

SACRAMENTALS AND THEIR MINISTERS

By

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The Constitution on the Liturgy gave us a new definition of what a sacramental is. In doing so it modified somewhat the definition found in the Code of Canon Law (can. 1144). Sacramentals are "sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy" (art. 60). Where Vatican II used here the word "signs", thus bringing the sacramentals closer to the sacraments, the Code of Canon Law had said "things and actions." Also in the sacramental we are given "access to the stream of divine grace which flows from the paschal mystery of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, the fountain from which all sacraments and sacramentals draw their power" (art. 61).

These sacramentals are to be revised. The primary principle of this revision is that of intelligent, active and easy participation of the people. In the course of time some sacramentals may have become obsolete, while new ones have to be created. This was meant when the Constitution on the Liturgy stated that "the requirements of our own times should also be weighed. When rituals are revised ... new sacramentals may also be added as the need for these becomes apparent" (art. 79).

Almost half of the blessings found in the Roman Ritual of 1952 (the date of its last pre-conciliar revision) had been reserved: eighty-seven in all. Fifty-three of them could be given only by members of certain religious orders and congregations, and eight by priests of certain dioceses, the rest by bishops and priests having a special indult. This reservation had been resented by many pastors so that Vatican II decreed that "reserved blessings shall be very few and only in favor of bishops and ordinaries" (Ibid.).

During the discussion on the Liturgy of Vatican II two bishops came up with the proposal that also lay people should be given the faculty to bless certain things and persons. Against a strong opposition in the Council Hall the final section of article 79 of the Constitution on the Liturgy was approved: "Let provision be made that some sacramentals, at least in special circumstances

and at the discretion of the ordinary, may be administered by qualified lay persons." In a last attempt 150 bishops opposed this section of article 79, and the spokesman of the conciliar commission on the liturgy had to reassure them by stressing the fact, that the terms *some, special circumstances, at the discretion of the ordinary and qualified* had to be understood in a restrictive sense.

According to the same conciliar document sacramentals have two aims: they are to dispose people to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and they are to render holy the various occasions of human life.

If we take the first aim ("to dispose men to receive the chief effect of the sacraments") we refer to those ceremonies which precede and follow the essential rite of the sacraments. In the celebration of infant baptism such sacramentals are the signing of the infant's forehead with the sign of the cross, the blessing of baptismal water, the pre- and post-baptismal anointings, the giving of the white cloth and of the lighted candle. These sacramentals have been reformed together with the sacraments to which they belong.

Most of the sacramentals, however, are celebrations which bear a resemblance to the sacraments, but are independent rites. Here theologians distinguish between consecrations and constitutive blessings on the one hand, and invocative blessings on the other. A consecration and a constitutive blessing assign a person or a thing permanently to the realm of the sacred. Unfortunately, there exists no agreement, how to distinguish clearly between a consecration and a constitutive blessing. The term consecration was used in various senses. Until Vatican II a priest was "consecrated" a bishop. According to the post-conciliar liturgy he is "ordained" a bishop. This new terminology wants to stress two things: first, that episcopal ordination confers the fullness of the sacrament of orders.¹ The episcopate is not a "consecration" that grants a priest merely greater powers of jurisdiction, as many theologians had thought during the Middle Ages. Secondly, there is only one sacrament of Holy Orders; therefore, not only deacons and priests, but also bishops are "ordained."

BISHOPS AS MINISTERS OF SACRAMENTALS

According to Canon Law "consecration" is a sacramental performed by a bishop or someone who has a special indult to celebrate the same rite (C.I.C., can. 1147, # 1). Sometimes it was added that

¹ Vatican II, Const. on the Church, art. 21.

a consecration required also an anointing with sacred oil. But the anointing cannot be the distinctive mark between "consecrations" and "constitutive blessings." Both in the former and the new rite of the "Consecration of Virgins" there is no anointing. But this solemn ceremony is exclusively reserved to the bishop of the place.

According to the pre-conciliar Roman Pontifical the dedication of a church was consecration, since its official title was "De Ecclesiae Dedicacione seu Consecratione." The recently published fascicle of the Pontifical, containing the revised rites for the dedication of churches³ meticulously avoids the term "consecration". But this ceremony is obviously a "consecration" because it is distinguished in the same fascicle from the "blessing" of a church. According to the revised Pontifical the dedication of a church or an altar is reserved to the bishop, but the bishop may delegate this solemn ceremony in urgent cases also to a priest.

The rite for the blessing of holy oils, as reformed after Vatican II makes a clear distinction between the blessing of the oil of catechumens and the oil of the sick, and the consecration of the chrism. "The consecration of the chrism belongs to the bishop alone."⁴ In the case of the baptism of adults, simple priests may bless the oil of catechumens, while the oil used for the Anointing of the Sick may also be blessed by a simple priest in the case of need.

A number of constitutive blessings are still reserved to bishops and will remain so also in the future. To them belong the blessing of a bell for the use of a new church or public oratory, the blessing of a new cemetery, the so-called papal blessings and the blessing and erection of the Stations of the Cross.⁵

PRIESTS AS MINISTER OF SACRAMENTALS

The blessings of the Roman Ritual, Title IX, Chapters 9, 10 and 11, hitherto reserved, can now be given by simple priests with the exception of the few constitutive blessings mentioned in the last paragraph. A few months after the publication of the first post-conciliar Instruction on the Liturgy, the Sacred Penitentiary declared

² The Rite of Consecration to a Life of Virginity, Introduction, n. 6

³ *Ordo Dedicacionis Ecclesiae et Altaris*, Vatican City 1977, 162 pp.

⁴ Rites for the Blessing of Oils and Consecrating the Chrism, Introduction, n. 6.

⁵ First Instruction for the Proper Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, of September 26, 1964, art. 77.

that a simple priest could also grant, together with the former reserved blessings, all the indulgences and privileges.⁶ From then on any priest can validly and licitly bless and impose the different scapulars, girdles, cords and medals, like the St. Benedict Medal and the Miraculous Medal. The same is also true of the different blessings of the Rosary (Dominican, Holy Cross, etc.). The only condition necessary is that the priest uses the official formula of the Roman Ritual.

Also a number of former consecrations, now considered to be constitutive blessings, can be performed by any priest in good standing: a priest can bless the oil of catechumens, the oil of the sick, as mentioned earlier, and a chalice for the celebration of holy Mass. A bishop may delegate priest to bless a church or an altar.

DEACONS AS MINISTERS OF SACRAMENTALS

Vatican II prepared the way for the re-introduction of the permanent diaconate in the Latin Church. Among the tasks entrusted to the deacon is now the solemn celebration of the sacrament of Baptism. The deacon is, together with the priest, the ordinary minister of this sacrament. He is also allowed to perform the rites, when a child or adult had received baptism in an emergency situation and is, after his recovery, subsequently brought to church for the first time.⁷ Together with the priest the deacon is now the ordinary minister of the distribution of holy communion, having the custody of the eucharist. After exposition of the Blessed Sacrament he may also give the blessing with the monstrance in the same way as the priest does.⁸ Also the Viaticum may be brought by a deacon to the dying. He may assist at wedding celebrations, and bless in this rite the rings, the arrhae and give the solemn nuptial blessing as the priest does. Obviously, he has to use the rite outside Mass. He may conduct funerals, and is allowed, as mentioned twice in recent documents concerning the diaconate, "to administer sacramentals."

May he administer all sacramentals? Certainly not those reserved to a bishop. May he then administer all those sacramentals which are granted to a priest? Some had answered this question in the affirmative, arguing "a maiore ad minorem." The deacon can celebrate solemnly some sacraments. Consequently, so

⁶ R. Kaczynski (ed.), *Enchiridion Documentorum Instaurationis Liturgicae*. Vol. I (1976) p. 71, n. 275.

⁷ Cf. *Infant Baptismal Rite*, Ch. VI.

⁸ *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, June 21, 1973, nn. 97 and 99.

it was asserted, he can also do what is less, namely administer sacramentals, by performing constitutive and invocative blessings. According to this theory he could bless, in general, persons (e.g., the blessing of throats on the memory of St. Blase on February 3) and religious objects, like crosses, statues, medals and rosaries.

This question has been referred to the Pontifical Commission for the Interpretation of the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council. Its answer was negative.⁹ A deacon can bless only those persons and objects which the law of the Church explicitly grants him. This "law of the Church" is laid down in liturgical books as they exist now or as they will be published in the future. The main reason for this negative decision was article 29 of the Constitution on the Church which states that "It is the duty of the deacon, to the extent that he has been authorized by competent authority . . . to administer sacramentals." The deacon can only impart those blessings which are part of the sacraments which are officially entrusted to him. In the course of the solemn rite of infant baptism he can bless baptismal water. In the celebration of marriage outside Mass he can bless the rings, the arrhae and give the solemn nuptial blessing. From the other sacramentals he can administer only those which are explicitly assigned to him in the liturgical books, be they already published or still to be published or revised. We must not forget that the *Benedictional* of the Roman Ritual has not yet been revised after Vatican II. Consequently, the deacon cannot bless — at least not at the present time — rosaries, medals, cars or houses.

There are several reasons which seem to justify the restrictive attitude of the Church. The first reason is ecumenical. The orthodox churches are opposed to the concessions in liturgical matters granted to deacons in the Latin rite. For them blessings are exclusively reserved to bishops and priests. In the oriental churches the deacon is, liturgically, what his name indicates: a minister of the bishop and the priest. Thus he assists the priest and the bishop in the celebration of baptism and the eucharist. Only in extreme need is the deacon allowed to baptize, because in the Eastern rites the solemn celebration of baptism includes always the celebration of the sacrament of Confirmation by the priest. But a deacon cannot celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation. In case the deacon baptizes, the parents have to bring the infant again later on to church to be confirmed by a priest.

⁹ De diaconi facultatibus quoad sacramentalia et benedictiones, *Notitiae* 11 (1975) 36-39.

A second reason for this restrictive attitude of the Church concerning sacramentals administered by deacons is dogmatical in nature. As its name indicates, the diaconate is ministerial in character, even more so than the episcopate and the presbyterate. As early as the beginning of the third century the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, the first post-New Testament liturgical book of which we have knowledge, stated that the deacon "is not ordained for the priesthood, but for the service of the bishop that he may do (only) the things commanded by (the bishop)."¹⁰ In the twentieth century Vatican II repeated and thus re-affirmed the same text, taking it from another ancient Christian liturgical source.¹¹

LAY MINISTERS OF SACRAMENTALS

"Provision should be made for the administration of some sacramentals at least in special circumstances and at the discretion of the ordinary, by qualified lay persons." As is well known, the post-conciliar development went far beyond this article 79 of the Constitution on the Liturgy. The ritual for the Baptism of Infants contains a chapter with the full rite of "baptism in the absence of priests and deacons."¹² This rite may also be used in the Philippines.¹³ The pertinent Roman instruction concerning this chapter of the infant baptismal ritual specifies who are the "qualified lay persons" who may celebrate in this way the sacrament of baptism. In the order of preference seminarians of at least 18 years who are taking at least the course preceding theology are mentioned first.¹⁴ Second in line of preference are religious men and women who are in vows or have made an equivalent commitment and have been catechetically prepared. Finally, the document mentions lay persons, men or women, at least 21 years old, with due catechetical and liturgical preparation.

From 1972 on we have also extraordinary ministers of holy communion who distribute holy communion when the ordinary ministers are either not available or prevented by ill health, age

¹⁰ G. Dix (ed.), *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition* (London 1968) p. 15.

¹¹ Const. on the Church, art. 29.

¹² Rite of Baptism for Infants, Ch. IV.

¹³ Cf. *Liturgical Information Bulletin* 8 (1973) 47-50.

¹⁴ Philosophers or seminarians in the College seminary.

or pastoral activities. The same extraordinary ministers may also be entrusted with publicly exposing the Blessed Sacrament for adoration. After the adoration and the connected devotion (e.g., Holy Hour, Adoracion Nocturnal) they may repose the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. But they are not allowed to give the sacramental blessing. Also in the form of Viaticum may extraordinary ministers bring holy communion to those who are terminally ill. More than thirty dioceses in the Philippines have extraordinary ministers for holy communion who preside in barrio chapels over Sunday services without a priest.

When Rome published the new Burial Rite (1969) it gave the permission that "if pastoral necessity demands, the conference of bishops may, with the permission of the Apostolic See, permit a lay person to celebrate the service."¹⁵ Lay people should preferably intervene at the station at the home of the deceased and at the cemetery. The bishops' conference of the United States permits a lay person to lead the station in the church, i.e., liturgy of the word and the rite of final commendation and farewell. Twenty-two Philippine dioceses permit — as of 1976 — lay people to conduct the service in the church or in the barrio chapel.¹⁶

In at least two dioceses of this country lay people were for some time allowed to officiate at wedding celebrations. Obviously, they were not allowed to give the solemn nuptial blessing. Upon the request of the priests of these dioceses this experiment was discontinued in the meantime.

A letter which recently reached the editor of the *Boletín Eclesiástico* complained: "It is becoming more and more common to see major seminarists and lay brothers (who have received none of the sacred orders and ministries) to go around blessing houses, cars and even the dead. I would like to know what is the present discipline regarding blessings. What are the different kinds of blessings and who can impart what blessings? I suppose this whole matter has also undergone revision in the post-conciliar and canonical renewal."

The previous pages tried to give an answer to this letter, by placing it in the wider context of the sacramentals in general. Also

¹⁵ Rite of Funerals, Introduction, n. 19.

¹⁶ On the data mentioned see C. J. Marivoet, Lay Ministries in the Philippines, *The Liturgical Information Bulletin* 11 (1976) 55-85.

here it has to be stated: lay people may administer only those sacramentals which are granted to them by the law of the Church, because "holy Mother Church has instituted" them.¹⁷ It is obvious, that lay people (major seminarians, lay brothers) are not allowed to bless houses and cars. Under certain conditions, laid down in the new "Rite of Funerals", they may bless the dead. In future certain ("some") other sacramentals will also be entrusted, in "special circumstances" to "qualified" lay people, but "at the discretion of the ordinary" or of the respective bishops' conference, as article 79 of the Constitution on the Liturgy had decreed. To a certain extent this article has been implemented. As far as the blessings are concerned we have still to wait for the Benedictional of the Roman Ritual. But there seems hardly to be any possibility that sacramentals will at any time in the future be administered indiscriminately by lay people.

¹⁷ Const. on the Lit., art. 60.