



INVALID MASSES

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ISSUE

Which changes and omissions render a Mass of the Roman Rite invalid?

RESPONSE

A Mass of the Roman Rite is invalid when the celebrant of the Mass is not a validly ordained priest, when the priest does not have the proper intention, when wheat bread or grape wine is not used, or when the words “This is my Body” or “This is ... my Blood” are not said.

DISCUSSION

The Mass is the unbloody renewal of the sacrifice of Calvary in which bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. However, the Mass is not itself the Sacrament of the Eucharist; the Sacrament of the Eucharist could be validly conferred outside of Mass if a priest were to pronounce the words of consecration over bread and wine with the intention of consecrating them. However, the Church considers this act the most heinous of crimes and gravely illicit in *all* cases, as is the consecration of one element without the other (Code of Canon Law, canon 927).

The Sacrament of the Eucharist’s “inexhaustible richness” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1328) comprises Holy Communion and Eucharistic reservation and adoration as well as the Eucharistic Sacrifice, for the Holy Eucharist “is at one and the same time a Sacrifice-Sacrament, a Communion-Sacrament, and a Presence-Sacrament.”¹ Moreover, the Blessed Sacrament is conferred at Mass, while it may be received outside of Mass.

The Second Vatican Council teaches:

Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the

bishop. In virtue of power conceded by the law, the regulation of the liturgy within certain defined limits belongs also to various kinds of competent territorial bodies of bishops legitimately established. Therefore no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), December 4, 1963, 22).

Unauthorized liturgical changes, then, are against the law of the Church: they are illicit. But not every illicit act renders the Mass invalid. The valid celebration of any sacrament requires the proper minister and intention, sacramental signs (matter), and form (usually words). Only changes to these render the Eucharistic Sacrifice invalid.

THE CELEBRANT OF THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE AND HIS INTENTION

The Church teaches that “it is Christ himself, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant who, acting through the ministry of the priests, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice.... Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord” (Catechism, nos. 1410-11, emphasis added). This dogma of the Catholic faith was defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: “And surely no one can accomplish this sacrament except a priest who has been rightly ordained according to the keys of the Church which Jesus Christ Himself conceded to the Apostles and to their successors.”²

A priest is validly ordained when a validly ordained bishop lays his hands on the man to be ordained and says the consecratory prayer (Catechism, no. 1538). “Only a baptized man (*vir*) validly receives sacred ordination” (Catechism, no. 1577).

¹ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, 20.

² Roy J. Deferrari, trans., *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (Marian House, 1955), 430. This work is a translation of

Henry Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Herder, 30th edition 1954).

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Thus priests, however vicious they may be, validly consecrate the Holy Eucharist; others, however virtuous, cannot.

- *The validity of ordinations of other Churches and ecclesial communities:* The Church teaches that the priestly ordinations of Eastern Orthodox Churches and ancient Christian Churches of the East are valid, as are the ordinations of more recent schismatics (e.g., the ordinations conferred by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre). The Church has also ruled that Anglican ordinations are invalid (Leo XIII, *Apostolicae Curae*, 1896). After that ruling, some Anglican bishops sought ordination from validly ordained schismatic bishops. Their ordinations may be valid, and these bishops in turn may have validly ordained men to the priesthood.
- *Intention:* The priest's proper intention to consecrate the Eucharist is ensured by the words that precede the consecration ("so that they may become the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ," or similar words).³

THE MATTER FOR THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

The Catechism teaches that "the essential signs of the Eucharistic sacrament are wheat bread and grape wine" (Catechism, no. 1412). The Council of Florence (1438-45) taught:

We have likewise defined that the body of Christ is truly effected in unleavened or leavened or wheaten bread; and that priests ought to effect the body of our Lord in either one of these, and each one namely according to the custom of his Church, whether that of the West or of the East.⁴

Thus canon 926 of the Code of Canon Law prescribes, "In the Eucharistic celebration, in accordance with the ancient tradition of the Latin Church, the priest is to use unleavened bread wherever he celebrates Mass." It is gravely illicit for a priest to use leavened bread in the Roman Rite, but such an action, of itself, does not make the Mass invalid. For most Eastern Catholic Churches, the matter for the Eucharistic Sacrifice is leavened bread.

Sacramental theologian Father Nicholas Halligan summarizes magisterial pronouncements on the matter for Eucharist:

The bread must be made from wheat, mixed with natural water, baked by the application of fire heat (including electric cooking) and substantially uncorrupted. The variety of the wheat or the region of its origin does not affect its validity, but bread made from any other grain is invalid material. Bread made with milk, wine, oil, etc., either entirely or in a notable part, is invalid material. Any natural water suffices for validity, e.g., even mineral water or sea water. The addition of a condiment, such as salt or sugar, is unlawful but valid, unless added in a notable quantity. Unbaked dough or dough fried in butter or cooked in water is invalid matter; likewise bread which is corrupted substantially, but not if it has merely begun to corrupt...

The bread must be of wheat flour and only in case of necessity a white material thrashed or crushed from wheat. It must be free from mixture with any other substance besides flour and water. It is gravely unlawful to consecrate with doubtful matter. Altar breads must be fresh or recently baked and must not be allowed to get moldy, which condition varies with regions, climates, etc....

To be valid, wine must be made from ripe grapes of the vine and not substantially corrupted; it cannot come from any other fruits or from unripe grapes or from the stems and skins of the grapes after all the juice has been pressed out. In regions where fresh grapes cannot be obtained, it is lawful to use raisin wine, i.e., wine made by adding water to raisins. Wine from which all alcohol has been removed or which on the other hand has more than twenty percent alcohol or to which foreign ingredients (e.g., water) have been added in equal or greater quantities is invalid material. Wine is likewise invalid which has turned to acid or which is not natural but was manufactured by some chemical process, i.e., by mixing the constituents found in wine so that the product resembles wine. Wine must also be in a potable [i.e., drinkable] state, and thus if it is congealed (although most probably valid), it must be

³ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (4th edition, 1960; published by TAN, 1974), 393.

⁴ *Op. Cit.*, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 692.

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melted. The color, strength, or origin of wine does not affect its validity.⁵

THE FORM (WORDS OF CONSECRATION) OF THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

Over the wheat bread and grape wine, “the blessing of the Holy Spirit is invoked and the priest pronounces the words of consecration spoken by Jesus during the Last Supper: ‘This is my body which will be given up for you.... This is the cup of my blood...’ ” (Catechism 1412).

The words of consecration have varied slightly in the different rites throughout the Church’s history, in part because the words vary slightly in different New Testament passages. In the Roman Missal of 1962, the words of consecration said over the bread are simply *Hoc est enim Corpus Meum*. In the Roman Missal of 1962, the words of consecration said over the wine are *Hic est enim Calix Sanguinis Mei, novi et æterni testamenti: Mysterium Fidei: qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum. Hæc quotiescumque feceritis, in mei memoriam facietis*.

In his apostolic constitution *Missale Romanum* (1969), which promulgated the current Roman Missal, Pope Paul VI writes:

We have ordered that the words of the Lord be identical in each form of the canon. Thus in each Eucharistic Prayer we wish those words to be as

follows: over the bread: *Accipite et manducate ex hoc omnes: hoc est enim Corpus meum, quod pro vobis tradetur*; over the chalice: *Accipite et bibite ex eo omnes: hic est enim calix Sanguinis mei novi et æterni testamenti, qui pro vobis et pro multis effundetur in remissionem peccatorum. Hoc facite in meam commemorationem*. The words *Mysterium fidei* have been removed from the context of Christ’s own words and are spoken by the priest as an introduction to the faithful’s acclamation.

Summarizing the Church’s theological tradition, Ludwig Ott believes that “Jesus effected the transmutation by the words: ‘This is My Body,’ ‘This is My Blood’.”⁶ These words, which are never omitted in any formula of consecration, are undoubtedly essential for the validity of the sacrifice.

LITURGICAL PRESENCE

In her desire to safeguard the mystery of the Holy Eucharist and protect the Blessed Sacrament from profanation, the Church clearly teaches the requirements for the validity of the Mass. The Church also teaches that the Mass, within which the Blessed Sacrament is conformed and received, should be celebrated properly and reverently. This reverence is fitting, for we enter into the presence of Jesus Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity during Mass. Let us strive to make our worship of God during Mass a time of “worship in Spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:23).

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⁵ Father Nicholas Halligan, *The Sacraments and their Celebration* (Alba House, 1986) in James Akin, *Mass*

Confusion: The Do’s and Don’ts of Catholic Worship (Catholic Answers, 1998), 70, 73-4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 393.