

Ecclesia Supplet: A Panacea for Anomaly in the Celebration and Administration of Sacraments?

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Abstract

Ecclesia supplet a Latin canonical term which, means 'the Church supplies' is invoked often albeit wrongly as remedy to anomaly (invalid) in the celebration and administration of sacraments. This piece addresses this concern by stating categorically that it cannot be invoked indiscriminately as a remedy to anomalies in the administration of sacraments. Therefore, it has considered contexts and circumstances when this can be invoked as well as indicating situations (specifying those sacraments) in which *Ecclesial supplet* cannot and should not be invoked. This being the situation, ministers must endeavor to celebrate sacraments in the manner approved using the right matter and form for their effectiveness as provided for by the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of 1983 which has served as a point of reference in this discussion.

Key words: *Ecclesia supplet*, *Sensus fidei* (*fidelium*), validity, invalidity and sacraments.

Preamble

I have been a canonist for over a decade now, but it never crossed my mind to pay attention to the famous *Ecclesia supplet*. This concept became very significant for me when I taught the course titled *Canon Law: Church and Sacraments* to theology students. A course, which focuses on the sanctifying office of the Church; it aims at understanding the *munus sanctificandi* (sanctifying office) which corresponds to the priestly function of Christ, one of the *tria munera Christi* (the triple functions/offices of Christ); the other two are the *munus Regnandi* or *Gubernandi* (governing office) which corresponds to the kingly function and the *munus docendi* (teaching office) the prophetic function (cf. can. 204 §1; 741).

My interaction with Seminarians in the class availed me the opportunity to become very conscious of the use of the expression as well as the opportunity to come to terms with the fact that *Ecclesia supplet* is quoted and invoked often albeit wrongly as remedy to anomaly (invalid) in the celebration and administration of a sacrament. My thesis seeks to establish whether *ecclesial supplet* can be invoked indiscriminately (in every situation and circumstance) as a remedy or not.

Understanding *Ecclesia Supplet* in Context

Ecclesia supplet is a Latin canonical term which, simply translated, means “the Church supplies”. When does the Church supply? Does the Church supply in every context and circumstance? The following narrative gives the response. I had earlier mentioned that in my interaction with students in class, it became obvious that whenever a sacrament is celebrated invalidly for want of the legitimate (right) Minister, Matter (material requirement) and Form (the prescribed words-formula) the “solution” as thought by the students and even in some other quarters was *ecclesial supplet*. A situation that we shall take into consideration to explain the issue of *ecclesial supplet* is the ordination of Fr. Matthew Hood of the Archdiocese of Detroit which supposedly took place in 2017 was later declared invalid. When I walked into the class for my usual lectures, one of the students posed two questions: firstly, now that the ordination of Fr. Hood is considered invalid what happens to the sacraments that he had hitherto celebrated? And secondly, what is the fate of all those to whom he had administered the various sacraments? Rather than give a direct response in my usual fashion, I decided to throw the question back to the class and to give room for possible answers. As usual, one of the students said for the sake of those innocent persons who didn’t know that Fr. Hood’s ordination was invalid, *Ecclesia supplet* can be invoked. He didn’t stop there; he went further to say that for the priest also who was not aware that his ordination was invalid and so went about celebrating and administering the sacraments, same could be invoked. Many of his classmates subscribed to the same idea. A few were not so convinced, hence were eagerly/anxiously waiting for my verdict. I decided to respond by rephrasing and posing these two questions to them. The questions were: why was *Ecclesia supplet* not invoked to validate Fr. Hood’s ordination so that in the same manner the sacraments he celebrated and administered would be valid? Why did the Church categorically declare his ordination invalid if *Ecclesia supplet* was a ready-at-hand remedy? This time around they chorused: *Sr we do not know; please tell us!* It is the response that was given in class, perhaps an in-depth response that is narrated subsequently.

Fr. Hood’s Ordination: Why Was It Declared Invalid?

Fr. Hood’s ordination was declared invalid because his baptism was an invalid one. According to the letter of Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron (American Magazine) of Detroit, issued on the 23 of August, 2020 he categorically informed his flock of the invalid ordination of Fr. Hood; this was in line with the statement issued by the then Congregation (now dicastery) for the Doctrine of Faith since the entrance into force on the 5th of June of *Praedicate evangelium*. Based on the statement issued, Fr. Hood’s baptism and ordination had been invalid because the minister at his baptism in infancy had said, “We baptize you” rather than “I baptize you” (Vatican press) which made the sacrament conferred invalid.

Briefly, Fr. Hood was supposedly baptized as an infant in 1990 the minister had used the formula “We” baptize you...” rather than “I” baptize you...” as provided for in the baptismal formula. The matter (Real water) was correct, but the formula used was incorrect. Replacing the “I” with the “We.” As simple as this is, it has the capacity of invalidating the sacrament of Baptism so administered in the light of the provisions of canon which 849 which recites:

Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments, is necessary for salvation, either by actual reception or at least by desire. By it, people are freed from sins, are born again as children of God and made like to Christ by an indelible character, are incorporated into the Church. It is validly conferred only **by a washing in real water with the proper form of words.**

To reinforce the legislation in the above-cited canon with special focus on the words highlighted on the required elements for the validity of the sacrament of Baptism, canon 850 sanctions thus:

Baptism is administered according to the rite prescribed in the approved liturgical books, except in a case of urgent necessity when **only those elements which are required for the validity of the sacrament must be observed.**

Commentaries on the two cited canons agree that these canons complement each other by emphasizing the elements required for the valid administration of the sacrament of baptism. What are these elements? For the validity of the sacrament of baptism, the prescribed matter and the formula are the real water and the form (Trinitarian formula CCC 1256) approved by the liturgical books to be “...I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These matter and form cannot be substituted with other elements. Because they have the capacity to render the administration of the said sacrament invalid such that as stated in canon 850, even in the case of urgent necessity (situation of danger of death), those elements for validity are not to be discounted on. Canon 853 reinforces the norm of law by stating the following: “Apart from a case of necessity, the water to be used in conferring baptism is to be blessed, in accordance with the provisions of the liturgical books.” Based on this provision, the water to be used in such a situation of emergency may not be blessed. Whereas the blessing of the water for baptism is contained in the rite of administering baptism it does not affect the validity of the sacrament albeit its’ liciteness. Thus, the legislator does not give room for replacing the water with another element. Same goes for the form. In the above canons referenced, the legislator is emphatic on this point such that there is no room to substitute the matter for instance replacing the water with some other liquid neither can the formula be modified or replaced as is with

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the situation under review. These elements are considered the constitutive elements (cf. canons 124; 126).

This being the case, the baptism of Fr. Hood was invalid for the simple fact that the Deacon who baptized him substituted the 'I' for 'We'. The invalidity of his baptism had other corresponding consequences one of such is to render any other sacrament subsequently received null and void. Baptism is considered the gateway/door to other sacraments (can. 849). The door to access other sacraments was closed hence it was impossible to receive such sacraments validly. As a result, his ordination was null and void and subsequently, it was declared as such. A declaration is a formal act of stating a fact. The competent authority therefore only states the fact; announces publicly that a supposed juridical act did not take place. In the case of Fr. Hood his baptism, and ordination did not take place owing to the invalidity of the sacrament of baptism received by him as well as some sacraments (those requiring holy orders as well as added faculties for their validity) administered by him. The validity of the sacrament of Holy orders requires that the candidate be a male who is baptized. Baptism then is the minimum requirement amongst other things (can. 1024-1049) and he didn't even have this. Was this his fault? By no means as many sympathized when the declaration was made and even requested/suggested that the *sensus fidei* (the sense of the faith of the people) cum *ecclesial supplet* (the church provides/supplies) could be used to remedy the situation since it was not his making that he was baptized invalidly, and he was not even aware of this fact. There is no way Fr. Hood would have known that his baptism was an invalid one since he was baptized as an infant. He was ignorant of this fact and so too was every other person concerned with his formation and subsequent ordination to the Catholic priesthood. It was after his ordination that a video clip of his ordination showed the fact that he was indeed baptized invalidly for want of the right formula.

Since he did not receive ordination knowing that it would be an invalid one neither did the ordaining prelate who ordained him knew he was ordaining him invalidly, can *ecclesial supplet* not be invoked to remedy (validate) the invalid situation? This was the cry from many quarters. According to canon 1045, the ignorance of irregularities and impediments does not exempt from them. This is because impediments belong to a class of laws termed incapacitating (cf. can. 10 and 15, 1073) and invalidating laws (cf. can. 10 and 14). The former renders a person incapable of placing a valid juridical act, and the latter nullifies the act when the requirements of the law are not respected while placing the act (can. 124).

It is important to note that Fr. Hood at the time of ordination was not baptized as such he was incapable of receiving other sacraments as repeatedly stated above. The law requires that he be baptized. It is of outmost importance to refresh our memories of one of the characteristics of law which is its

imperativeness. Law by nature demands observance (obliges) and threatens a sanction/penalty/punishment (Nwagwu 7) for its transgression (violation).

In the case of Fr. Hood, the law rendered him incapable of receiving the sacrament of holy orders for the reason that he was not baptized. He was not baptized because the minister had used the wrong formula. And since he was not aware that he was not baptized and so was subsequently confirmed and ordained, the law defended itself by rendering the ordination invalid. One who is to be ordained but has impediments to the reception of such an order if he is dispensed, the ordination would be valid. It is worthy to note that, while certain (some are not subject to dispensation) impediments can be dispensed from by the competent authority (cf. can. 1049 §1), baptism is surely not one of such since it is considered a foundation and a constitutive element for the valid reception of other sacraments not excluding Sacred orders (cf. cann. 85; 86).

The response to the question posed at the beginning of this piece; “can *ecclesial supplet* be invoked to remedy the anomaly (invalid) in the celebration and administration of sacrament? The response is in the negative, meaning that it cannot be invoked all the time as a means of validating an invalid act otherwise, it would have been applied to correct the anomaly in the use of the wrong formula for the administration of the Sacrament of baptism on Fr. Hood. Since baptism is considered the gateway to other sacraments, it meant that subsequent sacraments (confirmation, ordination) received by him were invalid. Some have argued that perhaps he had received baptism of desire; hence, he was baptized and so his ordination was valid. Authors such as Ronald L. Conte Jr subscribe to this position by citing the letter of Innocent II (1130-43) *Apostolicam Sedem* to the Bishop of Cremona, who sent a rescript to Pope Innocent seeking guidance concerning his priest whose baptism was invalid, but it was discovered after the death of the priest. The pope answered that the priest was to be considered to have received a baptism of desire, and that this was sufficient. Will this solve the issue? The answer is an emphatic no. The Church accepts baptism of desire (Martin De Agar 178; CCC 1257-1261) and there is no doubt about it as can be seen in can. 849; but as another author opined, which I also agree with him, the circumstances of baptism of desire cannot be applied to Fr. Hood. He was a child when he was supposedly baptized, he could not have received baptism by desire at such a tender age, moreover, the intention of his parents (on whose faith the church baptizes infants) was to have him baptized in fact (factual not baptism of desire), so he was given factual baptism only that it was invalidly administered.

What happens to the sacraments that Fr. Hood administered? Will all the sacraments be considered invalid then? I have consciously inferred that some of the sacraments administered will be invalid in answering the question of why Fr Hood’s ordination was declared invalid. In essence, not all the sacraments; but why is that? Below is the response to this pertinent question. I have created, at least, two scenarios to illustrate and explain why this is so.

Scenario One: A Validly Ordained Priest Whose Faculties are Seized

Our first scenario is that of a priest who was ordained and given the faculties to celebrate every sacrament. It is very important to refresh our memories by stating that an ordained priest is not automatically given every faculty by virtue of ordination (the fact of the reception of the sacrament of holy orders). While some faculties, albeit most, are received by virtue of ordination, others must necessarily be given afterwards. Typical of one such faculty is the faculty to listen to confessions and grant absolution for sins through the Sacrament of Penance. Penance is the sacrament of the remission of sins committed after baptism (CCC 1142). Remission of sins is obtained through confession which is an act of self-accusation of one's proper sins before a legitimate minister. Self-accusation implies disclosure, admission of one's sins and the taking of full responsibility for such sins (CCC 1455-1457). When a penitent has done the above, the legitimate minister verifies these other conditions: contrition and the firm resolve to amend self-imposed penance and then grant the sacramental absolution (can. 959; 981) to the penitent. Our interest here is the expression "legitimate minister" which we already met in canon 834§2. What qualifies a minister to be tagged legitimate? Or put differently, are some ministers legitimate and some not? The response is in the affirmative. For each sacrament, there is a legitimate minister. Legitimate ministers are persons lawfully deputed (can. 834§2). Legitimate ministers are further classified as ordinary and extra-ordinary. Some sacraments have ordinary and an extra-ordinary minister for their administration, while some do not. For a sacrament that has both, the implication is that if such a sacrament is administered by the ordinary minister, it would be valid; same would apply to the extra-ordinary minister in the absence of the ordinary minister.

The sacrament of penance considered in this first scenario does not have an extra-ordinary minister. Canon 965 provides "only a priest is the minister of the sacrament of penance." In like manner, the sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist also does not have an extra-ordinary Minister. The only minister who, in the person of Christ, can bring into being the sacrament of the Eucharist, is a validly ordained priest (can. 900 §1).

It is important to note as well that when a norm of law begins with the expression such as the ordinary minister it is implying that there is an extra-ordinary minister for the said sacrament. But if the provision in a norm begins with the minister or only a priest it is implying that there is no extra-ordinary minister as well as emphasizing the fact that only a priest can function as a legitimate minister.

Canon 965 recites "Only a priest (Pope, Cardinal and Bishop) and not cleric (Deacon) can celebrate the sacrament we are considering namely the sacrament of Penance (cf. CCC, no. 1461-1467). So, we gather from the above provision that the minister is an ordained priest. Is being priest enough? For this sacrament, it is not enough. It is required that this priest has the

corresponding faculty to grant absolution. This faculty is required for validity. “For the valid absolution of sins, it is required that, in addition to the power of order, the minister has the faculty to exercise that power in respect of the faithful to whom he gives absolution” (can. 966 §1).

The bishop is to grant this faculty to the priest at ordination and if the priest is a religious priest in a clerical order of Pontifical rights, then his ordinary grants him the said faculty (cf. can. 969; 971). The faculty is conferred after due examination of the priest by the competent authority (cf. can. 970).

From the above legislations, without this faculty given him, he cannot validly administer the sacrament of reconciliation (Penance). This is the point we wish to stress in this first scenario. The scenario paints a portrait of a priest who is validly ordained and granted the faculty to administer validly the sacrament of reconciliation, but whose faculty has been seized. Another point to note as we continue with our analysis is the fact that faculties can be seized by the competent authority.

Let us digress a little by establishing why faculties can be seized. Generally, in law, any faculty that has been abused can be withdrawn. When this happens, such a priest can no longer place validly the juridical act for which the faculty was granted him. In the case of the faculty to listen to confessions and grant absolution, the following reason amongst others can justify the seizure of the said faculty. A priest who violates the confessional seal (cf. can. 974); that is, divulging in the public space (external forum) information obtained in the confessional (internal forum). It is prohibited to do this under any pretext; and if he does, he is to be penalized. The penalty is the withdrawal of his faculty (cf. can. 1388). A priest whose faculty is withdrawn is not to celebrate this sacrament.

What happens if he does? When the faculty of a priest is revoked by the bishop of the diocese where he is incardinated or domiciled, he loses it everywhere. The same applies to a religious priest of a clerical institute of Pontifical right whose faculties are withdrawn by his proper ordinary (superior) (cf. can. 974). The sanction thus imposed bars him from celebrating the said sacrament. However, if he does listen and grant absolution in a situation of the danger of death (cf. can. 976), the sacrament would be valid as *ecclesial supplet* can be invoked. The legislator provides that in the situation of danger of death the faculty hitherto withdrawn is restored by the original author of this sacrament (God) for the benefit of the person(s) in the situation of death. In addition to this is the fact that, prior to the seizure of the faculty, the priest had been granted this faculty by the competent authority which made him a legitimate minister of the said sacrament. In this situation *ecclesial supplet* can rightly be invoked, owing to the fact that, the minister was a validly ordained priest who was also granted the faculty that was later seized due to the crime he committed. From this first scenario, yes *ecclesia supplet* can rightly be invoked. He had the faculty and even exercised it before its seizure as a penalty (punishment). The possibility of restoring this faculty by

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the competent human authority is also a possibility, since the seizure was occasioned by a crime/abuse in the use of the faculty. When a *Reo* (a delinquent/culprit) refrains from contumacy (Pulickal 125) and reforms (Papale 25), the competent authority is bound to lift the penalty imposed and to restore the faculty seized.

Applying this to Fr. Hood, we can categorically say that he does not fit into this scenario. He was not ordained and the faculty to listen to confession is granted only to ordained priests and not to lay people. This is one of such sacraments that were celebrated invalidly by him while he thought he was a priest. Another is the sacrament of the anointing of the sick which he also had celebrated and administered invalidly as he was incapable of celebrating this sacrament. Canon 1003 §1 states that “Every priest, but only a priest, can validly administer the anointing of the sick.” Still, another sacrament he celebrated invalidly was the sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist. Based on the provision in canon 900 §1: “the only minister, who, in the person of Christ, can bring into being the sacrament of the Eucharist, is a validly ordained priest”.

Scenario Two: *An Un-Ordained Person “Celebrates/Administers” Sacraments*

One who is not ordained but goes about impersonating as a priest cannot validly administer sacraments requiring holy orders, even if the matter and form for the sacrament are correctly used. We have noted above that some sacraments require holy orders and, in some instances, additional faculties. Such a person lacks the minimum requirements to validly celebrate those sacraments. The case of Fr. Hood fits into scenario two; while he did not intend to impersonate a priest, he acted as a priest with the presumption that he was a priest even though he was not validly ordained. Some sacraments do not necessarily require sacred orders for their validity; so, such sacraments administered by an un-ordained person can be considered valid. Example of such includes the sacrament of baptism.

Canon 861 §1 state:

The ordinary minister of baptism is a Bishop, a priest or a deacon, without prejudice to the provision of c. 530, n. 1. §2. If the ordinary minister is absent or impeded, a catechist or some other person deputed to this office by the Local Ordinary may lawfully confer baptism; indeed, in a case of necessity, any person who has the requisite intention may do so. Pastors of souls, especially parish priests, are to be diligent in ensuring that Christ’s faithful are taught the correct way to baptize.

Because the sacrament of baptism has an extra-ordinary minister, this can baptize when the ordinary minister is absent or impeded. While Fr. Hood

thought he was a priest he conferred baptisms. It is probable that he equally administered some baptisms in the case of necessity. Based on the provisions in paragraph two of canon 861, those baptisms are licit (CCC 1256). Another sacrament that does not require holy orders is the sacrament of matrimony in which the parties are themselves the ministers.

The Need to Celebrate and Administer Sacraments Validly

In Book Four of *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983, the legislator takes the pain of putting in place the norms and procedures to be observed in the celebration and administration of the sacraments in order to achieve its desired effects. For every individual sacrament, there are requirements for the valid administration. Validity designates an action which produces the effects intended; an action which does not produce the effects intended is considered invalid. These requirements consist in the Matter (Material requirement) and the Form (the words) as laid down in the norms to be followed strictly without modifications of any sort for its validity. The liturgical books, approved by the competent authority, are to be faithfully followed in the celebration of the sacraments (Bianco, 432). Accordingly, no one may on a personal initiative add to or omit or alter anything in those books (can. 846 §1).

Discounting on any item in the requirements for validity has dire consequences and would either affect the validity or licitness or the validity and licitness of the sacrament so administered. According to *mens legislatoris* (the mind of the legislator), those procedural norms as provided for both in *CIC* '83 and the minutes details as approved in Liturgical books must be observed for its efficacy.

Appeal to Ministers of the Sacraments

Rev. Andres Arango, the Deacon who supposedly baptized Fr. Matthew Hood had used the wrong formula. In fact, this erroneous use of the formula at Fr. Hood's baptism is not an isolated case. It was discovered that he had been doing that for decades. The Arizona priest gave thousands of invalid baptisms by changing a single word. The Catholic Diocese of Phoenix found that Rev. Mark Springer had been incorrectly saying "we baptize" instead of "I baptize." The error made thousands of baptisms and subsequent sacraments invalid.

Why did Rev. Springer use the wrong formula? Did he intentionally do that so that sacraments administered by him are rendered invalid? Or was it done out of carelessness? Or perhaps he was not aware of the consequences of modifying formulas as commented by someone? These questions can only be sufficiently answered by Rev. Arango. The last comment on whether he was not aware of the consequences has also attracted comments mostly negative ones calling to question the kind of seminary formation that was given to him. The issue might not necessarily bother on the kind of seminary he attended or the quality of formation he went through; rather, he must have taken thought too for an anomaly *ecclesial supplet* can be a remedy as many

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do. As repeatedly stated, it is very important that sacraments are celebrated and administered correctly.

The *munus sanctificandi* treated in Book IV of the 1983 Code expresses the role and the mission of the Church in the world; the Church exists as an instrument to bring about the salvation of humankind.

The Church fulfills its sanctifying function in a particular way through the sacred liturgy, which is an exercise of the priestly function of Jesus Christ. In the sacred liturgy, the sanctification of humanity is signified through sensible signs and effected in a manner proper to each sign. In the sacred liturgy, the whole public worship of God is carried out by the Head and members of the mystical Body of Jesus Christ; §2. Such worship takes place when it is carried out in the name of the Church by persons legitimately designated and through acts approved by the authority of the Church (can. 834).

The sensible signs mentioned in the above canon are the sacraments. These sacraments are at the center of the liturgical celebration. The effect of sanctification depends on the valid celebration or administration of the said sacraments. This is so because the sacraments in themselves produce effects, that is, grace, *ex opera operato* (Nwabude 205).

Since the sacraments are the same throughout the universal Church and belong to the divine deposit of faith, only the supreme authority in the Church can approve or define what is needed for their validity (can. 841).

When those elements needed are approved it is expected that ministers adhere to such so that the desired effect will be achieved. Not doing the right thing at the right time might cause and indeed causes untold hardship to others. While the Archbishop of Detroit assures that, upon discovery of the invalid baptism of Fr. Hood, he was subsequently validly baptized, confirmed and ordained. Although the anomaly was corrected by administering the said sacraments validly, that notwithstanding, the damage had been done. Fr Hood was devastated to learn that not only was he not baptized or confirmed, but also that he was not a validly ordained priest. In his words “it was an alienating sense that even though I was following the Lord, I wasn’t a priest, and I wasn’t a deacon” (A priest discovers). This was the negative effect that the wrong act had on him. If others (those to/on whom he administered sacraments) were interviewed, each will have their experiences to share on how they felt discovering that sacraments administered were invalid.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that *ecclesia supplet* cannot and should not be invoked indiscriminately as a solution to any Church anomaly especially in the administration of sacraments. This being the situation, ministers must endeavor to celebrate sacraments in the manner approved using the right matter and form for their effectiveness (McKenna 12). I do not make any wide claims that the topic of *ecclesia supplet* has been exhaustively treated

in this article. Far from it, it is rather a modest attempt to place *ecclesia supplet* in context.

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