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# The Ministry of the Deacon at Mass

General Instruction of the Roman Missal<sup>a</sup>, (171-186); *Redemptionis Sacramentum*

## General Principles

1. The Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass is the action of Christ and of God's people, in which the human race adores the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit (16), and the faithful join themselves to Christ in giving thanks and in acknowledging the great things God has done (78). The Mass is the sacrament of unity in which the faithful are nourished from the table of God's Word and of Christ's Body (28). This unity is expressed particularly in common posture (42), in communal singing (47), reverential silence (45, 56), and in sharing together of the one bread and one cup (83, 321).
2. The assumption of the *Roman Missal* is that every Sunday and feast day, the Eucharistic liturgy will be celebrated with song, with a cantor (104), with one or two readers (109), and with other assisting ministers (115). It is also assumed that all communicants present at Mass, priest celebrant, deacon, ministers and all in the assembly, will receive the sacrament from bread and wine consecrated at that Mass (85, 281, 321)<sup>2</sup>, just as the priest celebrant must do. The liturgical books, particularly those used by the priest celebrant, the deacon and the assisting ministers should be beautiful and appropriate to the celebration rather than being disposable pages or booklets (349).
3. The foundational principles explaining the purpose of the parts of the Mass are found primarily in the GIRM (27-90) and this chapter provides the basis for the more detailed norms found in (112-287). Chapters V (188-318) and VI (319-351) also give general principles regarding the arrangement of the church and the requisites for Mass.
4. The rubrics assume that the celebration of Mass will take place in a church (288) with a freestanding altar (299), an ambo for proclaiming God's Word (309), and a presidential chair used by the priest at certain points during the celebration (310). If the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary, all the ministers genuflect to it only when they first approach the altar and when they leave the sanctuary, but not during the celebration of Mass itself (274).
5. After the priest, by virtue of the sacred ordination he has received, the deacon has first place of service among those who minister in the celebration of the Eucharist since the diaconate has been held in high honor in the Church since the time of the Apostles.<sup>b</sup>

## Reflection on the Ministry of the Deacon

6. A deacon is one ordained to serve the community in charity and justice. That ministry, as in the ministries of bishop and priest and in the Christian witness of all the baptized, is always related to the word and to the altar. The Word of God and the Sacraments of the Church inform, structure, and give life to the ministry of each person baptized into the death and resurrection of the Lord. Each person participates and shares in the Eucharist according to his or her function and role in the community. No less is true for the deacon. If the deacon's primary ministry is one of service, then his action within the Mass and in all the other rites and celebrations of the Church is modeled on that *diakonia*. A thorough knowledge and

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent numbers are from the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)* unless otherwise noted

<sup>2</sup> See USCCB BCL "Five Questions on Communion from the Tabernacle", Dec. 2006; [www.richmonddiocese.org/worship](http://www.richmonddiocese.org/worship) under Guidelines

<sup>3</sup> See Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, *Sacrum diaconatus ordinem*, AAS 59 (1967), 697-704; Roman Pontifical, *De Ordinatione Episcoporum, presbyterorum et diaconarum*, editio typica altera, 1989, no. 173.

understanding of his functions within the liturgy are important to the deacon's ministry within the community.

## **Assisting at Mass**

7. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the deacon's role is clearly one of "assisting" the presider. The deacon assists in all the rites of the Mass, but especially at the altar in the preparation of the gifts and in the Communion Rite. However, there are other functions within the celebration of the Eucharist which the deacon performs.

8. During the Introductory Rites the deacon may proclaim the invocations of the Penitential Rite.

9. The deacon is a minister of the Word of God, in proclaiming the Word, especially the Gospel, preaching and catechesis. The ministry of preaching is conferred at ordination by the bishop.

10. The deacon is to announce the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass (177). Writing and presenting intercessions in the name of the assembly has traditionally been a diaconal role because it is the deacon, serving among the people in a ministry of charity, who ought to know well the needs of the community. He can give voice to those needs. The deacon, therefore, has an intercessory function within the Mass. In a sense the general intercessions are the prototype of diaconal prayer. The intentions are announced preferably from the ambo.

11. The intentions are announced preferably from the ambo, or from another suitable place, by the deacon, or by a cantor, a lector or one of the lay faithful if no deacon is present. Where customary, petitions may be composed and announced by the lay faithful (36, 69-71).

12. Throughout the Eucharistic liturgy, and in other rites at which the deacon assists, the deacon also has the role of calling upon the people to respond to prayer, or to exhort them to prayer. This invitatory function is clear in the Mass when the deacon calls upon the people to exchange the Sign of Peace. The deacon may also ask the people to kneel, bow their heads, or perform some ritual gestures in the Final Blessing at Mass.

13. The deacon has many other ministries in which service and liturgy intermingle. For example, the deacon has traditionally brought communion to the sick and the dying. Such visitation of those in spiritual need is as much a *diakonia* of liturgy as it is a ministry of charitable service.

## **Assisting at Mass with a Bishop**

14. In the reformed liturgy of the Roman Rite, especially as outlined in the Roman Pontifical, the deacon always assists the bishop, whether in the cathedral or in a parish church. Deacons assist the bishop in all the rites of ordination, not just those of deacons but also in the ordinations of bishops and priests. Deacons assist the bishop at the altar even if priests are present for it is not the role of priests to assist at the altar unless a deacon is absent (116).

# The Role of the Deacon at the Celebration of the Mass

(GIRM 171-186, 189-194 and 46-90; *Ceremonial of Bishops*)

## *Vesture*

1. The appropriate vesture for the deacon at liturgy is the alb and deacon stole, and if available a dalmatic, especially for more solemn occasions such as Easter, Christmas, Chrism Mass, Holy Thursday.

## *Preparation for Mass*

2. Preparations for Mass are of utmost importance to the celebration. Generally the deacon oversees preparation for the Mass. As needs dictate, the deacon fulfills the duties of other ministers if none of them are present. Ordinarily the sacristan, parish director, altar servers, master of ceremonies and other ministers help with the preparations. The deacon should make certain that the necessary liturgical books, vessels and vestments are properly arranged for the celebration. The Lectionary should be properly marked for the readings of the day and placed on the ambo (116-119).

## *Signs of Reverence in General*

3. A **bow** signifies reverence and honor shown to the persons themselves or to the signs that represent them. There are two kinds of bows: a bow of the head and a bow of the body.

- a. A **bow of the head** is made when the three Divine Persons are named together and at the names of Jesus, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saint in whose honor the Mass [or the liturgy of the hours] is being celebrated. It is also made when receiving the Body and Blood of Christ.
- b. A **bow of the body**, a profound bow, is made to the altar if there is no tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament directly behind the altar, to the bishop, before and after incensation (except in the case of the altar and gifts for the Eucharistic celebration), in the Creed at the words “*by the power of the Holy Spirit . . . and became man,*” during the Eucharistic Prayer when the priest genuflects after the words of institution, or whenever it is expressly called for by the rubrics of the various liturgical books (43). The same kind of bow is made by the deacon when he asks for the blessing before the proclamation of the Gospel. (275, 277; CB 68)

4. A **genuflection**, made by bending the right knee to the ground, signifies adoration, and therefore it is reserved for the Blessed Sacrament [whether exposed or reserved in the tabernacle], as well as for the Holy Cross from solemn adoration in the liturgical celebration of Good Friday until the beginning of the Easter Vigil. (274; CB, 69)

If, however, the tabernacle with the Blessed Sacrament is near or directly behind the altar, the priest, deacon, and other ministers genuflect when they approach the altar and when they depart from it, but not during the celebration of Mass itself. Otherwise it is a profound bow to the altar. (274)

5. Neither a genuflection nor a deep bow is made by those who are carrying articles used in the celebration, for example, the cross, candlesticks, the *Book of the Gospels*. Ministers carrying the processional cross or candles bow their heads. (173 & 275; CB 70)

## *Incensation*

6. The rite of incensation is a sign of reverence and of prayer and is optional in any form of Mass or as indicated in the liturgical books. (276; *CB* 84, 86-87)

a. At Mass incense may be used:

- during the entrance procession;
- at the beginning of Mass to incense the cross and the altar;
- during the procession and proclamation of the Gospel reading;
- at the presentation of the gifts to incense the gifts, altar, cross, bishop, concelebrants, and the people;

b. Use of incense as indicated in the liturgical books include:

- the dedication of a church or altar;
- the blessing of oils and consecrating chrism (esp. as they are taken away);
- at the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament when the monstrance is used;
- at funeral liturgies

7. Celebrations where as a rule incense should be used include: ( *CB* 88-89)

- the feast of the Presentation of the Lord
- Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday)
- the Mass of the Lord's Supper
- the Easter Vigil
- the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)
- other processions of solemnity
- Morning & Evening Prayer during the singing of the gospel canticle

8. How does a person incense? (277; *CB* 90-92)

a. The deacon presents the incense boat to the bishop or priest celebrant (two servers may bring the censer and the boat). After the bishop/priest places three scoops of incense onto the coals and blesses it, the deacon returns the boat to a server and gives the censer to the bishop/priest. (*CB*. 90)

b. Before and after an incensation, a profound bow is made to the person or object being incensed, except for the altar and gifts of the Eucharistic celebration.

c. The censer is swung back and forth **THREE** (3) times (*center, left, and to the right*--see *CB* no. 74 and *Book of the Gospels* no. 18) for the incensation of:

- the Blessed Sacrament [from a kneeling position]
- the gifts on the altar
- the altar cross
- the *Book of the Gospels*
- the Easter candle
- the bishop or priest celebrant
- the choir and people
- the body of a deceased person.

d. The censer is swung back and forth **TWICE** (2) – *to the left and to the right* – for the incensation of relics and images of the saints exposed for public veneration

9. At the beginning of Mass, if there is a cross *on or beside* the altar, it is incensed before the altar is incensed. If the cross is *behind* the altar, it is incensed as the priest passes in front of it. (277)

## THE ORDER OF MASS

### Introductory Rites

(GIRM 172-174, 46-54)

10. Vested and carrying the *Book of the Gospels* with the binding to the right and with the book slightly elevated, the deacon precedes the priest on the way to the altar. If the *Book of the Gospels* is already enshrined on the altar, the deacon walks at the priest's side. If there are concelebrating priests, he walks in front of them. He also walks in front of other deacons.

11. Upon arriving at the altar, if he is carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, the deacon omits the reverence, walks to the altar and places the book there.

12. After placing the *Book of the Gospels* on the altar, the deacon joins the priest and venerates the altar with a kiss. However, if he is not carrying the *Book of the Gospels*, the deacon customarily makes a profound bow to the altar with the priest alone, and then with him venerates the altar with a kiss. If the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary, the ministers who are not carrying sacred items genuflect to it only when they first approach the altar and when they leave the sanctuary, but not during the celebration of Mass itself (274).

13. **Incensation:** If incense is used, the deacon assists the priest in placing incense in the censer and incensing the cross and the altar.

14. After the incensation, the deacon goes to the chair with the priest, sits to his right, and assists him as required.

15. **Sprinkling Rite [Option A]:** On Sunday, especially in the Season of Easter, it is commendable that the rite of blessing and sprinkling holy water to recall Baptism replace the usual act of penitence. The deacon assists the bishop/priest and may also sprinkle the assembly with him. (51; CB 133)

16. **Act of Penitence [Option B]:** If the Act of Penitence "C" (cf. current *Sacramentary*) is used, the invocations can be said or sung by the deacon.

**NOTE:** The current *Sacramentary* offers eight models as well as the option to compose invocations. The writer should be mindful that the act of penitence focuses on the all-embracing mercy of God and is neither a listing of sins nor an examination of conscience. The tropes are invocations of praise addressed to Christ that are brief, adaptable to the season or Gospel of the day, and are not a substitution for nor an addition to the general intercessions.

### The Liturgy of the Word

(GIRM 175-177, 55-71)

17. The deacon remains seated at his place for the Liturgy of the Word until the time of the Gospel.

18. If incense is used, the deacon assists the priest when he places incense in the censer during the singing of the *Alleluia* or other chant.

19. Then the deacon makes a profound bow before the priest and asks for the blessing, saying in a low voice: "**Father, give me your blessing.**" The priest blesses him: "*The Lord be in your heart and on your*

*lips that you may worthily proclaim His Gospel. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" The deacon signs himself with the sign of the cross and responds: **Amen.***

20. Then after a profound bow to the altar, the deacon takes the *Book of the Gospels* which was placed on the altar and processes to the ambo, slightly elevating the book. A censer bearer may precede him, with the censer smoking. Ministers holding lighted candles may also precede him.

21. At the ambo the deacon greets the people, saying: "***The Lord be with you,***" and then, "***A reading from the Holy Gospel according to ...***" signing the book with his thumb and afterwards, himself on his forehead, mouth and breast.

22. If incense is used, the deacon incenses the book with three swings of the censer (see 8c. above) and proclaims the Gospel reading. After the reading, the deacon acclaim without raising the *Book of the Gospels*: "***The Gospel of the Lord,***" to which all respond: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ."

23. Then he venerates the book with a kiss and the deacon says inaudibly: "***Through the words of the gospel may our sins be washed away***".

24. While the priest is the usual homilist, he may delegate the deacon to do so. The deacon may preach the homily or this may be done by the presiding priest.

25. When the deacon is assisting a Bishop, he may kiss the book (or carry the book to him to be kissed). Please check with the MC in advance.

26. After the Gospel the deacon carries the *Book of the Gospels* to the side table or another dignified and appropriate place.

27. If there is no other qualified reader present, then the deacon may deliver the other readings as well. However, every effort should be made to insure the presence of lectors for the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy.

28. **Prayer of the Faithful:** After the Creed and after the priest introduces the *Prayer of the Faithful*, the deacon announces or sings the petitions from the ambo, or another suitable place. (See the *Roman Missal*, Appendix I, Optional General Intercessions 1-11). He remains at the ambo while the priest concludes the *Prayer of the Faithful* with a prayer. The deacon may compose the petitions of the Prayer of the Faithful, or they may be composed by the lay faithful.

## **The Liturgy of the Eucharist**

(GIRM 178-181, 72-83)

29. **Preparation of the Gifts:** After the *Prayer of the Faithful*, while the priest remains at the chair, the deacon prepares the altar, assisted by the altar servers. The deacon oversees the arrangement of the corporal, the paten, the vessels and the Roman Missal. (The care of the sacred vessels belongs to the deacon.)

30. Then the bread and the wine are brought forth by the people to an appropriate place. The deacon assists the priest in accepting the gifts of the people.

31. The deacon fills the chalices, assisted by other ministers if necessary. When the gifts are prepared at the altar, the deacon hands the priest the paten with the bread to be consecrated. Then the deacon pours wine and a little water into the chalice (or see Note below) saying inaudibly: "***By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.***" Then the deacon passes the chalice to the priest.

*NOTE:* The deacon does not need to add water to all the flagons or cups containing wine. He simply puts a little water in the main flagon and then pours the wine from this flagon into the chalice (BCL 2007). The other communion cups are then filled with wine.

32. If incense is used, the deacon assists the priest with the incensation of the gifts, the cross and the altar. Afterward he or the altar server incenses the priest and the people.

33. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon stands near but slightly behind the priest, so that he may assist the priest with the chalice or the *Roman Missal* (179).

34. Though the *GIRM 2002* and the *CEREMONIAL OF BISHOPS* state the deacon "normally" kneels from the epiclesis to the showing of the chalice (*CB* no. 155), it is the approved custom in the Diocese of Richmond that the deacon stands throughout the Eucharistic Prayer.

[The invitation to the **Memorial Acclamation** is said or sung by the priest, not the deacon.]

35. **Final Doxology:** At the final doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon stands to the right of the bishop/priest celebrant and holds up the chalice until the people have sung the acclamation, "*Amen.*" The final doxology is sung or said alone by the bishop/priest celebrant or with the concelebrating priests, the deacon does not proclaim the doxology.

36. At the final doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon stands next to the priest, and after the priest (or Bishop) hands him the chalice, he elevates the chalice as the priest raises the paten with the Eucharistic bread, until the people have responded with the acclamation *Amen* (180). (The doxology is the prayer of the priest alone.)

## **The Communion Rite**

(*GIRM 181-183, 84-89 and Norms for Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion*)

37. **Sign of Peace:** After the priest has said the prayer for peace and the greeting "*The peace of the Lord be with you always*" and the people have made the response "*And also with you,*" the deacon may invite all to exchange the Sign of Peace, saying, with hands joined and facing the people: "***Let us offer one another a sign of peace***". He himself receives a sign of peace from the priest and may offer it to the other ministers near him (181).

38. **Fraction Rite:** As the *Agnus Dei* or *Lamb of God* is begun, the bishop or priest alone, or with the assistance of the deacon, and if necessary of concelebrating priests, breaks the Eucharistic Bread. Other patens are then brought to the altar if this is necessary. The deacon or priest places the consecrated bread in several ciboria or patens as are required for the distribution of Holy Communion. If it is not possible to accomplish this distribution in a reasonable time, the celebrant may call upon the assistance of other deacons or concelebrating priests. *Norms Part I, No. 37*

39. **Communion Rite:** When the deacon hands the chalice or paten to a concelebrating priest, he does so silently; he does not say, "The Body of Christ," or "The Blood of Christ." (RS 98)

40. The deacon receives under both kinds from the priest himself, after the celebrant and all concelebrants have received. When communion is given under both kinds, “the deacon ministers the chalice” (94, 182, 246, 284a).

**Why?** Because throughout the Liturgy of the Eucharist the deacon assists the principal celebrant with the chalice: he prepares the chalice, he elevates it at the doxology, he pours the consecrated wine into the other chalices, he helps the priest with the distribution of the chalices to the EMHC, and, if there are many concelebrants, he can present the chalice to them. The Church’s doctrine of concomitance also instructs that the real presence of Christ – whole and entire – is in both Eucharistic elements (282). By virtue of their ordination, the deacon is an ordinary minister of Communion. As such, the deacon’s example as a minister of the cup helps to catechize the faithful on the fullness of the presence of Christ in both Eucharistic elements.

41. If extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are required by pastoral need, they approach the altar after the priest receives Communion. After the priest has concluded his own Communion, he distributes Communion to the deacon and then to the extraordinary ministers, assisted by the deacon.

42. When the distribution is completed, the deacon immediately and reverently consumes at the altar all of the Blood of Christ which remains. He may be assisted by other deacons and priests or by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion who consume what remains of the Precious Blood after distribution of Holy Communion.

43. After communion, the deacon returns to the altar with the priest and collects any remaining fragments. If necessary, an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion may place the ciborium in the tabernacle. The deacon may assist the priest in purifying the vessels at the altar, or take the vessels to the side table where he purifies them and arranges them in the usual way. The vessels, suitably covered and at a side table on a corporal, may be left to be purified immediately after Mass, there or in the sacristy. The deacon is to ensure that this important matter is tended to with reverence (RS 119).

## Concluding Rite

(GIRM 184-186, 90)

44. Following the *Prayer after Communion*, if there are any brief announcements, the deacon may make them, unless the priest prefers to do so himself.

45. If a solemn formula for the blessing or a prayer over the people is used, the deacon says: "***Bow your heads and pray for God's blessing.***"

46. After the priest's blessing, the deacon, with hands joined and facing the people, dismisses them, saying: "***Go in the peace of Christ***" or using one of the other formulas of the *Roman Missal* (185).

47. Along with the priest, the deacon venerates the altar with a kiss, makes a profound bow <sup>c</sup> and leaves in the manner prescribed for the entrance procession.

48. The *Book of the Gospels* is **not** carried in procession at the end of Mass (186, 251).

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<sup>4</sup> If there is a tabernacle in the sanctuary, all genuflect.

49. The above procedure is also followed in the usual way for a concelebrated Mass. A concelebrating priest does not assume the diaconal functions at the Mass when a deacon is present. (116, 171, 208, 215)