

inculturation and what happened in the West. This is really religious dance and the people often spontaneously take part in it.

I was particularly impressed by participatory religious dancing at the procession of gifts during some liturgies celebrated in Kenya and by the rhythmic movements of the people during the procession of the gifts in Ghana—a procession involving the whole congregation. This was a participatory activity, not an entertaining spectacle or performance, with self-conscious overtone. This activity does not come under most of the strictures of the 1975 ruling from the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments.

Therefore, in 1994 in the Instruction on Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy, from the same Congregation, we find that dancing may be incorporated into the liturgy where dance is an inherent part of the culture of the people and is “not simply a performance. This activity may even be promoted in places where dancing has a religious meaning compatible with Christianity. This cultural context accounts for the positive approach various Episcopal conferences have taken to the question.

Caution on Religious dance

But the same conferences and other authorities have pointed out that even in traditional cultures a blanket approval for

all forms of dance during worship must be avoided. Some dances and gestures from pre-Christian traditions relate to cults or worship of false gods, even demons, not to mention the erotic overtones of some dances, that would also exclude them from Catholic worship. Borrowing from another religious culture, for example Hinduism, may also raise problems of catechetical confusion or even syncretism. But when actions and gestures have wider cultural meanings, the Church can sometimes appropriate them, just as she has done over the two Millennia of her glorious history.

Therefore, in answer to this simple question, liturgical dancing should not take place during Mass in Western societies, where dancing in this context is not part of the culture. However Christian religious dance may be appropriate, even praiseworthy, in those cultures where it is part of the cultural patrimony and where it is regulated by the Ordinary and the Episcopal conference.

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Liturgical Dance and Inculturation

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Liturgical dance during Mass

Question: Is liturgical dancing permitted during Mass?

Answer: This short question opens the whole problem of appropriate inculturation and there can be no brief answer to it. The best approach would be to make a clear distinction between liturgical dancing in the West and religious dancing in other cultures in the wider world.

a) Let us begin in the West. In 1975 there was a negative reply to your question from the then Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, Dance in the Liturgy. The profane and erotic elements in dancing in the West were cited and the distracting nature of this dancing and its worldly associations were adduced as a strong reason against it.

This was a reaction against the fad of liturgical dancing in the 1970s which continued in some places during the 1980s. I well recall various attempts at liturgical dancing in those years. Some were incongruous, even embarrassing, for example, when a gowned youth was

surrounded by swaying damsels just after Holy Communion and at the jubilee Mass of a very embarrassed elderly Bishop. But I have also seen this dancing carried out well; for example, children trained to dance reverently and wave palms in a Palm Sunday procession. One of France's well-known liturgists promoted a skilled professional dancer who obviously prayed through her every gesture and movement. These last examples did not take place during Mass. But the issue is neither skill nor aesthetic quality. Something has "gone wrong" here, and this makes many people feel uncomfortable when they see liturgical dancing. So we have to ask deeper questions that go beyond whether this is permitted according to liturgical law.

In Western society we should ask an initial question: What is liturgical dancing meant to convey? Our habit of watching someone dance, our ballet tradition, seems to cause problems once dancing enters worship. The liturgical dance becomes a spectacle. Is this meant to teach us, to inspire us or to entertain us? When it ends with applause it has obviously entertained us. It may have been done well, or, as I also recall, it may have involved the children of admiring mothers! But that applause shows that it is not liturgical. This presentation has become a form of religious ballet, a show, an item on the program. This dancing may find a legitimate place in religious theater, such as a medieval mystery play, but not within the action of holy Mass.

Western Context of Liturgical Dance

We may therefore ask a more basic question: What is liturgical dancing meant to do? Here we need to take account of the modern crisis of Christian worship, which largely revolves around a disastrous overstatement of the instructional dimension of worship. This problem still plagues us—words and more words, the altar (1) turned into a pulpit, the personality cult of the "presider," trite songs and rationed silence. Therefore it is interesting, and not surprising, that liturgical dancing spread in the West at the very time when ceremonial and ritual actions were being rejected and when language came to dominate Catholic worship.

Here I would honor the intentions of some who promoted liturgical dancing in the unfortunate years of "experimentation" and desecralization. They at least were trying to resacralize the liturgy by giving it back some sense of movement and ceremony. They knew that ceremonial is a specific religious spectacle where watching can be active participation. I believe they were trying to fill the vacuum left by stripped sanctuaries and Masses reduced to a talk show. One only had to listen to the rationale they presented to justify their dancing. Some described the movements of the old High Mass as a "solemn holy dance," and there is some wisdom in that unusual perception. But when the argument shifted to the "dancing altar boys of Seville" or the

swaying Shakers, this seemed to be appealing to obscure exceptions to set up a general rule.

Religious dance vs. Western liturgical dance

Putting it simply, religious dance is not a normal part of Western culture and thus "liturgical dancing" can find no place in the celebration of holy Mass and the sacraments. This is not to exclude it absolutely from religious experience. In a reverent and skilled form, it may be appropriate in a paraliturgy, in religious theater and at grand outdoor events, such as a secondary event (2) in Eucharistic congresses. But within the Eucharistic celebration, the ceremonial itself, the gestures, reverences and processions already there, are enough to make up our sacred "dance before the Lord."

b) When we turn to the wider Church, beyond the West, we find cultures where traditions of religious dance pre-date evangelization. This is where dancing in worship seems "natural"; hence we should cease calling it "liturgical dancing." It is religious dancing. In these countries in recent decades Christian religious dancing or movement such as swaying, rhythmic clapping, etc., has become well established and it is regulated by the competent authorities, the local Ordinary and the Episcopal conference. But I would underline a major difference between this appropriate