

Rubrics

No, not the Hungarian chap who invented the puzzle cube, that was Rubik. No these are the “red bits” (from the Latin word *ruber* – red) in the altar missal used by the priest. Most of you will never have been close enough to an altar missal to notice that the text is a mixture of black and red – mostly black but a lot of red too. And why do I think this is of even the remotest interest to you? Well maybe it isn’t, but there again maybe it might be. Rubrics are what guide the priest in how he should celebrate Mass and, because they are determined by Rome for use internationally, in theory every Mass you attend whether in this country or elsewhere should therefore be celebrated in pretty much the same way – except they aren’t. The whys and the wherefores of why that’s the case are what I thought might be of interest.

I was just looking in the missal I was given for my confirmation in 1957. Interestingly it contains all the rubrics too. They were probably included as a guide to what was happening at the altar because, as those of us “of a certain age” will remember, much of what went on at the altar was a mystery to us because the priest stood with his back to the people for much of the Mass, effectively blocking our view. Those who, as children, had those little books with the Mass prayers on one page and a picture on the other of what the priest was doing at that point, will remember what a revelation it was – seeing what was happening on the other side of the priest! Only altar servers got a better view.

Once you are aware, as a priest, of what the rubrics say should be done at various points throughout the Mass – and we’ll get back to some examples later – it’s hard to understand why, if you watched ten different priests celebrating Mass, some things would be done ten different ways. Generally I put it down to different methods of training in the various seminaries priests attended. However, when you look at the rubrics in the old Latin altar missal, for the most part nothing has changed compared with those in the modern missal. And even more interesting is the fact that the actions of priests as they celebrated Mass back in the Latin days weren’t always what the rubrics called for (just as they aren’t always today either). And yet: ‘The priest must remember that he is the servant of the sacred Liturgy and that he is not permitted, on his own initiative, to add, to remove, or to change anything in the celebration of Mass’.¹

The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have recently published a new pastoral commentary² to accompany the Church’s revised norms and

¹ 2005 revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (para 24)

² *Celebrating the Mass*, CTS.

instructions on the celebration of Mass³. In the introduction the bishops say that it invites worshippers ‘to deepen their understanding of why we celebrate Mass as we do (which) is often of great assistance to us as we seek to do things well.’ (para 9) The General Instruction itself says that it ‘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.’

In the front of the current missal there are some sixty-four pages of *General Instruction* which constitute the rule book (as it were) on how the Mass should be celebrated.⁴ The rubrics that accompany the text of the Mass provide prompts, as it were, to remind the priest what he should be doing. Some of these are very important because they support and emphasise significant moments in the celebration. Even so, how those actions are carried out can vary - sometimes as a result of local adaptations made by the Bishops’ Conference, but more often simply because best practice (which is a little less formal than the actual rubrics) has slipped a little.

So who decides what constitutes ‘best practice’? Well, usually, the Liturgy Departments of our seminaries. Liturgists – those versed in best practice as well as the rubrics – can sometimes be quite dogmatic in what they teach, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing because their convictions are based on much study and, it has to be said, common sense. In defence of liturgists: ‘Because the celebration of the Eucharist is carried out through perceptible signs that nourish, strengthen, and express faith, the utmost care must be taken to choose and to arrange those forms and elements set forth by the Church [to] more effectively foster active and full participation’.⁵ But, because things aren’t always definitively black or white, in some cases there can be considerable room for personal interpretation and this may then be reflected in the different practice of priests depending on which seminary they trained at and also, of course, when they trained (because practice can change over time). Such differences don’t change the validity of the Mass, but they can be confusing as people wonder why priests do things in different ways.

Fr Allen Morris⁶ writes: ‘The General Instruction...is the user’s manual to the Missal, the book which contains the rites and prayers used at Mass. It not only says how things should be but, just as importantly, offers brief theological and pastoral notes on why they should be that way.’ In everything from connecting up a VCR, to assembling flat-pack furniture, there is no greater truism than: *If in*

³ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, CTS.

⁴ In the seminary we read the GI from beginning to end something, it was suggested, few priests will have ever done.

⁵ 2005 revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (para 20)

⁶ Secretary to the Department for Christian Life and Worship, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.

doubt, read the instructions! Similarly it's difficult to defend not making oneself familiar with the rules or laws governing an activity one is planning to take part in. It is, for example, essential to know the *Highway Code* from cover to cover not only to pass the test to get a licence, but also to drive thereafter safely and competently. If you plan to play a sport or a game, a basic and necessary requirement is to know the rules by which it is played.

The Roman Missal currently being used in this country was authorised for use in 1974. Over the years since then a number of changes have been introduced by our Bishops' Conference, none of them earth-shattering but they are the reason why some things are done (or are supposed to now be done) a little differently compared to previous practice. So let's take a look at just a few examples:

- At the Opening Prayer, following the priest's invitation, "Let us pray", the rubric requests a short space for quiet prayer first before the Prayer.
- There used to be an instruction for the priest to make the Sign of the Cross during the "May Almighty God have mercy on us..." prayer and, for some reason the people began to do the same. That rubric has now disappeared.
- During the Creed there was, and still is, a rubric that all should bow during the reference to the incarnation but this was stopped many years ago by, I presume, a Bishops' Conference instruction. I don't know why.
- One of the main areas where there seems to be a difference in practice is in the handling of the gifts. There is meant to be a progression in the height to which the gifts are lifted. During their preparation, the rubrics instruct the priest to hold the paten and then the chalice "slightly raised above the altar". At the consecration they are to be "shown to the people" – not lifted up high, just high enough to be seen. And at the doxology at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, they should then be "lifted up" or elevated. In that respect nothing has changed from what the Latin rubrics called for. I suppose that in order for a priest with his back to the people to be able to show them the host and chalice at the consecration, he had to elevate them above head height or they wouldn't have seen them, but an elevation as such wasn't actually called for, just a showing. When priests began celebrating Mass facing the people, the practice of elevating the host and chalice above head height probably continued out of habit even though that wasn't (and isn't) what the rubrics call for.
- At the preparation of the gifts, the two prayers that the priest says over the bread and then the wine are not communal prayers and are supposed to be said quietly. Of course there may be a hymn being sung at that point but, even if there isn't, the priest doesn't have to say those prayers audibly as a matter of course – even though most priests do.

- The rubrics still mention the ringing of a bell at the consecration but in most parish churches the bells were “disappeared” some time ago. They didn’t, of course, make any difference to the consecration though people often felt it “hadn’t worked” if the bells were rung! They were merely a hangover from the days of large congregations gathered in huge (and often market-place noisy) cathedral churches. The bell was rung prior to the consecration in order to alert people to the fact that something important was about to happen, then as a signal at the consecration because people were sometimes so far away from the altar that they might not have noticed otherwise, and again at communion as a sign to come forward. We no longer need these warning bells (and that’s all they were) in our modern, smaller churches.
- During the ‘Lamb of God’ the rubric instructs the priest to break the large host and place a small piece in the chalice – the “co-mingling”. It was explained to us in the seminary that this act is a remnant from the time when the Precious Blood was added to the consecrated bread (when regular bread was used) in connection with visits to the sick and, as such, now only has historical significance. Whether the fragment is added or not doesn’t affect the validity of the celebration. However, a further consideration is the fact that we now offer the chalice at communion (which wasn’t always the case) and it may not be very helpful for someone to find a fragment of host floating in the chalice as if had come from a previous communicant’s mouth. Not adding the fragment of host to the chalice in the first place, avoids the problem.⁷
- There was an instruction at the ‘Lamb of God’ that the priest should strike his breast three times. This was never an instruction to the people though they tended to copy the action of the priest. That rubric has now gone.

There are also things that are more a matter of rubrics interpreted in light of the *General Instruction*...

- At the start of Mass the priest greets the people using one of the established formal greetings such as “The Lord be with you” – the best and most comprehensive greeting that he could possibly offer. There is, therefore, no need to add less formal, chatty greetings such as “Good morning” – that’s already been said in another form.
- The Mass is a mixture of prayers which are proper to the priest, responses that are proper to the people, and prayers that are said together. The Eucharistic Prayer is offered by the priest on behalf of himself and the people, but it should be said only by the priest. The doxology at the end, being part of the prayer, is also said only by the priest.

⁷ Giving the co-mingling a theological meaning, the 2005 *General Instruction* says that adding the fragment to the chalice signifies the uniting of the Body and Blood of Christ in the work of salvation. It has also been suggested that this can be said to happen within each person as they receive the sacrament.

- The Sign of Peace is not physically passed down from the celebrant to the people. He wishes the people the peace of Christ and then invites them to offer one another that peace (in a manner appropriate to local custom) and it is also exchanged on the sanctuary between the celebrants and ministers. He doesn't approach anyone in the congregation to wish them peace, he has already done that verbally.
- Announcements, if they are necessary (it says), should be brief.⁸

And that's just a glimpse into the "wonderful world of rubrics" – and you thought celebrating Mass was easy!

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Fr Neil McNicholas

⁸ If the parish newsletter is worth its salt, announcements shouldn't really be necessary.