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EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

A. GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL 2002

162. The priest may be assisted in the distribution of Communion by other priests who happen to be present. If such priests are not present, and there is a very large number of communicants, the priest may call upon extraordinary ministers to assist him, e.g., duly instituted acolytes or even other faithful who have been deputed for this purpose. In case of necessity, the priest may depute suitable faithful for this single occasion.

These ministers should not approach the altar before the priest has received Communion, and they are always to receive from the hands of the priest celebrant the vessel containing either species of the Most Holy Eucharist for distribution to the faithful.

Commentary:

“This article, largely concerned with who is to distribute Communion, is completely new. These pastoral directives also have a strong theological subtext and clearly demarcate boundaries between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the faithful. Consistent with other Roman instructions, GIRM2002 notes the “extraordinary” (*extraordinarios*) nature of the assistance by the non-ordained in the distribution of Communion and indicates that such is permissible only in well-defined circumstances (cf. nos. 100 and 284; Redemptionis Sacramentum nos. 154-160). Yet GIRM2002 also gives the priest new latitude in deputing “suitable faithful” (*fides idoneos*) to help in cases of necessity (cf. no. 107), although the Instruction does not indicate what constitutes this suitability. Consistent with previous directives (e.g. no. 160), GIRM2002 ensures that the priest communicates first, even before extraordinary ministers approach the altar, and that extraordinary ministers never take the consecrated species from the altar, but receive them from the hands of the priest.”

(“A Commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.” E. Foley, N. Mitchell and J. Pierce, eds. A Pueblo Book, Minnesota, U.S.A., 2007), p. 259.

Supplementary Explanation: There are many parishes in the Philippines where the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion take their seats in the sanctuary. In big churches and cathedrals, this would pose no problem. But in smaller churches, with very limited space in the sanctuary, the presence of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion is not advisable. Judging from the context of the Instruction, the function of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion officially starts only after the priest has communicated. They cannot come up the altar before this. This means, therefore, that their presence in the sanctuary before the start of their function may not be necessary at all. The altar servers and acolytes, on the other hand, have to be in the sanctuary since they are expected to perform various liturgical functions during the Mass, such as holding the book, bringing the thurible and incense, setting up the altar during the preparation of the gifts, and assisting the priest in the Mass. GIRM2002 states: “Thus, it is appropriate, insofar as

possible, that the acolyte occupy a place from which he can conveniently carry out his ministry either at the chair or at the altar” (no. 189).

Moreover, the practice in many parishes where the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion come up the altar during the singing of the “Our Father” to hold hands with the priest-celebrant is definitely a violation of this provision.

Second, the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion cannot and should NOT take the ciborium or chalice directly from the altar. The Instruction is very clear: *“they are always to receive from the hands of the priest celebrant the vessel containing either species of the Most Holy Eucharist for distribution to the faithful.”* They have to wait for the priest to hand it to them. This is a very important gesture of delegation that underscores the extraordinary nature of their function.

Third, the Instruction simply says, *“the priest may call upon extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to assist him.”* There is nothing said about the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion receiving Communion from the priest. This implicitly indicates that he need not receive Communion every time he assists in the distribution of Holy Communion. Definitely, he has to attend one entire Mass, and so that he can have full participation in the Mass, he has also to receive Communion. However, in cases when he has to help in the distribution of Communion in two or more Masses, if he has already received Communion once, he need not receive Communion a second time, except in a few special circumstances in accordance with canons 917, par. 2 and 921, par. 2 of the Code of Canon Law.

B. REDEMPTIONIS SACRAMENTUM, On Certain Matters to be Observed or to be Avoided Regarding the Most Holy Eucharist (*Congregation For Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacrament, March 25, 2004*)

154. As has been already recalled, “the only minister who can confect the Sacrament of the Eucharist *in persona Christi* is a validly ordained Priest” (Code of Canon Law, can. 900, par. 1). Hence, the name “minister of the Eucharist” belongs properly to the Priest alone. Moreover, also by reason of their sacred Ordination, the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion are the Bishop, the Priest and the Deacon, to whom it belongs therefore to administer Holy Communion to the lay members of Christ’s faithful during the celebration of Mass. In this way, their ministerial office in the Church is fully and accurately brought to light, and the sign value of the Sacrament is made complete.

Explanation: This number aims to bring to light the ministerial office in the Church. There is a clear distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of Christ’s faithful. The ordained ministers are the ordinary ministers of the Eucharist. This function belongs to them by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

155. In addition to the ordinary ministers there is the formally instituted acolyte, who by virtue of his institution is an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion even outside the celebration of Mass. If, moreover, reasons of real necessity prompt it, another lay member of Christ’s faithful may also be delegated by the diocesan Bishop, in accordance with the norm of law, for one occasion or for a specified time, and an

appropriate formula of blessing may be used for the occasion. This act of appointment, however, does not necessarily take a liturgical form, nor, if it does take a liturgical form, should it resemble sacred Ordination in any way. Finally, in special cases of an unforeseen nature, permission can be given for a single occasion by the Priest who presides at the celebration of the Eucharist.

Explanation: This article talks about the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. It should be noted that there are three different levels of extraordinary ministers. The first is the acolyte. He is a minister in the liturgical celebration by institution. He is authorized to serve at the altar, assisting the deacon and ministering to the priest, especially in preparing the altar and sacred vessels. He may distribute Holy Communion, taking precedence over other extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Before the Second Vatican Council, this was a minor order, together with the other minor orders of Tonsure, Porter, Lector and Subdeacon. On August 15, 1972, Pope Paul VI, in his *motu proprio* “*Ministeria Quaedam*” suppressed the minor orders and the subdiaconate, and instituted the ministry of lector and acolyte. (cf. A Dictionary of Canon Law, J. Pulickal, MCL. West Bengal, India: Biblia Publications Inc., 2004).

The second is by delegation: “*another lay member of Christ’s faithful may be delegated by the diocesan Bishop ... for one occasion or for a specified time.*” In most dioceses around the world, it is for one year only, subject to renewal. This is the case in the Philippines (cf. Canon Law Digest of the Philippine Catholic Church, p. 14). This is the kind of extraordinary ministers that most parishes have. This is within the competence of the diocesan Bishop, but not the Parish Priest. There is no rite of “institution” as in the case of the Acolyte, but only “appointment” that may “not necessarily take a liturgical form.” The GIRM uses the word “deputed”.

The third is for a single occasion only, with the Priest-celebrant’s “permission”. There is no institution or appointment, but just permission. This is not supposed to happen on a regular basis, but only in unforeseen special circumstances. The Priest can ask any layperson from the congregation to help him distribute Holy Communion only during that one Mass having special circumstance.

156. This function is to be understood strictly according to the name by which it is known, that is to say, that of extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, and not “special minister of Holy Communion” nor “extraordinary minister of the Eucharist”, by which names the meaning of this function is unnecessarily and improperly broadened.

Explanation: This is a very helpful clarification of terms. The official and correct term for this function is “Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.” “Extraordinary” (“outside of the ordinary”) because the function and duty of distributing Holy Communion does not properly belong to him; it belongs ordinarily to the ordained ministers (Bishop, Priest and Deacon). It is only in extraordinary circumstances that his services are needed, as defined in the succeeding numbers. The term “special” is to be avoided since it has a connotation of being better or higher than the ordinary ministers. The term “extraordinary minister of the Eucharist” is also to be avoided because his function is limited only to the distribution of Holy Communion during and outside the Mass (as in giving Communion to the sick and homebound faithful), and nothing else.

157. If there is usually present a sufficient number of sacred ministers for the distribution of Holy Communion, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion may not be appointed. Indeed, in such circumstances, those who may have already been appointed to this ministry should not exercise it. The practice of those Priests is reprobated who, even though present at the celebration, abstain from distributing Communion and hand this function over to laypersons.

Explanation: The concept of the word “extraordinary” is being clarified in this number. When there is sufficient number of Priests and Deacons - the ordinary ministers of the Eucharist - who are available in the distribution of Holy Communion, the function of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion in that particular Mass is rendered superfluous. This scenario is commonly observed during concelebrated Mass. It is not proper to let the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion distribute Communion while the concelebrating priests remain seated in the sanctuary. In a formal inquiry on this matter, the Apostolic See goes further to include other ordinary ministers present in the church though not concelebrating. Below is the text:

The doubt: Whether the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, deputed in accordance with cc. 910, par. 2 and 230, par. 3, can exercise his or her supplementary function even when ordinary ministers, who are not in any way impeded, are present in the church, though not taking part in the Eucharistic celebration.

The Response: Negative. [*June 1, 1998, AAS 80 (1988) 1373.*]

158. Indeed, the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may administer Communion only when the Priest and Deacon are lacking, when the Priest is prevented by weakness or advanced age or some other genuine reason, or when the number of faithful coming to Communion is so great that the very celebration of Mass would be unduly prolonged. This, however, is to be understood in such a way that a brief prolongation, considering the circumstances and culture of the place, is not at all a sufficient reason.

Explanation: The special circumstances when the function of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion is justified are mentioned here. The first is when there is lack of Priests and Deacons. In many rural dioceses in the Philippines, this is perfectly justified. The Priest is alone in the parish, and he cannot go to the barrios to celebrate Mass, and the people will be deprived of the Eucharist for a long period of time. In this case, the diocesan Bishop can issue special norms (cf. no. 160) whereby the pastor can appoint an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion to bring the Sacred Hosts to the barrio and conduct the Celebration of the Word with Holy Communion.

The second case is when the priest is sick or debilitated due to sickness or old age. He can still celebrate Mass, but distributing Holy Communion may put so much physical strain on him. After distributing Communion to the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and possibly to a few parishioners, he may sit down.

The third case is when there are just too many people wishing to receive Communion, and the Mass will be unduly prolonged if the distribution of Holy Communion will just be done by the sacred ministers. This is the common case especially in many urban parishes. But this

Instruction immediately makes a clarification: “*a brief prolongation is not at all a sufficient reason.*” That is to say, if the Mass will be prolonged for only a few minutes when Communion is done solely by the available sacred ministers, then it is not justified to employ the services of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.

159. It is never allowed for the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion to delegate anyone else to administer the Eucharist, as for example a parent or spouse or child of the sick person who is the communicant.

Explanation: This is to highlight the concept of delegation and the extraordinary nature of this function. The extraordinary minister is only delegated by the ordinary minister to distribute Holy Communion. This is a special and particular delegation and as such, it cannot be subdelegated (canon 137, par. 3). He has, therefore, no right to delegate this function to another person under any circumstance.

160. Let the diocesan Bishop give renewed consideration to the practice in recent years regarding this matter, and if circumstances call for it, let him correct it or define it more precisely. Where such extraordinary ministers are appointed in a widespread manner out of true necessity, the diocesan Bishop should issue special norms by which he determines the manner in which this function is to be carried out in accordance with the law, bearing in mind the tradition of the Church.