

A COMMENTATOR'S ROLE. *Inappropriate tasks Commentators must avoid.*

by Father Edward McNamara, LC | Source: Catholic.net

QUESTION:

Can you provide any insight into the role of the commentator (*example described below is for a weekday mass*)?

The commentator is quite common here in the United States, and every church seems to have a different job description for this person. For example, in our parish before the start of Mass the commentator greets the people, asks if anyone is celebrating a birthday or anniversary or is visiting. Then there is the usual happy birthday or anniversary song. Then the commentator gives a 5 to 6 minute reflection and words of advice for the coming week. During the Mass the commentator sits in the sanctuary; directs the people via hand signals whether to sit, kneel, rise; calls out the music/song that we will be singing, etc. At the end of Mass, before the final benediction he/she reads the announcements, gives comments and their take on the homily, and thanks the people, etc. I have suggested this is taking the role of "commentator" a bit too far, but cannot find anything in the GIRM (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*) to help back up my claim. Can you help? -- M.P., Keaau, Hawaii

ANSWER:

I think you are correct that this is taking the role of commentator a bit too far.

The liturgical function of the commentator is described, along with that of sacristans, ushers, and those who take up the collection, in the GIRM, No. 105:

"The commentator, who, if appropriate, provides the faithful briefly with explanations and exhortations so as to direct their attention to the celebration and ensure that they are better disposed for understanding it. The commentator's remarks should be thoroughly prepared and notable for their restraint. In performing this function the commentator stands in a suitable place within sight of the faithful, but not at the ambo."

No. 352 of the GIRM later insists on the need for preparation:

"Since, indeed, many possibilities are provided for choosing the different parts of the Mass, it is necessary for the Deacon, the readers, the psalmist, the cantor, the commentator, and the choir to know properly before the celebration, the texts that concern each and that are to be used, and it is necessary that nothing be in any sense improvised. For harmonious ordering and carrying out of the rites will greatly help in disposing the faithful for participation in the Eucharist."

This is all that is said about the commentator. By saying that the commentator intervenes "if appropriate" could be interpreted that this function is best used whenever there is something special, such as a confirmation or ordination that requires some explanation.

The insistence that this office's functions must be meticulously prepared and are specifically orientated toward helping the people live the celebration would seem to exclude spontaneous interventions and unprepared remarks based on the homily.

Likewise it is highly debatable that the assembly's singing "Happy Birthday" is the most appropriate spiritual preparation for Mass.

It must also be remembered that GIRM, No. 31, specifically assigns the presentation of the rite and any concluding summaries to the presiding priest, and not to the commentator:

"It is also up to the priest, in the exercise of his office of presiding over the gathered assembly, to offer certain explanations that are foreseen in the rite itself. . . In addition, he may give the faithful a very brief introduction to the Mass of the day (after the initial Greeting and before the Act of Penitence), to the Liturgy of the Word (before the readings), and to the Eucharistic Prayer (before the Preface), though never during the Eucharistic Prayer itself; he may also make concluding comments to the entire sacred action before the dismissal."

GIRM, No. 50, however, foresees the possibility that the brief introduction to the Mass of the day may also be assigned to a lay minister.

Although it is not a specific function of the commentator to call out the songs or make the usual announcements at the end of Mass, it is practical so as not to multiply the number of people in the sanctuary. All the same, it would be better to find other means to designate the songs so as to limit interruptions to the prescribed rite.

The duty of indicating, whenever necessary, the posture to be adopted by the people has traditionally fallen on the deacon, or on the cantor. I believe that such indications are usually only necessary when some special rite is celebrated, such as the Litany of Saints during ordinations or in places where there are frequent visitors from different parts of the world who might be used to other practices. But No. 43 of the GIRM also allows this task to be assigned to another lay minister if necessary:

"With a view to a uniformity in gestures and postures during one and the same celebration, the faithful should follow the directions which the deacon, lay minister, or priest gives according to whatever is indicated in the Missal."

Otherwise I believe that it is better to leave aside choreographic gestures and indications for regular Sunday Masses. Some of these might have been necessary at the beginning of the reform until people got used to the new rite. But after nearly 40 years of practice I think most Catholics now know when to kneel, sit and stand.

Something similar can be said about the persistent habit of cantors raising their hands, or saying "Response" after each psalm verse or invocation of the prayer of the faithful. It was all very well when the responsorial psalm and the intercessions were liturgical novelties, but by now it is sometimes a bit theatrical and distracting.

It is worth noting that such gestures are studiously avoided in papal Masses celebrated in Rome. The faithful easily interpret the appropriate moment to intervene as indicated by a pause, the cadence of the melody, or the intervention of the organ.