

The Liturgical Role of the Deacon in the Sacred Paschal Triduum

Paul Turner

Every deacon accepts a call to service, and the revised liturgies of the Sacred Paschal Triduum are summoning him to duty. Most deacons make the Triduum a priority, and their presence enhances the ritual. However, in the years since the Second Vatican Council, the rubrics have not been very explicit about all the things a deacon should do. Now they are.

In each of the main services for the Triduum, the third edition of the Roman Missal has made a number of changes to the rubrics. All are small, but they are many. The appearance of these will surprise many people looking over the revised rites in English for the first time. The revisions have been available in the Latin edition of the missal ever since 2002, and some published articles have drawn attention to them, but the new English translation is making knowledge of them more accessible to a broader readership. Some changes restore practices from the past or make explicit some actions that have only been implicit. Some instructions are new - such as having the priest extend his hands for the prayers that formerly he was to say with hands joined (for example, the blessing of palm branches, fire, and water, as well as the opening prayer for the Good Friday liturgy).

Catholics are now well aware that the revised missal has introduced changes in translation. However, that is only one of the reasons why we have a new book. Even if there were no changes to the rules of translation, people would still notice some changes to the content of the missal - new observances in the cycle of saints' days, a new preface for martyrs, and additional masses for the Blessed Virgin Mary, for example. Included in the list of changes to content is the clarification of rubrics for the Triduum. These alterations have virtually nothing to do with the theory of translation. They pertain to other enhancements the liturgy has undergone even in the original Latin. These changes in content, and only these changes in content, explain why this missal is called "the third edition." Translation changes have happened at the same time, but they are tangential to the content of the missal. The same linguistic changes could have been introduced to a newly published retranslation of the second edition of the missal, the edition that was in use in our parishes before this past Advent, the one known as the 1985 Sacramentary. What makes the new missal "third" is not its translation, but its contents.

Among the many changes to the rubrics of the Triduum is the happy inclusion of more precise instructions pertaining to the deacon. This article will survey the deacon's role in each of the main liturgical celebrations. Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraph numbers in the pertinent sections of the third edition of the Roman Missal.

Thursday of the Lord's Supper at the Evening Mass

The smallest number of changes affect the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, one of the most popular celebrations of the Catholic liturgical year. Most of this liturgy

resembles a typical celebration of the eucharist, so the deacon performs his normal functions throughout.

The washing of the feet is still optional, but Catholic parishes around the world have embraced it. Rubrics for the washing of the feet retain the same instruction from previous editions of the missal, that the priest may pour water and dry feet “with the help of the ministers” (11). The third edition still makes no mention of the deacon, which is surprising now, because in many other instances like this, where previous editions of the missal have referred to generic “ministers”, the third edition lists the deacon as the first among them. Not so here, which is perhaps an oversight. No further explanation of the word “help” follows, so ministers may assist in any way that seems fitting. They could usher people on and off chairs, help the priest remove and reposition his vestments, hold the towel while the priest pours the water, hold the pitcher while he dries with the towel, scoot the bowl across the floor, or swap out towels. Of course, if the priest can manage all this by himself, he may not require any assistance, and his humble, solo servitude will send a precise message of charity.

New to the third edition is the request that communion be brought to the sick and homebound after this liturgy. Sharing communion with the infirm on Holy Thursday has always been permitted, but now the rubrics expressly prefer that this take place not at a more convenient hour during the day, but after the evening mass. During the liturgy, the priest entrusts the Eucharist to the deacon, instituted acolytes, and extraordinary ministers of communion, who will bring it to the sick at home (33). This service blends the deacon’s liturgical and ministerial roles, and in most parishes his assistance in bringing communion to the sick after the liturgy will inspire a similar response from the extraordinary ministers. On a practical note, before Holy Thursday someone should find out from the homebound and sick if they wish to have communion brought to them at the late hour. Some may be asleep by then; others may rejoice at the thought of sharing in the same communion in which the rest of the community participates at the mass of the Lord’s Supper. Because this celebration begins with an empty tabernacle, all those who receive communion at this mass - and immediately after it - are sharing in the fruit of the eucharist from Holy Thursday’s commemoration of the Last Supper. It means something more than receiving communion from previously consecrated hosts earlier in the day.

After communion, a procession forms as the priest transfers the Blessed Sacrament from the altar to its place of repose, where adoration will continue into the night. The rubrics still do not say where the deacon joins this procession (38). Does he carry a lighted candle with other ministers? Does he serve as the thurifer? Does he simply accompany the priest? Perhaps any of these solutions is acceptable.

At the place of repose, however, the instructions are more explicit. The sacramentary had said that the priest sets the ciborium down in the tabernacle and incenses the Blessed Sacrament. It also said the tabernacle “is closed” - not specifying who reached up and locked its doors. Now the rubrics say that, if necessary, the deacon may help the priest set the ciborium down, and that the priest or the deacon closes the tabernacle door (39). Either one may perform these actions. However, by allowing the deacon to do them, the liturgy suggests that carrying the Blessed Sacrament in the procession is more central to this part of the mass than the practical matters of

reposition. When a deacon assists by taking the ciborium from the hands of the priest, placing it in the tabernacle, and closing its doors, he helps keep the liturgy focused on its commemoration of the first Holy Thursday.

Specifically, then, the new legislation for deacons on Holy Thursday pertains to starting the period of adoration and bringing communion to the sick. If the deacon participates regularly in the eucharist, brings communion to those who cannot come to church, fosters devotion to the eucharist, and inspires service to the needy, he is living in a way that will add depth to his liturgical service on this day.

Friday of the Passion of the Lord (Good Friday)

At the start of the Good Friday liturgy, the priest and deacon go to the altar and make a reverence to it (5). This is virtually the same rubric that was found in the sacramentary. The only significant difference is the inclusion of the words, “if a Deacon is present.” The sacramentary could have been read to imply that a deacon was essential; in reality, not every parish has access to a deacon. The rubric still does not clarify what kind of reverence is intended - a low bow before the altar, or a kiss on its top, or both. It probably means a low bow, on the assumption that the rubric would have explicitly indicated a kiss if it meant for one to be given.

There is no change in the directions for those who proclaim the passion (9). The proclamation may be entirely delivered by a deacon or a priest, or the parts may be divided, as has become the more common practice. The priest should take the role of Christ, if possible. There is still no explicit instruction concerning which part the deacon takes; however, many communities find it logical for him to read the narrator’s part, which holds the story together.

Similarly, the deacon’s instructions for the solemn intercessions are virtually the same. Note that the words “general intercessions” no longer appear anywhere in the revised translation of the missal. These are replaced with the words “universal prayer” or “prayer of the faithful.” The ones for Good Friday are so unique that they carry the title “solemn intercessions.” They are unique because of their number, the scope of their intentions, the antiquity of their inclusion on Good Friday, and their structure: each has an introduction, a period of silence with optional changes in posture, and a prayer. Now if there is no deacon, a lay minister reads the first half, the introduction in which the intention is named (11). The priest is not to sing or read that part - he only offers the part that follows the silence, comprising the words that are addressed to God.

Between the halves of each intercession the deacon may still issue the traditional invitations to kneel and stand (12). However, the previous editions indicated that the conference of bishops could provide an acclamation instead of these commands. That practice was permitted in the United States. However, that alternative no longer appears. So either the deacon invites people to kneel and stand, or the two halves of each intercession continue uninterrupted by a change in posture, separated only by a space of silence.

In the first form of showing the cross, the deacon or another minister goes to the sacristy to bring out a cross veiled in a violet cloth (15). The third edition of the missal gives the first explicit mention of a deacon performing this action. This is also the first

time that the color of the cloth has been specified. Many parishes in the United States have veiled the cross in red to match the vestment color of the priest and deacon. Other countries have always used a violet veil, which is more traditional. Surprisingly, the color of the veil for the papal liturgy at St. Peter's in Vatican City has been red. Violet, however, is clearly specified. The rubric still states that the deacon or the choir assists the priest in singing, "Behold the wood of the cross." This probably means only if the priest needs help with the singing, but it is not stated that way. In practice, however, if the priest can sing, he should do this part himself. If he cannot, the task shifts to the deacon, and if he cannot, then to the choir.

The second form of showing the cross exhibits no change (16). The priest or deacon goes to the door of the church, receives an unveiled cross, and sings and begins the procession. Some communities have been combining the two forms - processing up the aisle with a veiled cross, stopping at intervals, and unveiling one branch at a time as the cross makes its way to the sanctuary. However, the rubrics envision that one or the other is done: either a veiled cross is brought from an adjacent sacristy directly into the sanctuary where it is slowly unveiled, or an unveiled cross is carried the distance in procession.

For the adoration of the cross, the rubrics now specify that the priest or deacon brings the cross forward to a place where the faithful may approach it (17). It was always brought forward, but the sacramentary never said by whom. Similarly, at the end of adoration, the deacon or another minister carries the cross to its place near the altar (21). Again, in the past, the cross was always moved, but the sacramentary had never said who does this. The rubrics seem anxious to put the deacon to work in assisting with the practicalities of the liturgy. This should free up the priest to concentrate on his role, and draw more attention to the principal parts of the liturgy.

Before the distribution of communion, the deacon may still bring the Blessed Sacrament to the altar, but now he is to wear a humeral veil (21). In his absence, it is now the priest who does this. Still, this procession should not resemble the one that concludes the Holy Thursday liturgy. It should be rather perfunctory. The humeral veil is the only additional nod to solemnity. No incense is used. A procession of many ministers should be avoided. The point is simply to move the Blessed Sacrament from the sacristy to the altar in a solemn yet simple way.

After communion, the deacon or another suitable minister takes the ciborium to its place of repose (29). The humeral veil is not mentioned, and it should probably not be worn. This procession has even less solemnity than the one that brought the Blessed Sacrament to the altar. The mention of the deacon here is new, but it has always been expected that the priest not be the one to leave the sanctuary at this point.

The Good Friday service has always concluded with a prayer after communion and a prayer over the people. Now, to identify more clearly the nature of this second prayer, the deacon, or in his absence the priest, commands the people to bow down for the blessing (31). He issues the same command throughout the liturgical year whenever the priest amplifies the final blessing with a solemn blessing or a prayer over the people. Now all the Sunday masses of Lent conclude with a prayer over the people. The sacramentary's solemn blessing for Lent no longer appears in the missal. A different

prayer over the people is supplied for each of the weekdays of Lent, but these are optional. Traditionally, Lent featured a daily prayer over the people ever since the middle ages, but the practice was discontinued after the Second Vatican Council. Now it has been restored - obligatory on Sundays, optional on weekdays throughout Lent. The prayer over the people on Good Friday can now be seen as the one that brings the entire series to a climax.

In summary, on Good Friday the deacon may move the cross from one position to another, and may carry the Blessed Sacrament to the altar. He thus manages the primary symbol of the Passion, the cross, which held the Body of Christ and received the stains of his Blood. He also transports the Body of Christ, the Blessed Sacrament through which Christ left us a memorial of his Passion. By removing the option for an acclamation during the solemn intercessions, the rubrics focus more on the commands of the deacon concerning the assembly's changes in posture. If the deacon is a leader of the people, urging them to discipleship through communion and sacrifice, he will bring depth to his words and actions in this liturgy.

The Easter Vigil in the Holy Night

The deacon "usually" assists the priest for the Easter Vigil (6). Some parishes do not have deacons, but this rubric now expresses a stronger desire that a deacon be on hand for the Vigil. His participation in this event, especially in its first part, has a long historical precedent.

After the priest lights the paschal candle, the deacon receives it and sings "The Light of Christ" (15). Note the revised translation of this announcement. It stands now in a series of acclamations with which Catholics are quite familiar when participating at the eucharist: "The Word of the Lord." "The Gospel of the Lord." "The mystery of faith." "The Body of Christ." "The Blood of Christ." If there is no deacon, another suitable minister takes the candle and sings; however, the option of the priest taking the candle in the absence of a deacon is no longer mentioned, as it was in the sacramentary (14). If there is no deacon, whichever minister is holding the candle should probably sing the acclamation all three times, prompting the response of the people. The locations for these dialogues have changed. Formerly, they were sung at the fire, the church door, and before the altar. Now they are sung at the door, the middle of the church, and before the altar (15-17). Some see in this a parallel to the second form of showing the cross on Good Friday, which utilizes similar stations. However, the first acclamation for the Vigil is sung outside the church, and the candle symbolizes the entrance of the risen Christ into the church, whereas the crucified Christ makes no parallel entrance on Good Friday. As in the past, the deacon places the candle in its stand (17).

For the Easter Proclamation (the exsultet), the deacon still asks the priest for a blessing (18). The sacramentary left the incensation of the book and candle optional, and never said who swung the censer. Now the deacon is expected to incense the book and the candle before singing the exsultet (19). In the absence of a deacon, the priest, a concelebrant, or a lay cantor may sing the proclamation, presumably after incensing the book and candle.

At the gospel, it should have been understood that the deacon asks the priest for the blessing as usual, but this is now clarified (35).

A procession to the font begins the baptismal liturgy unless the font is in the sanctuary. The third edition of the missal now gives the order for this procession (39). A minister with the candle leads, followed by those to be baptized with their godparents, other ministers, the deacon and the priest. This newly described order of procession is repeated two paragraphs later (41), which may be an editorial oversight. In any event, the deacon's place in the procession is now clear.

For the water blessing, the priest may still lower the paschal candle into the water near its conclusion. At the end of the blessing, the rubric still says, "the candle is lifted out of the water," without specifying who does this (47). If the priest needs assistance, it would be logical for the deacon to provide it.

For the lighting of baptismal candles, the rubric now states that a minister hands the paschal candle to the priest or deacon, and the candles of the newly baptized are lighted. This probably means that the priest or deacon holds the candle low while godparents light the baptismal candles from its flame. Even though the priest is mentioned first, there may be some preference for the deacon to do this. Again, he manages some of the practical matters of the liturgy, so that the priest's more principal actions stand out.

The entire baptismal liturgy may take place in the sanctuary if it is not feasible to do so in the baptistry; for example, if the baptistry is remote or in a small room. In that case, a vessel containing water may be blessed in full view of the gathered assembly (37). Afterward, the vessel should be carried to the font at the conclusion of the baptismal liturgy. The third edition of the missal now says the deacon and ministers perform this action (57).

The liturgy of the eucharist continues as usual, and the deacon may lead the prayer of the faithful, invite the people to exchange a sign of peace, and make announcements, as at every mass. The dismissal formula for the Vigil famously concludes with a double alleluia (69). The deacon sings this, as in the past, bringing the Vigil to its glorious conclusion. The deacon continues to use this double alleluia to conclude the mass on Easter Sunday and on all the days of the Easter Octave, including the Second Sunday of Easter. However, the double alleluia does not reappear after that until Pentecost.

Of all the liturgies of the Triduum, the deacon's presence is most integral to the celebration of the Easter Vigil. Whether incensing the candle, seeking a blessing before the Gospel, processing to the font, assisting with the various practicalities of baptism, or carrying baptismal water as he carried the cross and the Blessed Sacrament on Good Friday, he helps the flow of this complex liturgy, so that all may enter it with a spirit of joy and faith.

Throughout the third edition's treatment of the Sacred Paschal Triduum, the role of the deacon has been clarified and expanded. His ministry is much appreciated by the church, especially when it is founded upon a life that models faith, service, community, and celebration.

*Rev. Paul Turner is pastor of St. Munchin Parish in Cameron, Missouri, and its mission, St. Aloysius in Maysville. He has treated the revisions to Holy Week in more detail in his book *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of the Roman Missal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).*

This article first appeared in *Pastoral Liturgy* 43/2 (March-April 2012):4-8.