

Tradition in Continuity

Considerations for the Development of Catholic Sacred Architecture



The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration

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There are of course many important documents pertaining to the form and meaning of our celebration of the Holy Liturgy; including Conciliar documents, Encyclicals, Apostolic Exhortations, Motu Proprio, and even the Sacramentary and Lectionary. I've found it interesting that perhaps the one document most important to the ritual structure is the one least likely to have been read and studied by the faithful; the [General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#) (GIRM). ([PDF format available here](#))

I can claim no particular scholarly knowledge of the General Instruction. However as a Catholic architect assisting the Church through the design of buildings that serve, shelter, and support the Liturgy, I have as a matter of necessity become familiar with its contents. And so I thought it would be of some value to share a few passages with our readers who might not yet have been introduced to the document.

First, just a few words regarding the purpose and goal of the document. The GIRM is meant to provide a clear and common understanding of the third edition of the *Missale Romanum* authorized and promulgated by Blessed John Paul II in 2001. Much of the content of the GIRM is given over to description of the form and structure of how the liturgical celebration of the Holy Mass is to be celebrated in the Latin Church. The importance of this task is taken up as the subject of the very first lines of the Preamble:

1. When he was about to celebrate with his disciples the Passover meal in which he instituted the sacrifice of his Body and Blood, Christ the Lord gave instructions that a large, furnished upper room should be prepared (Lk 22:12). The Church has always regarded this command as applying also to herself when she gives directions about the preparation of people's hearts and minds and of the places, rites, and texts for the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist.

As is to be expected, the GIRM is heavily footnoted with passages from the Documents of Vatican II – including this sentence which picks up the theme above, and is taken from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*:

At the Last Supper our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, by which he would perpetuate the Sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again, thus entrusting to the Church, his beloved Bride, the memorial of his death and resurrection.

A longer, but wonderful passage that encapsulates a great deal of liturgical theology is offered for our consideration (and indeed for our prayerful contemplation) in the first several sections of the first chapter:

The Importance and Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration

I. The General Structure of the Mass

16. The celebration of the Mass, as the action of Christ and the People of God arrayed hierarchically, is the center of the whole Christian life for the Church both universal and local, as well as for each of the faithful individually. In it is found the high point both of the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ and of the worship that the human race offers to the Father, adoring him through Christ, the Son of God, in the Holy Spirit. In it, moreover, during the course of the year, the mysteries of redemption are recalled so as in some way to be made present. Furthermore, the other sacred actions and all the activities of the Christian life are bound up with it, flow from it, and are ordered to it.

17. *It is therefore of the greatest importance that the celebration of the Mass—that is, the Lord’s Supper—be so arranged that the sacred ministers and the faithful taking part in it, according to the proper state of each, may derive from it more abundantly²⁶ those fruits for the sake of which Christ the Lord instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood and entrusted it to the Church, his beloved Bride, as the memorial of his Passion and Resurrection.²⁷*

18. *This will best be accomplished if, with due regard for the nature and the particular circumstances of each liturgical assembly, the entire celebration is planned in such a way that it leads to a conscious, active, and full participation of the faithful both in body and in mind, a participation burning with faith, hope, and charity, of the sort which is desired by the Church and demanded by the very nature of the celebration, and to which the Christian people have a right and duty by reason of their Baptism.²⁸*

20. *Because, however, the celebration of the Eucharist, like the entire Liturgy, is carried out through perceptible signs that nourish, strengthen, and express faith,³¹ the utmost care must be taken to choose and to arrange those forms and elements set forth by the Church that, in view of the circumstances of the people and the place, will more effectively foster active and full participation and more properly respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful.*

21. *This Instruction aims both to offer general guidelines for properly arranging the Celebration of the Eucharist and to set forth rules for ordering the various forms of celebration.³²*

22. *The celebration of the Eucharist in a particular Church is of utmost importance.*

For the diocesan Bishop, the chief steward of the mysteries of God in the particular Church entrusted to his care, is the moderator, promoter, and guardian of the whole of its liturgical life.³³ . . .

The Bishop should therefore be determined that the priests, the deacons, and the lay Christian faithful grasp ever more deeply the genuine meaning of the rites and liturgical texts and thereby be led to an active and fruitful celebration of the Eucharist. To the same end, he should also be vigilant that the dignity of these celebrations be enhanced. In promoting this dignity, the beauty of the sacred place, of music, and of art should contribute as greatly as possible.

Much more could be drawn from the GIRM for our review and consideration. Perhaps I will take this up as a regular topic. In fact, this type of liturgical catechesis – this mystagogy – should be ongoing for us all. Developing a more complete understanding of the ritual action in the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries will allow us each and all to participate “both in body and mind, a participation burning with faith, hope, and charity,” as we are caught up with the entire mystical Body of Christ offering worship to the Father in spirit and truth until Christ is all in all.