

Sunday Celebrations in the absence of a priest: Directives for the dioceses of Australia

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2004)

INTRODUCTION

1. The Sunday Eucharist is the centre of our lives for the Eucharist makes us all that we are and hope to be. Yet, on every continent, and in places such as the Pacific Islands, growing numbers of Catholic communities are deprived of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, at times for extended periods, owing to a scarcity of priests.¹

2. Over recent years, the Church in many parts of Australia has been experiencing a decline in the number of priests. Although the Eucharist is the very heart of Sunday² parish communities are not always assured of the weekly celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. The lack of a priest and the need for Sunday worship in that situation is nothing new in Australia, especially in rural communities. Today, in addition to a growing Catholic population with fewer and older priests, and population shifts from rural to city centres, other kinds of pastoral situations present themselves. Christians in the armed forces, prisons, hospitals, and senior citizens' and nursing homes are unable to celebrate the Sunday Mass. In all these developments, the ministry of the priest continues to be essential for the life of the Church.

3. The Mass remains the proper way of celebrating Sunday, and other celebrations can never equal or replace it. Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest enable the continuance of a community's Sunday worship, but they are never to be used where it would be feasible for the faithful to participate in the celebration of the Sunday Mass. As Pope John Paul II has stated: "When a community lacks a priest, attempts are rightly made somehow to remedy the situation so that it can continue its Sunday celebrations, and those religious and laity who lead their brothers and sisters in prayer exercise in a praiseworthy way the common priesthood of all the faithful based on the grace of Baptism. But such solutions must be considered merely temporary, while the community awaits a priest. The sacramental incompleteness of these celebrations should above all inspire the whole community to pray with greater fervour that the Lord will send labourers into his harvest (cf. Mt 9:38)."³

4. Liturgy is the celebration of the whole Church. Christ is always present to his Church: in the assembly of the faithful gathered in his name, in the proclamation of the Word, in the person of the minister, and above all, in the eucharistic elements.⁴ The Christian community that comes together on Sunday to give God praise and thanks is, by its union with the bishop, united with the whole Church assembling on Sunday. Communities deprived of the Eucharist and of its ordained ministers are not cut off from the Church. This unity is maintained and celebrated in Sunday assemblies when there is no priest to preside over the assembly.

5. The Australian Catholic Bishops recognise the distress caused by the present pastoral situation and set forth these *Directives* and accompanying *Pastoral Handbook* to ensure "in the best way possible, and in every situation, the Christian celebration of Sunday" in this emergency situation.⁵ Although we cannot accept as normal a situation in which the community is deprived of the eucharistic celebration, the Bishops seek to foster the preservation and growth of the faith of communities unable to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist on particular occasions or on a regular basis. Individual bishops are entrusted

¹ Congregation for Divine Worship (1988), *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* [hereafter, *Directory*], 2, 4, 5; John Paul II, Encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) 32.

² John Paul II, Apostolic letter, *Dies Domini* (1998) 46; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [hereafter, SC] 102, 106.

³ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 32.

⁴ SC 7, 33; Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Eucharisticum mysterium* 9; cf., *Directory*, introduction.

⁵ *Directory*, Introduction, 7, 24, 41.

with implementation of these *Directives*, and should, in view of the conditions of the place and circumstances of their people, determine more precisely the details of the celebrations.⁶

A. WHEN THE EUCHARIST IS UNABLE TO BE CELEBRATED ON SUNDAY

6. If, due to the lack of a priest or for some other grave reason, participation in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is genuinely impossible, the faithful are strongly recommended to take part in a liturgy of the Word in the parish church.⁷ Although a local community cannot have a complete liturgical celebration of the Lord's Day, the community, nevertheless, is still called to assemble on Sunday. Even when there are other types of liturgical celebrations on weekdays, people still have a right to take part in Sunday worship and to hear proclaimed in their midst the Word of God that is proclaimed to all the faithful throughout the world.⁸

7. The provisions of the *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (1988) are to be observed in governing and directing liturgical ministry and worship when Sunday Eucharist is unable to be celebrated because of the lack of a priest or some other serious reason.⁹ The rites outlined in the *Directory* have a positive value in themselves: they become the principal means of the Christian community's sacramental encounter with the mystery of Christ. Without the Sunday assembly for liturgical prayer the faithful are deprived of many graces that provide spiritual support and growth.¹⁰

8. In the dioceses of Australia, when the Eucharist is unable to be celebrated on Sunday, the authorised form of liturgical assembly is a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest.

9. This assembly takes one of the following forms:

- (a) Liturgy of the Word;
- (b) Liturgy of the Word with Communion;
- (c) Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours.

10. In Australia such celebrations are known as a:

- Sunday Celebration of the Word OR
- Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion OR
- Sunday Celebration of the Hours.

11. The rite of the distribution of holy communion outside Mass may be added to the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word. It is not usual to add a communion service to the Liturgy of the Hours.

12. Under no circumstances should children receive communion for the first time at a Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion. The admission to communion is admission to the Eucharist in its fullness, and it can *only* take place at a celebration of the Eucharist.

13. Preaching, or giving a reflection on the scripture, is integral to the community's hearing of God's Word, to the sanctification of Sunday, and to their baptismal call to evangelisation and mission. Liturgical preaching or giving a reflection on the scriptures is carried out by women and men formed and delegated for this ministry by their bishop.¹¹

⁶ *Directory* 41.

⁷ SC 35.4; *Code of Canon Law* [hereafter, CCL], can. 1248, §2; *Directory* 2-7, 18, 20; *Dies Domini* 53.

⁸ *Directory* 19.

⁹ *Directory* 2, 7; cf. CCL can. 1248, §2.

¹⁰ *Directory* 3, 4, 50; SC 14; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 32. See also *Instruction On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest* 7.

¹¹ See *Directives for Preaching by Laypersons*, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (2003). See *Pastoral Handbook* – Appendix 7.

14. It is appropriate at the beginning of a Sunday assembly to call to mind the link between this gathering and celebrations of the Eucharist taking place elsewhere, or with the last eucharistic celebration to have taken place in the local community.¹²

B. THE ROLE OF THE DIOCESAN BISHOP

15. Each bishop has the task of determining the conditions for application of these directives to his own diocese. These are:

- (a) to prepare parishes for emergency situations when the parish priest is prevented from being present to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist;
- (b) to prepare parishes that foresee a real possibility that a time will come when a community can no longer celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday;
- (c) to determine whether these Sunday assemblies should be held on a regular basis in his diocese, and the manner in which they are celebrated;
- (d) to establish a process of selection of lay candidates worthy and capable of leading their parish Sunday assembly in its prayer and of preaching/leading a reflection on the Word of God;
- (e) to appoint candidates to serve in the ministries of leading and preaching in the local parish and commission them in the community;¹³
- (f) to enable adequate formation of all ministers of the word and other liturgical ministers;
- (g) to provide resources (personnel and finances) for an active and fruitful formation and ongoing catechesis on the liturgy, a fundamental ecclesial service indispensable for the growth of the Church.¹⁴
- (h) to determine any norms for vesture. Appropriate vesture for the lay leader may be the baptismal garment, the alb; a stole, symbol of the ordained, is never worn.

C. DISCERNING THE NEED FOR SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest must observe the following:

Real and Serious Need

16. The automatic use of these celebrations when a priest is absent is not always justified. The assumption is of a real and serious need, and not indiscriminate use, such as mere convenience,¹⁵ which does a disservice to the Church.

Prior pastoral planning: rationalisation of Mass times, amalgamation of Parishes and Mass Centres

17. A parish community or Mass centre has given due consideration to the number of times required for a parish to gather fruitfully for Mass on Sundays (including the Saturday vigil).

Expectations made of Priests

18. Unreasonable expectations cannot be made on priests. Even where there is a scarcity of priests, under Church law a priest may not celebrate the Eucharist more than two, and if necessary three times on Sundays.¹⁶

¹² These introductory remarks are carefully prepared. See *Pastoral Handbook* - Appendix 5.

¹³ See *Pastoral Handbook* – Appendix 8.

¹⁴ *General Directory for Catechesis* 219; 222-223, cf. 175; CCL can. 775, §1; Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* 73.

¹⁵ *Directory* 21.

Unexpected Absences of the Priest-Celebrant

19. Where a particular unforeseen occasion prevents a priest from being present (due to illness, travel circumstances, or other emergency), a Sunday Celebration of the Word or a Sunday Celebration of the Hours is celebrated and led by those delegated to do so.¹⁷ This response respects the normal parish worship schedule that people expect to follow.

Scheduled Short Term Absences of the Priest-Celebrant

20. Communities which expect a short term absence of an ordained minister (during vacation, retreats, sabbatical, or continuing education) or his absence on a regular basis should make a serious attempt to obtain the services of a supply priest so that the Eucharist can be celebrated.¹⁸

(a) Where there is no supply priest for an occasional scheduled absence of a priest, if the members of a parish, including the sick and elderly, are able to travel without disadvantage they should be encouraged to celebrate Sunday Mass in another nearby church or Mass centre.

(b) If it is not possible for the community to travel without disadvantage for the celebration of the Eucharist at the times of scheduled short term absences of the priest, they should assemble for Sunday worship in their own community under the leadership of those appointed by the bishop and pastor.

D. SUNDAY CELEBRATION OF THE WORD OR HOURS ON A REGULAR BASIS

21. These Sunday assemblies are to be conducted on a regular basis only in virtue of their convocation by the bishop, under the pastoral ministry of the parish priest (pastor) and by those formed and delegated to do so.¹⁹

22. Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest can never be presented as an equal choice with participation in the celebration of the Mass.²⁰ For this reason in any one parish or Mass centre, when there is to be a Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, including its anticipation on Saturday evening, Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest are normally not conducted. They should not detract from nor compete with the celebration of the Sunday Mass, the principal form of parish liturgy. They are never an alternative, in any real sense, to the Sunday Eucharist.

23. Flowing from the pastoral needs outlined, and, under the guidance and authority of the diocesan bishop, the Church entrusts the active participation in, and responsibility for conducting these celebrations to the lay faithful.²¹ In the absence of an ordained minister laywomen and laymen lead the prayer of the Sunday assembly by virtue of the dignity they possess through their baptism and confirmation.²² They must receive a mandate from the bishop. They may be commissioned in a simple liturgical rite in the parish for a specified duration, such as three years.²³

E. FORMATION OF THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY and FORMATION of LEADERS OF PRAYER

¹⁶ CCL can. 905, §2.

¹⁷ *Directory* 29-30.

¹⁸ *Directory* 12-13.

¹⁹ *Directory* 24, 26, 30-31; CCL can. 230, §3.

²⁰ *Directory* 21.

²¹ *Lumen gentium* 10, 11; CCL can. 204 §1. See also *Evangelii nuntiandi* 73.

²² *Directory* 30-31; *Lumen gentium* 10, 11; CCL can. 204 §1. See also *Evangelii nuntiandi* 73.

²³ The "Order for the Blessing of Those Who Exercise Pastoral Service" in the *Book of Blessings* (chapter 60) may be used for this purpose. See *Pastoral Handbook* – Appendix 8.

24. The bishop is to ensure that every effort is given to providing for initial and continuing liturgical formation and catechesis of all those involved in leading and celebrating the prayer of God's people.²⁴

25. The preparation of the whole parish for these celebrations is of vital importance and should always be addressed, where possible, before the introduction of Sunday Celebration of the Word or Sunday Celebration of the Hours.

²⁴ *Christus Dominus* 14, 16; CCL can. 773, can. 779; can. 231 §1.