



NewsLetter

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The Purification of Sacred Vessels by the Deacon at Mass

In the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, the role of the deacon has been considerably elaborated. The need for clarifications, however, are still present, and so the Secretariat of Divine Worship would like to offer the following elucidation, admittedly minor, regarding the purification of vessels by deacons.

One of the ways that the Church seeks to avoid confusion between the office of deacon and priest regards the manner of service at or near the altar. Service at the altar has many forms. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) states that the deacon “ministers at the altar, both as regards the chalice and the book” (no. 171b). GIRM no. 173 states that he may lay the *Book of the Gospels* on the altar and no. 178 states that he “prepares the altar” for the Liturgy of the Eucharist; he may also remove the corporal and sacred vessels from the altar after Communion. Purification of sacred vessels, however, is not something that the deacon does at the altar, but at the credence table, perhaps to avoid the appearance of the deacon doing a ministry alone at the altar that is other than preparatory or in assistance to the priest.

Paragraph 163 of the GIRM, which describes Mass without a deacon, describes the purification by the priest as being done either at the altar or at the credence table: “Upon returning to the altar, the Priest collects the fragments, should any remain, and he stands at the altar or at the credence table and purifies...” This contrasts, however, with the instruction found in paragraph 183, which describes Mass with a deacon:

When the distribution of Communion is over, the Deacon returns to the altar with the Priest, collects the fragments, should any remain, and then carries the chalice and other sacred vessels to the credence table, where he purifies them and arranges them as usual, while the Priest returns to the chair. Nevertheless, it is also permitted to leave vessels needing to be purified on a corporal, suitably covered, on the credence table, and to purify them immediately after Mass, following the Dismissal of the people.

Here, the deacon is at the altar with the priest to collect the fragments, but when the priest returns to the chair, the deacon carries the sacred vessels to the credence table to purify.

Although the 2004 Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* might seem to confuse these straightforward rubrics of the GIRM when it states, “Where a Deacon is present, he returns with the Priest to the altar and purifies the vessels” (no. 119), this actually coincides with GIRM no. 183, which similarly says that the priest and deacon return to the altar, and that the deacon purifies the vessels at the credence table. GIRM no. 183 makes clear what is left unstated by *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, that purification by the deacon takes place not at the altar, but at the credence table.

This clarification of the deacon’s role helps to bring forth a further expression of our theology of liturgy and holy orders, matters which are indeed central to our life in the Church.