

# Preaching through the Choir: The Merits of Assisting at Mass

## *In choro*

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Of the many changes to the Roman Rite following the Second Vatican Council, one of the least contentious was the restoration of priestly concelebration of the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> Before Vatican II, concelebration was seen only at ordination Masses in a very different form from that used today.<sup>2</sup> When a priest was present at Mass celebrated by a bishop or another priest, he normally assisted *in choro*<sup>3</sup> unless he was needed to fulfill the role of the deacon or subdeacon at High Mass, in the absence of those lesser-ranking ministers. A priest may still take the deacon's part when there is no deacon to assist;<sup>4</sup> however,

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1 Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* (4 December 1963), in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. and trans. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) §§ 57-58, p. 832; Sacred Congregation of Rites, Decree on Concelebration and Communion Under Both Kinds *Ecclesiae semper* (7 March 1965), in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*, trans. International Commission on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1982) [henceforth ES] §§ 1788-93, no. 222, pp. 554-56.

2 In the pre-Vatican II or "Tridentine" rite of concelebration at the ordination Mass, only those neophytes just ordained moments earlier co-consecrate the Eucharist with the bishop: they remain at their own stations and use their own vessels and missals while the bishop stands at the main altar praying the Canon aloud.

3 By "choir" is meant in this essay not the singers or *schola cantorum* but the clergy who attend Mass in the sanctuary, traditionally in the seats or stalls on either the right or left of the altar. Secular clergy assisting in choir wear the cassock and surplice, whereas religious wear their habit without the surplice. Canons and prelates have their own special choir dress. See Peter J. Elliott, *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite: The Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995) 138.

4 Paul VI, *Motu proprio* on First Tonsure, Minor Orders, and the Subdiaconate *Ministeria quaedam* (15 August 1972), in *Documents on the Liturgy*, §§ 2922-38, no. 340, pp. 908-11, abolished the subdiaconate and minor orders in the Latin Church.

in contrast to previous custom, he must wear priestly vestments and function as a concelebrant, extending his hands at the epiclesis and saying (or singing) the institution narrative together with the principal celebrant.<sup>5</sup> It is likewise permissible in the contemporary Roman Rite for a priest to assist at Mass in choir rather than to concelebrate, although this seldom happens. Concelebration, while generally optional,<sup>6</sup> has become standard. This is a good thing in the main, but too much of a good thing is not always wonderful. Although concelebration has much to recommend it, there are good reasons for priests occasionally to attend Mass in choir rather than to concelebrate. For these reasons, which I will spell out, a liturgical reform of the reform should seek to encourage greater awareness of, and recourse to, the option of attending Mass in choir.

Let me begin, however, by stating that I have no objection to priestly concelebration when it is done properly. The practice clearly manifests the unity of the Lord's sacrifice, of the ministerial priesthood, and of the whole people of God.<sup>7</sup> There is only one priesthood of the New Covenant, namely, Jesus Christ, in whose unique priesthood all Christians participate, even if we affirm an essential difference between the ordained priesthood and the priesthood common to all the baptized.<sup>8</sup> And since there is but one priest, there can be, at the level of deep theological understanding, only one "Mass": the sacrificial meal of the New Covenant instituted at the Last Supper, consummated by the Lord's voluntary surrender to death on the cross, and sacramentally re-presented on our altars. From this standpoint, therefore, we must exclude any idea of concelebration as being inferior to, or less priestly than, individual celebration of the Eucharist. In a celebrated Mass, "many priests act together with one will and one voice in virtue of the same priesthood and in the person of the one High Priest. Together they bring about and offer the single sacrifice by their single sacramental act and together they share in the sacrifice."<sup>9</sup> It hardly needs pointing out that when concelebrants fail to observe the gestures and postures prescribed for them, the resulting spectacle

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5 *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (Third Typical Edition)*, trans. International Committee on English in the Liturgy (Washington DC: USCCB, 2003) [henceforth GIRM] 208-9. By contrast, priests ministering as deacons and subdeacons in the preconciliar rite wear the dalmatic and tunicle, respectively.

6 GIRM 199.

7 GIRM 199.

8 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964) 10, ed. and trans. Tanner, vol. 2, pp. 856-57.

9 ES 1792.

is not only aesthetically vulgar but is a countersign to the unity of Christ's action. No need to belabor the point: *abusus non tollit usum*. As I stated earlier, I am not opposed in principle to concelebration. But even leaving aside the unseemliness and confused symbolism of sloppily concelebrated liturgies, there remain solid reasons for preferring to assist in choir.

Consider, for starters, the occasion that prompted me to write this essay. A few weeks ago in my diocese a funeral Mass was celebrated at which the bishop presided in choir, the parish pastor was principal celebrant, and several other priests concelebrated. It was widely known in advance that this funeral would be unusually lengthy given the circumstances. As it happened, some of the concelebrants had to leave before the conclusion of Mass, the first of whom departed during the presentation of the gifts. I do not fault them for running off, as I presume they had pressing commitments to keep. But since it was expected that the funeral would be exceptionally long, I wondered why they chose to concelebrate rather than attend in choir alongside the bishop. The reason, I strongly suspect, is that the option of assisting in choir never entered their heads, so much has the practice faded from clerical consciousness. Concelebration, like white vestments at American funerals, is *de rigueur*.

### THEOLOGICAL REASONS

The really significant question at hand, however, is a theological one. Did those priests who left early truly concelebrate that funeral Mass? The answer depends on how early is "early." While careful to avoid the "matter and form" reductionism that extracts the sacraments from their liturgical context,<sup>10</sup> we cannot ignore the Church's longstanding doctrine that a valid celebration of the Eucharist requires, *inter alia*, that the priest recite the words of consecration while intending to do what the Church does.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the priest who left prior to the

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10 It would be a mistake to think that this sort of minimalism is exclusive to Scholastic sacramentology, as then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger noted in his preface to the second edition of Alcuin Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy: The Principles of Liturgical Reform and Their Relation to the Twentieth-Century Liturgical Movement Prior to the Second Vatican Council*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005).

11 On the priest's intention regarding the Eucharist specifically, see Innocent III, Profession of Faith Prescribed to the Waldensians (1208), in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, 6<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (New York: Alba House, 1996) [henceforth ND] § 1703, p. 669. On the required intention of the minister regarding the sacraments in general, see Martin V, Bull *Inter cunctas* (1418), in ND § 1304, p. 519; Council of Florence, Decree for the Armenians

eucharistic prayer was not in fact a concelebrant, as that term is currently understood, for he did not confect and offer the sacramental sacrifice of the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> But, it may be objected, why make an issue of this, since the Mass is the Mass regardless of how many priests concelebrate?

Here is the rub. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, Christ's sacrificial offering on the cross and His mediation in heaven become effectively present in sacramental form, while at the same time the Church's self-oblation is subsumed into the priestly action of her Bridegroom and Head. Consequently, to affirm that there is but one sacrifice of Christ is not to deny that each celebration of the Eucharist involves new acts of worship by the Church<sup>13</sup> and so is the occasion for God to bestow, in a unique way, the fruits of Christ's redemptive work. Only in this sense can we say that two Masses are better than one. When we consider under this same aspect that concelebrants act *in persona Christi* no less than when they offer the Holy Sacrifice singly, it seems reasonable to maintain that a concelebrated Eucharist is the occasion for God to grant, in addition to the general fruits of redemption and the particular blessings arising from the main celebrant's intention, as many special fruits as there are priests concelebrating for particular intentions. Just as the decision to celebrate Mass or to attend Mass should be based on the desire to unite one's worship in a visible way with the sacrifice of Christ and His Church (and to receive the divine blessings derived therefrom), so a priest's decision to concelebrate should arise from the desire to offer the eucharistic sacrifice together with his brother priests when the law of the Church so permits. It is a poor motive to concelebrate simply because that is what all the other priests present are doing, or because some people mistakenly gauge the solemnity of the liturgy by the number

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(1439), in ND § 1307, p. 521; Council of Trent, Session 7, Decree on the Sacraments (1547), in ND § 1321, p. 523; Alexander VIII, Decree of the Holy Office (1690), in ND § 1325, p. 525. For the meaning of doing "what the Church does," see Colman E. O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments*, rev. Romanus Cessario (New York: Alba House, 1991) 102-3.

12 Pius XII, in ND § 1573, p. 596, distinguishes between sacramental and purely ceremonial concelebration: the former requires that concelebrants recite the words of institution together with the main celebrant; the latter, which has not existed in the west since probably the patristic era, does not involve co-consecration.

13 The question whether each eucharistic celebration is a sacrifice in its own right, and not simply the sacrament of the sacrifice of Calvary, is taken up by Michael McGuckian, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: A Search for an Acceptable Notion of Sacrifice* (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2005); see the review of this book by John E. McCormick in *Antiphon* 10 (2006) 121-23.

of priests at the altar. What is more, if a priest expects he will have to leave Mass early, he should not concelebrate. Instead, he should reverently assist *in choro*, even if the “choir” consists of him alone.<sup>14</sup> He thereby avoids the risk of having to abort his personal offering of the concelebrated sacrifice.

### CANONICAL REASONS

Besides the theological justification for sometimes opting to assist in choir, there is legal ground. Canon 905 § 1 states, “Apart from those cases in which the law allows him to celebrate or concelebrate the Eucharist a number of times on the same day, a priest may not celebrate more than once a day.”<sup>15</sup> Section 2 of the same canon states, “If there is a scarcity of priests, the local Ordinary may allow priests, for a good reason, to celebrate twice on one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holydays of obligation.”<sup>16</sup> Although priests are encouraged to assist at Mass as concelebrants,<sup>17</sup> this recommendation does not stand in isolation from the law. If the canon is interpreted strictly, a priest who has already celebrated Mass should not concelebrate (nor be expected to) but should assist in choir, except in those cases where concelebration is required or has special significance.<sup>18</sup> This norm is seldom observed, however. I recall a brief exchange I had with another priest before a concelebrated evening Mass. “What’s with the altar boy look?” he asked, referring to the cassock and surplice I was wearing. I answered that I was not going to concelebrate because I had already binated that day, having celebrated the morning parish Mass plus a funeral Mass. “So, it would kill you to concelebrate?” he rejoined, missing the point entirely. Even

14 As a hospital chaplain on call twenty-four hours most days, I am no stranger to this situation.

15 *Code of Canon Law Annotated: Latin-English Edition of the Code of Canon Law and English-language Translation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Spanish-language Edition of the Commentary*, ed. Ernest Caparros, Michel Thériault, and Jean Thorn (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur, 1993) 582. The two exceptions to this general norm are: (1) at Christmas and on All Souls’ Day, when the priest may celebrate three Masses; (2) when the Ordinary permits bination on any day of the week, or trination on Sundays or other holy days of obligation, owing to a scarcity of priests or pastoral necessity.

16 *Code of Canon Law*, ed. Caparros et al., 582-83. The local Ordinary may grant a dispensation from this norm only in occasional instances, and only the Holy See can grant a permanent dispensation.

17 GIRM 114; cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (25 March 2004) 128, Liturgy Documentary Series 15 (Washington DC: USCCB, 2004) [henceforth RS].

18 These cases are specified in GIRM 199.

if I had celebrated only one Mass that morning, it would have been illicit for me to concelebrate, since in my estimation I lacked sufficient cause for celebrating another – in this case, a third – Mass.

### SPIRITUAL REASONS

Lest my appeal to the law be deemed legalistic, it is worth noting that the canonical prohibition against celebrating more than one Mass a day is meant to preserve the spiritual welfare of the priest. Here, as ever, *salus animarum suprema lex*. To celebrate Mass more than once a day, as a matter of routine, risks reducing (humanly speaking) the divine sacrifice to a chore, something to be gotten through, whereas it is every priest's supreme privilege and, one hopes, his greatest joy. As one of my diocesan confreres wryly captured it, "How many times a day can you say 'Lift up your hearts' and *mean* it?" My own experience corroborates that sentiment. When I was ordained almost ten years ago, I promised myself I would not let a day pass without celebrating Mass (Good Friday excepted, of course). That promise was broken a few years later, when, for reasons beyond my control, I was binating or trinating most days of the week. It reached the point where I stopped celebrating Mass on my days off because I felt I needed a "break." The wisdom of the law in this instance boils down to "too much of a good thing." Multiple daily Masses, I aver with self-accusation, eventually exact a toll on priestly spirituality.

### PEDAGOGICAL REASONS

I have considered the theological, canonical, and spiritual reasons for occasionally preferring to assist at Mass in choir. Apart from the question of whether or not to concelebrate in a given situation, there are pedagogical benefits to assisting in choir. For one thing, if the secular clergy appear more frequently in choir, people will be less likely to equate choir dress<sup>19</sup> with altar servers' vesture. It is largely forgotten that the cassock and surplice – the latter being a shortened version of the alb – are originally clerical garments, having traditionally been worn during liturgical services by clerics in minor orders.<sup>20</sup> Just as, very early on, the unavailability of deacons necessitated the use of minor clerics to assist the priest, so the use of lay altar servers, men or boys exclusively, arose out of practical necessity when ordained acolytes were not generally on hand.<sup>21</sup> Servers dressed to resemble

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19 See note 3 above.

20 See note 4 above.

21 Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Francis A. Brunner, rev. and abridged by Charles K. Riepe

the clerics in whose stead they assisted at the altar. In view of history, to say that a cleric in choir dress resembles an altar boy is like saying that a bride in white gown and veil resembles a girl dressed for First Communion: it is quite the other way around.

More importantly, the use of choir dress respects the traditional distinction in the Latin Church between eucharistic and non-eucharistic vesture, a distinction not without catechetical value. Choir dress differentiates the clergy who are attending Mass from those who are exercising a ministerial role. The practice of assisting in choir also helps to counter an erroneous understanding of the relationship between the ordained priesthood and the royal priesthood of the baptized. For a while now, it has been politically correct in certain quarters for priests not to concelebrate but to be seated among the congregation in order to manifest their unity with the faithful and to prevent clerical domination of the liturgy. Moreover, where a heterodox brand of feminism holds sway there is also a worry about having the sanctuary filled with males. The Church, by contrast, teaches that her hierarchical ordering should be manifested at every liturgical celebration, so as to respect the proper office of the ordained priest and that of the priesthood of all Christians. Priests who are present at Mass should therefore as a rule concelebrate, for in so doing they exercise their proper office on behalf of the faithful.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as has been noted, there are times when a priest should not concelebrate. In such cases he should assist in choir and vest accordingly, since it “is not fitting, except in rare and exceptional cases and with reasonable cause, for them [priests] to participate at Mass, as regards to externals, in the manner of the lay faithful.”<sup>23</sup> If concelebration “strikingly presents and deeply inculcates truths of utmost importance regarding the spiritual life and the pastoral formation of priests and faithful,”<sup>24</sup> the same is true, to a lesser degree, of assistance in choir – hence this essay’s playful title.

### SOME SUGGESTIONS

I have outlined several reasons, some weightier than others, for encouraging a more frequent use of the custom of assisting in choir, even if this means at times opting against concelebration. Now let us consider, by way of conclusion, what practical measures can be taken toward this end. Three suggestions come to mind.

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(London: Burns & Oates, 1959) 154, 164-65.

22 GIRM 16-17, 114; RS 128.

23 RS 128.

24 ES 1792.

First, whenever the occasion to concelebrate Mass presents itself, a priest should first consider the mind of the Church apropos the circumstances, bearing in mind that concelebration, while generally recommended, is not always appropriate. Is his reason for being there specifically to offer the eucharistic sacrifice, or is it simply to join in a special event as a show of his support or camaraderie? He should also take into account the number of Masses he has already celebrated that day, and whether the liturgy in question prescribes concelebration. In other words, is it really necessary that he binate or trinate?

Second, whenever a number of priests may be expected to be present at Mass, as far as space allows, part of the sanctuary should be designated for priests who wish to assist in choir.<sup>25</sup> It should not be assumed that every priest will concelebrate.

Lastly, it would be helpful if bishops, as the chief liturgists and teachers in their dioceses, were to remind their priests that assisting in choir remains a viable and sometimes preferable alternative to concelebration.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, they should point out that the choice to assist in choir should not be construed as a retreat to the past or as a failure to appreciate the theological truths to which concelebration bears witness.<sup>27</sup>

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25 GIRM 310.

26 See, for example, Archbishop Raymond L. Burke's commentary on *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, published serially in *The St. Louis Review* in 2005 and available on the Internet at <[www.stlouisreview.com](http://www.stlouisreview.com)>. Participation in choir at Mass (rather than concelebration) is addressed in the edition of 23 September 2005.

27 See Timothy V. Vaverek, "The Future of the Society for Catholic Liturgy," *Antiphon* 9 (2005) 321: "The time for quick fixes or packaged programs is over; so, too, for ... false dichotomies between the 'old' and 'new,' and the resultant politicization of every liturgical action."