

Izvirni znanstveni članek (1.01)
Bogoslovni vestnik 77 (2017) 2,395—404
UDK: 27-528
Besedilo prejeto: 5/2017; sprejeto: 7/2017

Peter Caban

The First Mass Blessing as a Social Religious Element in the Christian West Tradition

Abstract: In order to complete the view on the Christian First Mass celebration we must mention the facts related to the liturgy of the First Mass which are deeply rooted in the folk devotion and imagery of the believers even though they are not the necessary parts of the First Mass liturgy. From the historical and liturgical point of view they are important facts that indicate and describe the important moment of the sacerdotal life and its first expressions in the local parish, among believers, parents or benefactors. In this study we will notice one of these elements – the First Mass blessing of new priests. It is evident that the First Mass played important role for the believers which was expressed in the First Mass customs.

Key words: The First Mass blessing, new priest blessing, *Missa prima*, Christian west liturgical tradition

Povzetek: **Novomašni blagoslov kot družbeno-religiozna prvina v izročilu krščanskega Zahoda**

Da bi dopolnili pogled na krščansko novomašno slavlje, moramo upoštevati dejstva, ki zadevajo bogoslužje nove maše in so globoko ukoreninjena v ljudskih pobožnosti in podobah vernikov, čeprav niso nujno del novomašnega bogoslužja. Z zgodovinskega in liturgičnega vidika pomenijo pomembna dejstva, ki razkrivajo in opisujejo neki pomemben trenutek duhovniškega življenja in so njegov prvi izraz v domači župniji, med verniki, starši ali dobrotniki. V tej študiji se bomo posvetili eni od teh prvin – blagoslovu, ki ga podeljujejo novomašniki. Očitno je, da so nove maše igrale pomembno vlogo za vernike, to pa je odsevalo v novomašnih običajih.

Ključne besede: novomašni blagoslov, blagoslovi novih duhovnikov, *missa prima*, zahodno krščansko liturgično izročilo

1. Introduction

The First Mass blessing is very respected religious tradition by the believers in the history of the Western Christianity. It is attested by a phrase in the European habit that »it is worth destroying the shoe soles so that we could receive the First

Mass blessing«. In the reports on the First Mass celebration and customs the First Mass blessing was and is highly respected.

Historical mentions prove that the new priest blessing was granted not only during the *Missae primae* but within some time period. (Niderberger 1924, 557) New priests could grant this blessing in the Mass of the sacerdotal consecration: »It is always an uplifting moment when the newly ordained grants the blessing for the first time to his consecrating bishop and many believers.« (Kenny 1985, 100) When he came to his native parish he granted his blessing again (Kohl 1908, 275). When he was personally invited the new priest could grant the blessing in each house. In the liturgy prior to the Second Vatican Council the First Mass blessing was granted after the procession to the church, before, during or after the homily, at the end of the First Mass and when he changed his vestment in the sacristy or after the procession with the Most Holy Sacrament if it was held after the First Mass. (Manuale caeremoniarum 1926, 184)

The blessing could be granted from the pulpit (Kohl 1908, 278) or from the altar to all or individually (Ritz 1968, 229). If the parents of the new priest had died, the new priest visited the tomb of his parents and granted them the blessing there. In some places the new priest granted the blessing in the hospitals and charitable institutions in the vicinity. The form of the blessing was inherited oral.

2. The most important mentions about the First Mass blessing

The new priest blessing is explicitly mentioned in the 13th century in the work of Humbertus de Romanis who reported that believers in the First Mass of the new priest kissed his hands and wanted to ask his blessing: »Et ideo fideles, ut sint participes huiusmodi gratiae, solent in tali Missa semper offerre et cum devotione manus consecratas Sacerdotis osculari et benedictionem ipsius petere.« (1677, 536) *Rituale Romanum* since his first edition in 1614 did not contain any special mentions about the form of the First Mass blessing (Mayer 1987, 297). The Roman Congregation of the rites approved the form of the blessing on March 30th, 1878:

»Oremus. Deus, qui charitatis dona per gratiam Sancti Spiritus tuorum fidelium cordibus induisti; da famulis et famulabus tuis pro quibus tuam deprecamur clementiam, salutem mentis et corporis, ut te tota virtute diligant, et quae tibi placita sunt, tota dilectione perficiant. Per Christum Dominum nostrum. R. Amen. Postea dicitur: Benedictio Dei omnipotentis Patris + et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti, descendat super vos (super te) et maneat semper. Amen.« (Wapelhorst 1892, 455)

The initial oration comes from the *Missale Romanum* and it was found among the »Orationes diversae« titled »Pro devotis amicis« (Bruylants 1952, 312). Together with the final form of the blessing they were part of the officially approved

form for the First Mass blessing. But we must not conclude that this form only was used after 1878. (Caban 2015, 230–239) The sources show the variability of the form of the First Mass blessing (Hauerland 1997, 295) and the approved text was just an alternative. One form which was not published in the liturgical books became very popular: »Per impositionem manuum mearum et invocationem beatae Mariae Virginis (many inserted the name of the patron saint here) et omnium sanctorum, omni benedictione coelesti et terrestri, benedicat te omnipotens Deus, Pater, Filius et Spiritus Sanctus.« (Kromler 1949, 71)

According to *Ceremoniale Parisiense* edited by the Paris priest Martin Sonnet in 1662 and according to *Ceremoniale* of the French diocese of Toulouse from 1700 the primiciant put both hands on the head of the believers at the end of the First Mass and prayed »Deus misereatur tui« using Psalm 67 and the reply »Et benedicat tibi«. Alternative word of the blessing was quoted by the new priest from the missionary speech of the Resurrected to his disciples at the end of the Mark's gospel (16,18). The activity of the new priest was perceived as an act of faith: »Super aegros manus imponent et bene habebunt and people replied Amen.« (Cérémonial de Toul 1700, 250) If there were a lot of believers the new priest blessed people in pairs. He gave his hand for kissing and he put his hand on their heads with the prayers of the blessing. This custom was used in the French diocese until the end of the 19th century.

In *Benedictionale Constantiense* from 1781 a special »Benedictio neomystae« was mentioned. The new priest said a simple form of blessing over an individual or over several kneeling persons. This blessing was usual for the end of the Mass: »Neomysta, seu novus sacerdos, more passim recepto benedicturus unum, vel plures ante se genuflexos junctis manibus dicit: Benedicat te (vos) omnipotens Deus; deinde manu sinistra infra pectus posita, extensa manu dextera formando Crucem pergit: Pater, et Filius + et Spiritus sanctus. Amen.« (Cérémonial de Toul 1700, 250) and he made the sign of the cross over the blessed person. (Hauerland 1997, 230–236)

3. *Te Deum* and blessing

According to *Cérémonial* of the cathedral of Verdun from 1832, when the new priest sang *Te Deum*, he put his hands on everyone and said the text of the blessing (342). According to the decree of the bishop of Litoměřice from 1839 »before the new priest left the presbytery, he had to grant his new priest blessing to his parents and other relative. /... / If the priests asked for the First Mass blessing, the uplifting of the believers was higher.« (Hnojek 1842, 245) According to Antonín Vojtech Hnojek the First Mass blessing was a

»proper task of the new priest during the whole First Mass day and the new priest had the sacred duty to fulfill the pious desires of the believers by granting the blessing in order to support the piety by this dignified holy activity with the holy patience, tireless eagerness and truthful piety« (246).

In the decree there were no proposals of the texts for the diocese of Litoměřice.

The *Ritual* for the priests of the diocese Hradec Králové from 1846 registered the custom that the new priest granted his blessing at the end of *Missae primae*. When he unvested his ornate and maniple, he put his hands on individuals and prayed for them. At the grades of the altar the blessing was received by the priests according to their rank, then the parents of the new priests and his relative. The blessing was granted to the other believers later outside of the presbytery. In relation to the First Mass the new priest should not omit the preparatory prayers at the grades of the altar and thanksgiving after the blessing. (106)

4. Austrian forms

The proper texts for the new priest blessing contained also *Collectio rituum* from St. Pölten from 1873. It is mentioned that the First Mass blessing was granted after the Mass. Besides the forms of the First Mass blessing *per impositionem* and *per elevationem* this collection offered some other texts as well. There is the preparatory prayer of the new priest – the primiciant asked God to bless the people. Then there is the general form of the blessing. The text mentions the omnipotence of the Father, the wisdom of the Son and wish that God hear these petitions. This request is ended by the proper form. It could be used as a shorter form as well or it could be ended by the greeting of peace without the reply of the blessed person. (346) It is interesting that the gift of knowledge is not listed in the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit but *amor Dei* is used instead:

»Illuminet Deus vultum suum super te, et memor sit omnis sacrificii tui et holocaustum tuum pinquescat, ut velut victima Abel placeat Altissimo oblatio tua; induat te Deus salutari suo, ut mundo corde, puris labiis, innocens manibus ei hostiam laudis offeras; superabundet in te spiritus sapientiae, intellectus, consilii, fortitudinis, pietatis, timoris et amoris Dei. Et omni benedictione coelesti benedicat etc. ut supra.« (347)

The book contained the proper texts of the First Mass blessing for the parents, siblings, benefactors, children and the sick (Hauerland 1997, 230–236).

5. References about the First Mass blessing in Poland

According to the rituals for Polish dioceses (*Rituale Sacramentorum ac aliarum ecclesiae caeremoniarum*) published in 1884 in Cracow when the Holy Sacrament was exposed at the First Mass, at its end the Sacrament was deposited and the new priest granted his First Mass blessing. He stood at the altar. First he blessed the manuductor, then the assistance and clergymen, subsequently he blessed his parents and other believers arranged in pairs. (873–878)

1. Ritual of Cracow. He put both hands on the blessed person and said the form. He was clothed in superpelicia and stole (Haunerland 1997, 309–310). From the Cracow ritual we have some forms of the First Mass blessing for priests: clerics, religious men or women, parents, siblings, adolescents and virgins. After the general form of the blessing the ritual recommended how to proceed when there was a high number of believers. In such case *Benedictio generalis* had to be used. (Rituale sacramentorum 1884, 875–880) A Polish peculiarity is the warning that the new priest should not grant the blessing to the bishop but the bishop could bless the primiciant before all the particular blessings. At the end the ritual warned that all the benedictions must not be granted in a day when the priest celebrated the Mass for the deceased in black colour because all the blessings were omitted in the Mass for the deceased according to the prescriptions of the *Missale Romanum* from 1570. (Haunerland 1997, 323–329)

2. Others mentions. In 1910 Josef Erker in his *Enchiridion Liturgicum* mentioned the text of the First Mass blessing approved by the Congregation of rites. It consisted of the oration *Deus, qui charitatis dona* and the form of the blessing *Benedictio Dei*. (412) According to A. Nowowiejsky who edited the rite of the First Mass celebration in Poland, the new priest put his hands on the head of the archdeacon and then to the present priests, parents and other members of the family. He blessed them with the usual words: *Benedicat te omnipotens Deus* or by another form approved by Rome. Even though there were instructions and texts for the First Mass blessing in several diocesan rituals in the first half of the 20th century and there was even a form of blessing approved by Rome, it cannot be supposed that obliging normative existed in all dioceses. When he made the sign of the cross, the left hand should be on the head of the recipient and the new priest blessed with his right hand. (1906, 397)

6. *Collectio rituum* in Vienna

In the First Mass rite of the *Collectio rituum* published in 1889 for the archdiocese of Vienna there were prayers for various church states before the granting of the First Mass blessing. *Collectio* mentioned that besides priests, lower clerics, lay brothers and virgins were blessed. (96–98) After the blessing of the parents there was the form for the blessing of children and special forms were ended by the text of the blessing for other believers: »Omnipotens et misericors Deus concedat tibi (vobis) perpetuam mentis et corporis sanitatem, fidei, spei, et charitatis augmentum, perseverantiam in bonis operibus, et gloriam vitae aeternae.« (98) The greeting of peace was supposed at the end of the benediction of the priests, lower clerics and lay brothers; for the virgins it was said »sine osculo« (98).

7. Status in the Moravian Church and in Slovakia

The *Agenda* for the Moravian Church province from 1932 commented that the new priest could grant the blessing without the maniple after the First Mass. He granted the blessing to his assistance, then to other priests and clerics and subsequently to his parents, relatives and other believers. It could be done so when time and other circumstances allowed. (597)

In the book of Miháľfi Ákoš published in Banská Bystrica in 1937 three forms were mentioned. They could be used for the First Mass blessing in Slovakia. The primiciant could bless the believers individually, collectively or generally using the following methods:

1. »Per impositionem manuum mearum et invocationem omnium sanctorum benedicat te (vos) omni benedictione coelesti et terrestri omnipotens Deus Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus. Amen.«

2. »Benedicat te (vos) omnipotens Deus Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus. Amen.«

3. »Benedictio Dei omnipotentis Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti descendat super te (vos) et maneat semper. Amen.« (193)

The following report testifies about a First Mass celebration in Slovakia during the Communism:

»It happened in 1966. Due to numerus clausus there were only 12 new priests ordained in the seminary of Bratislava for the whole Slovakia. I was one of them. The number of the accepted candidates was regulated by the Communist authorities. 19 religious sisters coming from Vítaz, a village under Branisko, were invited for the First Mass which was celebrated with ThDr. Pavol Čech on the same Sunday. We were surprised that only one of them could come. We decided to go to the Czech Republic where our religious sisters were living. We visited them and granted them the new priest blessing from Osek to Tulešice. We were surprised when we met the bishop ThDr. Vasil' Hopko in Osek (he served as the priest for the religious sisters). We celebrated the Mass one after another and the bishop served as the altar boy even though we disagreed. After the Mass he asked the blessing. I told him: Yes, with pleasure but first you must bless us as the successor of the apostles. The bishop agreed and granted his apostolic blessing. I do not know why but I inserted the following words into the text of the blessing: By imposing of my new priest hands and at the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Basil the Great, the saint missionaries Cyril and Methodius, by this new priest blessing I pray that you would ordain the priests in Prešov soon. The bishop began to cry and replied: That will never happen. Two years later (in 1968) after the Prague spring, the bishop returned from Osek to the eparchy of Prešov. In 1972 we met at the burial of the bishop Róbert Pobožny. At the parking lot in Rožňava we parked our cars next to each other. When the bishop Hopko saw me, he told Mons. Ján Hirka, the ordinary of Prešov, smiling: Look, the prophet of Osek. The bishop told me that my wish or prophecy kept him alive.« (Príbehy a svedectvá 2008)

The contemporary renewed Benedictional (*De benedictionibus*) published in 1985 does not include texts for a special First Mass blessing. On November 5th, 1964 the Apostolic Penitentiary issued a decree that the each new priest can grant the papal blessing for one time. The blessing is related to the full indulgences. (Enchiridion 1988, 303) It would be interesting to know which countries use this faculty.

8. The first Mass blessing and Mass celebration in the social context

Even though the First Mass blessing of the newly ordained priest does not have any special consequences for the future of the pastoral care in his native place and the primiciant begins his sacerdotal ministry in the parish selected by the bishop, the First Mass with its blessing is one of the most important events in the life of the local parish community. In many European countries we can see that in the countryside people expect for many years that a person from their village would be ordained as priest so that they could celebrate his First Mass. In the cities this custom is less evident – there the anonymity is higher. However, the First Mass is also an important phenomenon in the life of the urban parishes. It can encourage believers and it can be a challenge for the new priestly vocations. The First Mass is the integral feature of the parish structure of the particular Church. It is usual to celebrate the First Mass in the native place of the new priest because it is the particular Church community where the primiciant found his identity and was formed for the priestly vocation. The newly ordained priest could experience the enthusiasm of the sacerdotal ministry or the vocation in the parish community of his native place or during the implementation of various liturgical ministries (altar boy, sexton, lector of God's word etc.). It was interesting to observe how many new priests (and most of them) were altar boys before they became priests.

Pope John Paul II in the apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* from 1992 wrote about the native place of the priest, about the community of believers in the native parish or in the parish where the primiciant grew. This community influences the formations of the future priest. The pope speaks about the family of the priest:

»Let us mention first of all the family: Christian parents, as also brothers and sisters and the other members of the family, should never seek to call back the future priest within the narrow confines of a too human (if not worldly) logic, no matter how supported by sincere affection that logic may be. Instead, driven by the same desire to fulfill the will of God, they should accompany the formative journey with prayer, respect, the good example of the domestic virtues and spiritual and material help, especially in difficult moments. Experience teaches that, in so many cases, this multiple help has proved decisive for candidates for the priesthood. Even in the

case of parents or relatives who are indifferent or opposed to the choice of a vocation, a clear and calm facing of the situation and the encouragement which derives from it can be a great help to the deeper and more determined maturing of a priestly vocation.« (68)

An important part of the prayerful and human background of the new priest in his native place is the parish community which should be closely related to the family community and both communities should complement each other:

»Closely linked with the families is the parish community. Both the community and the family are connected in education in the faith. Often, afterward, the parish, with its specific pastoral care for young people and vocations, supplements the family's role. Above all, inasmuch as it is the most immediate local expression of the mystery of the Church, the parish offers an original and especially valuable contribution to the formation of a future priest. The parish community should continue to feel that the young man on his way to the priesthood is a living part of itself; it should accompany him with its prayer, give him a cordial welcome during the holiday periods, respect and encourage him to form himself in his identity as a priest, and offer him suitable opportunities and strong encouragement to try out his vocation for the priestly mission.« (68)

The way of the seminarians leading to the First Mass should be supported by the associations and youth movements which are signs and proof of the vitality of the particular Church and they should contribute to the human, spiritual, pastoral and intellectual formation of the new priest. For these reasons it is understandable that the birth place of the priest played an important role in the liturgical celebration of the First Mass or in his pastoral activities – for example to act as a substitute of the priest in the native parish during his vacation, participation in the solemnities of the patron saint. From the theological point of view we should not mention the birth place as the host of the First Mass but we must think on the spiritual good and human uplifting related to the First Mass for the parish community and believers. We must not forget that spiritual preparation for the First Mass is very beneficial in the parish community. Dimensions of the theological aspect of the First Mass would not be understood if we think that the First Mass must be celebrated in the birth place of the new priest. In the past as well as in the future there will be new priests who renounce the luxurious celebrations of the First Mass. The renunciation would be problematic if the motivation would be found in the individualist understanding of the sacred *ordo* or unilateral presbyter piety and if the new priest perceives the ordination as the contribution to his own sanctification.

9. Conclusion

On the basis of the historical mentions presented in this study we can state that the celebration of the First Mass blessing in history was regulated in the decrees of particular councils or in the documents published by the bishops for their dio-

ceses. Some peculiarities of particular Church communities testify that the directions for this blessing celebration had various dimensions and they served for suppressing of unwanted behaviour related to the celebration of the First Holy Mass especially against costly and profane celebration. The texts of the particular liturgical day were used as the form for the First Mass and blessing. The celebration of the First Mass in front of the exposed Eucharist was prescribed only in the orders of the First Mass for the Czech dioceses of Litomerice in 1839 and Hradec Kralove in 1846. The kissing of the hand of the primiciant was mentioned in the Paris ceremonial book from 1662. (Hauerland 1997, 192–196) Thanksgiving after the First Mass by the Ambrosian canticle *Te Deum laudamus* was mentioned for the first time in the ritual book for the diocese of Chur in Switzerland in 1732. This custom was accepted in several countries. In the context of the historical interpretation it is interesting that unlike most ritual books (mostly German), the order of the First Mass from the diocese of Litoměřice in 1839 and ritual book for Hradec Králové in 1846 mentioned the distribution of the Holy Communion in the First Mass for the relatives and people as a matter of fact and not only as a possibility as it was mentioned in the German rituals of the First Mass.

The First Mass is rightly considered the integral part of the priestly initiation. In this sense the celebration of the First Mass should serve the unity of the Church because it unites the community of the believers in the Holy Spirit. The First Mass should serve the sanctity of the primiciant and the believers because by the celebration of the First mass we share in the sanctified gifts of the Eucharist in the sacrament community with Christ through *communio sanctorum*. The celebration of the First Mass serves the Catholicity of the parish because through the primiciant who was sent by the bishop the particular Church community is in communion with the bishop and other parish communities. On the basis of the presented facts we can state that the form of the first Mass blessing has its historical substantiated specifics and special accents in every era from the viewpoint of historical and liturgical development. During its development we can see that *Missa prima* with blessing is the lively beginning of the beautiful priestly ministry in the West Christian tradition.

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