

Tridentine Community News

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Ecclésia Supplet

In an earlier column, we discussed the difference between *validity* of a Sacrament and *licitness*. To be *valid*, a Sacrament must have proper matter (in this case, unleavened bread) and form (the words of consecration as specified by the Church). Using the improper words for the Consecration of the Mass renders the Sacrament of the Eucharist invalid, for example.

A Sacrament is *licit* when it is celebrated under the structures that Holy Mother Church defines. Priests of the SSPX, for example, celebrate valid but illicit Masses, because they are doing so without the approval of the competent authority, who in most cases is the local diocesan bishop.

Jurisdiction is a correlated concept: Certain actions of a priest are only valid if the priest has jurisdiction to perform that activity. Notably, a priest may only hear Confessions in a diocese where he has been given faculties, or permission, to do so. Visiting priests are supposed to request faculties from the diocesan offices if they wish to hear Confessions in that diocese. The form and matter of the Sacrament can be proper, but the Sacrament could still be invalid. The lack of jurisdiction is a case where being illicit also makes a Sacrament invalid.

By way of analogy, a policeman from Detroit would not be able to pull over and ticket a speeder in Windsor. While it might seem a sensible thing for him to do, he does not have the authority to perform that action. A properly filled-out City of Detroit ticket form carries no weight in Windsor.

After our recent series of columns on *De Defectibus*, the section of the Extraordinary Form Roman Missal that describes potential flaws in the celebration of Holy Mass and what should be done when they occur, some questions were raised. Shouldn't the Church be more charitable in assuring validity of the Sacraments? Do the faithful really need to be worried about whether they are actually receiving the Sacraments they think they are getting? Specifically, does the notion of *Ecclésia Supplet* apply?

Ecclésia Supplet ("The Church Supplies") is a principle of Canon Law which means that in cases of absent or questionable jurisdiction, Holy Mother Church supplies the jurisdiction in cases of need. This is a charitable concept with many practical advantages, especially in our era when there are insufficient priests to minister to the faithful. Consider this example: A priest

is leading a pilgrimage to a rural part of Italy. One of the members of the tour group wishes to make a Confession. None of the local priests speaks English. It is reasonable to think that the pilgrimage-leading priest could validly hear such a Confession because of need. The Church needs order, yes, but She does not want such order to come at the expense of the salvation of souls in cases of need.

An important distinction is made by Sacred Heart Seminary Professor of Canon Law Dr. Ed Peters in his February 22, 2007 posting on www.canonlaw.info: The principle of *Ecclésia Supplet* is restricted to matters of jurisdiction. It does not apply to matters of Sacramental Form.

Deus Próvidet

Dr. Peters explains that a different but allied concept, *Deus Próvidet* ("God provides"), applies in certain circumstances. As an

example, if a celebrant accidentally neglects to place a ciborium on the corporal prior to praying the words of consecration, it is only logical to believe that God makes up for this unintentional failure and still makes the consecration valid. At the same time, Peters argues that God expects something of his ministers and of the faithful. A priest cannot habitually do, or fail to do, something that results in a Sacrament being invalid.

Likewise, members of the faithful who are aware that

a priest did something invalid, such as failing to speak the specified words of absolution in Confession, must act based upon this knowledge. One must either ask the priest to say the approved words of absolution, or one must go to another confessor and reconfess one's sins. As mature Catholics, we are expected to be able to distinguish between a one-time mistake and a bad habit. As long as priests are available, we do have a right to receive Sacraments that are valid.

As with so much of our Catholic Faith, the bigger picture concept is logical and reasonable: Was it an accident? Was the recipient of the Sacrament unaware of the error? Then God understands. But God expects more of those to whom He has given greater knowledge. Those individuals need to take responsibility for celebrating and receiving valid Sacraments. And this is where the beauty of *De Defectibus* lies: It is an instructional piece whose goal is simply to form the priest better, so that the faithful have less likelihood of receiving an invalidly consecrated Eucharist.

