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Summary:

◇ **Note of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith "Gestis verbisque" on the validity of the Sacraments**

NOTE

GESTIS VERBISQUE
ON THE VALIDITY OF THE SACRAMENTS

Presentation

Already at the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery in January 2022, the Cardinals and Member Bishops had expressed their concern about the multiplication of situations in which they had been forced to ascertain the invalidity of the Sacraments celebrated. Serious changes in the matter or form of the Sacraments, rendering their celebration null and void, had then led to the need to trace the persons involved to repeat the rite of Baptism or Confirmation, and a significant number of the faithful rightly expressed their upset. For example, instead of using the established formula for Baptism, formulas such as the following were used: "I baptize you in the name of the Creator..." and "In the name of Father and Mother... we baptize you." Priests also found themselves in such a serious situation. The latter, having been baptized with such formulas, painfully discovered the invalidity of their ordination and the sacraments celebrated up to that time.

While in other areas of the Church's pastoral action there is ample room for creativity, such inventiveness in the area of the celebration of the Sacraments turns rather

in a "manipulative will" and cannot therefore be invoked.¹ Changing, therefore, the form of a Sacrament or its subject matter is always a gravely illicit act and deserves exemplary punishment, precisely because such arbitrary gestures are capable of producing grave harm to God's faithful People.

In his address to our Dicastery at the recent Plenary Assembly on January 26, 2024, the Holy Father recalled that "through the Sacraments, believers become capable of prophecy and witness. And our time is in particular urgent need of prophets of new life and witnesses of charity: let us therefore love and make loved the beauty and saving power of the Sacraments!" In this context, he also indicated that "special care is required of ministers in administering them and in disclosing to the faithful the treasures of grace that they communicate."²

Thus it is that, on the one hand, the Holy Father invites us to act in such a way that the faithful can fruitfully approach the Sacraments, while on the other hand he strongly emphasizes the call for "special care" in their administration.

We ministers are therefore required to have the strength to overcome the temptation to feel that we own the Church. We must, on the contrary, become very receptive to a gift that precedes us: not only the gift of life or grace, but also the treasures of the Sacraments entrusted to us by Mother Church. They are not ours! And the faithful have the right, in turn, to receive them as the Church disposes: it is in this way that their celebration corresponds to Jesus' intention and makes the Easter event relevant and effective.

With our religious respect as ministers toward what the Church has established regarding the matter and form of each Sacrament, we manifest before the community the truth that "the Head of the Church, and therefore the true president of the celebration, is Christ alone."³

Therefore, the *Note* we present here does not deal with a merely technical or even "rigorist" issue. By publishing it, the Dicastery primarily intends to luminously express the priority of God's action and humbly safeguard the unity of the Body of Christ that is the Church in its most sacred acts.

May this Document, unanimously approved on January 25, 2024 by the Members of the Dicastery gathered in Plenary Assembly and then by the Holy Father Francis himself, renew in all ministers of the Church the full awareness of what Christ told us, "*You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you*" (Jn. 15:16).

Víctor Manuel Card. FERNÁNDEZ
Prefect

Introduction

1. With intimately connected events and words, God reveals and implements his plan of salvation for every man and woman destined for communion with him.⁴ This salvific relationship is realized in

¹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal Note about the Modification of the Sacramental Formula of Baptism* (June 24, 2020), note 2: *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 7, 2020, 8.

² FRANCIS, *Address to participants at the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*, Clementine Hall (January 26, 2024): *L'Osservatore Romano*, January 26, 2024, 7.

³ DICASTERO PER LA DOTTRINA DELLA FEDE, *Note Gestis verbisque* on the validity of the Sacraments (February 2, 2024), no. 24.

⁴ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum* (Nov. 18, 1965), no. 2: *AAS* 58 (1966) 818.

effectively in liturgical action, where the proclamation of salvation, which resounds in the proclaimed Word, finds its implementation in sacramental gestures. These, in fact, make present in human history God's saving action, which has its culmination in Christ's Passover. The redemptive power of those gestures gives continuity to the history of salvation that God is in the process of bringing about in time.

Instituted by Christ, the sacraments are, therefore, actions that enact, through sensible signs, the living experience of the mystery of salvation, making possible the participation of human beings in divine life. They are the "masterpieces of God" in the New and Eternal Covenant, forces that come forth from the body of Christ, actions of the Spirit working in his body which is the Church.⁵

This is why the Church in the Liturgy celebrates with faithful love and reverence the sacraments that Christ himself entrusted to her so that she may keep them as a precious inheritance and source of her life and mission.

2. Unfortunately, it must be noted that the liturgical celebration, particularly that of the Sacraments, is not always carried out in full fidelity to the rites prescribed by the Church. Several times this Dicastery has intervened to settle *doubts* about the validity of Sacraments celebrated, within the framework of the Roman Rite, in disregard of liturgical norms, sometimes having to conclude with a painful negative response, noting, in those cases, that the faithful have been robbed of what is due to them,

"that is, the paschal mystery celebrated in the ritual mode that the Church establishes."⁶ By way of illustration, reference could be made to baptismal celebrations in which the sacramental formula was changed in one of its essential elements, rendering the sacrament null and void and thus compromising the future sacramental journey of those faithful for whom, with grave discomfort, the celebration had to be repeated not only of Baptism but also of the sacraments received subsequently.⁷

3. In some circumstances, one can observe the good faith of some ministers who, inadvertently or driven by sincere pastoral motives, celebrate the Sacraments by modifying the essential formulas and rites established by the Church, perhaps to make them, in their opinion, more suitable and understandable. Frequently, however, "recourse to pastoral motivation masks, even unconsciously, a subjectivistic drift and a manipulative will."⁸ A formative gap is also manifested in this way, especially with regard to awareness of the value of symbolic action, an essential trait of the liturgical-sacramental act.

4. In order to help bishops in their task as promoters and custodians of the liturgical life of the particular Churches entrusted to them, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith intends to offer in this *Note* some elements of a doctrinal nature with regard to discernment on the validity of the celebration of the Sacraments, paying attention also to some disciplinary and pastoral implications.

5. Moreover, the purpose of this paper applies to the Catholic Church in its entirety. However, the theological arguments that inspire it sometimes resort to categories proper to the Latin tradition. It is entrusted, therefore, to the Synod or Assembly of Hierarchs of each Eastern Catholic Church to duly adapt the directions of this document, resorting to the

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1116.

⁶ FRANCIS, Lett. Ap. *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), no. 23: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30 2022, 9.

⁷ Some priests have had to note the invalidity of their ordination and the sacramental acts they celebrated precisely because of the lack of a valid Baptism (cf. can. 842), due to the negligence of those who had arbitrarily conferred the Sacrament on them.

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE *DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH*, *Doctrinal Note about the Modification of the Sacramental Formula of Baptism* (June 24, 2020), note 2: *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 7, 2020, 8.

own theological language, where it differs from that in use in the text. The result be, therefore, submitted, prior to publication, for the approval of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

I. The Church is received and expressed in the sacraments

6. The Second Vatican Council analogically refers the notion of Sacrament to the whole Church. In particular, when it states in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that "from the side of Christ sleeping on the cross sprang the admirable Sacrament of the whole Church,"⁹ it relates back to the typological reading, dear to the Fathers, of the relationship between Christ and Adam.¹⁰ The council text evokes the well-known statement of St. Augustine,¹¹ who explains, "Adam sleeps that Eve may be formed; Christ dies that the Church may be formed. From the side of Adam who sleeps Eve is formed; from the side of Christ who died on the cross, struck by the lance, flow the Sacraments by which the Church is formed."¹²

7. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church reiterates that the latter is "in Christ as Sacrament, that is, sign and instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race."¹³ And this is realized precipitously through the Sacraments, in each of which the sacramental nature of the Church, the Body of Christ, is implemented in its own way. The connotation of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation, "shows how the sacramental economy ultimately determines the way in which Christ, the one Savior, through the Spirit reaches out to our existence in the specificity of its circumstances. The Church receives and at the same time expresses itself in the seven sacraments, through which God's grace concretely influences the existence of the faithful so that all life, redeemed by Christ, becomes worship pleasing to God."¹⁴

8. Precisely by constituting the Church as his Mystical Body, Christ makes believers participants in his own life, uniting them to his death and resurrection in a real and arcane way through the sacraments.¹⁵ Indeed, the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit acts in the faithful through the sacramental signs,¹⁶ making them living stones of a spiritual edifice, founded on the cornerstone that is

⁹ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), nos. 5, 26: *AAS* 56 (1964) 99, 107.

¹⁰ Pope Francis comments in this regard, "The parallel between the first and the new Adam is astonishment: just as from the side of the first Adam, after bringing a torpor down upon Him, God drew Eve, so from the side of the new Adam, asleep in the sleep of death, the new Eve, the Church, is born. Awe is for the words we can think of that the new Adam makes his own as he looks at the Church, "This time is bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh" (*Gen. 2:23*). For believing the Word and going down into the water of Baptism, we have become bone from his bones, flesh from his flesh": FRANCIS, Ap. Lett. *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), no. 14: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30, 2022, 9.

¹¹ Cf. St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 138, 2: CCL 40, 1991: "Eve was born from [Adam's] sleeping side, the Church from [Christ's] suffering side."

¹² Id., *In Johannis Evangelium tractatus* 9, 10: PL 35, 1463.

¹³ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 1: *AAS* 57 (1965) 5. Cf. *Ibid.*, nn. 9, 48: *AAS* 57 (1965) 12-14, 53-54; Id., Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), nos. 5, 26: *AAS* 58 (1966) 1028-1029, 1046-1047.

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Exhort. Ap. postsynod. *Sacramentum caritatis* (Feb. 22, 2007), no. 16: *AAS* 99 (2007) 118.

¹⁵ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 7: *AAS* 57 (1965) 9-11.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.* n. 50: *AAS* 57 (1965) 55-57.

Christ the Lord,¹⁷ and constituting them as a priestly people, partakers of the one priesthood of Christ.¹⁸

9. The seven vital gestures, which the Council of Trent solemnly declared to be of divine institution,¹⁹ thus constitute a privileged place of encounter with Christ the Lord who bestows his grace and who, through the words and ritual acts of the Church, nourishes and strengthens faith.²⁰ It is in the Eucharist and all the other sacraments that "we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and being reached by the power of his Passover."²¹

10. Aware of this, the Church, from its origins, has taken special care of the sources from which it draws the lifeblood for its existence and witness: the Word of God, attested by sacred Scripture and Tradition, and the Sacraments, celebrated in the liturgy, through which it is continually led back to the mystery of Christ's Passover.²²

The interventions of the Magisterium in sacramental matters have always been motivated by the fundamental concern for fidelity to the mystery celebrated. Indeed, the Church has a duty to ensure the priority of God's action and to safeguard the unity of the Body of Christ in those actions that have no equal because they are sacred "par excellence" with an efficacy guaranteed by Christ's priestly action.²³

II. The Church guards and is guarded by the Sacraments

11. The Church is the "minister" of the sacraments, not their mistress.²⁴ By celebrating them she herself receives their grace, she guards them and is in turn guarded by them. The *potestas* she can exercise in reference to the Sacraments is analogous to that which she possesses in regard to sacred Scripture. In the latter the Church recognizes the Word of God, put in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, establishing the canon of the sacred books. At the same time, however, she submits herself to this Word, which

"piously hears, holily keeps and faithfully expounds."²⁵ In a similar way the Church, assisted by the Holy Spirit, recognizes those sacred signs by which Christ bestows the grace that emanates from Easter, determining their number and indicating, for each of them, the essential elements.

In doing so, the Church is aware that to administer God's grace is not to appropriate it, but to make herself an instrument of the Spirit in transmitting the gift of the Paschal Christ. She knows, in particular, that her *potestas* in regard to the sacraments stops at their substance.²⁶

¹⁷ Cf. *1 Pet* 2:5; *Eph* 2:20; CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 6: *AAS* 57 (1965) 8-9.

¹⁸ Cf. *1 Pet.* 2:9; *Rev.* 1:6; 5:10; CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), nn. 7-11: *AAS* 57 (1965) 9-16.

¹⁹ Cf. CONC. OF TRENTO, *Decretum de sacramentis*, can. 1: DH 1601.

²⁰ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 59: *AAS* 56 (1964) 116.

²¹ FRANCIS, Lett. Ap. *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), no. 11: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30 2022, 8.

²² Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum* (Nov. 18, 1965), no. 9: *AAS* 58 (1966) 821.

²³ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), n. 5, 7: *AAS* 56 (1964) 99, 100-101.

²⁴ Cf. *1 Cor* 4:1.

²⁵ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum* (Nov. 18, 1965), no. 10: *AAS* 58 (1966) 822.

²⁶ Cf. CONC. OF TRENTO, *Session XXI*, ch. 2: DH 1728: "The Council declares, moreover, that the Church has always had the power to establish and modify in the administration of the Sacraments, without prejudice to their substance, those elements which it deemed most useful for those who receive them or for the veneration of the same Sacraments,

Just as in preaching the Church must always faithfully proclaim the Gospel of Christ who died and rose again, so in sacramental gestures she must guard the saving gestures Jesus entrusted to her.

12. It is also true that the Church has not always univocally indicated the gestures and words in which this substance *divinitus instituta* consists. For all the Sacraments, in any case, those elements that the ecclesial Magisterium, listening to the *sensus fidei* of the people of God and in dialogue with theology, has called matter and form, to which the minister's intention is added, appear fundamental.

13. The *matter* of the Sacrament consists of the human action through which Christ acts. In it there is sometimes a material element (water, bread, wine, oil), at other times a particularly eloquent gesture (sign of the cross, laying on of hands, immersion, infusion, consent, anointing). Such corporeality appears indispensable because it roots the Sacrament not only in human history but also, more fundamentally, in the symbolic order of Creation and leads it back to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word and the Redemption wrought by Him.²⁷

14. The *form* of the Sacrament is constituted by the word, which gives transcendent meaning to matter, transfiguring the ordinary meaning of the material element and the purely human meaning of the action performed. Such word always draws inspiration in varying degrees from sacred Scripture,²⁸ rooted in living Church Tradition,²⁸ and authoritatively defined by the Church's Magisterium through careful discernment.²⁹

15. Matter and form, because of their rootedness in Scripture and Tradition, have never depended nor can they depend on the will of the individual or the individual community. For in regard to them, the task of the Church is not to determine them at anyone's will or arbitrariness, but, safeguarding the substance of the Sacraments (*salva illorum substantia*),³⁰ to point them out authoritatively, in docility to the action of the Spirit.

For some Sacraments, the matter and form appear substantially defined from the beginning, so that their foundation by Christ is immediate; for others, the definition of the essential elements has only come to be specified in the course of a complex history, sometimes not without significant evolution.

16. In this regard, it cannot be ignored that when the Church intervenes in determining the constituent elements of the Sacrament, she always acts rooted in Tradition to better express the grace conferred by the Sacrament.

It is in this context that the liturgical reform of the sacraments, which took place according to the principles of the Second Vatican Council, called for a revision of the rites so that they would more clearly express the holy realities they signify and produce.³¹ The Church, with its magisterium in sacramental matters,

according to the diversity of circumstances, times and places"; CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), no. 21: *AAS* 56 (1964) 105-106.

²⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Enc Lett. *Laudato si'* (May 24, 2015), nos. 235-236: *AAS* 107 (2015) 939-940; Id, Ap. Lett. *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), no. 46: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30, 2022, 10; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1152.

²⁸ It is precisely in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist that the Word of God reaches its maximum effectiveness.

²⁹ Cf. *Jn* 14:26; 16:13.

³⁰ CONC. OF TRENTO, *Session XXI*, ch. 2: DH 1728. Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 38: *AAS* 56 (1964) 110.

³¹ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 21: *AAS* 56 (1964) 105-106. The Church has always been concerned with preserving sound tradition while paving the way for legitimate progress. Therefore, in reforming the rites she has followed the rule that "new forms, in some

exercises his *potestas* in the groove of that living Tradition "which comes from the Apostles and progresses in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit."³²

Recognizing, therefore, under the action of the Spirit, the sacramental character of certain rites, the Church has deemed them to correspond to Jesus' intention to make the Paschal event actual and participatory.³³

17. For all Sacraments, in any case, the observance of both matter and form has always been required for the validity of the celebration, with the understanding that arbitrary changes to one and/or the other - the severity and invalidating force of which must be ascertained on a case-by-case basis - jeopardize the effective bestowal of sacramental grace, to the obvious detriment of the faithful.³⁴ Both matter and form, summarized by the Code of Canon Law,³⁵ are established in the liturgical books promulgated by the competent authority, which must therefore be faithfully observed, without "add, take away or change anything."³⁶

18. Tied to matter and form is the intention of the minister celebrating the Sacrament. It is clear that here the issue of intention should be well distinguished from that of the minister's personal faith and moral condition, which do not affect the validity of the gift of grace.³⁷ Indeed, he must have the "intention to do at least what the Church does,"³⁸ making the sacramental action a truly human act, removed from any automatism, and a fully ecclesial act, removed from the arbitrariness of an individual. Moreover, since what the Church does is nothing other than what Christ instituted,³⁹ intention, along with matter and form, also contributes to making sacramental action an extension of the Lord's saving work.

way, flow organically from those that already exist": *Ibid.*, n. 23: *AAS* 56 (1964) 106. For proof of this see: PAUL VI, Const. Ap. *Pontificalis Romani* (June 18, 1968): *AAS* 60 (1968) 369-373; Id., Const. Ap. *Missale Romanum* (April 3, 1969): *AAS* 61 (1969) 217-222; Id., Const. Ap. *Divinae consortium naturae* (August 15, 1971): *AAS* 63 (1971) 657-664; Id., Const. Ap. *Sacram unctionem infirmorum* (Nov. 30, 1972): *AAS* 65 (1973) 5-9.

³² CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Dei Verbum* (Nov. 18, 1965), no. 8: *AAS* 58 (1966) 821.

³³ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Exhort. Ap. post-synod. *Sacramentum caritatis* (Feb. 22, 2007), no. 12: *AAS* 99 (2007) 113; CIC, can. 841.

³⁴ The distinction between lawfulness and validity should be reiterated, just as it should be remembered that any change to the formula of a Sacrament is always a gravely illicit act.

Even when it is considered that a small change does not alter the original meaning of a Sacrament and, consequently, does not make it invalid, it still remains illicit.

In doubtful cases, where there has been an alteration in the form or matter of a Sacrament, discernment as to its validity is within the competence of this Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

³⁵ By way of example, see: CIC, can. 849 for Baptism; can. 880 § 1-2 for Confirmation; can. 900 § 1, 924 and 928 for the Eucharist; can. 960, 962 § 1, 965 and 987 for Penance; can. 998 for the Anointing of the Sick; canons 1009 § 2, 1012 and 1024 for Holy Orders; canons 1055 and 1057 for Marriage; canon 847 § 1 for the use of holy oils.

³⁶ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 22: *AAS* 56 (1964) 106. Cf. CIC, can. 846 § 1.

³⁷ Cf. CONCILIIUM OF TRENTO, *Decretum de Sacramentis*, can. 12: DH 1612; *Canones de sacramento baptismi*, can. 4: DH 1617. Writing to the emperor in 496, Pope Anastasius II thus said, "If the rays of this visible sun, though passing through fetid places, are not at all contaminated by any pollution by cause of contact, much more is the power of that [sun] which has made coelestus visible, not restricted by any unworthiness of the minister": DH 356.

³⁸ CONCILIIUM OF TRENTO, *Decretum de Sacramentis*, can. 11: DH 1611. Cf. CONCILIIUM OF CONSTANCE, Bull *Inter cunctas*, 22: DH 1262; CONCILIIUM OF FLORENCE, Bull *Exsultate Deo*: DH 1312; CIC, cann. 861 § 2; 869 § 2; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1256.

³⁹ Cf. S. THOMAS AQUINUS, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 64, a. 8; BENEDICT XIV, *De Synodo dioeclesiana*, lib. VII, ch. 6, n. 9, 204.

Matter, form and intention are intrinsically united: they are integrated into the sacramental action in such a way that intention becomes the unifying principle of matter and form, making them a sacred sign by which grace is conferred *ex opere operato*.⁴⁰

19. Unlike matter and form, which represent the sensible and objective element of the Sacrament, the minister's intention-along with the disposition of the recipient-represents its inner and subjective element. It, however, tends by its very nature to manifest itself externally as well through the observance of the rite established by the Church, so that the serious alteration of the essential elements also introduces doubt about the minister's real intention, vitiating the validity of the Sacrament celebrated.⁴¹ Indeed, in principle, the intention to do what the Church does is expressed in the use of the matter and form that the Church has established.⁴²

20. Matter, form and intention are always placed in the context of the liturgical celebration, which does not constitute a ceremonial *ornatus* of the sacraments or even a didactic introduction to the reality being fulfilled, but is as a whole the event in which the personal and communal encounter between God and us, in Christ and in the Holy Spirit, an encounter in which, through the mediation of sensible signs, "perfect glory is rendered to God and men are sanctified," continues to take place.⁴³

The necessary solicitude for the essential elements of the Sacraments, on which their validity depends, must therefore accord with care and respect for the entire celebration, in which the meaning and effects of the Sacraments are made fully intelligible by a multiplicity of gestures and words, thus fostering the *actuosa participatio* of the faithful.⁴⁴

21. The liturgy itself allows for that variety which preserves the Church from "rigid uniformity."⁴⁵ This is why the Second Vatican Council decreed that, "without prejudice to the substantial unity of the Roman rite, even in the revision of liturgical books room should be left for legitimate diversity and adaptations to the various ethnic groups, regions, peoples, especially in the missions."⁴⁶

By virtue of this, the liturgical reform desired by the Second Vatican Council not only authorized the Bishops' Conferences to introduce general adaptations to the Latin *editio typica*, but also provided for the possibility of particular adaptations by the minister of celebration, with the sole purpose of meeting the pastoral and spiritual needs of the faithful.

⁴⁰ CONCILIIUM OF TRENTO, *Decretum de Sacramentis*, can. 8: DH 1608.

⁴¹ Cf. LEON XIII, Lett. Ap. *Apostolicae curae*: DH 3318.

⁴² However, it is possible that, even when outwardly observing the prescribed rite, the minister's intention differs from that of the Church. This is what happens within those Ecclesial Communities that, having altered the faith of the Church in some essential element, corrupt by the same means the intention of their ministers, preventing them from having the intention to do what the Church does-and not their Community-when celebrating the Sacraments. This is, for example, the reason for the invalidity of the Baptism conferred by the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints): since the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are for them something essentially different from what the Church professes, the Baptism administered by them, although conferred with the same Trinitarian formula, is vitiated by an *error in fide* that redounds to the minister's intention. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Resp. ad propositum dubium de validitate Baptismatis* (June 5, 2001): *AAS* 93 (2001) 476.

⁴³ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 7: *AAS* 56 (1964) 101.

⁴⁴ In this regard, the Second Vatican Council urges pastors to be vigilant "so that in the liturgical action not only the laws for valid and licit celebration are observed, but the faithful take part in it consciously, actively and fruitfully": CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 11: *AAS* 56 (1964) 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 37: *AAS* 56 (1964) 110.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 38: *AAS* 56 (1964) 110.

22. However, so that variety "does not harm unity, but rather serves it,"⁴⁷ it remains clear that, outside of the cases expressly stated in the liturgical books, "regulating the sacred Liturgy is the sole responsibility of the authority of the Church,"⁴⁸ which resides, depending on the circumstances, in the bishop, the territorial episcopal assembly, and the Apostolic See.

It is clear, in fact, that "to change on one's own initiative the celebratory form of a Sacrament does not constitute a simple liturgical abuse, as a transgression of a positive norm, but a *vulnus* inflicted at the same time on ecclesial communion and on the recognizability of Christ's action, which in the most serious cases renders the Sacrament itself invalid, because the nature of ministerial action demands that one faithfully transmit what one has received (cf. 1 *Cor.* 15:3)."⁴⁹

III. Liturgical presidency and the art of celebration

23. The Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar Magisterium make it possible to frame the ministry of liturgical presidency in its proper theological meaning. The bishop and his collaborating presbyters preside over liturgical celebrations, culminating in the Eucharist, "source and summit of all Christian life,"⁵⁰ *in persona Christi (Capitis)* and *nomine Ecclesiae*. In both cases, these are formulas that - albeit with some variations - are well attested by Tradition.⁵¹

24. The formula *in persona Christi*⁵² means that the priest re-presents Christ himself in the event of the celebration. This is realized in a culminating way when, in the Eucharistic consecration, he pronounces the words of the Lord with the same efficacy, identifying, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, his own self with that of Christ. When the Council then specifies that presbyters preside at the Eucharist *in persona Christi Capitis*,⁵³ it does not intend to endorse a conception according to which the minister disposes, as "head," of a power to be exercised arbitrarily. The Head of the Church, and therefore the true president of the celebration, is Christ alone. He is "the Head of the Body that is, of the Church" (*Col.* 1:18), insofar as he causes her to spring from his side, nourishes and cares for her by loving her to the point of giving himself for her (cf.

⁴⁷ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 13: *AAS* 57 (1965) 18.

⁴⁸ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 22 § 1: *AAS* 56 (1964) 106.

⁴⁹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal note about the modification of the sacramental formula of Baptism* (August 6, 2020): *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 7, 2020, 8.

⁵⁰ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 11: *AAS* 57 (1965) 15.

⁵¹ Cf. in particular, for the formula *in persona Christi* (or *ex persona Christi*), S. THOMAS AQUINUS, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 22 c; q. 78, a. 1 c; a. 4 c; q. 82, a. 1 c; for the formula *in persona Ecclesiae* (which later tends to be supplanted by the formula *[in] nomine Ecclesiae*), Id, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 64, a. 8; ad 2; a. 9, ad 1; q. 82, a. 6 c. In *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 82, a. 7, ad 3, Thomas is careful to connect the two expressions: "... sacerdos in missa in orationibus quidem loquitur in persona Ecclesiae in cuius unitate consistit. Sed in consecratione sacramenti loquitur in persona Christi cuius vicem in hoc gerit per ordinis potestatem."

⁵² Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 33: *AAS* 56 (1964) 108-109; Id., Dogmatic Const. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), nos. 10, 21, 28: *AAS* 57 (1965) 14-15, 24-25, 33-36;

PAUL VI, Lett. Enc. *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* (June 24, 1967), no. 29: *AAS* 59 (1967) 668-669; Id., Exhort. Ap.

Evangelii nuntiandi (Dec. 8, 1965), no. 68: *AAS* 68 (1976) 57-58; JOHN PAUL II, Ap. Lett. *Dominicae*

Cenae (Feb. 24, 1980), no. 8: *AAS* 72 (1980) 127-130; Id., Exhort. Ap. post-synod. *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (2

December 1984), nos. 8, 29: *AAS* 77 (1985) 200-202, 252-256; Id., Lett. Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (April 17, 2003),

No. 29: *AAS* 95 (2003) 452-453; Id., Exhort. Ap. post-synod. *Pastores gregis* (Oct. 16, 2003), nos. 7, 10, 16: *AAS*

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(2004) 832-833, 837-839, 848; CIC, cann. 899 § 2; 900 § 1.

⁵³ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Dec. 7, 1965), no. 2: *AAS* 58 (1966) 991-993. Cf. also JOHN PAUL II, Exhort. Ap. post-synod. *Christifideles laici* (Dec. 30, 1988), no. 22: *AAS* 81 (1989) 428-429; Id., Exhort. Ap. post-synod. *Pastores dabo vobis* (March 25, 1992), nos. 3, 12, 15-18, 21-27, 29-31, 35, 61, 70, 72: *AAS* 84 (1992) 660-662, 675-677, 679-686, 688-701, 703-709, 714-715, 765-766, 778-782, 783-787; CIC, can. 1009 § 3; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 875; 1548-1550; 1581; 1591.

Eph 5:25, 29; *Jn* 10:11). The minister's *potestas* is a *diakonia*, as Christ Himself teaches the disciples in the context of the Last Supper (cf. *Lk* 22:25-27; *Jn* 13:1-20). Those who, by virtue of sacramental grace, are configured to Him, participating in the authority with which He leads and sanctifies His people, are therefore called, in the Liturgy and in the entire pastoral ministry, to conform to the same logic, having been constituted shepherds not to lord it over the flock but to serve it after the model of Christ, the good Shepherd of the sheep (cf. *I Pet* 5:3; *Jn* 10:11, 14).⁵⁴

25. At the same time, the minister who presides at the celebration acts *nomine Ecclesiae*,⁵⁵ a formula that makes it clear that he, while he re-presents Christ the Head before his Body which is the Church, also makes present before his own Head this Body, indeed this Bride, as the integral subject of the celebration, the all-priestly People in whose name the minister speaks and acts.⁵⁶ After all, if it is true that "when one baptizes it is Christ Himself who baptizes,"⁵⁷ so is the fact that "the Church, when she celebrates a Sacrament, acts as a Body working inseparably from her Head, inasmuch as it is Christ the Head who acts in the ecclesial Body generated by Him in the mystery of Easter."⁵⁸ This underscores the mutual ordination between the baptismal and ministerial priesthoods,⁵⁹ allowing for the understanding that the latter exists in the service of the former, and for this very reason-as we have seen-in the minister who celebrates the Sacraments can never lack the intention to do what the Church does.

26. The dual and combined function expressed by the formulas *in persona Christi - nomine Ecclesiae*, and the mutually fruitful relationship between baptismal priesthood and ministerial priesthood, combined with the awareness that the essential elements for the validity of the Sacraments must be considered in their proper context, that is, the liturgical action, will make the minister increasingly aware that "liturgical actions are not private actions but celebrations of the Church," actions which, though in "diversity of statuses, offices and active participation," "belong to the whole Body of the Church, manifest it and imply it."⁶⁰ For this very reason, the minister should understand that the authentic *ars celebrandi* is one that respects and exalts the primacy of Christ and the *actuosa participatio* of the entire liturgical assembly, including through humble obedience to liturgical norms.⁶¹

27. It seems increasingly urgent to mature an art of celebration that, keeping at a distance as much from rigid rubricism as from unbridled imagination, leads to a discipline to be observed, precisely in order to be authentic disciples: "It is not a matter of having to follow a liturgical etiquette: it is rather a matter of a 'discipline' - in the sense used by Guardini - which, if observed with authenticity, will lead us

⁵⁴ This is what is also stated in the *General Ordinance of the Roman Missal*, No. 93: "Therefore, when celebrating the Eucharist, [the presbyter] must serve God and the People with dignity and humility, and [...] make the faithful perceive the living presence of Christ."

⁵⁵ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 33: *AAS* 56 (1964) 108-109; Id., Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 10: *AAS* 57 (1965) 14-15; Id., Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), no. 2: *AAS* 58 (1966) 991-993.

⁵⁶ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 10: *AAS* 57 (1965) 14-15.

⁵⁷ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 7: *AAS* 56 (1964) 101.

⁵⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal note about the modification of the formula Sacramental of Baptism* (August 6, 2000): *L'Osservatore Romano*, August 7, 2000, 8.

⁵⁹ Cf. CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), no. 10: *AAS* 57 (1965) 14-15.

⁶⁰ CONC. ECUM. VAT. II, Const. lit. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Dec. 4, 1963), no. 26: *AAS* 56 (1964) 107.

See also *ibid.*, no. 7: *AAS* 56 (1964) 100-101; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1140-1141.

⁶¹ Cf. *General Ordinance of the Roman Missal*, no. 24.

form: they are gestures and words that bring order inside our inner world by making us experience feelings, attitudes, behaviors. They are not the enunciation of an ideal to which we try to be inspired, but are an action that involves the body in its totality, that is, in its being a unity of soul and body."⁶²

Conclusion

28. "We [...] have this treasure in vessels of clay, so that it may appear that this extraordinary power belongs to God, and does not come from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). The antithesis used by the Apostle to emphasize how the sublimity of God's power is revealed through the weakness of his ministry as a proclaimer also well describes what happens in the sacraments. The whole Church is called to guard the richness contained in them, so that the primacy of God's saving action in history may never be obscured, even in the fragile mediation of signs and gestures proper to human nature.

29. The *virtus* operative in the sacraments shapes the face of the Church, enabling it to transmit the gift of salvation that Christ who died and rose again, in his Spirit, wishes to share with every man. In the Church, its ministers in particular are entrusted with this great treasure, so that as "caring servants" of God's people they may nourish it with the abundance of the Word and sanctify it with the grace of the Sacraments. It is up to them first to ensure that "the beauty of the Christian celebration" is kept alive and is not "defaced by a superficial and reductive understanding of its value or, even worse, by its instrumentalization in the service of some ideological vision, whatever it may be."⁶³

Only in this way can the Church, from day to day, "grow in the knowledge of the mystery of Christ, immersing [...] life in the mystery of his Easter, awaiting his return."⁶⁴

The Supreme Pontiff Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on January 31, 2024, approved this Note, decided at the Plenary Session of this Dicastery, and ordered its publication.

Given in Rome, at the headquarters of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, February 2, 2024, on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

Víctor Manuel Card. FERNÁNDEZ

Prefect

Msgr. Armando MATTEO
*Secretary
for the Doctrinal Section*

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⁶² FRANCIS, Lett. Ap. *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), no. 51: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30 2022, 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, no. 16: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30, 2022, 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 64: *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 30, 2022, 12.

FRANCISCUS

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