

Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: It has come up several times at liturgy meetings as follows: 1) Should there be an ambo candle always displayed at the ambo? 2) If so, would this then eliminate processing with the two candles, with the priest/deacon, and the Book of the Gospels to the ambo? 3) If an ambo candle is required to be present at all times, then I would assume this candle would be removed from the sanctuary from the Easter Vigil to Pentecost when the paschal candle remains in the sanctuary during this period, the paschal candle taking precedence over the ambo candle? -- G.F., New Orleans, Louisiana

A: I have observed this practice in some places, but there is no mention of it in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM). Nor does it form part of liturgical tradition.

Candles are traditionally brought to the ambo only for the reading of the Gospel and usually accompany the procession of the Book of the Gospels from the altar to the ambo. Certainly, all Scripture is God's word, but the Gospel has traditionally received special veneration.

According to some authors, the candles burning next to the ambo or altar should remind us especially of the tongues of fire that appeared above the apostles when the Holy Spirit descended on them at Pentecost. Just as the Almighty was present in them, he is present in the Word of God and at the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Regarding specific norms GIRM in No. 60 says:

"The reading of the Gospel is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy itself teaches that great reverence is to be shown to it by setting it off from the other readings with special marks of honor: whether the minister appointed to proclaim it prepares himself by a blessing or prayer; or the faithful, standing as they listen to it being read, through their acclamations acknowledge and confess Christ present and speaking to them; or the very marks of reverence are given to the Book of the Gospels."

And later in GIRM, No. 133:

"If the Book of the Gospels is on the altar, the priest then takes it and goes to the ambo, carrying the Book of the Gospels slightly elevated and preceded by the lay ministers, who may carry the thurible and the candles. Those present turn towards the ambo as a sign of special reverence to the Gospel of Christ."

In earlier centuries the difference between the Gospel and other readings was even more emphasized, including reserving a special and highly decorated ambo for the Gospel readings. This can still be seen in some ancient churches, such as Rome's St. Lawrence Outside the Walls.

The practice of placing permanent candles at the ambo tends to blur the special role of the Gospel and, as Monsignor Peter Elliott mentions in his *Liturgical Question Box*, could also tend to "overemphasize the distinction between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, to the point of symbolically separating the two phases of the one liturgy."

Regarding the use of candles in general, GIRM, No. 117, specifies:

"[O]n or next to the altar are to be placed candlesticks with lighted candles: at least two in any celebration, or even four or six, especially for a Sunday Mass or a holy day of obligation. If the Diocesan Bishop celebrates, then seven candles should be used. Also on or close to the altar, there is to be a cross with a figure of Christ crucified. The candles and the cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified may also be carried in the Entrance Procession."

These norms are basically repeated, albeit with some further specifications, by the U.S. bishops' guidelines for church building, "Built of Living Stones."

First of all, it emphasizes that ambo and altar should help us to perceive the celebration as a single celebration. The use of permanent candles at the ambo could lead to a conceptual separation of the table of the word and that of the Eucharist. Thus the document says:

"55. The principal ritual furnishings within the sanctuary are the altar on which the eucharistic sacrifice is offered, the ambo from which God's word is proclaimed, and the chair of the priest celebrant. These furnishings should be constructed of substantial materials that express dignity and stability. Their placement and their design again make it clear that although they are distinct entities, they are related in the one eucharistic celebration."

Regarding the ambo itself it says:

"61. The central focus of the area in which the word of God is proclaimed during the liturgy is the *ambo*. The design of the ambo and its prominent placement reflects the dignity and nobility of that saving word and draws the attention of those present to the proclamation of the word. Here the Christian community encounters the living Lord in the word of God and prepares itself for the 'breaking of the bread' and the mission to live the word that will be proclaimed. An ample area around the ambo is needed to allow a Gospel procession with a full complement of ministers bearing candles and incense. The *Introduction to the Lectionary* recommends that the design of altar and ambo bear an 'harmonious and close relationship' to one another in order to emphasize the close relationship between word and Eucharist. Since many people share in the ministry of the word, the ambo should be accessible to everyone, including those with physical disabilities."

It is noteworthy that the text only foresees candles carried by ministers and makes no reference whatsoever to permanent fixtures.

With respect to candles it adds:

"92. Candles, which are signs of reverence and festivity, 'are to be used at every liturgical service.' The living flame of the candle, symbolic of the risen Christ, reminds people that in baptism they are brought out of darkness into God's marvellous light. For the celebration of the Eucharist it is appropriate to carry candles in the entrance procession and during the procession with the *Book of the Gospels*. At least two candles are placed near the altar in the sanctuary area. If there is a lack of space, they may be placed on the altar. Four or six candles may be used for the celebration of Mass and for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. If the bishop of the diocese celebrates, seven candles may be used. Candles placed in floor-standing bases or on the altar should be arranged so they do not obscure the view of the ritual action in the sanctuary, especially the action at the altar."

As we can see from these documents, there is no requirement for any permanent ambo candle. In fact, there is not even a justification for the existence of such a candle. In other words, the only candles envisaged by the Church near the ambo are those accompanying the proclamation of the Gospels and the Easter candle.

With this clear, our reader's other queries can be answered. The procession of the two candles at the Gospels should not be eliminated. It is the ambo candles that should be done away with. The ambo candles should not only be removed during Easter but permanently, since they do not form part of Roman-rite liturgical practice and are a recent novelty with practically no liturgical justification. Indeed, as we saw above, there is even some danger that they might give the wrong message regarding the unity of the celebration.

The presence of candles near the ambo does form part of other liturgical traditions such as the Byzantine. However, in this case the ambo is considered as part of the altar and is placed directly in front of the Holy Doors of the iconostasis.

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Follow-up: Lay Ministers Wearing a Deacon's Stole

With respect to extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion wearing a vesture similar to a deacon's stole (see [April 21](#)), a reader from Singapore wrote:

"It might help to clarify that this is common not just in Vietnam but in other parts of Asia. Father, of course, answered rightly that lay ministers should not wear any vestment or clothing that might blur the lines between the ordained and lay ministries. But I would suggest that it wasn't a 'stole' per se that the

extraordinary ministers in Vietnam were wearing over their suits, but rather a sash to denote their role as Communion ministers during Mass. We have the same custom in the Singapore Archdiocese, where many parishes identify their EMs by having them wear a white sash over the shoulder. In the same way, the church wardens wear a different colored sash to identify themselves in the performance of their duties. Years ago, when the EMs were first introduced in Singapore, they were required to wear albs in some parishes. But that gave rise to confusion among some that they were somehow connected to the priestly office. And in time, that was replaced with a simple white sash -- which admittedly could be mistaken by some to be a deacon's stole -- but it's really not the same thing. Hope that helps."

I would say that, wearing a sash during Mass denoting the role of the extraordinary minister of Holy Communion is a legitimate option for the bishop to determine and unlikely to cause confusion.

However, in the photo sent to me the minister was directing a Communion service in the absence of a priest, and the sash resembled very closely the stole worn by deacons. There are ways of designing a sash that would avoid all confusion.

A reader from Oxford, England, asked: "Occasionally one sees priests vested as and serving as deacons in the ordinary form (in particular, I have seen this in the GoodFriday liturgy -- or even with bishops, as when cardinal deacons assist at the Holy Father's Mass). Is this appropriate?"

In the ordinary form there are no occasions in which a priest dresses as a deacon. If three priests proclaim the Gospel on Good Friday, they use red chasubles or simply alb and stole. The case is different with bishops, who may wear the dalmatic under the chasuble on certain solemn occasions such as ordinations. The case of cardinal deacons, who are usually bishops, is a particularity of papal celebrations which has its own liturgical traditions and legislation.

Finally, a reader from Indiana commented: "At our parish we sometimes have the priest and two deacons, and all of them are dressed the same. It is confusing. None of them wears the deacon stole but all have on the full vestments. Is this allowed, and how could the faithful know which is a priest and who are the deacons?"

I would suggest to our reader that the next time it happens he take a closer look at the deacons' vestments. It is probable that they are wearing a dalmatic of a design similar to the priest's chasuble. The dalmatic differs from the chasuble in having wide short sleeves and, usually, two stripes down the front and back.