

Celebrating Mass Alone

What does the priest do when no people have gathered?



By Father Paul Turner

“When the people are gathered, the priest approaches the altar.” Thus begins the Order of Mass.

But what does the priest do when no people have gathered? What governs the celebration of a private Mass?

Various circumstances may cause the priest to ponder celebrating Mass alone. He may be sick and contagious. The weather may prevent him from safely traveling a distance to the church where Mass has been scheduled. Returning home late from a trip, he may not have had the opportunity to celebrate Mass with a congregation. On his day off, he may prefer spiritual seclusion to rejuvenate his public ministry the next day.

Some priests in a community feel awkward about concelebrating. Convinced of the spiritual benefits of an individual Mass, he may elect not to concelebrate, in favor of presiding alone. Although there is a long liturgical tradition supporting priests concelebrating with their bishop on occasions such as the Chrism Mass and priesthood ordinations, concelebrated Masses without a bishop entered history rather late.

Other priests may celebrate a private

Mass to satisfy a paid intention. On days when they may not be scheduled to preside in public, they may celebrate in private to fulfill a donor’s request.

Daily Mass Encouraged

Many priests want to celebrate Mass every day as an expression of devotion to their ministry. Popes have supported this. In September 1965, near the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. Paul VI

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issued an encyclical on the holy Eucharist, *Mysterium Fidei*. His words affirmed that the sacred liturgy holds “first place in the life of the Church” (No. 2) while promoting “abundant fruits in the form of Eucharistic devotion” (No. 6). In that context, the pope stated, “each and every Mass is not something private, even if a priest celebrates it privately; instead, it is an act of Christ and

of the Church” (No. 32).

A few months later, the council’s document *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, relied on this teaching when it stated, “The daily celebration of Mass is strongly urged, since even if there cannot be present a number of the faithful, it is still an act of Christ and of the Church” (No. 13). In 2003 Pope St. John Paul II cited the same passage to show “how important [the Eucharist] is for the spiritual life of the priest, as well as for the good of the Church and the world” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, No. 31).

Despite this encouragement, other priests feel awkward celebrating Mass alone. They sense that it turns a public liturgy into a private devotion or that it fosters clericalism by excluding the faithful.

Celebrating alone may also feel illogical given that a typical Mass calls for a variety of ministers, as well as an assembly of the faithful. Some priests relish celebrating Mass without anyone else there. Other priests avoid it. In the middle are priests who do it out of a sense of duty or piety, and who happily return to Mass with a congregation as it becomes possible.



Scant Legislation

Legislation is scant but helpful. Vatican II promoted concelebration, “whereby the unity of the priesthood is appropriately manifested” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 57), but it declared “each priest shall always retain his right to celebrate Mass individually, though not at the same time in the same church as a concelebrated Mass, nor on Thursday of the Lord’s Supper” (No. 57).

This teaching entered canon 902 in 1983. It also entered the third edition of the Roman Missal in 2002 (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 199), where it forbade an individual Mass not only on Holy Thursday but also on the Easter Vigil.

The same constitution on the liturgy said that “communal celebration involving

the presence and active participation of the faithful ... is to be preferred.” Furthermore, “this applies with especial force to the celebration of Mass and the administration of the sacraments, even though every Mass has of itself a public and social nature” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 27).

Canon 904 recommends that a priest

celebrate Mass daily even if the faithful cannot be present, but Canon 906 says not to do it except for a “just and reasonable cause.” The 1917 code allowed him to celebrate alone for a “grave cause.” The current code thus loosened the conditions but appears to expect some cause beyond the mere convenience or personal preference

WHEN TO CELEBRATE MASS ALONE

From the USCCB’s Committee on Divine Worship, March-April 2021 newsletter, we can find this explanation when celebrating Mass alone is acceptable: “The 1949 instruction *Quam Plurimum* of the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments cites several cases in which Mass may be celebrated alone, e.g., during a pandemic, when otherwise a priest would have to abstain from the Eucharist for a lengthy period of time; or when necessary to consecrate a host to be used as viaticum; or if the server were to leave during the Mass. Clearly, these are not everyday circumstances.”

of the priest.

In the ordination ceremony, a deacon promises to celebrate faithfully the Liturgy of the Hours (cf. Ordination of a Bishop, of Priests, and of Deacons, No. 228), but the priest does not promise to celebrate daily Mass. This probably stems from practicality — it is far easier to pray the Liturgy of the Hours than to secure all the necessary elements for a celebration of the Mass.

Nearly all of the Roman Missal is devoted to Mass with a congregation. However, its general instruction realizes that the ideal cannot always be achieved. Therefore, it includes an Order of Mass with the Participation of a Single Minister.

The instruction explains, “Mass should not be celebrated without a minister, or at least one of the faithful, except for a just and reasonable cause” (GIRM, No. 254). This, of course, relies on Canon 906.

A priest facing circumstances in which,

without a congregation, he still wishes to celebrate Mass, should not pass over the liturgical and canon law too lightly.

The preference is that he secure an assisting minister. Whether a deacon or a layperson, that minister expands the experience of the Eucharist, allowing it to breathe with the two lungs of its dialogic nature. To help the priest, and to encourage him to seek this solution, the Roman Missal provides a special Order of Mass so that he can easily, calmly and faithfully enter the celebration.

Nonetheless, realizing that even the less-than-ideal is not always achievable, the missal laconically states what the priest is to do when he celebrates alone: “In this case, the greetings, the instructions, and the blessing at the end of Mass are omitted” (GIRM, No. 254).

It does not call for the omission of all dialogues, nor does it provide a clear and

complete Order of Mass as it does when a single minister participates.

Something to Ponder

Almost every priest will have a unique interpretation of that sentence from No. 254. Here are some thoughts to ponder.

In the introductory rites, the priest omits the greeting and the introduction to the penitential act, which falls under the category of “instructions.” However, he may recite the Confiteor, even though, in the room, there are no brothers and sisters whom he is addressing.

The other forms of the penitential act are dialogic, so, as No. 254 implies, the priest says his parts, but no one makes the response. Do the “instructions” include, “Let us pray”? If so, the priest omits those words and recites the collect. Does he say, “Amen”? Probably not because the missal assigns that word to the people.

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'THE WHOLE CHURCH'

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal, No. 79, offers this in its summary of the Eucharistic prayer concerning its participants: "The intercessions by which expression is given to the fact that the Eucharist is celebrated in communion with the whole Church, of both heaven and of earth, and that the oblation is made for her and for all her members, living and dead, who are called to participate in the redemption and salvation purchased by the Body and Blood of Christ."

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In the Liturgy of the Word, does he announce the readings and conclude them with the appropriate formula? Probably so, but he does not make the responses, which are assigned to the people.

By a similar logic, at the preparation of the gifts, the priest blesses God for the gifts of bread and wine, but he does not make the responses. Does he say, "Pray, brothers and sisters"? It is neither a greeting nor an instruction, so No. 254 does not exclude it. But if greetings are to be omitted, why would he say this when there is no one to respond?

As the Eucharistic prayer begins, the priest is instructed not to say the greeting, "The Lord be with you," but he is not told to omit the other parts of the preface dialogue.

He commands, "Lift up your hearts" and "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God," but these words garner no reply. He omits the memorial acclamation because no member of the faithful is present (*Notitiae*: 5 [1969], 324-325, No. 3). At the end of the prayer, the priest recites or sings the doxology, but no one answers "Amen," a word that the missal assigns to the people alone.

The introduction to the Lord's Prayer falls under the canopy of "instructions," so

the priest omits it. At any Mass, the sign of peace is included "if appropriate" (GIRM, No. 154), but when alone, the priest has no one with whom to exchange it. He logically takes the option of omitting the invitation.

At Communion time, he omits, "Behold the Lamb of God." This follows the procedure when celebrating Mass with a single minister who assists but who does not receive Communion (No. 268).

Does the priest conclude the Mass with the dismissal formula? No. 254 does not exclude it, but no one is there to hear the command.

A priest who chooses to celebrate holy Mass alone faces rubrical, canonical and theological questions. Still, the law permits it, and popes have affirmed that the priest is not really alone: Christ and the Church are present. Even so, the Roman Missal takes pains to offer what it considers a more fulfilling solution: Invite someone else to participate, to answer the dialogues and physically represent the broader Church. **TP**

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