THE TEN MOST COMMON LITURGICAL ABUSES

And Why They're Wrong

By Kevin Orlin Johnson

Before Vatican II there weren’t any surprises when it came to the Mass. Now in many parts of the United States you’ll find priests improvising as they go along. Even archbishops issue pastoral letters directing things at odds with liturgical regulations. As Pope John Paul II noted in a 1998 *ad limina* address to the American bishops of the western states, not all of the changes in the liturgy "have always and everywhere been accompanied by the necessary explanation and catechesis; as a result, in some cases there has been a misunderstanding of the very nature of the liturgy, leading to abuses, polarization, and sometimes even grave scandal."

"Scandal" is a word much in the news these days, but it doesn’t really mean a shameful or sexual misdemeanor. "Scandal" in the Church’s vocabulary means just what it means in the Bible: a stumbling block, something that obstructs a person’s way to the faith (Matt. 18:6–9).

When the Mass is presented as something casual, entertaining, or improvisational, the whole point of it disappears. If the priest conducts himself as if Christ were not truly present in the Eucharist, why should the lay people in his parish think the Eucharist means anything? Why should they bother to go to Mass at all? Although census figures report that the Church in America is growing, only twenty-five percent of Americans who call themselves Catholic attend Mass regularly (down from seventy percent before the liturgical reforms following Vatican II). Worse, close to two-thirds of American Catholics say they don’t believe in the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist—and many of those are among the twenty-five percent who still attend Mass.

A strong argument can be made that the loss of structure in liturgy caused an erosion of faith that in turn dealt a near-mortal blow to the American priesthood. Religious vocations, always sufficient in this country, began dropping off as the new order of the Mass was imposed without the necessary explanation and catechesis. Now many parishes have priests of other nationalities; we have become virtually a missionary country.

In an atmosphere of free-form liturgy, it’s up to the laity to know the laws about texts, gestures, the sacred objects used, and the proper conduct of the Mass; to obey those laws; and to see that the clergy obeys them, too. It’s up to us to call our priests back to due reverence when it comes to matters of taste that aren’t covered by law. It’s also important to know the difference between matters of law and matters of taste, because you have to know when you can insist and when you have to persuade. But by and large the laws binding on all priests are enough to bring back the reverence that is all too often missing.

If you question some liturgical practice at your parish, go to your nearest Catholic library or bookstore and have a look at these texts: the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM); the *Code of Canon Law* (its acronym, CIC, is derived from its Latin title, *Codex Iuris Canonici*); the *Ceremonial of Bishops* (CB); and the *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite* (CMRR). The

Check the directives from popes and Vatican congregations, particularly the Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship (CSDW). The Congregation publishes the answers to questions of interest in a periodical called Notitiae. These reinforcements of law are binding on all the faithful, and they go into greater detail than the laws themselves can; but mostly they repeat that the laws must be followed in this and every other instance. Pauline Books & Media publishes many of these documents in inexpensive editions. And if you have a computer, check the Internet. You can easily find the complete texts of just about any Church document, free, including a good many articles from Notitiae.

Above all get a copy of the Order of Mass approved for use in the United States. Unfortunately, it’s hard to find the Order outside of huge altar books, which are expensive, or missalettes, which aren’t always accurate. Pangaeus Press in Dallas publishes an affordable edition of the Order.

When you have the applicable laws, write to the offending priest, citing the law, chapter, and verse and quoting it in full. Be objective and charitable; if you can, phrase your concerns as questions. An errant priest simply might not know what he’s doing, but whether he’s negligent or willful he might get obstinate or try to save face when his error is pointed out. If you get no satisfaction after a reasonable exchange, repeat your concerns to the priest in writing and send a copy to your bishop. It might end up being a longer and less pleasant process than you’d think. So be prepared to repeat the process and to keep the focus on the exact issue and the exact laws that it violates. As frustrating as the process might get, never lose your sense of charity. If your complaint comes to a successful conclusion, don’t crow about it; you haven’t won anything. The law has been fulfilled. The Blessed Sacrament has won.

Here are the most common abuses that you find in American liturgies today, with a few references to the laws that prohibit them. Check out those references and you’ll probably find laws on similar problems in your own parish.

1. Disregarding the prescribed text of the Order of Mass.

This particular abuse is perhaps the most widespread. You might think that the mere existence of a prescribed, official Order of Mass would be enough to show priests that they’re not to change or improvise, but it isn’t.

It’s not uncommon to find lectors eliminating male references to God in the Scripture readings or using the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (or other inaccurate and unapproved ones) for the readings. You sometimes hear priests changing the words of the Nicene Creed—omitting the word "men" in "for us men and for our salvation" is the most common violation—or omitting the Creed altogether; saying aloud the prayers to be said quietly; or generalizing them, saying, for instance, "Lord, wash away our iniquities and cleanse us of our sins" (instead of "my" and "me").

You hear priests changing the tense and thereby the sense of phrases like "pray that our sacrifice
is acceptable" instead of "may be acceptable" or "the Lord is with you" instead of "the Lord be with you." You hear them inviting the congregation to join in prayers specified as the priest’s alone. On occasion you even find priests winging it during the Eucharistic Prayer. And beyond the improvised words you’ll find a lot of flippanit practices like using blue vestments for Marian feasts or gingerbread for the Eucharist at children’s Masses.

All of this is unlawful: "Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the bishop. Therefore no other person, even if he be a priest, may add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 22, repeated in documents like Sacram Liturgiam; Tres Abhinc Annos; CIC 841, 846; and many other laws and regulations). Deviations from the Order are illicit, and when done intentionally they’re a grave offense both against the Church and the faithful who have a right to an authentic liturgy (Inaestimabile Donum, CSDW, April 3, 1980).

2. Interrupting the Mass.

The priest has no more right to interrupt the Mass from the sanctuary than you have to interrupt it from the pews. At the conclusion of Mass the lector or priest may make general announcements for the information of the parish; that’s specified in the Order. But no one may stop the Mass to make announcements, give financial reports, or make pleas for funds (Inter Oecumenici; Inaestimabile Donum). No one may stop the Mass for extra homilies (CSDW, Liturgicae Instaurationes 2(a)) and certainly not for other activities that are themselves unlawful, like skits or "liturgical dance."

3. Omitting the penitential rite.

This one is often misunderstood. A priest may choose to use the rite of blessing and sprinkling as given in the Order, in which case he must omit the "Lord have mercy." But a priest can never omit the penitential rite altogether, and he cannot give a general absolution during the penitential rite of the Mass as a substitute for individual Reconciliation (nor can he do so during a communal penance service [CIC 961]).

There are other options available to the celebrant elsewhere in the Order. The sign of peace, for instance, is optional (GIRM 112). If he includes it, though, the priest is not allowed to leave the sanctuary to exchange it with the congregation (GIRM 136).

4. Replacing or omitting the homily.

A priest may omit the homily only on weekdays that are not holy days. On Sundays and holy days he must give a homily (Sacrosum Concilium; CIC 767); it should relate the readings to one another and indicate how their message can be applied to the lives of his parishioners (Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntianidi; Inter Oecumenici). No priest can substitute announcements, financial reports, or pleas in place of the homily, nor add such things to it. Of course the Holy See isn’t going to make a fuss if he takes a couple of sentences at the end of the homily to make an announcement, tell how much is in the building fund, or mention a second collection.
Nobody who is not a priest, deacon, or bishop can give the homily at Mass; nobody who is not ordained can give a "talk" or "reflection" in place of the homily (CIC 766–768). Although some few groups like the Society for the Propagation of the Faith have a dispensation to speak on behalf of an order or mission at the time appointed for the homily, it is never permitted without that dispensation—not even if he (or, worse, she) gives a short homily before launching into the appeal. An ordained minister gives a homily structured on certain guidelines; that’s it.

Incidentally, he may not leave the sanctuary during the homily (GIRM 97).

5. Dictating posture.

There are parishes where the ushers will ask you to stand when you’re kneeling. Many churches are being built now without kneelers to discourage you from kneeling at all. This violates the law and does no honor to Christ nor to the martyrs who died rather than compromise the outward signs of their faith.

But if the celebrant and his ushers can’t mandate your posture, the law can, and it does. Everybody at Mass is supposed to be uniform in standing, sitting, and kneeling (GIRM 20), and there are universal rules about it. In this country you are still required to kneel during the Consecration, from after the end of the Sanctus until the Great Amen, even if there aren’t any kneelers (GIRM 21; Appendix to the General Instruction 21). You are required to bow or kneel at the words "by the power of the Holy Spirit" in the Creed (GIRM 98). You are required to genuflect whenever you pass the Eucharist, whether it’s in the tabernacle or publicly exposed except when in procession (GIRM 233; CB 71). And contrary to what you might see these days, the Eucharist’s tabernacle can’t be tucked out of the way. It should be "placed in a part of the church that is prominent, conspicuous, beautifully decorated, and suitable for prayer" (CIC 938).

After Communion, though, you’re free to stand, sit, or kneel as you choose.

6. Dictating the manner of reception of the Eucharist.

Vatican II never mentioned receiving the host in hand. But when some countries introduced the practice illicitly Pope Paul VI surveyed the world’s bishops to see if it should be allowed where it already existed. Rather than suddenly suppressing reception in the hand, the pope granted an indult intended to let the practice continue for a time in those areas where it already existed. Oddly enough, the bishops of the United States—where the practice did not exist—asked permission of the Holy See to introduce it here. Even more amazingly, they got it.

Still, universal Church law does not permit reception of the Sacrament in the hand, and John Paul II disapproves of the practice. The indult that allowed it specified that reception in the hand "must not be imposed" (CSDW, En réponse, 1969). Absolutely no priest or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may refuse to administer the Eucharist on the tongue. Your right to determine which lawful manner you use is stated in the GIRM (Appendix for the United States, 240b).

The chalice cannot be left on the altar for people to pick up and drink from, not even during lightly attended Masses. The celebrant must distribute the Sacrament (United States Bishops’
Directory on Communion Under Both Species, 47). In fact, you’re not allowed to dip your host into the chalice; you have to take the cup and drink from it (DCUBS 45).

By the way, as to Eucharistic ministers, it’s important to note that they’re not supposed to help distribute the Sacrament routinely; only if there’s an unusually large number of people at Mass or if they’re sent to distribute extraordinarily outside of Mass, as to the sick. They are not supposed to assist at all when a priest is in attendance. Their office has nothing whatever to do with increased participation by the laity.


The official statement of the rules for reception has recently been rewritten by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and unfortunately it’s pretty vague. But it still says clearly that "in order to be properly disposed to receive communion, participants . . . normally should have fasted for one hour," abstaining from food and drink except water or medicine.

The rewrite also goes to great lengths to say that non-Christians and Christians not in communion with the Church are welcome to come to Mass, but it’s not nearly so clear as it used to be on the fact that they may not receive the Eucharist. The new phrase "ordinarily not admitted to holy communion" makes some Catholics—and too many priests—figure that it’s all right for non-Catholics to take communion on special occasions like weddings or funerals, or if the non-Catholic is a prominent person like a government official or head of state. Exceptions are so few and given in circumstances so rare that it might have been more helpful to write simply "not admitted to holy communion"; but that’s for the bishops to say.

Naturally, you’re also required to be free from "grave" sin—what we all used to call "mortal" sin—which means Reconciliation before reception if you have committed a grave offense. And, no, the theology about what constitutes a grave sin has not changed, even if the terminology has.

8. Holding hands during the Our Father.

This is oddly widespread in the United States but it’s an illicit addition to the liturgy. The official publication of the Sacred Congregation for the Sacrament sand Divine Worship, Notitiae (11 [1975] 226), states the practice "must be repudiated . . . it is a liturgical gesture introduced spontaneously but on a personal initiative; it is not in the rubrics." And anything not in the rubrics is unlawful, again because "no other person . . . may add . . . anything [to] the liturgy on his own authority" (ibid).

Notitiae (17 [1981] 186)) also reaffirms that the priest may never invite the congregation to stand around the altar and hold hands during the Consecration. He stays in the sanctuary and we stay outside of it.

9. Performing liturgical dance.

Introducing dance into the liturgy in the United States would be to add "one of the most desacralized and desacralizing elements" leading to "an atmosphere of profanity, which would easily suggest to those present worldly places and profane situations. Nor is it acceptable to
introduce into the liturgy the so-called artistic ballet because it would reduce the liturgy to mere entertainment” (*Notitiae* 11 [1975] 202–205).

10. Closing the holy water fonts at some seasons.

This is another innovation introduced spontaneously, and while holy water fonts are not integral parts of the Mass, emptying them during Lent or Advent is wrong no matter how you look at it. It’s not found anywhere in liturgical law, which is reason enough to suppose it to be forbidden. And it makes absolutely no sense. Holy water is a sacramental, so its right use carries with it a certain degree of forgiveness of sin and remission of punishment (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1668; CB 110–114). There is no positive spiritual benefit in depriving the faithful of this legitimate aid at any time. In fact, removing it during penitential seasons is bizarre—that’s when we need it most.

By the way, because the penitential rite of the Mass and reception of the Eucharist remit venial sins, there’s no need to use holy water on the way out of Mass. Unless you’ve been up to some mischief in those few minutes.

As a postscript, I mention something that might be categorized as an abuse by the laity: parish-hopping. The Code of Canon Law provides that "The precept of participating in the Mass is satisfied by assistance at a Mass which is celebrated anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the holy day or on the evening of the preceding day" (1248, para. 1). Consequently, you can fulfill your Sunday obligation by going to a Mass anywhere. While your legal membership still remains in your local parish, the only times you are required to check in there are when you want to receive a special sacrament (e.g., marriage, confirmation) for which the priest needs the jurisdiction to administer.

Nevertheless, if you flee your home parish when things get ugly, you are in a sense not living up to your responsibility as a lay person. It is your duty to point out that liturgy is not entertainment. The liturgy is reality, the primary reality of this world. Christ is God, the reality on whom the secondary reality of creation depends ("through him all things were made," remember?). And the liturgy is the sacrament by which he comes personally and physically among us. The Mass is indisputably the single most important thing that human beings can do.

You have your part to fill in this great work. In fact, that’s what the liturgy is: the word is from the Greek meaning "the laity’s job." We are the Church itself, we are not the Church’s customers. Still less are we the Church’s audience. And we have a right to authentic liturgy (*Inaestimabile Donum*), liturgy exactly in line with all applicable rules and celebrated with a suitable sense of reverence (CIC 528). So if your priest offers sloppy, illicit, or even inappropriate liturgies, guess whose job it should be to pitch in and fix the problem?