

Concelebrated Mass—One or Many?

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Cardinal Charles Journet once wrote, in an article in *Nova et Vetera*, the following words:

Allow me to say a word about concelebration. Let us imagine several persons coming together to baptize simultaneously a little child. There would be several baptizers but only one baptismal action, *plures baptizantes, una baptizatio*. In concelebration, one equally finds several “consecraters,” *plures ex aequo consecrantes*, but only one consecrating action, *una consecratio*.¹

The above words express an important theological fact regarding the Holy Mass, one which is rooted in the teaching of the Magisterium and the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, and which is important for all to understand, namely the unicity of a concelebrated Mass, indeed of any Mass.

The holy Cardinal Journet always had the good of God’s Church in the forefront of his mind; his love for the Church was as a principle from which flowed all his priestly activity, be it preaching retreats, hearing confessions or writing theological tracts. It was this love of the Church which urged him to clarify this small but extremely important point regarding the concelebrated Mass, a point which was and is still at times misunderstood. Being a faithful disciple of the Angelic Doctor, Journet knew that a small error made in the beginning often leads to a graver one later on; and hence he was quite aware of the disastrous conclusions which would follow from a misunderstanding of this seemingly insignificant point. Inspired by his efforts to proclaim sound teaching in this area, we hope to present the Catholic doctrine, *ever ancient ever new*, concerning the unicity of a concelebrated Mass.

Perhaps one can begin by asking the question why anyone would think that a concelebrated Mass is more than one Mass in the first place. From where would one derive such an idea? There are a few possibilities. First, and that which is most often used as a source, is the following sentence found in an allocution of Pope Pius XII: *There are as many actions of Christ as there are celebrating priests*.² At first glance this would seem to be a very clear proof that the Church holds for multiple Masses resulting from a concelebration; but when read in context the words take on a different sense. The pope is refuting here the error, common at the time, which states that the laity’s participation at a Mass carries with it a value equal to that of the celebrating priest. The pope stresses that the actions of Christ, the actual offering of the Holy Sacrifice, are based on the celebrating priest’s liturgical actions and not the laity’s. The question of multiple priests concelebrating was not the issue at hand.

¹ Un mot de la concélébration. Imaginons plusieurs personnes s’unissant pour baptiser simultanément un petit enfant. Il y aurait plusieurs baptisants mais une seule action baptismale, *plures baptizantes, una baptizatio*. En concélébration, on aura pareillement plusieurs consacrans, *plures ex aequo consecrantes*, mais une seule action consécatoire, *una consecratio*. Charles Journet, “Le sacrifice de la Messe,” *Nova et Vetera* 46, (1971), 241-250; cf. p. 248.

² Tot actiones Christi...quot sunt sacerdotes celebrantes. AAS 1954, 669.

Something else which might seem to support the theory that there are multiple Masses in a concelebration is the fact that the Church allows priests to receive stipends for a concelebrated Mass.³ This seems to some to imply that there are as many Masses as there are priests. For how otherwise can the Church allow a priest to accept a stipend for a concelebrated Mass? Such a conclusion, however, does not follow and reflects a misunderstanding regarding the “fruits” of the Mass and ultimately the instrumental causality of the sacraments.

Normally one admits a triple fruit of the Mass: 1) a general fruit for the entire Church; 2) a special fruit for those for whom the Holy Sacrifice is offered; 3) a most special fruit for the celebrant himself. Naturally every Mass has an infinite value and each concelebrant participates in the whole sacrificial action, which produces the same specific fruit of a Mass celebrated privately. This reasoning is acceptable at least insofar as the substance is concerned, namely that which concerns the very action of Christ. The argument justifies completely the practice of accepting a stipend; but it clearly cannot, in any way, demonstrate the multiplication of the Mass in a concelebration.⁴

A concelebrating priest may take a stipend because he does in fact offer up the Holy Sacrifice, the value of which cannot be depleted. This however says nothing about the number of Masses offered at a concelebration. The fruits come from the Holy Sacrifice, which no one denies is offered by the concelebrant. But, one may ask, if we grant that every priest confects the sacrament, how can we conclude that there is only one Mass, and not as many Masses as there are priests? Here one must not forget that when the priests consecrate the Host they are united in intention:

Because the intention is required for the perfection of the sacraments, therefore, since all have one intention of consecrating, there is but one consecration only. All the celebrants must direct the intention to that moment in which the bishop pronounces the words; and thus the intention of the bishop is not defrauded, nor does anyone do there what has already been done.⁵

Also, all the concelebrants act in the line of instrumental causality:

³ Cf. *In celebratione Missae*, AAS 1972, 561-563.

⁴ Normalmente ogni Messa si ammette un triplice frutto della Messa: --un frutto generale per tutta la Chiesa; --un frutto speciale per color per i quali è offerto il S. Sacrificio, ed infine—un frutto del tutto specialissimo per il celebrante stesso. Naturalmente ogni messa ha un valore infinito e ciascun concelebrante partecipa a tutta l'azione sacrificale, la quale produce lo stesso specifico frutto di una Messa celebrata privatamente. Almeno per quanto riguarda la sostanza e cioè in quanto si tratta dell'azione stessa di Cristo, questa ragione è accettabile. L'argomento giustifica completamente l'attuale pratica delle elemosine, ma evidentemente non può, in alcun modo dimostrare la moltiplicazione delle Messe in una concelebrazione. Mons. Dr. Antonio Piolanti, *Il Mistero Eucaristico*, Terza edizione riveduta e aumentata, Pontificia Accademia Teologica Romana (Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1983), 506. This entire chapter dedicated to concelebration is actually the work of Rev. Rudolf Michael Schmitz.

⁵ Quia intentio requiritur ad perfectionem sacramentorum, ideo, cum omnes habeant intentionem unam consecrationem faciendi, non est ibi nisi una tantum consecratio. Omnes celebrantes debent intentionem referre ad illud instans, in quo episcopus verba profert; et sic episcopi intentio non defraudatur, nec aliquis ibi facit quod factum est. *IV Sent.*, 2. 13, q. 1, a.2, q. 1, 1m.

.... It can happen that one and the same effect proceeds from a plurality of instrumental causes under one principal agent, which uses them as one, since the instrumental power is then formally one. Indeed, if any of the priests acted by his own power, says the Angelic Doctor, then the other celebrants would be superfluous, one celebrant sufficing; but because the priest does not consecrate except *in persona Christi*, the many are one in Christ, and therefore it does not matter whether the Sacrament is consecrated by one or many, save that the rite of the Church be kept. By several priests consecrating one host the unity of the Church is in some way signified, of which this Sacrament is a type, since the many are one in Christ.⁶

These words of St. Thomas, as related by Fr. Lepicier, begin to clear up the confusion; and yet one more essential element must be pointed out, namely the role of the sacramental rite. For, while it is true that the priests act as instrumental causes in confecting the sacrament, united in one intention and by the power of one principal agent, it must be added that they do this through the instrumentality of the liturgical rite, which is one also:

In reality, the origin of the sacrament, at the level of the mediation of the Church, is not found only in the ministerial act of the priest, nor only in the *gestus sacramentalis*, but in both simultaneously and inseparably...The ministerial act is possible only by means of the sacramental [act]. And because in a concelebration the number of sacramental acts is not increased, the number also of Masses is not increased. Without wishing to deny the instrumental causality of the priest, which is very important, one needs to point out the instrumental causality of the liturgical rite.⁷

This important relation between Christ as principal agent and the priests and the liturgical rite as instruments has not gone unnoticed by the Church's Magisterium.

⁶ Potest esse ut unus idemque numero effectus procedat a pluribus instrumentis totalibus, sub uno principali agente, quod eisdem utatur per modum unius, cum virtus instrumentalis tunc sit formaliter una. Nimirum, si quilibet sacerdotum operaretur in virtute propria, ait Angelicus, superfluerent alii celebrantes, uno sufficienter celebrante; sed quia sacerdos non consecrat nisi in persona Christi, multi autem sunt unum in Christo, ideo non refert utrum per unum aut per multos hoc sacramentum consecretur, nisi quod oportet ritum Ecclesiae servari. Per hoc autem quod plures unam hostiam consecrant, quodammodo significatur unitas ecclesiae, cuius hoc sacramentum typus est, cum multi sint unum in Christo. Fr. Alexio Maria Lepicier, *Institutiones Theologiae Dogmaticae Ad Textum S. Thomae Concinnatae: Tractatus de Sanctissima Eucharistia, Pars I*, quaestio 9, a. 2, (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1915).

⁷In realtà, l'origine del sacramento non si trova, al livello della mediazione della Chiesa, nè soltanto nell'atto ministeriale del sacerdote, nè soltanto nel *gestus sacramentalis*, ma in ambedue contemporaneamente ed inseparabilmente...L'atto ministeriale è possibile solo attraverso quello sacramentale. E poiché nella concelebrazione il numero degli atti sacramentali non è aumentato, anche il numero delle Messe non è aumentato...Senza voler negare la causalità strumentale del sacerdote, che è molto importante, bisogna porre in evidenza la causalità strumentale del rito liturgico. Piolanti, 506-507.

In this manner of celebrating Mass the several priests, in virtue of the same Priesthood and in the person of the High Priest, act together with a single will and a single voice, and together bring about and offer the unique Sacrifice by a single sacramental act, and together participate in that same [Sacrifice].⁸

Hence we see the relation between the one principal agent (Christ), the several living instrumental agents (concelebrants) united in one intention to carry out the will (the oblation of the Mass) of the principal agent, and the means (sacramental rite) or inanimate instrumental cause by which this is brought about. It is this unity between the concelebrants' principal agent, intention and action which makes concelebration what it is. If there were many Masses being said then there would be, in fact, no *concelebration* at all.

The analogies of musicians coming together to perform a symphony and multiple soldiers performing an execution have been used to demonstrate this process.⁹ In both cases we have several instrumental causes united in one intention, performing together one action, producing one effect: the musicians are not said to produce many symphonies, but rather one only; the soldiers, firing their guns at the same time with the same intention produce one sole execution, with one sole victim. So it is with a concelebrated Mass—many agents, united in one intention, performing one liturgical action, producing one effect.

The last point which needs to be addressed is the one regarding the Church's present acceptance, and even promotion of concelebrated Masses. Because of the Magisterial approval of concelebration, the argument is put forth that such permission must imply that there are in fact multiple Masses being said at a concelebration, for otherwise the Church would be depriving herself and the world of a multitude of Masses and hence many graces as well. One could say that this is an argument from established practice. But to call forth the Church's present approval of this liturgical practice as evidence would prove nothing but the validity of a concelebrated Mass, which no one doubts. Indeed, by pointing to established practice one could equally appeal to the limits placed on concelebration by the Church as evidence that she recognizes the unicity of a concelebrated Mass. Whether the world is in fact being deprived of graces is another issue, a most important issue, but it is not the one in question here. Perhaps it is this very problem which Cardinal Journet was thinking of when he, on another occasion, spoke about concelebration:

In a concelebration—let us say by three priests—is there one Mass or three Masses? There is one sole Mass, one sole offering, one sole Sacrifice. There are not three Masses, as there are not three Baptisms when you have three priests who baptize; there is but one sole Baptism and there are several who baptize. So then, there are the celebrants and there is the celebration, which is the unbloody

⁸Nam in hac ratione Missam celebrandi plures sacerdotes, in virtute eiusdem Sacerdotii et in persona Summi Sacerdotis simul una voluntate et una voce agunt, atque unicum Sacrificium unico actu sacramentali simul conficiunt et offerunt, idemque simul participant. *Ecclesiae Semper*, Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, AAS 1965, 411.

⁹ P. Joseph De Sainte-Marie, O.C.D., *L'Eucharistie Salut du Monde—Études Sur le Saint Sacrifice de la Messe, Sa Célébratione, Sa Concélébration*, (Paris: Les Éditions De Cèdre, 1981), 64.

envelopment containing the bloody envelopment, which has infinite power. The Church will be able to slake her thirst at the Sacrifice of the Mass. I am one, I say the Holy Mass, well! There is an ocean of redemptive graces, and the Church can draw in this grace according to the intensity of her fervor. And in the Church, throughout history there are different rhythmns, there are times when she grows more; and there are periods when there are many apostasies, and then times of great holiness. So, if one were to look at the Church from on high, as do the saints and angels, one would see the flame of the Church rising and falling, but which is never extinguished. The Church draws in the infinite power of the one Sacrifice according to the proportion of her devotion, which can, as I already said, oscillate at certain moments. Jesus said: "When the Son of Man comes again, will He find any faith?" (Lk 18:8). There will be many apostasies, but there will also be superabundances of love, which will allow the Church to find once again that which she had at the time of the first persecutions.¹⁰

A small error in the beginning leads to a graver one later on. Did the holy Cardinal see among the Church's "rhythmns" the grave consequences which would follow from a misunderstanding of this small but significant point regarding the unicity of a concelebrated Mass, namely the deprivation of graces given to God's Church and the world?

The fundamental principle upon which Cardinal Journet built his whole ecclesiology was the Church as the Church of the Word Incarnate, one which is both human and divine, visible and invisible, material and spiritual. The Church, like her Founder, makes use of material things to communicated spiritual realities, sacramental rites to communicate supernatural grace. The oneness of a concelebrated Mass is evident from the oneness of the sacramental rite. The Word Incarnate has so willed it that the representation of His supreme Sacrifice be bound as it were to the mere words and actions of man; and what God has bound let no man put asunder.

¹⁰ Dans une concélébration—disons il y a trois prêtres—,y a-t-il une messe ou trois messes? Cela fait une seule messe, une seule offrande, un seul sacrifice. Il n'y a pas trois messes, comme il n'y a pas trois baptêmes quand vous avez trois prêtres qui baptisent, il n'y a qu'un seul baptême et il y a des baptisants. Alors, il y a des célébrants et il y a une célébration qui est l'enveloppe non sanglante contenant l'enveloppe sanglante, laquelle est d'une valeur infinie. Alors, l'Eglise va pouvoir puiser dans le sacrifice de la messe. Je suis seul, je dis la sainte messe, eh bien! *il y a l'océan de la grâce rédemptrice*, l'Eglise va puiser dedans selon l'intensité de sa ferveur. Et dans l'Eglise, au cours des âges, il y a des rythmes, il y a des périodes où elle s'étend davantage, il y a des périodes où il y a beaucoup d'apostasies, et puis des grandes saintetés. Alors, celui qui regarderait l'Eglise d'en haut, comme le font les anges et les saints, il verrait le feu de l'Eglise qui s'élève ou qui s'abaisse, et qui n'est jamais éteint. Alors, l'Eglise puise dans l'infinité de la valeur d'un seul sacrifice selon la proportion de sa dévotion, qui pourra, comme je vous dis, osciller à certains moments. Quand Jésus dit: "*Quand le Fils de l'homme reviendra, trouver-t-il encore la foi?*" (Lc 18,8). Il y aura beaucoup d'apostasies, mais il y aura des surcompensations d'amour qui feront que, peut-être, l'Eglise retrouvera ce qu'elle avait au temps des premières persécutions. Charles Journet. *Conférences Données par le Cardinal Journet à Argentan – Jouques et Fribourg en 1974 sur Le Mystère de L'Eucharistie*. Avec l'autorisation de Monseigneur Pierre Mamie. (Suisse: Fondation du Cardinal Journet).