

Tridentine Community News

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Liturgical Law, Canon Law, and Custom – Part 1 of 3

One of the main attractions of the Extraordinary Form of Holy Mass is its predictability. While there are some permitted options, such as the choice of Mass to be celebrated on third and fourth-class feast days (Votive, Requiem, etc.), within the Mass itself, these are relatively few as compared to the Ordinary Form. Almost anywhere you travel worldwide, an attentive and experienced celebrant will celebrate the Mass in virtually the same manner.

Yet there are differences. Pay attention to when the bells are rung, for example. Why do different Mass sites do things differently if the Traditional Mass is so codified?

The answer is that the celebration of the Mass is actually subject to three sets of guidelines: Liturgical Law (Rubrics), Canon Law (general laws of the Church), and Custom (permissible regional variations).

Liturgical Law Source #1: Rubrics of the Roman Missal

The increasingly popular expression “Say the Black, Do the Red” refers to a priest’s obligation to pray the prayers printed in black text, while doing what the red text in the *Missale Romanum*, the Altar Missal, directs. In fact the word “Rubric” derives from the Latin word for red. For instance, each kiss of the altar and each sign of the cross in the Canon are specified by red Latin text interspersed within the black Latin text of the Canon itself. Of these rubrics, there can be absolutely no debate. The adjacent photo of the Altar Missal, viewable in color on our web site, depicts this concept quite clearly.

At the very front of the Altar Missal, there are several pages of “General Rubrics”. These are more detailed than the interlinear rubrics that are kept short so as to be easily readable during the celebration of Mass. This is the same section which is well-known as the “GIRM” (General Instructions of the Roman Missal) in the Ordinary Form Missal. Subjects addressed in this section include how to prepare the chalice and how the priest is to approach the altar at the beginning of Holy Mass.

Liturgical Law Source #2: The Ceremoniale Episcoporum

A Bishop celebrates a Pontifical Mass with somewhat different and more elaborate rubrics. The reference book for these is the Ceremonial of Bishops. As you may have noticed when Bishop

Earl Boyea has celebrated the Extraordinary Form Mass at St. Josaphat, he brings a special book, called a Pontifical, to be used in place of the altar cards. It contains the Ordinary of the Mass – the regular Altar Missal is moved in place for the Propers – with additional prayers reserved for bishops, such as vesting and unvesting prayers used before and after Mass. In a few instances where clarification is not found in other sources, the “C.E.” is cited as a source of rubrics even for non-Pontifical Masses.

Liturgical Law Source #3: The S.R.C.

The Vatican department currently known as the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments was formerly known as the Sacred Congregation for Rites, or S.R.C. Over time, it issued regulations and clarifying documents concerning the Sacred Liturgy. Like most official Vatican documents, these were all assigned a reference number, thus one might see a rule for Mass referenced as “S.R.C. #4268 § 3”.

Today, this congregation no longer has authority over the Extraordinary Form of the Mass, thus there are no new “C.D.W.” rulings expected concerning the Traditional Mass. The C.D.W. is currently exclusively concerned with the Ordinary Form.

Liturgical Law Source #4: The P.C.E.D.

Authority over the Extraordinary Form of the Mass is nowadays in the hands of the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei. Like the S.R.C., the P.C.E.D. issues rulings,

usually in response to “*dubia*”, or questions, submitted in writing. Each response of the P.C.E.D. is assigned a Protocol Number for future reference. For instance the ruling governing the permissibility of an Instituted Acolyte to serve as Subdeacon in a Solemn High Mass was issued as Protocol #24/92. So far, no one has yet published a collection of all of the P.C.E.D.’s rulings, which would be quite useful.

Liturgical Law Source #5: Bishops’ Conferences

The Bishops’ Conferences of various countries, prior to Vatican II, issued regulations for the Mass that applied only to their own lands. One of the best known of these is the command to recite Prayers for the Queen after Sung Mass on Sunday in England and Wales. Certain feast days are also observed only in certain countries. For now, there are unlikely to be changes to, or even awareness of, such rulings among national Bishops’ Conferences. That does not invalidate the previous instructions, however.

