

The Incarnation, History and Sacrifice of the Mass: The Problems of Frequent Concelebration

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Frequent and regular concelebration has become commonplace in the Church. Many priests have recently abandoned daily private celebration, contenting themselves with participating in Mass *modo laicorum*. Some simply no longer attend the Holy Sacrifice. Concelebration is even becoming, despite all the contrary prescriptions of canon law, almost an obligation. What vicar of any parish, going against the often explicit wishes of his parish priest and the ill will of the sacristan, has the personal courage to celebrate alone, in a church that, at worst, will be closed? How many religious, who would still like to celebrate Mass daily, find themselves generally compelled—by social pressure, impossible celebration times, a lack of support or specific regulations—to concelebrate?² The celebration without the faithful and with a single minister has become an absolute exception, which we now encounter only among a few secular priests and in a few rare spiritual communities. It is, moreover, the religious who, in doing so speaking for their own cause, have generally become the most ardent defenders of the equal ecclesial value of individual celebration and concelebration, to such an extent that one frequently has the impression that the aim is to underpin with theological arguments and justify a posteriori a practice that has existed *de facto* since the Second Vatican Council and which seems irreversible forever.

Numerous arguments are put forward to defend the absolute equality of value between concelebration and individual celebration.³ They draw upon both the history of the liturgy and theology of the sacraments and ecclesiology. In contrast to the thesis—which I find convincing—put forward by Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie, who asserts a difference in sacramental value between the two ways of celebrating Holy Mass,⁴ most apologists for frequent concelebration refer in this instance to the article by Dom Paul Tiro, a Benedictine monk, entitled: ‘Concelebration and the Tradition of the Church’. Given that this article presents an intelligent and in-depth summary of the arguments put forward by those who believed, during the Second Vatican Council, and those who still maintain today that concelebration has not only failed to diminish

¹ Lecture delivered at the 3rd CIEL Colloquium in Versailles, October 1997.

² Cf. R. Henseler, “Konzelebrationspflicht durch klösterliches Partikularrecht”, *OK* 25 (1984) 193–108.

³ Cf., regarding concelebration: H.A.P. Schmidt, *Introductio in liturgiam occidentalem*, Rome-Fribourg-Barcelona 1960, pp. 406–410; S. Madeja, ‘Bibliografia sulla concelebrazione eucaristica’, in: *EphLit* 97 (1983), pp. 262–273; J. de Sainte-Marie, *The Eucharist, Salvation of the World. Studies on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, its Celebration and Concelebration*, Paris, 1981, pp. 143–150

⁴ Cf. R.M. Schmitz, ‘Eucharistic Concelebration: a single sacrifice’, in: *Sedes sapientiae* 9 (1991), no. 36, pp. 25–39; by the same author, ‘Concelebration and the Fruits of the Sacrifice of the Mass’, in: *Sedes sapientiae* 9 (1991), no. 38, pp. 25–36.

but has, on the contrary, enhanced the sacramental and ecclesiological significance of the Holy Mass, it seems appropriate to revisit Dom Tirot's highly insightful observations. In doing so, we shall, within the context of this presentation, confine ourselves to the main thrusts of his argument, but this will suffice to assess the whole.

I - The history of the liturgy as *a locus theologicus*

A – The hierarchical structure of concelebration

Dom Tirot rightly emphasises, in line with the liturgical tradition of the Church, that the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice must, especially when celebrated with solemnity, appropriately express the hierarchical structure of the Church. In his view, this hierarchical dimension is particularly evident in concelebration. However, this argument appears all the less justified for daily concelebration in that, at the end of the first part of his article, he is forced to admit clearly that in this instance it can only and exclusively be a matter of concelebration with the bishop or his representative; he further acknowledges that, in the Eastern Church, concelebration without the bishop is relatively recent and that, in the Latin Church, it has in fact only existed since the Second Vatican Council. He expressly criticises the current practice and makes an exception only for the parish priest's Sunday Mass and, *pro domo*, for the community Mass with a weekly celebrant.

Thus, the rite of concelebration was essentially that of the presbyterium gathered around its head. This was the wish of Dom Lambert Beauduin, as well as of Canon Catta. It is the rite that the Second Vatican Council first sought to restore. It is this rite that ought to be maintained. Today, it is enough for two or three priests to meet at the same time in the same church for them to spontaneously concelebrate. Concelebration is not merely a way of saving time or simplifying matters. To view it in this way is to lose sight of its profound significance. Certainly, on Sundays, the parish priest, the bishop's delegate, presides in his name, just as the weekly celebrant of a religious community presides in the name of the superior. The rite must therefore always signify the participation of the whole People of God, in their own way, around the bishop or his representative and his priests celebrating the Eucharist, each according to their own order.⁵

Regardless of the canonical fact that the parish priest is not merely the bishop's delegate but that, in his parish, he possesses *potestas ordinaria*,⁶ the last sentence would imply that, if the rite were always to signify the participation of the whole People of God, each according to

⁵ Cf. Dom Tirot, 'Concelebration and the Tradition of the Church', in: *EphLit* 101 (1987), pp. 33–59, 182–214, here p. 48:

"Since relatively recent times, concelebration has been permitted in the Orthodox Church without the presence of the bishop; Benedict XV recognised this same right for the Uniates. The same has been the case in the West since Vatican II."

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

In his order, there could be no concelebration without a deacon either. From an ecclesiological perspective, it seems problematic to regard the role of the superior of a religious community as equivalent to that of a bishop. What of cases where this superior is not even a priest? Given that, in the early days of monasticism, it was frequently the case that these superiors were not priests or that, in any event, they did not need to be, it seems somewhat difficult, within the framework of an argument based on the history of the liturgy, to assert this equivalence by drawing on the early practice of the Church, not to mention that, between the hierarchy of the Church and the hierarchy of a religious community, there is a difference that falls under divine law. From a sacramental and jurisdictional point of view, even an abbot wearing the mitre is not a representative of Christ on the same level as a bishop.⁷

Furthermore, when Dom Tirot, to better support his thesis, cites the example of concelebration during the solemn administration of the sacraments, the weakness of an argument based on the history of the liturgy becomes even more apparent. He himself says that, in the early Church, the administration of baptism was concelebrated only ‘in a broad sense’ — and, from a theological point of view, it could not have been otherwise. What is known as the concelebration of priestly and episcopal ordination, which he also cites as an example, rather supports our thesis, as we shall see later. As for the Anointing of the Sick, one can certainly say the same as for Baptism. To regard marriage as a concelebration is not only artificial but also impossible from theological and canonical points of view, for it involves the exchange of consent, which is precisely not a common act but a mutual one. As for the consecration of the Holy Oils on Holy Thursday, which Dom Tirot also regards as a concelebration, it goes without saying that this is not a sacrament but a sacramental.

On the other hand, a concelebration solely between priests tends to highlight the hierarchical character of the Holy Mass less than an individual celebration in which the priest, as the representative of Christ and the Church, stands at the head of the people whilst at the same time representing them

represents them. Concelebration tends rather to diminish this impression.⁸ On the other hand, in the case of

concelebration with the bishop or with the Pope, it may be conceded that the hierarchical dimension of the sacrifice of the Mass is visibly manifested in the most solemn form of liturgical celebrations still in use today. However, this form of concelebration is so rare that it is certainly not the source of the theological problem that concerns us

⁷ Cf. CIC/1983, c. 519: ‘Parochus est pastor proprius parocchie sibi commissae...’.

⁸ Cf. H.A.P. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, no. 2, p. 411: “From a liturgical perspective, the presence of a single Celebrant (who alone performs the consecration) is a more perfect expression of the unity of the sacrifice in the Church than the simultaneous presence of many priests who together pronounce the words of Consecration... the unity of Christ, the sole Supreme Pontiff and the sole Victim, seems in some way to be obscured externally by the presence of many ministers performing the same function at the same time.”

is of primary concern, namely the diminishing of the objective fruits of the sacrifice of the Mass; at the root of this problem lies frequent and daily concelebration, which, for its part, tends to have a levelling effect. It seems to me indisputable that the hierarchical structure of the Church appears much more clearly in the classical liturgy with a single celebrant performing the Holy Sacrifice. It is there that the various orders of the ecclesial hierarchy, corresponding to the orders of the heavenly hierarchy, are effectively and clearly presented to all participants. Even today, in any traditional parish High Mass, but also, more particularly, in any pontifical High Mass celebrated by a bishop or the superior of a religious community, there is no need for concelebration for what Dom Tirot believed he could observe more particularly during the first five centuries of the Church to be clearly manifested:

During the first five centuries of the Church, both in the East and in the West, the Church, according to Pauline theology, is truly a body with diverse and hierarchically ordered members, acting as a whole, each according to their own role; from the bishop, who possesses the fullness of the priesthood, his presbyterate, which participates in a secondary order, the deacons, who assist the bishop, the lower orders, right down to the laity, who participate according to their baptismal priesthood .⁹

B – ‘*Silent*’ concelebration

We have therefore seen that the history of the liturgy offers little in the way of a satisfactory locus theologicus to justify the practice of frequent or daily concelebration without the bishop .¹⁰ However, even in its current form, concelebration with the bishop finds no firm grounding in the history of the liturgy, as Dom Tirot himself is forced to acknowledge when he discusses in detail what is known as ‘silent’ concelebration. Along with Dom Botte ,¹¹ whom he cites as his principal witness, Dom Tirot considers it impossible to establish, as Hanssens did in his famous article on the history of concelebration,¹² for the early centuries, a distinction between ceremonial concelebration and sacramental concelebration .¹³ In Dom Tirot’s view, to assert that the silence of the concelebrants implied a purely ceremonial participation on their part in the Holy Sacrifice would be an anachronism insofar as it would be interpreted in the sense

⁹ Cf. Dom Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 34.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Egler, ‘Die Diskussion um die Neuordnung der Konzelebration auf dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil, Fides et ius’; FS für Georg May zum 65. Geburtstag, W. Aymans, A. Egler, J. List, Regensburg, 1991; pp. 423–451, esp. 424–426.

¹¹ Cf. B. Botte, ‘La concélébration dans l’Eglise ancienne’, in: LMD 1953, no. 35, p. 12.

¹² Cf. J.M. Hanssens, ‘De concelebratione eucharistica’: in: PRMCL 16 (1927), pp. 143–154, 181–210; 21 (1932), pp. 193–219, here 16 (1927), pp. 143 ff.

¹³ See P. Tirot, *op. cit.*, note 4, p. 37.

of a theology of the sacraments that only became established later. But, in the same vein, one might say that it is also an anachronism, based on the current practice of sacramental concelebration, to conclude that the concelebrants of the early centuries might have performed a sacramental act without pronouncing the words of consecration. In truth, the sole purpose of this conclusion is to underpin current custom with an argument supposedly drawn from liturgical tradition. If the Church's power over the form and matter of the sacraments were such that she could alter even the sacramental structure and transpose its elements onto a purely intellectual and intentional plane, it would then not be necessary to find evidence in the history of the liturgy to introduce sacramental concelebration, which would then fall within the Church's mere discretion. On the other hand, however, if the Church, as St Augustine already recognised,¹⁴ is bound to a particular sacramental structure, then, in order to prove the sacramentality of a rite, it will be necessary to rediscover this structure at the level of the real dimension of the action of those who perform the rite.

Whatever certain liturgists may say, who endeavour to justify the current practice by means of a *petitio principii* regarding the apparent sacramentality of silent concelebration, one is compelled to note that, if the validity of the sacramental act during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is linked to the pronouncement of the words of consecration, this does not date from the declaration to that effect by Pius X II.¹⁵ What is certain, contrary to what Dom Botte believes,¹⁶ is that, if we take into account the conclusions of the exegetes regarding the accounts of the Last Supper¹⁷ — and despite a different hypothesis put forward by Innocent III (*De sacro altari mysterio* IV,6) —, we must hold, in accordance with patristic theology,¹⁸ that there is no transubstantiation when the words of consecration have only a mental reality. It is therefore essential to affirm that, for there to be effective transubstantiation, the act of pronouncing the words of consecration is of such importance that it can only be adequately described as being of divine right. Thus Dom Tirot himself must admit that all liturgists who trace sacramental concelebration back to the early centuries proceeded from the hypothesis—which has since been shown to be false¹⁹—that the words of consecration were pronounced by all.²⁰

¹⁴ Cf. In Ioan. tr. 80, 3: 'Accedit verbum ad elementum, fit sacramentum'. On this subject, cf. T.H. Schneider, *Zeichen der Nähe Gottes*, Düsseldorf 1987, pp. 17–69; A. Piolanti, *I Sacramenti*, 3rd ed., Vatican 1991, esp. 12–123.

¹⁵ Cf. Pius XII, 'Address of 2 November 1954' in: A.A.S. 46 (1954), pp. 666–677; by the same: 'Address of 22 September 1956' in: A.A.S. 48 (1956), esp. pp. 716–718.

¹⁶ See B. Botte, *op. cit.* note 11, p. 12.

¹⁷ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Das Fest des Glaubens*, 2nd ed., Einsiedeln 1981, pp. 31–54; G. Koch, 'Abendmahlberichte' in: *Lexikon der katholischen Dogmatik*, edited by W. Beinert, 2nd ed., Fribourg-Basel-Vienna 1998, pp. 1–2.

¹⁸ Cf. L. Ott, *Grundrisse der katholischen Dogmatik*, 10th ed., Fribourg-Basel-Vienna 1981, p. 469.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Raes, 'La concélébration dans les rites orientaux', *LMD* 35 (1953), pp. 24–27.

²⁰ Cf. P. Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, pp. 39–40.

The rite of episcopal consecration, during which, originally, the co-consecrators laid their hands on the candidate in silence, cannot be invoked against the necessity of pronouncing the words of Eucharistic consecration, a necessary condition for the validity of transubstantiation; indeed, no parallel can be drawn here, as Dom Tirot seems to think. Undoubtedly, in these two sacraments we find the fundamental sacramental structure of the union of two complementary elements in the whole that constitutes the realisation of the sacrament; however, in the case of the laying on of hands required for the consecration of a bishop, this is clearly a visible action which outwardly manifests the intention of the one performing it simultaneously with the sacramental act, even if he utters no words. The incarnational structure inherent in all sacraments is therefore already effectively symbolised by the mere gesture of the laying on of hands. Thus, this gesture can at the same time become the bearer of the divine power given in the incarnational structure of the sacraments. But the situation is different in the case of the Eucharist. Here, within the dual sacramental structure, the words spoken alone constitute the complementary element to the material reality. It must be clearly understood—both from a biblical perspective and from the perspective of the history of the liturgy—that, in the Eucharist, every gesture, however commonplace it may have become today in concelebration, has the sole role of visibly interpreting and emphasising the sacramental word. Thus, for this fundamental incarnational dimension of sacramental efficacy to be realised, everything depends on the expressive power of the word, which must be spoken aloud precisely because, if it were not, it would completely lack sacramental embodiment, and therefore the capacity to be an effective sign in conjunction with the material.²¹

Furthermore, if what Dom Tirot says regarding the full participation of each concelebrant in the sacramental act of transubstantiation is correct, one would have to conclude that it should also be possible to celebrate alone without pronouncing the words of consecration aloud. Indeed, either concelebration is a fully valid priestly action in persona Christi during the consecration, in which case the conditions applicable to concelebration would also have to apply to individual celebration; or it is not, in which case Dom Tirot's thesis no longer holds. But then, if concelebration is nevertheless a fully valid priestly action, Dom Tirot can no longer assert that concelebration and individual celebration have the same value, unless he admits that, for their action to be valid, all the concelebrants must also pronounce the words of consecration aloud, as was logically decided on 8 March 1957 by a rescript of what was then the Holy Office.²²

²¹ To remove any doubt regarding episcopal consecration, Pius XII prescribed that, in this case too, the formula must also be pronounced aloud by the co-consecrators, in: *Apostolic Constitution Episcopalis consecrationis*, A.A.S. 37 (1945), pp. 131–132.

²² 'Dubium de valida concelebratione', published on 23 May 1957, in: A.A.S. 49 (1957), p. 370.

Consequently, the concelebrations of the past, in which the words were not spoken, might no longer be merely ceremonial — or at least, perhaps, not intentionally so — but neither would they then be sacramentally effective in the strictly objective sense of the term. Indeed, the mental act pertaining to the performance of the sacrament is not sufficient in itself to guarantee that performance. The physical realisation of the incarnational structure proper to each sacrament must take place, a realisation which unites with intention to form a whole and which can only in this way share in the divine-human omnipotence proper to the original sacrament of Christ. In the case of priestly ordination or episcopal consecration, the laying on of hands may suffice as a gesture of full validity; but in the case of Eucharistic consecration, this creative gesture is precisely the pronouncement of the words of consecration, *for verbum caro factum est!* If, for this reason, the West—which has always emphasised this incarnational structure more clearly than the East in its visibility, particularly due to a deeper ecclesiological conception—recognised as early as the end of the fourth century the difficulties posed by concelebration, and if it increasingly gave preference to individual celebration, this may be due to the fact that it considered the incarnational content of silent concelebration to be insufficient.²³ The custom of restricting concelebration to a few rare solemn feasts—a custom which persisted in certain places until the 18th century, and in Lyon for the celebration of Holy Thursday until the liturgical reform,²⁴—does not contradict this hypothesis: these were precisely exceptions, during which, moreover, the words of consecration were pronounced aloud.

Finally, according to Dom Tirot, if one believes that the Holy Spirit constantly governs the Church, one cannot accept that the early Church and the Eastern Church up to the present day have never sacramentally concelebrated.²⁵ On this subject, it may be said that, as regards the , it is precisely thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit that the meaning of the celebration of Mass and the adoration of the Holy Eucharist could be deepened, and that this deepening has made it possible both to increase the richness of the liturgical forms of Eucharistic piety and to increase the number of Holy Masses. Why should the Holy Spirit not gradually lead the Church, over the centuries, to ever greater closeness to the Eucharistic Lord? It would be strange indeed to suppose that the assistance of the Holy Spirit had failed the Church at any point in its development. And yet, the history of the Church shows that erroneous forms have developed, which have subsequently disappeared. Let us consider certain periods in history

²³ Cf. P. Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 47.

²⁴ Cf. P. Martin, ‘A remnant of Western concelebration: the Pontifical Mass of Lyon on Holy Thursday’, in: LMD 35 (1983), pp. 72–74.

²⁵ Cf. P. Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 47.

of the Church, when certain bishops were not consecrated, when, even in religious communities, Holy Communion was rarely received, or when, for the appointment of bishops, the Pope was bound by the exequatur of temporal powers.

All these manifestations touched the very heart of the sacramental or jurisdictional structure of the Church. Thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit, they have been overcome. It would undoubtedly be detrimental to the Church to seek to artificially revive them. And this applies in particular to all forms of liturgical archaeologism which Pope Pius XII deplored in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*. If concelebration had almost entirely disappeared for some eight centuries and if, as Dom Tirot does not deny, it had long been contested in the West, perhaps one is justified in seeing in this the action of the Holy Spirit. In any case, when considering liturgical tradition, the facts do not seem so clear that one can, if only for historical reasons, see the action of the Holy Spirit in the reintroduction of concelebration as a *de facto* permanent, if not even daily, practice. In any case, as regards sacramental concelebration presented as a custom of the early Church or practised habitually in a later period, there is no scientifically indisputable or even clear evidence on this point, either in the Latin Church or in the Eastern Catholic Churches, that could justify its recent introduction as a general practice. Furthermore, the practice of the Orthodox Churches, which remain separated from Rome to this day, cannot serve as a definitive or irrefutable reference for the Roman Catholic Church, all the more so as their entire ecclesiological conception—which is not without influence on the doctrine of concelebration—remains markedly different from our own. To see this as an action of the Holy Spirit is hardly justified.

II - The effect of sacramental concelebration

Having seen that the history of the liturgy can be regarded as a *locus theologicus* that is, at the very least, highly dubious as a basis for justifying the current and widespread practice of concelebration, we shall now take a step in the direction of Dom Tirot and discuss sacramental concelebration as it occurs when priests say the words of consecration together. This is not the place to discuss once again the views of the various classical authors to whom Dom Tirot refers and which Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie has brilliantly refuted. The only questions we shall address here concern the manner of the concelebrants' participation in the sacramental act and the multiplication of the *fructus generalis* of the Holy Sacrifice in proportion to the number of celebrants.

A – Manner of participation of the concelebrants

Dom Tirot agrees with Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie — and with ourselves — in saying that,

In concelebration, there is only one sacrifice of the Mass; in other words, there is only one transubstantiation. Indeed, for Dom Tirot, this is the only viewpoint compatible with the teaching of the Magisterium as well as with the theology of the Doctor Angelicus.²⁶ However, for Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie, there is a co-action of the concelebrants in a single sacramental act, which does not depend solely on their instrumental ministerial action but derives its effective unity from the objective sacramental rite which the participants concelebrate;²⁷ Dom Tirot, for his part, defends a conception that derives essentially from late scholasticism and according to which each concelebrant acts independentem ab aliis, a conception which he appears to regard as the *sententia communis*.²⁸

If Dom Tirot was able to adopt this viewpoint, it is because he failed to take into account the difference between St Thomas's objective sacramental conception and the subjective sacramental perspective found in Suárez, although Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie had clearly highlighted this important distinction. For St Thomas, the efficacy of the ministerial act performed by the priest lies precisely in the fact that he participates in the unique sacramental fulfilment of the sacrament. It is therefore not the ministerial act alone that produces the effect of the action, but rather the objectification of this ministerial act in the external rite through the transubstantiation of the single sacrificial offering. For Dom Tirot, 'the ministerial action is nothing other than the sacramental priestly action'.²⁹

This is also why it can be said that, for a sacramental concelebration, the mental word has never been sufficient. On the contrary, it must be clearly understood that it is only through participation in the objective sacramental rite—which, even in concelebration, is unique and of which the pronouncement of the words of consecration forms part—that the ministerial action becomes the sacramental action of Christ and that the intention becomes one with the objective incarnational structure of the indivisible sacramental accomplishment.

Consequently, the concelebrants do not act independently of one another but in a common participation in the single action of Christ, who does here, through the mediation of many, what he could also do through the mediation of one. If each performs a total sacramental act, thus acting in persona Christi, it is because the act in common is performed simultaneously and together by several, Christ making their subjective ministerial action his own. This is why each of the concelebrants celebrates in the full sense of the term, and why, correspondingly, each has an equal share in the application of the fructus generalis to the celebrant — and

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 50–54.

²⁷ Cf. J. de Sainte-Marie, Note on 'A Theology of Concelebration', in: *La Pensée Catholique* 180 (179), pp. 17–41, here p. 29.

²⁸ Cf. P. Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 206.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 189: 'Contrary to Father Joseph de Sainte-Marie, we see here no subjectivism, no radical opposition to St Thomas: the latter emphasising the sacramental action, Suárez the subjective ministerial action. We shall say that the ministerial action is nothing other than the sacramental priestly action.'

and thus of *the fructus specialissimus* — than if he had celebrated it alone, but this, of course, solely to the extent of his personal devotio. The act performed is the sacrifice of Christ renewed sacramentally in a bloodless manner, a sacrifice which lives not only from the *actus ministerialis* but also, precisely, from *the actus sacramentalis totalis*. If *the actus ministerialis* is multiplied, *the actus sacramentalis* remains undivided. Several people do the same thing together, but only one thing takes place. If the sacramental rite were not of such importance, and if one could indeed simply identify the ministerial act with the sacramental priestly act, then everything would depend on the intention of the priest alone, and the concrete realisation would be stripped of all profound meaning. That said, even if one recognises the priest's ministerial action in an external performance—for example, because all the concelebrants perform an external act and are therefore morally one in this—the fact remains that a single sacramental act is performed, in which several participate in a moral unity. The unity of the act determines the community of action, just as the single and shared causality, which produces a single effect, namely transubstantiation, the sacrifice of Christ. This is, moreover, reflected in the terminology used by the Magisterium; one might cite, for example, what Pius XII said in an address to the International Congress on Liturgy in Assisi: he emphasised that, during a concelebration, Christ acts no longer through a single celebrant but through several, and he spoke in this regard of a ‘simultaneous celebration’ ().³⁰

One may also cite, in the same vein, the post-conciliar decree *Ecclesiae semper*³¹ and the 1972 declaration *De concelebratione*, which also speaks of a “single sacramental act around a single altar”.³²

B – *The fruits of the Holy Sacrifice*

Contrary to what Dom Tirot believes, Fr Joseph de Sainte-Marie does not deny that all priests who celebrate Holy Mass together are, on an equal footing, concelebrants. On the contrary, since his thesis can only be fully reconciled with the fact of the unity of the sacramental act, it means precisely that, ministerially, all participate and share equally in the single sacramental act of Christ and the Church. However, just as the objective sacramental reality cannot be multiplied, neither can its objective effects be multiplied.

Similarly, it is not possible to defend the thesis of a virtual multiplication of sacramental offerings through the multiplication of the number of participants who offer *independently*

³⁰ Cf. Pius XII, ‘Address of 22 September 1956’, in: A.A.S. 48 (1956), pp. 717–718.

³¹ See A.A.S. 57 (1965), p. 412: ‘... several priests concelebrate the same Mass. For in this manner of celebrating Mass, several priests, by virtue of the same Priesthood and in the person of the High Priest, act together with one will and one voice, performing and offering together the one sacrifice through a single sacramental act, and all participate in it together and at the same time.’

³² Cf. A.A.S. 64 (1972), pp. 561–563.

the sacrifice of Christ in its entirety³³ and who, in so doing, would multiply the objective fruits of sacrifice of the Mass. This would amount to granting the subjective level pre-eminence over objective reality. One cannot rightly say, as Dom Tirot does, that, during the celebration, ‘Christ’s sacramental action can be said to be multiple because of the multiplicity of ministers through whom he acts’. This would imply that the multiplicity of ministers completely takes precedence over the objective aspect of the liturgical performance of the sacramental rite, which is one. Dom Tirot fails to recognise this when he asserts that the action of the ministers multiplies the action of Christ.³⁴ In this case, to be logical, one would have to speak of a multiplicity of Masses, which Dom Tirot absolutely refuses to do. One would have to say that the sacramental action, and thus the multiplication of the total sacramental rite, multiplies the actions of Christ. However, when there is only one rite in which several people participate, the action of Christ is not multiplied by the action of the participants; rather, it is appropriate to say that the action of the participants is unified by the action of Christ, so that, during the performance of the single rite, each person shares in the one action of Christ.³⁵

But further arguments can be brought against this thesis of the virtual multiplication of Christ’s action. Indeed, can a virtual multiplication—which must obviously and necessarily be limited to the level of *the* subjective *actus ministerialis*—have an objective result, as if the incarnating sacramental reality of the sacrament were ultimately nothing more than a less significant complement to its total fulfilment? Dom Tirot is right to say that, during concelebration, the ministers are one because the multiple instruments are united in the single power of the principal agent, namely Christ. In this sense, each performs *the actio Christi* but, precisely, in a participatory manner. On the other hand, if one wishes to base oneself on a theology of the sacraments that is objectively incarnational, it seems impossible to consider, as Dom Tirot does, that *the actio Christi* is virtually multiple by virtue of the specific power of each minister, with which each of them, by the very nature of the priesthood, fully accomplishes the sacrifice of Christ. He does not specify where this virtual multiplication of Christ’s single action might possibly come from if, for the fulfilment of Christ’s sacrifice to be effective, the total sacramental rite—which is one—necessarily comes into play as well. And even if one were to admit this virtual multiplication of *the actio Christi* through *the actio ministerialis*, how could it then

³³ Cf. P. Tirot, *op. cit.* note 4, p. 56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214: ‘Although Christ’s sacrificial act is unique on Calvary, Christ’s sacramental action may be said to be multiple because of the multiplicity of ministers through whom he acts. In other words, in itself, the action of the ministers multiplies the action of Christ.’

³⁵ What Dom Tirot says at the end of his article shows once again, regardless of the imprecision of the expression, that he regards the supposedly virtual multiplication of the *actio Christi* by the virtue of the priest as the reason for an objective multiplication of the graces of the sacrifice of the Mass: “Thus, one may speak here of a single *actio Christi*, virtually or equivalently multiplied from a single *actio Christi* because of the union of the instruments in the single virtue of the principal agent; virtually multiplied because of the proper efficacy of each minister, which causes each of them to offer Christ in his entirety.” (sic!).

Does this, therefore, produce an objective multiplication of *the fructus generalis* of the one and only sacrifice actually accomplished? This is not a matter of the subjective application of grace but of its objective outpouring! What, then, could be the effect here of a mere virtuality?

That said, given that a single objective act is performed by many, the accomplishment of this act—which represents a single action of Christ through many—will produce only a single objective result, namely the outpouring of the grace of salvation upon the Church and the world: this is the general fruit of the Holy Mass, which is infinite, although, for us, it is applied in a finite manner. The application of this grace of salvation to the person for whom the Mass is particularly celebrated is what is called the *fructus specialis*, which may be extended by the Church to as many people as she wishes. During concelebration, the *fructus specialissimus* is the application of the grace granted to the Church through the sacramental renewal of Christ's sacrifice to the one who, performing this act in persona Christi, has done so fully, albeit in participation in a greater whole. The fullness of the application of these two fruits depends on the piety of the priest, and this is why, on this point, Dom Tirot concedes that there may be an obligation to celebrate alone when this serves to increase the celebrant's piety and, consequently, to enhance the fruits of the sacrifice of the Mass in the ' .³⁶ However, if we truly acknowledge the incarnational reality of the sacramental rite in its fullest sense, it follows that the obligation to celebrate alone does not rest on this reason alone. There is an outpouring of the *fructus generalis* whenever a Mass is celebrated, as the Second Vatican Council also emphasises (SC 2). The outpouring of this fruit of grace takes place directly and without the mediation of any particular intention on the part of the priest or any other ministerial action on his part, but simply by virtue of *the actio Christi* which the priest—alone or with others

—performs in persona Christi in the rite of the Mass. The glory of God, the salvation of the world and the state of the Church depend on the celebration of Christ's Sacrifice. This is why the Church has always desired that celebrations should be multiplied. Of course, this does not mean falling into blind sacramentalism. God's grace is not bound to the sacraments. But the sacraments are bound to grace. Whenever, therefore, the complete objective sacramental act of the sacrifice of the Mass is performed, whether by one or by many, the grace of the Cross is poured out upon us anew. Thus every priest has a duty to consider seriously whether he can assume the responsibility of reducing his priestly ministry to the point of making habitual a practice which, even from the perspective of the history of the liturgy, can only be justified as a sign of hierarchical unity around the one High Priest, for example on the rare occasions of concelebration with the Pope or a bishop; for, once it becomes habitual, not only does this practice no longer possess its ecclesiological significance, but, moreover, it no longer affords the one who concelebrates regularly the opportunity to fulfil his own duty on a daily basis

³⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

primarily priestly, namely *the incarnational imitatio Christi*, in the total objective fulfilment of Christ's sacramental Sacrifice, 'to the glory of God and for the salvation of the world'. Whilst, for practical reasons, the Liturgical Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* 57 speaks of *the utilitas fidelium* in relation to individual celebration, on the other hand, for theological reasons, this *utilitas fidelium* is never lacking because the world and the faithful need, today more than ever, the grace that the Lord pours out upon them at Holy Mass.

III - Concelebration and the Church

Along with Dom Tirot, an ecclesiological reason is often put forward to dismiss the reservations raised against frequent or daily concelebration. On the one hand, it is said that a practice which the Church herself recommends cannot be bad in itself, nor can it harm the Church. Undoubtedly, concelebration is not bad in itself, and an isolated instance of concelebration cannot in any way directly harm the Church. It must nevertheless be emphasised that concelebration is but a single offering of the Holy Sacrifice, despite the increase in the number of celebrants, and that the objective grace of this sacrifice does not increase in proportion to the number of celebrants; thus, frequent or daily concelebration constitutes an objective loss for the Church. How, then, can the Church recommend concelebration?

It will be said on this subject that, following the publication of the *Codex Iuris Canonici*, one can no longer speak of a recommendation. Undoubtedly, the CIC authorises concelebration in principle when the good of the faithful does not preclude it (can. 902); in this sense, it goes beyond the list of possibilities set out in the conciliar constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 57 § 1, 2a. In doing so, the CIC authorises, following the Second Vatican Council, a practice of concelebration which, in this form, did not previously exist in either the Eastern or the Western Church, namely the possibility of concelebrating at any time in the absence of the bishop. However, we have seen that *the utilitas fidelium* — provided one does not wish to interpret this term solely in terms of purely practical considerations — renders frequent or daily concelebration in the absence of the bishop problematic, to say the least. It is also known that the Commission which drafted the canon in question deliberately chose the phrase 'concelebrare possunt', whereas the first version contained a recommendation of concelebratio on³⁷. Undoubtedly, there are certain texts of the Magisterium, of lesser canonical importance, which seem to recommend concelebration; yet, in the corpus of decisive post-conciliar canonical texts of the Latin Church, there is now no longer any mention of a recommendation for concelebration. In the Codex

³⁷ Pointed out by Prof. Benoît Duroux, OP, Rome.

Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium, a specific paragraph is even devoted to the pastoral needs of the faithful, which must serve as a ‘measure’ for concelebration; it states that, where concelebration is possible (“si tamen fieri potest”), concelebration is permitted with the bishop or, in a case even more unusual for the Eastern Church, with another priest (“aut cum alio presbytero” — note the remarkable singular form!), the reason given being that this allows the unity of the priesthood to be expressed appropriately. The subjunctive used here, ‘concelebrent’, cannot of course imply either an obligation or even a mere recommendation, but simply an authorisation for a practice that is somewhat unusual, if one considers the immediate continuation of the text, which expressly emphasises the right to individual celebration (CCEO c. 700 §§ 1 & 2).

It remains to be seen, however, how the Church can authorise a practice which, in the manner in which it is exercised today and in a form prepared by the Second Vatican Council, nevertheless harms the common good of the Church—a common good which, as she expressly emphasises in can. 223 § 1 of the CIC, must be given particular consideration. In his argument, Dom Tirot relies on an article from the Synod of Pistoia — an article severely criticised by Pius VI — which he, moreover, presents in a curious translation, as if it were dealing with general laws relating

specifically to the liturgy.³⁸ In reality, the article in question speaks in very general terms of ecclesiastical discipline in which a distinction must be made between things that are necessary and useful and those that are dangerous and harmful and may lead to superstition and materialism.³⁹ The Pope categorically rejects such a distinction insofar as it implies that an aberrant discipline might be adopted by the Church.

Regardless of the specific historical context of this censure, it cannot be accorded decisive weight in our context: for whilst one may have reservations about frequent or daily concelebration, the discipline of concelebration as authorised by the Church is in itself neither dangerous nor harmful, and one cannot claim that it leads to superstition or materialism. Nowhere does the Church expressly authorise frequent or daily concelebration, nor does she directly encourage it. But the fact that, in many places, the authorisation to concelebrate has caused the celebration to disappear almost entirely

³⁸ Cf. Dom Tirot, *op. cit.*, note 1, p. 209: ‘On the other hand, Pius VI severely censures the Fathers of the Synod of Pistoia for asserting that the Church can enact general laws that are useless or harmful, ‘as if the Church of God, which is governed by the Holy Spirit, could institute general laws (especially liturgical ones) that are not only useless or overly burdensome, but also perilous, harmful, and leading to superstition or materialism.’”

³⁹ DS 2678: “The Synod’s Prescription on the Order of Matters to be Addressed in Collations, which, after stating, ‘in every article it will be necessary to distinguish that which pertains to faith and the essence of religion from that which is proper to discipline’, adds, ‘in this very discipline, a distinction must be made between what is necessary or useful for keeping the faithful in the spirit of the faith, and what is useless or burdensome, insofar as the freedom of the children of the New Covenant permits, and even more so from what is dangerous or harmful, such as that which leads to superstition and materialism’; insofar as, by the generality of the terms, it encompasses and subjects to the prescribed mindset even the discipline established and approved by the Church, as if the Church, which is governed by the Spirit of God, could establish a discipline that is not only useless and more burdensome than Christian freedom can tolerate, but also dangerous, harmful, and leading to superstition and materialism: false, reckless, scandalous, pernicious, offensive to pious ears, injurious to the Church and to the Spirit of God by whom she is governed, and at the very least erroneous.”

Individual celebration is something that was neither directly intended nor even desired in the authorisation granted in the Church's Canon; this is, moreover, very clear in the two Codices, which expressly emphasise the right to individual celebration. It is therefore not the law of the Church as such, but rather its unreserved application that leads to a practice harmful to the life of the Church—an application, moreover, of which the mens legislatoris was unaware, as Anna Egler demonstrated in a critical study on the origin of the authorisation of concelebration at the Second Vatican Council.

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It must be said, however, that in the history of the Church, as we have seen previously, there has been a whole series of legal provisions, authorisations and privileges which, when interpreted in a particular way and over the long term, have been detrimental to the life of the Church. It would be to turn a blind eye to reality to claim, under the guise of misplaced papalism or anachronistic triumphalism, that every disciplinary decision taken by Church leaders has always been a good one. With all due respect for the authority of the Church, and with full confidence in the Holy Spirit who governs it, such an exaggeratedly blissful optimism would completely fail to recognise that this holy Church is also Christ crucified and that, often, the Lord himself has had to save his successors from drowning.

IV - Conclusion

It is therefore clear that the issue of frequent or daily concelebration is closely linked to a particular interpretation of the history of the liturgy, to an insufficient sense of the objectivity of the liturgical rite, to a somewhat erroneous conception of the relationship between metaphysical potentiality and reality in the order of grace, and finally, which is almost a paradox, to a certain legalism in the interpretation of ecclesial discipline. However, the complex web of historical, metaphysical, dogmatic and canonical aspects of this whole question takes a back seat to the visible erosion of the priest's role, a role that can only suffer from such considerations, which are theoretical only in appearance. In his very interesting and important article, which sets out a position now widely held, Dom Tirot himself mentions the abuse of concelebration, without always drawing the logical conclusions from it. On the other hand, if we accord due importance to the priest's proper role in that, through the sacrifice of the Mass, he conveys graces in persona Christi, we must re-evaluate the individual celebration, for this alone can guarantee that the priest truly fulfils the essential task that is his in the world and in the Church. This does not prevent concelebration, in certain cases, from having its own ecclesiological value, precisely

⁴⁰ Cf. A. Egler, *op. cit.* note 10, esp. pp. 427–450.

when, under the presidency of the Pope or the bishop, it manifests the hierarchical structure of the Church. However, if we are to prevent the priesthood from losing more and more of its supernatural splendour in daily life, such situations must remain exceptions in the practice of the individual priest.

It is the Incarnation that decisively determines the history of salvation and the paths of grace in our order of redemption. This is evident in the respect that the Church has always maintained, despite all attacks, particularly for those elements of the Incarnation that bear the imprint of God's will in the celebration of the sacraments. Let us simply consider the refusal to ordain women or the care taken to use only unleavened bread for the consecration. But if the will of God, thus made visible according to the order of the Incarnation in the institution and efficacy of the sacraments, is of such importance, we cannot in good conscience assert that the outpouring of the graces of salvation in the sacrifice of the Cross, renewed sacramentally in the Holy Mass, occurs independently of the unity of the sacrificial offering and the dependence of the acts of the concelebrating priests on *the single actus sacramentalis visibilis*. Anyone who attaches decisive importance to the Incarnation and, by the same token, to the historicity of the sacramental realities of the faith, will be careful not to spiritualise their mode of action. And, if he is a priest, he will prefer to celebrate alone. On the one hand, because the celebration helps him to preserve his own priestly identity and, on the other hand, because, whenever he celebrates Mass in this form, his action allows God's graces to pour out without doubt upon our poor world, for whose salvation he became a priest of Jesus Christ.