the celebration of Mass. This faculty is conceded for a period of three years as a dispensation from the norm of the [new General Instruction] of the Roman Missal” (letter of Cardinal Medina Estevez, March 22, 2002 [Prot. 1382/01/L]).

From the phrasing of the indult, it would appear that the faculty can be extended by the bishop to individual priests only when there are grave pastoral reasons, such as the physical inability of the priest to stand for the period needed

to purify the vessels or the unavailability of deacons or acolytes to perform the function. The indult is due to expire in 2005 unless it is renewed.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

Mass may not be celebrated contrary to the provisions of liturgical law. To do so is liturgical abuse. Some general advice can be offered for people when they encounter liturgical abuse:

1. Determine whether a genuine violation of the law is occurring. Sometimes what appears to be an abuse is not.
2. Determine how serious the abuse is. There may be larger issues at a parish that should be dealt with before the particular abuse is addressed.
3. If action should be taken immediately, approach those directly involved in the abuse. Be unfailingly polite and kind when discussing the matter with them.
4. If you are told that the pope or the bishop has authorized the practice in question, ask to see the document that gives the authorization.
5. If the action is an ongoing abuse, consider whether recourse should be taken to higher authority. Be prepared to document the abuse with specifics: who committed it, when, how often, and what specifically was done.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

A brief guide cannot cover all the changes dealt with in the new GIRM, but additional resources are available:

- To read a copy of the American GIRM in its entirety, see the U.S. bishops' website:
www.uscb.org/liturgy/current/revmissalisromanien.htm
- To read a copy of the 1975 GIRM or to read documents bearing on the interpretation of the GIRM, see Catholic Answers' web site (www.catholic.com/library/liturgy).
- Look for the forthcoming revision of Jimmy Akin's *Mass Confusion: The Do's and Don'ts of Catholic Worship*, which will offer a thorough guide to current law regarding the celebration of the Mass.