

During this time of pandemic, the necessary occasions for the priest to celebrate Mass without the assistance of at least one minister may arise more often. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 254 indicates that in such a circumstance, “the greetings, the instructions, and the blessing at the end of Mass are omitted.” As this can still leave room for interpretation, the following article authored by Fr. Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum University, might help shed some light on the finer details:

### **When Celebrating Mass Alone**

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Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: I was recently speaking with some of my brother priests about the celebration of a private Mass when there is no server and no congregation, just the priest. There seemed to be no uniformity on how it is to be done, and the only thing we could find in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) is a few lines found in No. 254. It says, "Mass should not be celebrated without a minister or at least one of the faithful, except for a just and reasonable cause. In this case, the greetings, the introductory or explanatory remarks, and the blessing at the end of the Mass are omitted." I know this question really is of no interest to most people, but I think many priests (at least the ones I have talked to) would like some guidance on this topic. — D.C., Sioux Falls, South Dakota

A: Our correspondent also laid out a scheme of what he believed should be omitted in this case. I will use the scheme although modifying some details.

Although this might appear to be a rather obscure point, nothing in liturgy is so obscure that liturgists cannot find points to disagree on — and this is no exception. Therefore some of what I say is just my personal opinion based on what I believe to be an adequate interpretation of the law.

The most difficult aspect to interpret regards what is encompassed under the Latin term "Monitionis." The English translation of this term as "introductory or explanatory remarks" may give rise to a very broad interpretation.

Other languages have generally preferred to keep the technical term "monitions," which may be more restrictive. Either way, neither the original Latin rubric nor the translations are really that helpful in resolving our query. As far as I know there is no official interpretation from the Holy See.

Before entering into detail I wish to mention that some priests believe that this form of Mass with no faithful present is now forbidden. This is not the case. Indeed, present canon law, by requiring a just cause for celebrating alone, and no longer a grave cause as did

the 1917 code, has actually made it easier to celebrate such a Mass even though it should always be seen as an exception and to be avoided whenever possible.

All the same, many priests have on some occasion been faced with the choice of celebrating alone, or not celebrating. Both canon law and the law of grace recommend celebrating Mass as the better thing to do.

The basic model to be followed would be the rite of Mass with only one minister present, omitting whatever would be directed toward this minister as well as the gestures of turning toward the minister for these greetings.

Therefore when a priest celebrates alone he does the following:

— After kissing the altar he recites the entrance antiphon and makes the sign of the cross.

— He omits the greeting at the beginning of Mass ("Dominus vobiscum") and the invitation at the beginning the penitential rite ("Fratres, agnoscamus ..."). The rest of the penitential rite is as normal.

— He recites the invitation to the orations ("Oremus"), for these are not just invitations directed to the people but invitations in which he himself is included. The same criterion is obeyed for the introduction to the Our Father which is not omitted.

— He includes the introduction to the readings and Gospel ("Lectio sancti ...") but does omit the greeting of the people at the Gospel ("Dominus vobiscum"). He includes the conclusion to the readings and Gospel ("Verbum Domini"). These are also for his benefit and not just greetings to the people.

— At the presentation of gifts he recites the prayers offering the bread and wine but omits the response "Blessed be God ...." He also omits the "Pray Brethren" ("Orate, fratres") along with the response "May the Lord accept ...."

— Unlike the other "Dominus vobiscum," I believe that the one which forms part of the initial protocol of the preface dialogue should always be said. The norms are clear that the Eucharistic Prayer must always be said integrally and that it retains its plural form even when the priest is alone. As this dialogue is inseparable from the Eucharistic Prayer it should always be recited.

In support of this interpretation of the particular character of this "Dominus vobiscum" is the fact that even when Mass was generally celebrated toward the east, the rubrics did not ask the priest to turn toward the people at this moment as happened in almost every other case, but rather to look at the altar cross.

— Although the Eucharistic Prayer must be said in its entirety, the memorial acclamation ("Mysterium fidei") does not form part of the prayer. Therefore both introduction and acclamation are omitted. This rubric is explicitly stated in some orders for concelebration when only priests are present at the Mass.

— The giving of the peace ("Pax Domini sit semper ...") is omitted.

— The moment of showing the host is easily confused. In fact we have two prayers which are placed one beside the other.

Here, the norm of No. 268 of the GIRM is followed: "If, however, the minister does not receive Communion, [or there is no minister] the priest, after genuflecting, takes the host and, facing the altar, says quietly the 'Domine, non sum dignus' (Lord, I am not worthy) and the 'Corpus Christi custodiat' (May the Body of Christ bring) and then receives the Body of Christ. Then he takes the chalice and says quietly, 'Sanguis Christi custodiat' (May the Blood of Christ bring), and then consumes the Blood of Christ."

— After holy Communion the priest recites the Communion antiphon before purifying the sacred vessels.

— After a period of silent thanksgiving the priest says "Let us pray" and recites the prayer after Communion.

— Both the final blessing and the "Ite missa est" are omitted. Mass ends with the "Through Christ our Lord. Amen" of the closing prayer, followed by kissing the altar and either a bow toward the altar or a genuflection toward the tabernacle, as the case may be, before withdrawing.

These gestures are considered as sufficient forms of conclusion. There is no need to add other gestures not foreseen in the ritual such as making the sign of the cross.

Of course, this in no way excludes the recommendation that, immediately after Mass, the priest dedicates some moments to personal thanksgiving for the grace and privilege of having celebrated the Holy Sacrifice.