

April 10, 2000

Reverend and Dear Father [*the priest addressed was Joseph Fessio, SJ*]:

This Congregation for Divine Worship wishes to acknowledge reception of the documentation in which you raise certain questions pertaining to the authentic celebration of Holy Mass and about the proper interpretation of the relevant liturgical legislation.

That documentation, and in particular, a transcript of your lecture of May 22, 1999, in which you present your opinion about the intention of the post-conciliar liturgical reform in implementing the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, has been carefully studied by this Dicastery. This study has not found anything doctrinally erroneous in the text and therefore, no basis for an allegation of heterodoxy against you. Indeed, the Congregation would point to the fundamental right of all the faithful to make their views known to other of Christ's faithful, provided that they always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 37, §1; Code of Canon Law, can. 212, §3).

With respect to your question regarding the positions of the priest celebrant permitted by liturgical law, this Dicastery wishes to state that Holy Mass may be celebrated *versus populum* or *versus apsidem*. Both positions are in accord with liturgical law; both are to be considered correct.

It could be that in some circumstances, because of the sensibilities of the faithful, celebration of Holy Mass *versus populum* would be indicated, however, it should be borne in mind that **there is no preference expressed in the liturgical legislation for either position. As both positions enjoy the favor of law, the legislation may not be invoked to say that one position or the other accords more closely with the mind of the Church.**

For the same reason, a priest's choice of position to offer Holy Mass, whether facing the apse or facing the people, may never be used to call into question his adherence to Catholic Doctrine. Priests, and indeed any member of the faithful, are free to develop sound theological arguments to support their convictions and even to posit a certain personal preference for one manner of legitimate celebration over another based upon what they consider to be most pastorally beneficial for the faithful (cf. *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*, no. 313). As noted above, the Second Vatican Council and the Code of Canon Law require only that the faithful always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals in expressing their opinions.

The disposition made by the MOST REVEREND DAVID E. FOLEY, in the *Norms for Televising the Mass* in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama (22 Feb. 2000), concern only Masses which are broadcast or taped for television and are produced in that Diocese. The Bishop has explained his intention as that of seeking to promote a manner of celebration which would avoid any risk of confusion among those who view the broadcast. The publication of such norms [*i.e. television broadcasts*] falls within the responsibility of the Diocesan Bishop in virtue of his role as moderator of the Sacred Liturgy in the particular Church entrusted to his pastoral care. In exercising this responsibility, even though **he** [*viz. the diocesan bishop*] **is unable to exclude or mandate the use of a legitimate option**, [** italics in the original*] the Diocesan Bishop is competent to provide further guidance to priests in their choice of the various options of the Roman Rite. As a sign of his acceptance of this disposition of law, His Excellency Bishop Foley has kindly withdrawn the preceding Decree dated October 18, 1999, on March 13, 2000, and the Congregation for Divine Worship is grateful to His Excellency for this decision.

In the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy, priests for their part should be sensitive to the legitimate attitudes of the faithful, which is to say, those which are compatible with the doctrine, the traditions and the liturgical law of the Church. As a result, when priests — or for that matter, any of the faithful — express their legitimate personal preferences, they are to avoid demeaning other opinions approved by the Church.

With every good wish for a fruitful Holy Week and blessed Easter, I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

✠ JORGE A. CARD. MEDINA ESTÉVEZ, Prefect

✠ FRANCESCO PIO TAMBURRINO, Archbishop Secretary