

Peace be with me. And with my spirit.

A reflection on offering Mass alone

“The Roman Missal: Third typical edition” our present Mass missal notes in its introductory pages at Paragraph 254 “Mass should not be celebrated without a minister, or at least one of the faithful, except for a just cause. In this case, the greetings, the instructions, and blessing at the end of Mass are omitted”. Clearly our COVID-19 protocols are “a just cause” to permit a priest to celebrate Mass alone.

It may be a surprise for lay Catholics to know that a priest is obligated to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Office but not to offer a daily Mass. A priest assigned as a pastor is obligated to offer a Sunday and on other days of obligation a Mass for his parish. I am therefore obligated to pray my Office and to offer a Mass on Sunday for the parishes of SMO and SMP. Certainly the grace of God within a strong spiritual life leads one to value being gathered for the sharing of the Eucharist often if not daily.

Why would one be obligated to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and not to offer Mass? It goes, I believe, to the nature of the Liturgy of the Hours as an individual prayer although best celebrated in community, as a monastery community does daily throughout the day at the various prayer hours of the day. The Mass is a community prayer, a prayer of a number gathered and who in some way are a community. If in no other way than that they are gathered for that particular Mass. If a community isn't present how is the prayer of a community to be offered alone by a single individual? For a Mass to be a Eucharist a priest is required to preside over the Mass. Is not also a community required?

As noted in “The Roman Missal” the community that should be with the priest offering the Mass can be represented by a single individual just as the priest is a representation of Jesus Christ as he offers the Mass. If there is no true community and not even a single representative of the community present may the Mass be prayed by the priest alone? While such a total congregation less

Mass should not be offered, in extreme cases such as the present COVID-19 protocols in may be offered.

As I see the Mass through the centuries it went from a common small community gathering at table to a prayer at a table/altar with a congregation and presider together gathered around. One may recall the Jewish custom of the necessity of a Minyan (10 adult males) to be present for a private devotion to be become a community prayer with fuller content and the fuller presentation of worship. The Mass continued to morph with the presider presenting at an altar/table facing a crucifix and the people taking on the posture of the presider, no longer gathered around the altar/table with the presider but at the presider's back sharing the presider's view of the crucifix. I suggest that the tangible presence of the community continued to be lost as an essential component of the Mass until the presider himself came to be recognized at once as the presence of Christ and the community.

The liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council reclaimed the Mass from these centuries of less than a best metamorphosis, reclaiming the proper identity and presentation of both presider and community at Mass. It is the individual identity of presider and community and their liturgical, mutually interrelated and common participation within the Mass that as a presider alone offering a Mass I have found wanting. There is a representative status of Christ and community possessed by a single priest preside as with a priest confessor that enables a single priest presider alone to offer a Mass during extreme conditions but it is far from as it should be.

Paragraph 254 requiring the omission of greetings, instructions and final blessing at a Mass offered by a single priest presider underscores the want for the community's presence. It is good to know, that "Peace be with me. And with my spirit" ought not to be said. It is just as challenging for a priest to be another Christ as it is for the priest to be the community. You, my community of SMO/SMP are deeply missed as I continue at times alone in these days of crisis to offer Mass for me and for you – Fr. John