

By Michael J. Taylor, O.F.M. Conv.

How to be a Good Concelebrant

For the veterans among us, this might seem like an imposing, if not a downright offensive title. But I have some reasons for wanting to write this piece, so permit me to explain its inception by way of an incident I witnessed when I was in the seminary.

A well-known and revered member of our community had died and his funeral Mass was being held at his last assignment which was our major seminary in Rensselaer, N.Y. Many friars, local priests and our bishop came to celebrate this funeral Mass at which our Minister Provincial was to be the main celebrant.

One of my classmates was chosen to be the Master of Ceremony for this Mass, and he took great care in making sure the sacristy and chapel were well prepared and that those participating in the pews were escorted properly to their seats. He then took the time to inform all the concelebrants about some of the customs during the Mass at our chapel, as well as where the homilist and classmates of this deceased friar should sit and stand during the Mass and who was to assist in the distribution of Holy Communion. His final instruction was to mention the name of our bishop to which one priest very glibly said: "In other words, just concelebrate Mass."

Just Concelebrate Mass

"Just concelebrate Mass." These words, though spoken rather innocuously, do reflect the attitude of many of us who have been participants, in one way or another, in all kinds of Eucharistic liturgies. *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*: attitude has a way of perfecting execution, and execution of the Sacred Liturgy is one way that we draw others or, sadly enough, fail to draw others closer to the Lord during the Sacred Liturgy.

The origin of concelebration can be traced back to the earliest days of the Church in the West but for a variety of reasons (including war, plague and shortage of priests) fell into general disuse until the time of the Second Vatican Council, except, perhaps, at the ordination of a priest or the consecration of a bishop. The Eastern Catholic Churches preserved the tradition from antiquity to the present day.

The Committee on Divine Worship of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reiterates very well the aims of the Second Vatican Council in restoring the practice of concelebration in their document *Guidelines for Concelebration of the Eucharist* issued on Nov. 12, 2003. The committee based this document on three principles, namely:

- a) Priests concelebrate the one single sacrifice of Christ through Christ's own priesthood;
- b) Concelebration expresses the unity of the priesthood;

c) Beyond practical considerations, concelebration manifests priests' relationship within and among the People of God.

Not Merely A Fixture

Thus priesthood cannot be seen solely as a function but even more so as a relationship; this sacrament binding him to Christ the Eternal Priest and His People.

Then how does the priest, express this relationship with God and the Church if he is a concelebrant, with one other priest or with hundreds of his brother priests? And what is the point of this article anyway?

The point is that when concelebrating, the priest is not merely a social fixture at a public event but, rather, he is continuing the saving work of Christ among God's people. Francis of Assisi was very keen to this in his Letter to the Whole Order when he wrote, "all you my friar priests, whenever you (may want to) celebrate Mass, you do so purely and faultlessly with reverence to the true sacrifice...with a holy and clean intention...because He alone is at work there...."

Francis hits the mark by not exalting these friars who are ordained, but wants them to embrace the vastness of the call to bring Christ to others and to lead others to Christ.

So when we priests concelebrate, we must do so with humility.

Therefore, practically:

1. Vesture. Upon arrival at church, we vest. That which we wear on our bodies should reflect what is unseen in our lives. So that we don't draw undue attention to ourselves and make this Mass a "liturgical fashion show." Unless other vestments are provided, wear the appropriate color stole, perhaps as "plain" or "low key" as possible. Try not to "stand out" but to "stand in" with your brother priests who carry the hope and worries and prayers of their people as well as their own.

2. Procession. Entering the assembly as one body can be a powerful moment. Whether it is joyful, such as an ordination or anniversary, or as somber, such as an anointing service or a funeral Mass, it is still a graced moment to be recognized as a priest among priests. Therefore, let everyone, both priests and people, take heart in the moment of these great processions. Avoid coming to a halt to shake hands or embrace someone in the assembly you know, thereby "holding up the line." A simple smile or turning toward a friend can be more than enough in thanking them for being there.

3. Koinonia. Priestly fraternity is great, but don't sit next to any priests with whom you know you'll be talking the whole time. Trust me, I know! I found that what I used to think was my whisper can be used to reach millions! What is there left to say?

4. Memento Domine. Many of us have the opportunity to concelebrate at Masses where one or two or several people are to be remembered. If it is the custom of the local place of worship that these names be remembered audibly at the appropriate place of the Eucharistic Prayer, then do prepare for this moment by memorizing or, better yet, writing down the name(s) to be mentioned rather than pausing and pulling out the bulletin from underneath the Sacramentary. The Mass indeed is the "work of the people" and on certain days it is not only appropriate but edifying to hear their names among the people by whom they are still loved.

5. Pax tecum. Ironically, I, personally, have never heard so many arguments spring forth about the liturgy as I have about the sign of peace. Taken from the very action and words of Christ himself (Jn 21:19) these words for priests and laity alike are to express what we all should be striving for in our daily lives, the unity with God that is beyond all else. So that it does not overshadow any other parts of the Mass (and all the parts are important) a simple exchange to those immediately around you should suffice.

And if there is a need for a much more involved reconciliation, through a real session of "talking it out," get your technology involved! God has given us the ability to develop all forms of communication. After Mass, use them to contact a brother priest with whom you need to be reconciled, "and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 8:23-24).

6. Ecce quam bonum. For a number of our brother priests of all ages, concelebration of the Holy Eucharist may be the only time they are able to publicly exercise their dignity as priests. This could be due to a variety of reasons. The Servant of God, Terence Cardinal Cooke said, "Life is no less beautiful when it is accompanied by illness, weakness, hunger or poverty, physical or mental diseases, loneliness or old age." Therefore, when we have the opportunity, let us afford our brothers the right and the privilege of being present in the Upper Room that might not come as frequently in the past.

We can all think of ways of making sure our brothers are seated where they can be seen and heard, with vesture to serve as a reminder of their servanthood without fear of soil or stain. Very simply, to treat them as we would wish to be treated (Mt 7:12).

May this brief meditation call each of us to a more grounded holiness and help us to remember that every Mass we celebrate or concelebrate is indeed a privilege to be shared with our brother priests and with our people as the most gracious gift of Christ for all generations and for all time to come. TP

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