

SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST GUIDELINES

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The guidelines which follow pertain to parish Sunday celebrations when a priest cannot be present to celebrate the Eucharist with the community or when it is not practical for a community to participate in a liturgy at another parish. A Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest would happen only rarely and under an emergency situation.

I. SUNDAY, THE PREEMINENT DAY FOR THE EUCHARIST

By a tradition handed down from the apostles and having its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery every eighth day, which, with good reason, bears the name of the Lord's Day or Sunday.

The New Testament gives ample evidence that for the early Church, Sunday was the "Lord's Day." For it was on Sunday that the Lord conquered sin and death and rose to new life.

In our own time, the Second Vatican Council has reminded us: "On this day, Christ's faithful must gather together, so that, by hearing the Word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, resurrection, and glorification of the Lord Jesus and may thank God, who 'has begotten them again unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'" (1Peter 1:3)

The Mass is the only true actualization of the Paschal Mystery and is the most complete manifestation of the Church: "Hence the Lord's Day is the first holy day of all and should be proposed to the devotion of the faithful and taught to them . . . Other celebrations, unless they be truly of greatest importance, shall not have precedence over the Sunday, the foundation and core of the whole liturgical year" (SC, art. 106).

II. SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

In the Diocese of Owensboro, there are instances in cases of emergency when the People of God do not have access to the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation. Current projections do indicate that there will be fewer priests in the future to staff existing parishes. Consequently, there is:

- a. A continuing need for each parish to review the current Sunday Mass schedule and to eliminate any unnecessary Masses.
- b. A need for neighboring parishes to coordinate the scheduling of both the number and times of Sunday Masses.
- c. A need to train Leaders of Prayer for emergency Sunday situations such as sudden illness which may prevent the priest from celebrating Mass.
- d. A need to study ways of holding retreat weekends without the presence of a priest (i.e. celebrating forms of prayer other than the Eucharist; retreatants traveling to a nearby parish to attend liturgy, etc.)

III. OCCASIONS FOR SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

- A.** Word and Communion services on Sundays should not happen on a regular basis.

They should occur only when, in the judgment of the diocesan Bishop, or in his absence the Vicar General, it is not practical or possible for the community to participate in the celebration of Mass in a church nearby. In that case, the community should assemble for Sunday worship in their own community under the leadership of the person the Bishop and pastor have designated to lead them in prayer. In such a case, the celebration takes one of the forms found in the ritual Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition. These celebrations should always lead the community back to the Eucharist. "Assemblies of this kind should not take away but rather increase the desire of the faithful to take part in the celebration of the Eucharist, and should make them more eager to be present at the celebration of the Eucharist" (*Directory for Sunday Celebrations*).

B. For Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, a Word and Communion Service led by a lay presider may be scheduled after consulting with the Bishop or Vicar General when the assigned priest is prevented from presiding at Mass due to an extended leave because of illness.

C. For Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, a Word and Communion Service may be scheduled without consulting with the Bishop or Vicar General when the assigned priest is prevented from presiding at Mass due to the following:

1. Sudden illness of the priest;
2. Emergency in priest's family;
3. Weather conditions make travel inadvisable.

When possible, the assigned priest will make the decision to hold a Word and Communion Service; however, in the absence of the priest or parish staff, the Parish Pastoral Council or other pre-selected individual(s) may make the decision.

IV. RITUAL

The rituals to be used for Sunday Word and Communion Services are found in the Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition (published by the Catholic Book Publishing Co. (this can be purchased through a Catholic bookstore or from the USCCB 1-800-235-8722). Every parish should obtain a copy of this ritual book.

V. LEADERS OF PRAYER (LAY PRESIDERS)

A. Definition

Leaders of Prayer are lay persons commissioned by the Bishop to lead the faithful in the following acts of worship in their parish:

1. Liturgy of the Hours (Morning and Evening Prayer)
2. Liturgy of the Word
3. Sunday celebrations and Holy Days of Obligation when a priest cannot be present.

B. Selection

Leaders of prayer will be selected by the pastor in consultation with the Parish Pastoral Council and the Liturgy Committee. Candidates may be women or men who are fully initiated.

Leaders of prayer should be persons who exhibit the following qualities:

1. Catholic in good standing.
2. A living appreciation for Scripture and a deep reverence for the Eucharist.
3. Apparent strong faith.
4. A sense of presence in movement, gesture and prayer.
5. Skills in public speaking.
6. A spirit of cooperative involvement and leadership with the laity and clergy of the parish community.
7. A commitment to ministry and the time required for training and continued formation.

Depending on size and need, each parish might eventually select a minimum of two persons to exercise this ministry.

C. Formation

A course of formation is required for Leaders of Prayer. This formation, coordinated by the Office of Worship and the Diocesan Liturgical Commission, will include an overview of the Church's faith and tradition as expressed in its worship life, a study of the sacramental and prayer life of the Church, the theology of ministry, formation in the Scriptures, the Liturgy of the Hours,

the liturgical year, and a familiarity with the Lectionary and the ritual for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest.

D. Commissioning

Upon completion of the course of formation, the Bishop or his delegate will commission the new Leaders of Prayer to minister in the local parish for a period of three years. After a favorable evaluation by parish members, the Bishop may renew the period of service.

E. Continuing Formation

Leaders of Prayer bear a responsibility for continuing personal growth through prayer and study beyond the formation period. They will need to root themselves ever more deeply in the mystery of Christ. Of special value will be retreats and days of recollection, parish adult religious education programs, and workshops sponsored by the diocese that address the needs of sacred worship. The reading of periodicals and books on liturgy and prayer, and the study of Scripture will nourish these ministers and those they serve. Annual opportunities for continuing formation will be offered.

VI. SPECIFIC NORMS FOR LEADERS OF PRAYER

1. Leaders of Prayer are to be vested in an alb for all services conducted in the Church building.
2. Leaders of Prayer are to avoid all things proper to a priest or deacon such as greetings and blessings as outlined in the ritual Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leaders' Edition.
3. The ambo is reserved for the Liturgy of the Word. The altar is used only when the Eucharist is placed on it before the distribution of communion, if it is included in the celebration.
4. The Scripture readings are those designated by the liturgical calendar. They are to be proclaimed from the *Lectionary*.
5. Ideally, when acting as Leaders of Prayer, these persons are not to assume roles assigned to other ministers such as lectors, cantors, etc.

6. The lay presider may offer a prepared reflection on the Gospel.
7. An intention for vocations should be included in the general intercessions.

VII. CATECHESIS FOR MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY

With the inauguration of a process to form and commission Leaders of Prayer, there is a need for thorough catechesis of the assembly regarding the difference between full and active celebration of the Eucharist and a communion service. This might take the form of homilies and/or bulletin inserts for the entire parish. *(See Appendix A for sample bulletin insert.)* Additional recommended resources are also included at the end of this document.

Additionally, an explanation of the difference between full and active celebration of the Eucharist and a communion service should be given each time a service is conducted in which communion is distributed outside of Mass.

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Is there a difference between celebrating Mass and receiving Holy Communion outside of Mass?

The source of our celebration of Eucharist is the Last Supper. The New Testament tells us that the celebration of Eucharist involves seven important actions. "On the night before he died, Jesus took bread and gave thanks. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: 'Take this, all of you and eat it: this is My body which will be given up for you.' When supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples, and said, 'Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.'"

When we gather for Eucharist, these seven actions are perceived as four distinct parts of the Mass. During the presentation and preparation of the gifts, bread and wine are taken from the assembly and placed on the altar. During the Eucharistic Prayer, we give thanks and praise to the Father for all he has accomplished for us through Jesus, his Son. During the Lamb of God or fraction rite, consecrated bread is broken and wine is poured. During communion, we eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine which is the Body and Blood of Christ.

This Eucharistic action, linked to the Liturgy of the Word, is what we as Catholics believe to be the full and active celebration of Eucharist X the Mass.

This full celebration of the Eucharist is different from communion distributed outside of Mass. When communion is distributed outside of Mass, the community eats bread which was consecrated at a fuller celebration of the Eucharist.

Outside of Mass, the seven actions are reduced to one. The taking, giving thanks and praise, breaking and pouring are not present. Distribution of communion outside of Mass is linked to full and active celebration of the Eucharist, but it remains distinct from it. To celebrate Eucharist is different from receiving holy communion.

The distinction is a subtle but important one. At a time in our history when there is discussion of the possibility and reality of receiving holy communion outside of Mass, it is important for us to deepen our understanding of what we do when we gather as God's people to celebrate the Eucharist.

Recommended Resources

Dallen, James. The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.

Henchal, Michael Rev. Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. Washington, D.C.:FDLC, 1992.

Hovda, Robert. Strong, Loving & Wise: Presiding in Liturgy. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1976.

Huck, Gabe (editor). Psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995.

Hughes, Kathleen, R.S.C.J. Lay Presiding: The Art of Leading Prayer. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1988.

NCCB. Book of Blessings. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989.

USCC. Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leaders' Edition. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994.

USCC. Gathered in Steadfast Faith: Statement on Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. United States Catholic Conference, Inc., Washington D.C., 1991.