



GATHERING AROUND THE ALTAR AT THE CONSECRATION

A SERVICE OF CATHOLICS UNITED FOR THE FAITH

ISSUE

Are members of the congregation permitted to stand around the altar during the consecration at Mass?

RESPONSE

While not explicitly prohibited, the faithful can infer from Church documents that the congregation should not gather around the altar during the consecration. The Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments has issued a prohibition of this practice.

DISCUSSION

The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM) is the authoritative Church document that provides guidelines for the celebration of the Mass. There are no explicit prohibitions of the congregation standing around the altar during the consecration found in the GIRM, but there are implicit prohibitions of this practice. The Holy See in Rome has clarified the matter of standing around the altar during the consecration in the Church's official liturgical publication, *Notitiae*. The Church's response is provided here in full:

Query: At the presentation of gifts at a Mass with congregation, persons (lay or religious) bring to the altar the bread and wine which are to be consecrated. These gifts are received by the priest celebrant. All those participating in the Mass accompany this group procession in which the gifts are brought forward. They then stand around the altar until communion time. Is this procedure in conformity with the spirit of the law and of the Roman Missal?

Reply: Assuredly, the Eucharistic celebration is the act of the entire community, carried out by all the members of the liturgical assembly. Nevertheless, everyone must have and also must observe his or her own place and proper role: 'In liturgical celebrations each one, minister or

layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy' (SC 28). During the liturgy of the Eucharist, only the presiding celebrant remains at the altar. The assembly of the faithful take their place in the Church outside the 'presbyterium,' which is reserved for the celebrant or concelebrants and altar ministers [*Notitiae* 17 (1981) 61].

There is not an explicit prohibition of standing around the altar in any Church documents. However, there are many implicit prohibitions—both of (1) standing during the consecration at all, and (2) having the congregation be present within the sanctuary, whether standing or kneeling. The reason for this is that the liturgical norms set forward what should be done; they cannot be expected to foresee and prohibit every innovative practice that should not be done. However, we can assume that if the liturgical norms set forth a certain practice, the contrary practice is implicitly prohibited.

On this issue of whether it is licit for the congregation to stand during the Eucharistic Prayer, the GIRM, no. 43, states:

In the dioceses of the United States of America, [the people] 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 . . . The faithful should kneel after the *Agnus Dei* unless the Diocesan Bishop determines otherwise.

The following precepts from the GIRM, taken in total, implicitly prohibit gathering around the altar:

In the absence of an instituted acolyte, lay ministers may be deputed to serve at the altar and assist the priest and the deacon; they may carry the cross, the candles, the thurible, the bread, the wine, and the water, and they may also be deputed to distribute Holy Communion as extraordinary

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ministers (GIRM, no. 100).

The following also exercise a liturgical function:

- a) The sacristan, who carefully arranges the liturgical books, the vestments, and other things necessary in the celebration of Mass.
- b) The commentator, who provides the faithful, when appropriate, with brief explanations and commentaries with the purpose of introducing them to the celebration and preparing them to understand it better. The commentator's remarks must be meticulously prepared and clear though brief. In performing this function the commentator stands in an appropriate place facing the faithful, but not at the ambo.
- c) Those who take up the collection in the church.
- d) Those who, in some places, meet the faithful at the church entrance, lead them to appropriate places, and direct processions (GIRM, no. 105).

The People of God, gathered for Mass, has a coherent and hierarchical structure, which finds its expression in the variety of ministries and the variety of actions according to the different parts of the celebration. The general ordering of the sacred building must be such that in some way it conveys the image of the gathered assembly and allows the appropriate ordering of all the participants, as well as facilitating each in the proper carrying out of his

function.

The faithful and the choir should have a place that facilitates their active participation.

The priest celebrant, the deacon, and the other ministers have places in the sanctuary. Seats for concelebrants should also be prepared there. If, however, their number is great, seats should be arranged in another part of the church, but near the altar.

All these elements, even though they must express the hierarchical structure and the diversity of the ministries, should nevertheless bring about a close and coherent unity that is clearly expressive of the unity of the entire holy people (GIRM, no. 294).

Since the GIRM defines the roles of everyone who may be present in the sanctuary, and the members of the congregation are not mentioned, one can infer that they do not have a reason to be in the sanctuary. The GIRM states: "All, therefore, whether they are ordained ministers or lay Christian faithful, in fulfilling their office or their duty, should carry out solely, but completely, that which pertains to them" (no. 91). The Church does not provide for members of the congregation to stand around the altar during the consecration, and according to Vatican II, a priest may not add anything to the liturgy on his own authority (cf. SC 22).

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