

Celebrating Mass Alone

One number in the Code of Canon Law regulates the celebration of Mass without the presence of the faithful. Canon 906 reads, "A priest may not celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice without the participation of at least one of the faithful, unless there is a good and reasonable cause for doing so." This is to make clear that the Eucharist is always and everywhere a public action, and not something private. Nevertheless, Canon 904 reads, "Remembering always that in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice the work of redemption is continually being carried out, priests are to celebrate frequently. Indeed, daily celebration is earnestly recommended, because, even if it should not be possible to have the faithful present, it is an action of Christ and of the church in which priests fulfill their principal role." The daily celebration of the Eucharist is a source of great joy for the priest. It is the primary way in which the priest lives out his union with Christ the High Priest. The daily celebration of Mass, even without the presence of the faithful, even on a day off, is a way for the priest to experience and express his identity.

I have recently received a number of requests from my brother priests to clarify the method for celebrating Mass by themselves, whether on a day when they are not actively exercising public ministry, or when they are traveling. The church has never explicitly defined a method for celebrating Mass alone, and another expert in liturgy could legitimately argue for slight variations, but I offer an exemplar here. The main principle is that any part that is explicitly a dialogue with the people is omitted. This is not the method that would be used when celebrating with one or several other priests. In that case, all of the various dialogue parts would be done.

-- 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 ("The Lord be with you") and the invitation at the beginning the penitential rite ("Let us acknowledge ..."). The rest of the penitential rite is as normal.

-- He recites the invitation to the orations ("Let us pray"), 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 ("A reading from ...") but does omit the greeting of the people at the Gospel ("The Lord be with you"). He includes the conclusion to the readings and Gospel ("The Word of the Lord"). 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 "The Lord be with you," 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, "The Lord be with you," 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 ("The mystery of faith") 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 ("The peace of the Lord ...") 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 'Lord, I am not worthy' and the 'May the Body of Christ ... and then receives the Body of Christ. Then he takes the chalice and says quietly, 'May the Blood of Christ...', 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 "Go in peace..." are omitted. Mass ends with "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.

This description was prepared by Fr. Edward McNamara of *Regina Apostolorum* in Rome, and I see no reason to altar the suggestions. I pray this allows you to celebrate beautifully, even in those times at which you do not have the presence of a congregation.