

**The *celebret* between tradition and digital innovation.
Considerations and perspectives from recent news cases**

10 September 2024

Ferragosto 2024 was marked for the Diocese of Arezzo-Cortona-Sansepolcro by the peculiar affair of a man who had presented himself in several parishes in the Arezzo area, declaring himself to be a Catholic priest and incardinated in the same diocese, concelebrating the Eucharist or participating in liturgical actions on several occasions. Following several reports questioning the man's priestly status, in an initial Note dated August 17, 2024¹, published online and later withdrawn, the Curia of Arezzo specified that the presentation Mr. XY made of himself was not truthful: *“in quanto egli non è sacerdote incardinato nella nostra diocesi e, per la verità, neanche risulta che sia sacerdote cattolico”* and invited the Catholic community not to give him credit. Following a meeting between the diocesan bishop and Mr. XY, and after reviewing the documentation submitted by the latter, in a further Note dated August 20, 2024², the Curia clarified that the ordination received by Mr. XY. in the *Old Catholic Apostolic Church* (based in the United Kingdom) could not be recognized as valid in the Catholic Church and consequently the same could not under any circumstances preside or concelebrate the celebration of the Eucharist, administer the sacraments and perform any other act reserved for priests of the Catholic Church. A few months earlier, then, again the Bishop of Arezzo-Cortona-Sansepolcro had unwittingly found himself involved in the case, followed by great media clamor, of a deacon who had “concelebrated” a Mass - obviously in an invalid and illicit manner - presided precisely by the Arezzo prelate at the chapel of the Fatima apparitions. On the case the Diocese of Arezzo-Cortona-Sansepolcro by Note specified: *“Per amore di verità, tuttavia, egli intende segnalare che non conosceva il diacono in questione, come del resto non conosceva i concelebranti di quella Messa che non fossero sacerdoti della nostra diocesi. Del resto, nei santuari e in altri luoghi di pellegrinaggio come Fatima, dove è sempre molto numerosa e varia la presenza di vescovi, sacerdoti e diaconi provenienti da diocesi e, sovente, da nazioni diverse, non compete a chi occasionalmente presiede la celebrazione eucaristica verificare*

¹ The news can be found at <https://www.arezzonotizie.it/>

² Cf. <https://diocesi.aretzo.it/2024/08/20/nota-di-curia-11/>

che gli altri sacerdoti e diaconi presenti siano effettivamente in possesso dell'ordine sacro e delle altre condizioni necessarie per la celebrazione dei sacramenti, né potrebbe concretamente farlo"³.

The events recalled, serious abuses no less than facts capable of integrating canonical criminal offenses, not isolated unfortunately according to the chronicles, bring to attention the need for reflection on the relevance and function of the celebret⁴ today, a statement in itself as useful as it is evidently obsolete in practice and outdated in its regulation. The celebret, as an authorization to celebrate issued by the ecclesiastical authority to a Catholic priest (and deacon) in the form of a card or printed format, because of its deteriorability and/or the need for its periodic renewal, often not carried out by its holders, has over time lost importance, taking into account that the instrument does not always succeed in returning a current "snapshot" of the personal condition of the cleric, whose individual and ecclesial "history," and especially whose juridical condition, could undergo, even in a short time, changes affecting his ministerial status, impossible to know or detect from a paper card, often issued years ago or not renewed. It is true that in the face of an "expired" or non-renewed celebret card, the pastor/rector of a church who allows the alleged priest to celebrate is acting lightly and superficially, but it should also be borne in mind that reliance in good faith on what the "colleague" claims about himself and the ever-increasing need for pastoral collaborations in the parish even on a one-time basis, usually lead to avoid more in-depth investigations, only to find oneself faced with scams involving the People of God, almost always for lucrative purposes, profanations and serious abuses, which create scandal and division, undermining above all the sacredness of the most precious goods that the Catholic Church should guard and defend, the sacramental ones.

Canon 903 of the Code of Canon Law⁵ states: *"A priest shall be admitted to celebrate even if he is unknown to the rector of the church, provided that he exhibits the letter commendatory from his Ordinary or Superior, given at least within the year, or it may prudently be assumed that he is not prevented from celebrating"*. The letter commendatory⁶ referred to in the canon is commonly equivalent to the celebret card issued by the superior to the cleric. Although canon 903 expressly refers to the celebration of the Eucharist, it is to be considered that the celebret should be requested and exhibited in the case of the administration of other sacraments as well, since it may (*rectius*

³ Cf. <https://diocesi.arezzo.it/2024/08/09/nota-di-curia-10/>

⁴ Cf. EGIDIO MIRAGOLI, *Il celebret*, in *Quaderni di Diritto ecclesiale*, 4, 1994, pp. 435-442.

⁵ Cf. CCEO, can. 703.

⁶ Cf. the prescriptions of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

should) contain, for example, a statement about the priest's authority to administer the sacrament of penance. The renewal of the celebret, as provided for in can. 903, is annual, and this has certainly contributed to making the instrument less efficient over time, taking into account the work required of the Curie in frequently proceeding with the renewal and re-printing of cards/letters for all clergy. Thus, customs contrary to the norm have not infrequently been created, which, with the 2004 Instruction *Redemptionis sacramentum*⁷, the then Congregation for Divine Cult and the Discipline of the Sacraments intimated should be eliminated, not to mention the emerging profiles of criminal relevance and which pertain, at least, to the cases referred to in canons 1041, 6th (on the subject of irregularity in receiving orders), 1379 (on the subject of attentive celebration of the Eucharist or attempted sacramental absolution), 1382 (on the subject of profanation), 1383 (on the subject of illegitimate profit from the alms of the Mass), 1391 (on the subject of false redaction or alteration of an ecclesiastical document)⁸.

In the past 40 years, several proposals have been made to modify or reform the celebret, all of them evidently inadequate, if the chronicle still places before us the stories of false priests abusing the good faith of the faithful. An effective solution for renewing the celebret tool could be offered with the help of digital technology⁹, which is valuable, if not indispensable, in many areas of ecclesial experience and life today.

A version of celebret 5.0 has already been proposed and shared by the French bishops in 2021 on a national basis¹⁰ and made effective from 2023. The digital celebret card created by the French bishops, along the lines of an electronic identity card, carries the cleric's essential data and makes it possible, in this specific case with a QRCode system¹¹, to verify immediately, and without violating the cleric's privacy, whether or not he is qualified to perform liturgical activities or which ones are forbidden to him, though without specifying the nature of the restrictions. In the French case, the celebret informs, with a color system (green/red), whether the cleric can celebrate the Eucharist

⁷ CONGREGATION FOR THE DIVINE CULT AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Instruction *Redemptionis sacramentum*, on some that are to be observed and avoided concerning the Most Holy Eucharist, March 25, 2004, n. 111, the full text of which is published at www.vatican.va.

⁸ Cfr. BRUNO FABIO PIGHIN, *Il nuovo sistema penale della Chiesa*, Marcianum press, Venice, 2021, *passim*.

⁹ Cfr. RAFFAELE SANTORO, PAOLO PALUMBO, FEDERICO GRAVINO, *Diritto canonico digitale*, Editoriale scientifica, Naples, 2024.

¹⁰ Cf. <https://eglise.catholique.fr/sengager-dans-la-societe/lutter-contre-pedophilie/520492-resolutions-votees-par-les-eveques-de-france-en-assemblee-pleniere-le-8-novembre-2021/>. Among the motivations that led the French bishops to the decision to adopt the national digital celebret is that of prevention and protection in the area of child abuse: <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/in-francia-la-lotta-alla-abusipassa-anche-da-un-co>

¹¹ Instead, a contactless microchip is present in the CIE.

and administer the other sacraments, celebrate funerals, be able to have contact with youth and minors, and participate in television, radio, or network broadcasts. The complete and specific record of the cleric is, then, always accessible, but only to him and to the ecclesiastical authority, which is required periodically to update the database with the data of the priest/deacon.

With this system, in particular, the problem related to the periodic renewal of the paper celebret is overcome, and the “position” of the cleric is always updated. With a cell phone or tablet, then, by framing the QRCode, those responsible for verification can instantly know, and with current data, whether or not the cleric can perform certain functions. A specific Dossier was produced in May 2023¹² by the French Bishops' Conference clarifying that the national digital celebret card must contain an identifying photo of the cleric, incardination information, first name, last name, date of birth, place of birth, and information concerning ordination. A QRCode to be scanned also appears on the card. The system, now in place in France, affects 13,000 priests and 3,000 transitional and permanent deacons.

Not all priests, however, have willingly accepted the transition to this digital version of the celebret, so much so that, in some cases, such as for the Dioceses of Quimper and Leon, Cahors, and Evry, the bishop had to issue an ad hoc decree establishing the deadline (month of June 2024) by which all clerics incardinated or assigned to his diocese had to be equipped with the digital celebret¹³. From the theological point of view, criticisms have also been made of the national digital celebret, which has been accused of no longer representing the sacramental relationship between bishop and priest, but of becoming a mere certificate of eligibility, in the same way as that which is also received to carry out other professions, if not even an instrument of control over priests and their functions.

Despite the criticisms and the improvements/adaptations that may be found, drawing inspiration, for example, from established models such as those of the Electronic Identity Card and apps for reading data or being able to reach the point of dematerializing the celebret thanks to NCF connectivity and also reasoning on the advisability of presenting the data in several languages¹⁴, the path opened by the French bishops seems fully shareable, in step with the times, useful, able to restore vitality and effectiveness to the instrument of the celebret and, hopefully, can be an example for all the Bishops' Conferences. It could, in this way, create a universal database containing the data

¹² Cf. <https://eglise.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/05/DP-Celebret-mai-2023.pdf>

¹³ Cf. <https://eglise.catholique.fr/>

¹⁴ Not only Latin, as suggested by EGIDIO MIRAGOLI, *Il celebret*, cit., p. 441.

of clerics, periodically updated, under the supervision of the Dicastery for the Clergy, which, in the future, could provide guidelines to standardize the particular disciplines and practices of national digital celebrities.

For Italy, one could start by refocusing the responsibility of FACL (Federation among the Associations of Clergy in Italy), which since 2002, under an agreement with the C.E.I., has the authority to issue the celebrity card for all dioceses that request it¹⁵. It would be possible, therefore, to create a national database implemented by the data coming from the different dioceses, on the basis of which to arrive at the issuance of the digital celebrity by the competent body at the national level. Nor would this be a particularly burdensome and demanding task for the dioceses, taking into account the total number of Italian clerics today. Nor can recourse to the digital celebrity be considered useless or futile by advancing as a justification the small size of a given diocesan community, since human mobility today affects every place in the world and the chronicle shows us that precisely in the smallest and most peripheral contexts it is easier for abuse and fraud by “false priests” to take place. The digital celebrity would, then, also shelter, as far as possible, from distorted or exorbitant projections in the field of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. A further development could be to make the information of the celebrity usable by all the faithful who, in this way, could have a useful service to use in case of doubt about the status of a particular cleric (today made even more uncertain by the general avoidance of the obligation to wear the ecclesiastical habit provided for in canon 284) with whom one relates spiritually or sacramentally, preventing fraud, abuse and preserving intact the right to spiritual goods. A request by a lay believer, for example, to be able to scan the digital celebrity of a cleric should not be considered excessive or detrimental to the right to privacy. Indeed, can. 223 reminds us, as clarified by the Dicastery for Legislative Texts¹⁶, that *“l’autorità ecclesiastica, in quanto ha la funzione di procurare il bene comune, possiede anche la potestà di moderare l’esercizio dei diritti dei singoli, nel senso di regolarli con provvedimenti di carattere generale per circoscrivere il loro concreto esercizio secondo le esigenze del bene comune [...] proprio per dare certezza del diritto a tutela della persona del fedele”*.

¹⁵ Together with the proper competence that each diocesan bishop has to produce the celebrity for the clerics of his territory.

¹⁶ DICASTERY FOR LEGISLATIVE TEXTS, *Chiarimenti circa l’applicazione del can. 223 § 2 CIC*, in *Communicationes*, 44, 2010, pp. 280-281.

In conclusion, it is not a matter of further “bureaucratizing” church life as much as “difenderne la dignità”¹⁷, nor is it a matter of turning fraternal trust among priests and that between clerics and laity into distrust or suspicion. It is about becoming aware that we live a “cambiamento d’epoca”¹⁸ and digital technologies, again, can facilitate such important processes and ensure safeguards and transparency.

Paolo Palumbo

University Giustino Fortunato



¹⁷ EGIDIO MIRAGOLI, *Il celebret*, cit., p. 442.

¹⁸ FRANCESCO, *Address of the Holy Father Francis to the Roman Curia for Christmas Greetings*, 21 December 2019, the full text of which is published at www.vatican.va.