



GUARDIANS OF THE SACRED LITURGY - WITHOUT BORDERS

Theology of the “Fraternal Correction” Obligation of the Guardians

Why do we need to address liturgical impropriety or abuse in liturgical celebrations in the Church? Why can we not just attend the Mass, participate by saying the responses or prayers, singing, kneeling, standing, sitting, listening to the readings, the Gospel and the homily, receiving Communion and giving money to the collection or whatever we are required to do in the Mass? Why can we not just leave the priests alone at the altar?

Priests know what they are doing; they are priests after all. Why bother? Who are we to tell them what to do or that what they are doing is wrong.

Liturgical impropriety or liturgical abuse, as the Universal Church calls it, is a breach of ecclesial, in particular, liturgical laws. Any breach of liturgical laws, rules or norms is a sin, says the Council of Trent. It must be corrected and stopped.

The *Instruction Redemptionis Sacramentum* par #183 says so. This document issued by the (then Congregation) Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments also stresses that it is a bounden duty of the people of God including the laity to correct “irreverence or distortions” and to stop liturgical abuse.

The Universal Church considers the impropriety or abuse a serious offence to the extent that some of these abuses are so grave (*graviora delicta*) that the Code of Canon Law imposes severe penalties such as *latae sententiae* excommunication. All breaches or violations of liturgical laws are liturgical abuse and are considered crimes under the canons of the Church. Liturgical abuse, especially those that involve profanation of the Holy Eucharist, is an offence against the Holy Spirit, a blasphemy, a direct assault against God and Jesus which is unforgivable; it is an eternal sin (Mt 12:31-32; Mk 3:29).

The duty and obligation to correct and stop these liturgical “wrongs” are incumbent upon all the people of God including the laity.

This duty to correct “wrongs” of others is called “fraternal correction”. God, himself, commanded “fraternal correction” during the time of the Prophets. It is a paradigm of love of neighbours, the second of the two parts of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments of God, being Love of God is the first.

There are many passages in the Scripture about the duty of “fraternal correction” but the most significant example of this mandate is in Ezekiel 33:7-9.

EZEKIEL 33:7-9

So you, son of man, I’ve made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, “Oh wicked one, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

This is “fraternal correction” or co-responsibility. We are co-responsible for our neighbour, our brothers and sisters in Christ, to save their souls from eternal damnation. We are obliged to correct the wrongs that others do or warn them of the consequences. If we do not, we are accomplices for the sins that others have committed and we become liable for the same punishment of the sinful person.

In the New Testament, Jesus repeated the same obligation of “fraternal correction” or co-responsibility and prescribed the process for dealing with the troublesome person. The most important step to remember is to “point out their fault” with the duty to escalate it to the highest authority, the Church.

MATTHEW 18:15-17

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister^[a] sins,^[b] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’^[c] ¹⁷ If they still refuse

to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This is how the Guardians propose to deal with the liturgical impropriety or abuse in liturgical celebrations, as you will learn in the later modules.

Fast forward to contemporary time, the Holy See through the then Congregation (now Dicastery) for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments decreed the fraternal obligation and co-responsibility as a “most serious duty incumbent upon each and every one, and all are bound to carry it out”. This duty and obligation to protect the Holy Eucharist “from any and every irreverence or distortion” and to correct thoroughly “all abuses” are accentuated at par 183. The Congregation also prescribed the process to be followed in addressing liturgical abuse at par 184.

INSTRUCTION REDEMPTIONIS SACRAMENTUM:

*[183.] In an altogether particular manner, **let everyone do all that is in their power to ensure that the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist will be protected from any and every irreverence or distortion and that all abuses be thoroughly corrected. This is a most serious duty incumbent upon each and every one, and all are bound to carry it out without any favouritism.***

(emphasis supplied)

*[184.] Any Catholic, whether Priest or Deacon or **lay member of Christ's faithful, has the right to lodge a complaint regarding a liturgical abuse to the diocesan Bishop or the competent Ordinary equivalent to him in law, or to the Apostolic See on account of the primacy of the Roman Pontiff.** It is fitting, however, insofar as possible, that the report or complaint be submitted first to the diocesan Bishop. This is naturally to be done in truth and charity.* (emphasis supplied)

So, you see, it is the duty and obligation of the lay people of God to address the liturgical impropriety or abuse perpetrated and perpetuated by the clergy at the altar and the sanctuary. These liturgical improprieties or abuse are happening in Catholic Churches worldwide as acknowledged by the Universal Church. We, the lay people of God are empowered and endowed with the authority to do something about it.