

Vatican II, Paul VI, the Carthusians, and the private Mass

Many people are under the impression that the private Mass was abolished by Vatican II. You may well be told by liturgists that saying Mass without "the people" present makes no sense in the modern Church - or even that it is forbidden. Next time anyone tries to tell you this, refer them to the letter *Optimam partem* of Pope Paul VI in 1971 to Fr Andrew Poisson, the Minister General of the Carthusians. The text (in Latin) can be found in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 1971, volume 63 pages 447-450. Here is my translation of the relevant section of the letter:



Monks, who are bound by the obligation of choir in the Carthusian Order, almost from its beginning, have been priests, or religious who are preparing themselves to receive sacred orders. There are those today who are of the opinion that this is not fitting that cenobites or hermits, who are never going to exercise the sacred ministry, should be raised to the priesthood. As we have already said elsewhere (Cfr. AAS 58 (1966) p.1181) this opinion certainly lacks a firm foundation. For many Saints and very many religious have combined the profession of the monastic or indeed the eremitical life with the priesthood because they have had a sound perspective of the fitting relationship between both consecrations, that proper to the priest, and that proper to the monk. Indeed, solitude, the absolute loss of the goods of this world, the abnegation of one's own will: things that are undertaken by those who enclose themselves within the bounds of the monastery, most singularly prepare the soul of the priest to be devoutly and ardently offered up for the Eucharistic sacrifice which is "the source and summit of the whole Christian life". Furthermore, when that full self-giving, to which the religious devotes himself, is added to the priesthood, he is

configured in a special way to Christ who is at the same time priest and victim.

When the second Vatican Council treated in a special document about priests and their duties, it rightly laid down that those duties include the care of the people of God. However, this care is carried out by yourselves in celebrating the eucharistic sacrifice as you are accustomed to do every day. This celebration most often takes place in your eremitical oratories, that is to say, in a devout recess, where the soul of the monk, fixed on the things of above, drinks in more richly the Spirit of love and light. Therefore the vocation of the Carthusian, when it is faithfully adhered to, brings it about that the universal intention, which is present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, becomes the intention of each monk who is carrying out the sacred rites. The Vatican Council itself declared this fullness of Eucharistic charity in these significant words: "In the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which priests fulfil their office most especially, the work of our redemption is continually carried out, and therefore its daily offering is warmly commended. Even if the presence of the faithful is not possible, this offering is an act of Christ and the Church." (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 13)

The novice-master put me onto this document last year when he was talking to me about the course in sacramental theology. It is listed as one of the important *fontes* in the Carthusian statutes - one of very few magisterial documents to refer specifically to the Carthusians. By affirming the value of the private Mass, it is also important for the secular priest who should never feel awkward about celebrating Mass quietly on a day when he is not bound to celebrate a publicly scheduled Mass.

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