

A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH

Deacon's Role at Incensing

Accompaniment of Celebrant and Blessings

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Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q1: My question regards the role of the deacon(s) in the proper incensing of the altar after the entrance procession and similarly during the offertory. Specifically, I am unclear as to whether there is a distinction between the privileges of bishops and priests with regards to whether the deacon(s) accompany the celebrant as he incenses around the altar. The Ceremonial of Bishops seems to directly assert that the deacon(s) should accompany the celebrant, as it states that “the bishop, accompanied by the two deacons assisting him, incenses the altar and the cross” (131). However, the wording in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) is different as it states that during a Mass with a deacon, “he assists the Priest in putting some (incense) into the thurible and in incensing the cross and the altar” (173). So, I was curious if this difference in wording (i.e. “assisting” vs. “accompanying”) highlights perhaps a privilege of bishops to have their deacon-chaplains accompany them when incensing, as opposed to priests doing so alone (comparable to bishops remaining seated before the Gospel procession when adding incense, as opposed to standing like priests), or if this is purely a difference in wording that gets across the same idea of all deacons accompanying the celebrant. I have seen both interpretations in the liturgy, with some bishops choosing to have the deacons remain behind the altar, but also some priests choosing to have deacons accompany them. Is there a “right” way to approach this? — C.R., Abington, Massachusetts

Q2: Does liturgical law (or custom) allow a deacon, when presiding at a liturgy wherein incense will be used (e.g., presiding at morning prayer or evening prayer; presiding at Benediction; or presiding at a funeral service), when he places the incense, to bless the incense also (as a priest or bishop would)? In the absence of a higher minister and if he’s presiding at a liturgy in which he is an “ordinary” minister, is there any reason why he could not? The GIRM states: “179. During the Eucharistic Prayer, the Deacon stands near the Priest, but slightly behind him, so that when necessary he may assist the Priest with the chalice or the Missal. From the epiclesis, until the Priest shows the chalice, the Deacon usually remains kneeling. If several Deacons are present, one of them may place incense in the thurible for the Consecration and incense the host and the chalice at the elevation.” On the other hand, the Code of Canon Law states in Canon 1169 §3, “A deacon can impart only those blessings expressly permitted by law.” — D.M., Loose Creek, Missouri

A: As both questions relate to deacons and incensing, I have opted to address them together.

First, some contextualization is in order so as to properly frame a response.

The first edition of the GIRM was frequently accused of vagueness and imprecision in its rubrical indications, leaving those in charge of arranging ceremonies somewhat perplexed as to how to proceed.

Because of this, when the Ceremonial of Bishops was issued in 1984 it was far more detailed in its descriptions of rites. It also declared that the previous liturgical books remained in force unless the Ceremonial explicitly changed it.

Therefore, in practice, the Ceremonial of Bishops served as a practical guidebook for masters of ceremonies and all those in charge of liturgical celebrations, especially in areas where the instructions of the missal were approximate or unclear.

When the third typical edition of the Roman Missal was published it incorporated many of the precisions of the Ceremonial, changed a few, and generally described the rites with greater detail.

It is important, however, to remember the contexts of each volume. The Ceremonial is concerned with celebrations by bishops, the missal with normal celebrations by priests. That is why the missal hardly ever mentions the specific roles of a bishop except in the case of stating that before the Gospel only the bishop places incense and blesses the deacon while remaining seated.

The different contexts are at the root of the different wordings in the liturgical books, but these differences do not necessarily imply different norms.

Thus, the fact that the Ceremonial, in describing the entrance procession, mentions two deacons and the missal one is based on the presumption that in a solemn Mass the bishop would normally be accompanied by two deacons, whereas this would be uncommon in a parish situation even on solemn occasions.

Also, No. 131 in the Ceremonial says that the bishop, “accompanied by the two deacons assisting him, incenses the altar and the cross.” Therefore in both the missal and the Ceremonial the primary function of the deacon is to “assist” the celebrant.

GIRM No. 173 says that the deacon “assists the Priest ... in incensing the cross and the altar”; it would be difficult to see how he can assist the priest while incensing the altar if he does not accompany him. This assisting would usually be in the nature of holding back the folds of the chasuble so that the priest’s arms are free to move.

We must also remember that the wording of GIRM No. 173 exercises verbal economy because it takes into account the description of the incensing in GIRM No. 123 and does not repeat itself. The Ceremonial, on the other hand, is deliberately detailed.

Therefore, I would say that being accompanied by one or two deacons during the incensing of the altar is not an episcopal privilege but is applicable to any priest presiding at a solemn celebration.

That said, there may be occasions when the limits of space or other logistical concerns mean that the celebrant, whether bishop or priest, won’t be accompanied while incensing the altar.

To the second question, we can answer in the affirmative.

In celebrations that foresee the possibility of their being presided over by a priest or deacon, the deacon carries out the rites in the same way as the priest unless the rubrics themselves explicitly make a distinction. Since this is not done in the case of blessing incense when a deacon presides at Lauds, Vespers, Benediction, a funeral service outside of Mass and other similar occasions, then it can be legitimately deduced that he may also bless the incense as it forms part of the normal rite.

The particular case of GIRM No. 179 mentioned by our readers is a different situation. At this moment the deacon simply places incense into the thurible for practical reasons but does not bless it.

On the one hand, he would not bless the incense because, in the middle of Mass, there are priests and or bishops present, and a deacon would not give a blessing in these cases.

However, more importantly, it is because incense is never blessed at this particular moment as it is seen as something practical to assure that there is sufficient incense to last the Eucharistic Prayer. If there is only one deacon, he remains at the altar while the acolyte acting as thurifer places incense in the thurible and incenses the Host and chalice at the elevations.

Bishop Peter Elliott describes this in his book “Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite”:

“403. For the incensation of the Host and the chalice, there are two possibilities, (a) If there is more than one deacon, one of them (the deacon of the Word) leaves the altar and joins the thurifer after the Sanctus. He places incense in the thurible and kneels for the epiclesis. He incenses the Host and the chalice at each elevation with three double swings, by modern practice kneeling at the center of the sanctuary. Then he returns to his place at the altar after the acclamation. (b) When there is one deacon assisting, he remains at the altar, and the thurifer incenses

the Blessed Sacrament at each elevation. In this case, the M.C. or boat bearer helps to prepare incense. At each elevation one of the candle bearers kneeling at the credence table, or another server, may ring the bell.”

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