



Archdiocese of Oklahoma City

Guidelines for use of Matachines in Catholic Celebrations

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the council fathers remind us that “the liturgy, ‘through which the work of our redemption is accomplished, ‘most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.’” (SC 2) The Paschal mystery, the Christ-event, is revealed in the liturgy, and thus according to the constitution, “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows.” (SC 10) The universal quality of the liturgy gathers God’s people to the one source and one summit, Calvary, where the Paschal mystery penetrates time and space to draw souls to Christ the High Priest.

Nonetheless, “Legitimate differences in the Roman rite were allowed in the past and were foreseen by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, especially in the missions.” (*Variates Legitimae*, 1) The goal of this work of inculturation is expressed by the constitution: “Both texts and rites should be so drawn up that they express more clearly the holy things they signify and so that the Christian people, as far as possible, may be able to understand them with ease and to take part in the rites fully, actively and as befits a community.” (SC 40)

Variates Legitimae: Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, notes specifically that “among some peoples, singing is instinctively accompanied by handclapping, rhythmic swaying and dance movements on the part of the participants. Such forms of external expression can have a place in the liturgical actions of these peoples on condition that they are always the expression of true communal prayer of adoration, praise, offering and supplication, and not simply a performance.” (VL 42)

Furthermore, this instruction reminds those with care for the sacred liturgy that “Adaptations of the Roman rite, even in the field of inculturation, depend completely on the authority of the Church. This authority belongs to the Apostolic See, which exercises it through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments; it also belongs, within the limits fixed by law, to episcopal conferences and to the diocesan bishop. ‘No other person, not even if he is a priest, may on his own initiative add, remove or change anything in the liturgy.’” (SC 22)

Inculturation is not left to the personal initiative of celebrants or to the collective initiative of an assembly.” (VL 37)

In the United States, Mexico, and Latin American Countries there is a tradition of incorporating ritual dancing by Matachines into religious celebrations.

Matachines (Spanish singular *matachín*; sword dancers dressed in ritual attire called bouffon) are a carnivalesque dance troupe that emerged in Spain in the early 17th century inspired by similar European traditions such as the *moresca*. The term *danza de matachines* is also used to refer to their characteristic dance and music. The dance was documented in the 1642 treatise *Discursos sobre el arte del dançado* by Juan de Esquivel Navarro. The tradition was imported into Latin American countries such as Mexico and Peru.

Well-meaning pastors of parishes in Catholic Churches around the United States have welcomed this *danza de matachines* into their churches which have sizable Hispanic populations as a token of good will and inclusivity. This inclusivity touches the spirits and souls of those in attendance who joyfully relate such ritual dances with a sense of the sacred and their own experience of the faith.

However, the ritual dances slowly became more and more attached to the celebration of the Eucharist, which, as *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Variatates Legitimae* remind us, finds its lawful and fruitful celebration under direction by Holy Mother Church.

According to the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, the Entrance Procession includes the following persons: “The thurifer carrying a thurible with burning incense, if incense is used; The ministers who carry lighted candles, and between them an acolyte or other minister with the cross; The acolytes and the other ministers; A lector, [or deacon, cf. no. 172] who may carry the Book of the Gospels (though not the Lectionary), which should be slightly elevated; The priest who is to celebrate the Mass.” (GIRM 120) During the Presentation of the Gifts, “The offerings of the faithful are received by the priest, assisted by the acolyte or other minister. The bread and wine for the Eucharist are carried to the celebrant, who places them upon the altar, while other gifts are put in another appropriate place (cf. no. 73).” (GIRM 140) Finally, at the conclusion of the Mass, “as a rule, the priest venerates the altar with a kiss and, iafter making a profound bow with the lay ministers, departs with them.” (GIRM 169)

The ritual action of dancing is not primarily considered as a form of prayer by Catholic Hispanics, although there is sometimes a spiritual element present (for example, the dancer's desire to honor Christ and Our Lady). The dance of the Matachines instead is performed as an expression of Mexican (or Latin-American) identity. Often this identity and culture is bound up with the Catholic faith, but unfortunately, it is not uncommon for Matachines groups to include dancers with little to no faith life.

Therefore, we give the following guidelines to direct the use of Matachines during church festivals and celebrations, especially when the local ordinary is present:

- 1) Matachines are always welcome to perform outside of the church as an expression of Hispanic culture and identity.
- 2) Performances of matachines associated with the Celebration of the Mass should consider the following
 - a. Ideally, considering particular parish circumstances, Matachines should perform outside of the church before or after Mass.
 - b. If no suitable location is available outside of the church, or the circumstances make this difficult, Matachines may be permitted to dance inside the Church according to the following guidelines:
 - i. Matachines may dance before and/or after the Mass. Matachines may not perform at any part during the Mass.
 - ii. Matachines may not join in the entrance procession. They should conclude their performance and be seated before the entrance procession begins. Then they should stand with the congregation as the ministers enter for Mass.
 - iii. After the blessing and dismissal, the Matachines may perform after all the ministers have departed from the sanctuary.
- 3) Granting the profound and symbolic nature of having an evil character during the Matachines performance, we strongly recommend exercising pastoral care in the selection of such characters. For instance, references to movie images, popular cultural images, “santa muerte” or other images that might cause confusion to the faithful should be avoided.

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