

GATHERED IN STEADFAST FAITH

STATEMENT OF THE BISHOPS' COMMITTEE ON THE LITURGY ON SUNDAY WORSHIP IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

Introduction	18
I. The Tradition of Sunday, the Day of the Lord	20
II. Sunday, the Preeminent Day for the Eucharist	21
III. Sunday Celebrations when a Priest Cannot Be Present	22
IV. The Leader at a Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest	24
Selection	25
Training	25
Commissioning	26
Continuing Formation	26
V. General Principles of Liturgical Prayer that Apply to Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest	27
Proclamation of the Paschal Mystery	27
The Necessity of Preparing the Celebration	28
Liturgical Texts	28
Ministers	28
Music	29
Silence	29
The Environment for Worship	29
Movement, Gesture, and Posture	30
VI. The Structure of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest	30
Morning or Evening Prayer	30
Liturgy of the Word	31
Specific Norms	31
VII. Catechesis	33
Conclusion	33

INTRODUCTION

1. When the Catholic Church was just beginning to take root in North America, it often happened that only on an occasional Sunday could the new communities expect to gather for the celebration of the Mass. Priests found it necessary to divide their presence among a circuit of fledgling parishes. As a result, Catholic families in those communities would stay at home on other Sundays for family devotions, private prayer, festive meals, and the observance of the Sunday rest.
2. Today an increasing number of Catholic communities throughout the United States are faced with a similar reality: the necessity of observing Sunday, of keeping holy the Lord's Day, without the liturgical leadership of their priest. In many dioceses, large parishes which formerly had several priests may now have only one; parishes which once had a resident pastor are now served by a priest traveling from a nearby community; areas that once had large Catholic populations, e.g., inner cities, are now experiencing population shifts; people are moving to different regions of the country, but they are not bringing clergy with them; some parishes have been and will continue to be combined with neighboring ones.
3. This situation, while being a serious problem facing the Church, is also a cause for reflection upon the mystery of the Church and the role of all the baptized in its mission. It raises the possibility of creative solutions in the redistribution of ordained priests within and among dioceses and of new approaches in the discernment and nurturing of vocations to the priesthood.
4. Until such new approaches bear fruit, there will continue to be priests in certain areas of the country who must celebrate Mass several times on Sundays in many widely scattered churches in order to serve the needs of the faithful. These priests are to be commended for their dedication and pastoral zeal.
5. It is the entire Church which the New Testament refers to as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Through baptism all Christians are called to holiness and are commissioned for Christian service to the Church and to the world. Through baptism all participate in the paschal mystery of the

Lord's dying and rising; all are called to continual conversion, ever-stronger discipleship, abundant life, and unfailing hope.

6. The common priesthood of all the baptized provides impetus for the Catholic people of God to gather in solemn assembly for worship on the Lord's Day, normally with the celebration of the eucharist. Likewise, when the community of believers is deprived of priests and therefore unable to celebrate the eucharist, the bishop should make provisions that will enable it to assemble on Sunday in order to be strengthened in faith through various liturgical celebrations. Such communities may celebrate Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours or have a Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, all of which may include the distribution of holy communion, reserved for this purpose.

7. This statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy acknowledges a growing need for these celebrations. At the same time, the committee wishes to reaffirm the constant teaching of the Church concerning the primacy of Sunday, its intimate connection with the celebration of the eucharist, and the constitutive nature of the ministerial priesthood for the life of the Church. The statement affirms that the Church is by its nature sacramental, and that the full eucharistic celebration is the fount and summit of the life of the Church.¹ It also addresses the many modes of Christ's presence in the community, the Sunday assembly as a visible gathering of the Church, and the need for well-prepared and reverently celebrated liturgical prayer.

8. In addition, this statement presents several points for the consideration of those communities which, because of the absence of priests, are unable to have the celebration of Mass on Sunday. It recognizes that alternative liturgical celebrations cannot truly substitute for the eucharistic sacrifice, for it is in the eucharistic celebration that "the entire Church recognizes and gives expression to itself."² But when necessity demands that the Sunday liturgy take another form, it is to be structured in the best way possible while being made clear to all that it is not the Mass. In addition, assemblies without the presence of a priest are to be encouraged to look forward to the celebration of the eucharist; one way of helping to ensure this is through good celebrations of other forms of liturgical prayer until such assemblies may once again celebrate the eucharist each Sunday.

9. This statement has been prepared in light of the *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship on 2 June 1988. It is meant to assist diocesan bishops, who are faced with the unavoidable reality of Sunday assemblies deprived of the celebration of Mass. The statement is seen as providing for a present need,

while never forgetting the plea of the Good Shepherd, "Ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Matthew 9:38; Luke 10:2).

I. THE TRADITION OF SUNDAY, THE DAY OF THE LORD

10. From its earliest days the Christian faithful have assembled for corporate worship on the Lord's Day. It was on the "first day of the week," according to the Jewish calendar, that Christ rose from the dead and appeared to and was present with his disciples (see Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1). No doubt it was for this reason that Christ's followers met on the first day of each week for common and, almost certainly, eucharistic worship. Saint Paul presumed this weekly gathering of the Church (1 Corinthians 16:2).

11. For Christians the earliest term for Sunday was "the first day of the week." That was soon replaced by "the Lord's Day" (see Revelation 1:10; Ignatius, *Letter to the Magnesians* 9:1; *Didache* 14:1), a term which was used along side of the customary civil designation of "the day named after the sun," that is, "Sunday." In about 150 A.D. Justin Martyr wrote concerning the activity on this day:

And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. . . . Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated (elements) by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. . . . We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead on the same day.³

12. Keeping the Lord's Day by coming together for the weekly assembly was regarded as essential in the life of a Christian, even in times of persecution: "We have to celebrate the Lord's Day. It is our rule. . . . We could not live without celebrating the Lord's Day," the martyrs of Abitina asserted.⁴

13. For Christians Sunday was always a day of joy;⁵ no one was allowed to fast⁶ or to kneel.⁷ It became a day of rest after 321 A.D. when Constantine closed the law courts and stopped people from working on that day. Under Constantine Sunday became the Christian festival of the Roman Empire.

14. In their observance of the Lord's Day the early Christians realized their identity and mission. In their eucharistic celebrations they strengthened their faith, steadied themselves for further worship and service in society, helped to liberate themselves from the manifold pressures of an isolating and alienating existence, and readied themselves again to become more clearly the life and the leaven of the world.⁸

15. This weekly celebration of Christians remains as a "sign" of the salvific reality of the new creation that began with the resurrection of Christ. As a feast of the Christian assembly, a day of eucharistic celebration, and a day of Christian anticipation of what is to come, Sunday is indispensable, and no other day of the week can be substituted for it.⁹

II. SUNDAY, THE PREEMINENT DAY FOR THE EUCHARIST

16. Whenever the Christian community gathers to celebrate the eucharist, it shows forth the death and resurrection of the Lord in the hope of his glorious coming.¹⁰ "In the Mass we have the high point of the work that in Christ God accomplishes to sanctify us and the high point of the worship that in adoring God through Christ, his Son, we offer to the Father."¹¹ By entering into the eucharistic action, the community enters into the sharing of the body and blood of Christ, for "the sharing of the body and blood of Christ does nothing less than transform us into what we receive."¹² By sharing in the eucharistic body and blood of Christ, the Church becomes the body of Christ in the world, and by being united to Christ, the head of the Church, the members of his body are united to one another.

17. Saint John Chrysostom, when speaking of the central importance of the eucharist in the life of the Christian, declared, "To abstain from this meal is to separate oneself from the Lord: the Sunday meal is that which we take in common with the Lord and with the brothers and sisters."¹³ The eucharist, then, is a celebration of communion, of union with the Lord Jesus and with his Body, the Church, that unites and transforms both the individual and the community.

III. SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS WHEN A PRIEST CANNOT BE PRESENT

18. When a priest cannot be present for the celebration of Mass on the Lord's Day, it is of paramount importance that the parish or mission community still come together to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord.¹⁴ If in the judgment of the diocesan bishop it is not practical or possible for the community to participate in the celebration of Mass in a church nearby,¹⁵ they should assemble for Sunday worship in their own community under the leadership of the person the bishop, in consultation with the pastor, has designated to lead them in prayer. In such a case the celebration may take one of the forms given in the *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition*: Morning or Evening Prayer or a Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, all of which may include the distribution of holy communion.

19. By continuing to gather on the Lord's Day to hear God's word and reflect on it, to make intercession for the Church and the world, to sing God's praises, and to encourage one another in the life of grace,¹⁶ the community expresses and develops itself as Church. It contributes to the building up of the faith of its members; it gives glory to God.

20. The faith of a Catholic Christian is normally lived in the context of a parish community; for it is there that faith is nourished and celebrated. Thus, even when the Sunday eucharist is not available, the community's gathering for worship preserves the sanctity of the Lord's Day, helps them to remain in the habit of assembling on Sunday, and prepares them for the time when there will be a priest to lead the community in the Sunday eucharist.¹⁷ These Sunday assemblies also provide opportunities within the community for nurturing vocations to the priesthood and diaconate and for continual prayer for vocations to the ordained ministries of the Church.

21. These Sunday celebrations will also contribute to the preservation of programs of catechetical instruction, the care of the sick and of persons with disabilities, and small gatherings for study, prayer and witness in the community. The community is less likely to grow in faith—or even sustain its faith—if the Sunday liturgical assembly disperses in various directions. Therefore, no effort should be spared in helping foster the celebration of faith, particularly on Sunday—even in the absence of a priest in those ecclesial communities judged by the bishop to be viable, independent faith communities.

22. The thought of Roman Catholics gathering for Sunday worship without the celebration of the Mass is altogether new for most. The years of

liturgical renewal since the Second Vatican Council have rightly reinforced the understanding that the eucharist is both essential and central to the lives of the faithful. For it is in the eucharistic action that the Church encounters Christ in a preeminent way and through a variety of modes:

First, he is present in the very assembly of the faithful, gathered together in his name; next, he is present in his word, with the reading and explanation of Scripture in the church; also in the person of the minister; finally, and above all, in the eucharistic elements. In a way that is completely unique, the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially and permanently present in the sacrament. This presence of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine "is called real, not to exclude other kinds of presence as though they were not real, but because it is real par excellence."¹⁸

Yet throughout the ages Christians have believed that Christ is present in other liturgical celebrations in the ways indicated above.

23. Divine Revelation continually underscores the Church's understanding that Christ is present in the assembly of the faithful,¹⁹ especially when it gathers in prayer.²⁰ Christ manifests himself in the words and gestures of the assembly as it listens and responds to the proclamation of God's Word and as it gathers around the altar to give thanks and praise and receive the body and blood of Christ.²¹ Among the symbols of the liturgy the assembly of believers is of particular importance.²²

24. It is likewise Catholic belief that Christ is truly present in the Word, "since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church."²³ Thus the Church has always revered sacred Scripture even as it has revered the Body of the Lord, because, above all in the liturgy, it never ceases to receive the Bread of Life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's Body and Blood.²⁴ The Second Vatican Council likened the Bible to a fountain of inner renewal within the community of God's people, and directed that in the revision of liturgical celebrations there should be more reading from Scripture.²⁵ Thus it is seen that by means of the Scriptures proclaimed and explained within the liturgy "God is speaking to his people, opening up to them the mystery of redemption and salvation, and nourishing their spirit; Christ is present to the faithful through his own word."²⁶

25. The ordained ministers of the Church have the responsibility of presiding over the prayer which builds up the Church. Through the minister the voice of Christ himself calls, invokes, challenges, proclaims, and encourages. This manifestation of Christ, of course, is most clearly seen in the bishop or priest who presides at the eucharist. By virtue of priestly

ordination, he acts in the person of Christ when he prays, presides over the assembly, and speaks on behalf of all present.²⁷

26. Through ordination the deacon also has the responsibility of leading the prayer of the assembly, since he “has been ordained for the nurture and increase of the people of God.”²⁸ For this reason, all things being equal, the diocesan bishop should give preference to the appointment of deacons as presiding ministers at Sunday worship in the absence of a priest.

27. Likewise a layperson who has been appointed by the bishop may be given the responsibility of leading worship in the absence of a priest or deacon. Although not ordained, a layperson leads the prayer of a community by virtue of that common priesthood which each Christian shares through baptism and confirmation.²⁹

28. Finally, and above all, Christ is uniquely present in the eucharistic elements under the appearances of bread and wine at each celebration of the eucharist. This presence continues even after the celebration has concluded. The Church accordingly reserves the consecrated elements for the communion of the sick and viaticum for the dying, and for the adoration of the faithful. The reservation of the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood also makes it possible for communities without a priest to receive holy communion when Mass cannot be celebrated; this practice is to be encouraged. The eucharist is reserved under the form of the consecrated bread, except in those circumstances where the sick are able to receive communion only under the form of the consecrated wine (see *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, no. 74). The pastor should see that the eucharist is brought at least weekly to the community from the parish or other community where the eucharist has been celebrated. This will serve to strengthen the bonds between the community without a priest, its pastor, and the other communities where the eucharist is celebrated.

IV. THE LEADER AT A SUNDAY CELEBRATION IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

29. When the Sunday Mass cannot be celebrated because there is no assigned priest or because the priest is legitimately unavailable, the diocesan bishop, in consultation with the pastor, may appoint a deacon or, if necessary, another person, lay or religious, to lead one of the several liturgical rites provided in *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader’s Edition*. If desired, the bishop may determine a specific term for this appointment, and its renewal may be subject to review.

30. Those so chosen for this ministry should be trained to lead each of these liturgical rites: Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and the Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, all of which may include the distribution of holy communion. In addition, especially when these ministers also serve as the pastoral administrators of parishes, they should be well versed in the administration of communion to the sick and viaticum to the dying, in preaching (when specifically designated), in the exposition of the holy eucharist, in those rites from the *Order of Christian Funerals* which, on occasion, they may be required to lead, and in other liturgical and devotional services.

SELECTION

31. Each diocese should establish its own procedures for the selection of suitable candidates for formation in leading the Sunday assembly in worship. Pastoral insight must be exercised in the selection of those to be trained and commissioned to serve in such a capacity.

32. Those chosen for this ministry should not merely be “volunteers,” but persons who exhibit a living appreciation for Scripture, a deep reverence for the eucharist, an active prayer life, an exemplary moral life, a spirit of cooperation with the laity and clergy of the particular community, an acceptance by the members of the community, an active involvement in the pastoral life of the community, and both a strong desire and ability to foster participation by lay people as members of the worshiping assembly and in other liturgical roles. The cultural make-up and linguistic needs of the assembly should also be considered in the selection of candidates.

33. Moreover, the candidates should demonstrate the necessary skills for public speaking which will enable them to be heard and understood in a liturgical setting, as well as the requisite sense of presence that is called for in movement and gesture in prayer. Finally, there should be evidence of the persons’ commitment to this ministry, of their availability to exercise it, and of their willingness and ability to integrate within a solid spirituality the exercise of this ministry with personal and family obligations.

34. In parishes and missions where Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest may be required on a regular basis, e.g., bi-weekly or monthly, it is recommended that a minimum of two candidates receive formation in exercising the ministry of leading Sunday celebrations.

TRAINING

35. Each candidate for the role of leader should complete the program of training and formation required by the diocese. This training will help the

candidate to learn what the ministry requires with respect to knowledge of the Church's faith and tradition, as these are expressed in its worship life, and what the leadership of the local assembly in the expression of its faith requires. The training sessions should include a study of the sacramental and prayer life of the Church and its sources and spirituality, the theology of ministry, formation in the Scriptures and in the ministry of preaching, the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the rite of holy communion outside Mass, the liturgical year, devotions in the life of the Church, a familiarity with the *Lectionary for Mass*, the *Sacramentary*, and other liturgical books, and a practicum in liturgical presidency.

COMMISSIONING

36. Upon completion of the course of formation, the bishop or his delegate should commission the new ministers. The "Order for the Blessing of Those Who Exercise Pastoral Service," contained in the American edition of the *Book of Blessings*, might be used or adapted. (Deacons, by their ordination, are ordinary ministers of the eucharist and have received the commission to preside at Christian worship. However, it may on occasion be possible to include them in a service led by the bishop or his delegate which bestows a mandate for leadership in a specific community, while, at the same time, acknowledging that they are ordained ministers of the Church.) The initial designation to function in this ministry should be established for a specific place and period of time, after which, upon a favorable evaluation of an individual's service, the bishop's appointment may be renewed.

37. The commissioning rite may be celebrated in the parish church of the candidates. However, when candidates from several parishes are commissioned by the bishop at the cathedral church, it is appropriate that members of their communities be present at the commissioning along with the clergy, and the family and friends of the candidates. In such cases, it is recommended that a brief letter from the bishop be read to the community of the newly commissioned minister on the first Sunday that minister leads the community's Sunday worship.

CONTINUING FORMATION

38. Those who exercise the role of leading Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest bear a responsibility for continued personal growth in the Lord through prayer and study beyond the formation period itself. If their ministry is not to become routine and perfunctory, they will need to root themselves ever more deeply in the mystery of life in Christ. Of special value will be retreats and days of recollection, parish adult 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 also serve to nourish not only these ministers but also those they serve. Parishes would do well to make such periodicals available to all who exercise liturgical ministries on their behalf.

V. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LITURGICAL PRAYER THAT APPLY TO SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

39. Several fundamental principles concerning liturgical prayer provide assistance in correctly understanding the nature of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. These principles must be kept in mind when planning the celebrations.

PROCLAMATION OF THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

40. “Themes” are never arbitrarily to be imposed on the liturgy. Rather the assembly’s Sunday worship always flows from four interrelated liturgical factors. Foremost among them is the understanding that at the center of all Christian worship is the proclamation of the paschal mystery: the Good News of God’s marvelous plan whereby the scattered children of God have been gathered together in love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

41. The second factor which shapes the liturgy on any given Lord’s Day is the liturgical year. The Sundays and seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time and the other elements of liturgical time (sunrise and sunset, vigils and octaves, and particular festivals) provide the setting through which the community gains an understanding of the meaning and celebrates a particular facet of the mystery of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

42. God’s saving plan, unfolded in the course of the Church’s year, is illumined further by the Scripture readings assigned in the *Lectionary for Mass*. Through the appointed Scripture readings of the *Lectionary*, the Church reaches a more specific statement of the Good News by which the members are spiritually nourished.

43. Finally, this proclamation of the paschal mystery must be related to the living, human experience of a specific group of people at a particular time and place. In light of this factor the leader and all who prepare the

liturgy should mold the explanation of the Scriptures, the general intercessions, the choices made among prayer texts where options are provided, the selection of music, and the composition of introductions to the needs of the worshipping community.³⁰

THE NECESSITY OF PREPARING THE CELEBRATION

44. In order to ensure that the Sunday celebration be done as well as possible, care should be taken to prepare carefully all the elements of the celebration: the ministers, the liturgical texts, the actions and gestures, the music, the liturgical environment, and the assembly itself. This should be done in collaboration with the parish or community liturgical committee.

LITURGICAL TEXTS

45. The *Liturgy of the Hours*, the *Sacramentary*, the *Lectionary for Mass*, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, and the other approved ritual books offer a variety of prayers, readings, and other texts for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. In order to assist ministers, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has prepared *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition*, a ritual book composed of texts taken from the above-mentioned sources. On Sundays and solemnities no substitutions should be made for the readings given in the *Lectionary* and the Prayer of the Day (used as the opening prayer or the concluding prayer) since these have been chosen with the whole Church in mind.³¹ But whenever optional texts are provided, the leader and those who assist in preparing for the celebration should make use of the options allowed. These options might include the choice of particular readings and presidential prayers, etc. However, the basic structure of the rite itself should not be changed or adapted, even by the leader. "Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the Church."³²

MINISTERS

46. In addition to the leader, a full complement of trained and prepared ministers should participate in each celebration: readers, musicians, cantors, choir, acolytes, ministers of hospitality (ushers), and any other ministers required for the celebration. "In liturgical celebrations each one, minister or layperson, who has an office to perform, should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office by the nature of the rite and the principles of liturgy."³³ Hence, the leader should not assume the roles and function of other ministers.

MUSIC

47. The musical principles given in the introductions to the various rites of the Church, as well as those provided by the Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, such as *Music in Catholic Worship* (1972; revised edition, 1983) and *Liturgical Music Today* (1982), are to be applied to Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. At a celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the principle of progressive solemnity should guide the choice of sung settings of the various elements.³⁴ Similarly, the musical requirements for celebrations of the Word and the distribution of holy communion are similar to those for the celebration of the eucharist, except for those elements of the Mass which are not included (i.e., the preparation of the altar and the gifts, the eucharistic prayer, and the breaking of the bread).

48. Since the liturgy is an action of the whole assembly, the first attention of leaders and music planners should be given to the moments of sung prayer which belong to the whole assembly, namely, the entrance song, the responsorial psalm, the gospel acclamation, and, when communion is distributed, the communion song. After that music has been planned, with special attention to seasonal and particular needs, other congregational, choral, vocal, or instrumental music may be chosen. In particular circumstances the use of music in more than one language may be appropriate. All musical choices, including the manner in which the music will be performed, must serve the shape and dynamics of the entire liturgy, as well as its basic structure.

SILENCE

49. Silence serves as a positive and necessary element within the structure of worship. It is important because it provides the community with the opportunity for personal reflection. A period of silence should be observed after the invitations to prayer, i.e., "Let us pray," the Scripture readings, and the communion song.³⁵

THE ENVIRONMENT FOR WORSHIP

50. A carefully prepared environment will convey the message and spirit of celebration to the community as it enters the area for worship. Vesture, lighting, the effective use of colors, candles, incense, live plants, an attractive *Lectionary* and *Book of Gospels* (when available), incense and candles at the proclamation of the Gospel (when judged appropriate)—all have a great effect on the mood of the celebration. Attention should also be given to the cultural life, religious symbols, and artistic expressions of a

particular community. Whenever possible, attempts should be made to integrate them into the liturgical environment.

MOVEMENT, GESTURE, AND POSTURE

51. The words and music of the community's prayer should be balanced and focused by attention given to movement, gesture, and posture. The care with which these bodily elements of worship are approached by those who prepare the liturgy, the leader, the other ministers, and the entire assembly will affect the prayer of all present.

VI. THE STRUCTURE OF SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

52. Two options are provided for Sunday worship in the absence of a priest: the celebration of Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, or the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, all of which may include the distribution of holy communion.

MORNING OR EVENING PRAYER

53. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer both have the same structure and the following elements:

Introductory Rites. These rites (Invitatory and Hymn) serve to gather the faithful into a worshipping community.

Psalmody. The singing or recitation of psalms and scriptural canticles, along with their respective antiphons and optional psalm-prayers, permits the assembly to join its praise and thanksgiving to God to that of Christ, who is our great high priest and advocate.

Liturgy of the Word. The proclamation of the Scripture readings assigned in the *Lectionary for Mass* brings to those gathered in faith the message of the good news of salvation and redemption in Christ. The response of the assembly to the Word of God is a combination of thanksgiving (Canticle of Zechariah or Canticle of Mary) for God's goodness to us, and of intercession (Intercessions) for the needs of the Church and the world.

Communion Rite. The assembly unites itself to the paschal mystery of Christ in holy communion. The reception of communion is also a sign and expression of the assembly's union with those who are

able to celebrate the eucharist on that particular day. If holy communion is not distributed, this portion of the rite is omitted.

Concluding Rite. After having heard the Word of God (and having been nourished by the body and blood of Christ in holy communion), the assembly is sent forth with God's blessing to live the Christian life.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

54. When the Sunday celebration takes the form of a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, it includes the following elements:

Introductory Rites. The purpose of these rites is to form the gathered faithful into a community and to dispose them for the celebration.

Liturgy of the Word. God speaks to his people through the Scripture readings assigned in the *Lectionary for Mass*, disclosing to them the mystery of redemption and salvation; the people respond through the profession of faith and the general intercessions.

Thanksgiving. The community blesses God for the gift of redemption in Christ.

Communion Rite. This rite is an expression and accomplishment of communion with Christ and with his members, especially with those who on this same day take part in the eucharistic sacrifice. If holy communion is not distributed, this portion of the rite is omitted.

Concluding Rites. The blessing and dismissal point to the connection existing between the liturgy and the Christian life.

SPECIFIC NORMS

55. In either form of the Sunday celebration the following particular points should be kept in mind by those responsible for planning the celebration and by the leader.

A. The person who leads the community at a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, whether a deacon or layperson, is called the "leader."

B. The leader may be vested in lay clothing or religious habit, a well-designed alb, or other suitable vesture according to diocesan policy. The use of the stole and dalmatic is reserved to deacons.

C. Laypersons are to avoid all things proper to a priest or deacon. They do not use the greeting before the Gospel ("The Lord be with you") or any of the other greetings designated for a deacon or priest. Nor do they use the priestly or diaconal forms of blessing. *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest:*

Leader's Edition provides proper forms of blessing for laypersons. When giving a blessing, a layperson does not make the sign of the cross over the people.

- D. The chair used by a layperson must be different from the presidential chair used by a priest or deacon, and normally it should be placed outside the presbyterium in close proximity to the assembly. 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 holy communion, if it is included in the celebration.
- E. The readings assigned in the *Lectionary* for a particular Sunday, solemnity, or feast are always to be used. On occasions when there are no assigned readings or when a selection is provided, the minister may choose appropriate readings. On Sundays and solemnities three readings are used, as at Mass. Whenever possible a sung responsorial psalm should follow the first reading.
- F. The preaching of a homily is part of most liturgical rites and is, by its very definition, reserved to a priest or deacon.³⁶ However, the bishop may allow a layperson who is properly trained to explain the Word of God at Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest or deacon and at other specified occasions.³⁷

The pastor may provide a text for the leader to read,³⁸ or if the bishop has authorized the leader to preach, the minister preaches in his/her own words. It is essential that when the leader is to preach, the text should be prepared well in advance.

Preaching, an irreplaceable ministry for explaining the Scriptures and applying them to the here-and-now of a particular gathering, is a task to be taken seriously by those who have been duly delegated by the bishop. When one preaches in the name of the Church, the great public work of Christ is continued. For deacons, and for those laypersons who may be delegated to preach within the Lord's Day assembly, a diligence in prayer, commitment to the study of Scripture, growth in faith, and preparation are required.³⁹

- G. Candles may be used in the entrance procession or placed near the ambo. When the distribution of holy communion concludes the celebration, candles are lighted at the altar before the sacrament is brought to it from the place of reservation.
- H. A layperson, delegated by the bishop, may impart any of the blessings given in the *Book of Blessings* which are not reserved to a bishop, priest, or deacon.

VII. CATECHESIS

56. It is essential that before Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest are begun in a particular community there be a period of thorough catechesis on the importance of Sunday worship, the reasons for having these celebrations, and the need for prayer and other means of encouragement for more vocations to the priesthood. It is especially important that the community be assisted in deepening its understanding of the importance of the sacramental worship of the Church and its ordained ministry, lest, in time, Sunday worship in the absence of a priest come to be seen as normative.

57. Catechesis directed to the Sunday assembly should clearly state the Church's teaching on the meaning of the Mass as found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*.⁴⁰ The catechesis should explain the very nature of the eucharist and the difference between the distribution of holy communion outside Mass and the celebration of Mass. Because of this difference, only a bishop or priest may preside at the eucharist, while a deacon, acolyte, or other specially designated minister may distribute holy communion.⁴¹ Although a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word followed by the rite for the distribution of holy communion outside Mass parallels in a general fashion the structure of the Mass—introductory rites, celebration of the Word of God, reception of holy communion, and concluding rite—the essential element of the full eucharistic action, the eucharistic prayer and the usual rites for preparing the altar and the gifts of bread and wine, are not included. Reception of communion at such a liturgical celebration is from the reserved sacrament consecrated at an earlier celebration of Mass, particularly a Mass celebrated the same day (or preceding evening). Thus, in referring to these Sunday celebrations, the expression that a layperson or a deacon is “celebrating Mass” is to be studiously avoided.

58. When due to necessity Christians receive communion outside of Mass, “they are closely united with the sacrifice which perpetuates the sacrifice of the cross.”⁴² The sacred species themselves are reserved in Catholic churches for sharing communion, especially with the sick, and viaticum with the dying, and for that worship of the eucharist which flows from the Mass. It is always the celebration of the eucharist itself which is at once the origin and the goal of the reverence which is shown the eucharist outside the Mass.⁴³

CONCLUSION

59. The preparation of this statement and *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition* has been a major project for the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy. The committee wishes to thank all

those who assisted in this work and is especially appreciative of all the bishops who cooperated in the survey it conducted in 1987.

60. The task group that was established by the Liturgy Committee to prepare these documents quickly learned of the complexity of the problem on both the theological and pastoral levels. It also discovered that proposed solutions did not really deal with the root problem. The primary need for having Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest is the lack of a sufficient number of priests or, at least, an inequitable distribution of priests so that some regions of the country have large numbers of priests and others are forced to place several parishes under a single pastor. Until a solution is found for the lack of a sufficient number of priests, the need for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest will continue and, according to the survey conducted by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy in 1987, the need will increase at least through the next several years.

61. On the positive side, it is clear that Sunday celebrations under the leadership of a deacon or layperson will enable a community to continue to worship and be nourished by the Word of God and the eucharist. Such celebrations allow Catholics to take responsibility for prayer and worship in the absence of their own priest, a responsibility that flows from their baptism and confirmation.

62. However, at best these celebrations are only a temporary measure. The community is deprived of the celebration of the eucharist, and holy communion is separated from the Mass. There is a danger of a return to the situation of the past in which the Mass was seen only as a means for providing consecrated hosts for communion. The positive effects of the liturgical reform and renewal which have affirmed the Mass as the fount and summit of the Church's life are endangered by the practical need for these celebrations. Another danger which may arise is the acceptance of the notion of the Church as a local community with little or no direct connection to the diocese and the universal Church. It can easily lead to a sense of self-sufficiency that sees little or no need for ordained ministers. The challenge that faces the Church is to ensure that parishes and other communities that do not have a priest remain closely connected to the life of the diocese, and that Mass be celebrated in them as frequently as possible.

63. The Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy is convinced that in the present circumstances providing Sunday celebrations under the leadership of a deacon or designated layperson is the best response to the phenomenon of the "priestless Sunday." These celebrations enable communities gathered in steadfast faith to hear and respond to God's

Word, to be strengthened and nourished by the body and blood of Christ, and to continue to do the work of Christ in the world. However, it remains for the entire Church to continue to work and pray for more laborers for the harvest, more shepherds for the sheep. The Church has faced similar problems in the past and with a faith-filled hope now looks to the future and to the continuing renewal of all the People of God.

NOTES

1. See Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)* [hereafter SC] (4 December 1963), art. 10; the English translation is from *Documents on the Liturgy 1965-1979: Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts* [hereafter DOL] (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 1, no. 10.

2. Congregation for Divine Worship, circular letter *Eucharistiae participationem* (27 April 1973), no. 11 [DOL 248, no. 1985].

3. Justin Martyr (ca. 150 A.D.), 1 *Apology* 67:3-7, English translation by Edward Rochie Hardy, from *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril C. Richardson, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1970), 287.

4. *Bibliographica bagiographica latina*, no. 7492, in Peter G. Cobb, "The History of the Christian Year" in *The Study of Liturgy*, Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 405.

5. *Didascalia* 21; see Cobb, 405.

6. Tertullian, *On the Crown* 3; see Cobb, 405.

7. Tertullian, *On Prayer* 23; Canon 20 of the Council of Nicaea; see Cobb, 405.

8. These effects flowing from the Sunday celebration have not always been adequately perceived or appreciated by Catholic Christians. In the Middle Ages the Church found it necessary to impose a law which commanded the observance of Sunday through participation in the Mass and by abstinence from all unnecessary work. Such a law remains to this day (see 1983 *Code of Canon Law* [hereafter CIC], canon 1247. It should be noted, however, that canon 1248 recognizes that at times participation in the eucharist is impossible either because no priest is available or for some other grave cause. In such cases, "it is specially recommended that the faithful take part in the liturgy of the word if it is celebrated in the parish church or in another sacred place according to the prescriptions of the diocesan bishop, or engage in prayer for an appropriate amount of time personally or in a family or, as occasion offers, in groups of families.") Thus the faithful have the duty of regularly taking part in Sunday worship not merely because of a legal precept, but as an expression of the virtue of religion, of gratitude and love for God, and in witness to those who do not know the Lord. In their catechesis on Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest, diocesan bishops should ensure proper instruction on the precept of participating in Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation and the obligations of those who are unable to do so because of the lack of a priest or some other grave circumstance.

9. Joint Synod of the Dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany, Resolution on the Liturgy (21 November 1975), no. 2.1. Typescript copy.

10. Sacred Congregation of Rites, Instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium* [hereafter EM] (25 May 1967), no. 25 [DOL 179, no. 1254].
11. Congregation for Divine Worship, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [hereafter GIRM], 4th ed. (27 March 1975), no. 1 [DOL 208, no. 1391].
12. Leo the Great, "Sermon 63," in EM, no. 7 [DOL 179, no. 1236], see also Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen gentium)* (21 November 1964), art. 26 [DOL 4, no. 146].
13. In *Epist. 1 ad Cor. Hom. 27*, in Cobb, 405.
14. Although, in certain circumstances, it may be the pastoral decision of the diocesan bishop to close a parish or combine one or more parishes or communities into a new parish or community with a common church or other place for the Sunday celebration of the eucharist, this document is concerned with circumstances where parishes or communities continue, but without the regular weekly celebration of Mass on Sunday.
15. See Congregation for Divine Worship, *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* [hereafter *Directory*], (2 June 1988), no. 18.
16. See CIC, can. 1248, par. 2.
17. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Sunday Liturgy: When Lay People Preside," *National Bulletin on Liturgy* 14 (May/June 1981), 102-103.
18. Congregation for Divine Worship, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* [hereafter HCWEOM] (21 June 1973), General Introduction, no. 6 [DOL 279, no. 2198]. The internal reference in this quotation is from the encyclical of Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei* (3 September 1965), no. 39 [DOL 176, no. 1183].
19. Ephesians 2:15-23; 3:9-10; 3:19; 5:18.
20. Matthew 18:20; 1 Corinthians 5:4.
21. See Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, 1978, no. 29.
22. *Ibid.*, no. 28.
23. SC, art. 7 [DOL 1, no. 7].
24. See Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei verbum)* (18 November 1965), art. 21 [DOL 24, no. 224].
25. SC, art. 35 [DOL 1, no. 35].
26. GIRM, no. 33 [DOL 208, no. 1423].
27. SC, art. 33 [DOL 1, no. 33].
28. *Directory*, no. 29.
29. *Directory*, no. 30.
30. SC, art. 35.3 [DOL 1, no. 35]. GIRM, nos. 11 and 13 [DOL 208, nos. 1401 and 1403].
31. See GIRM, nos. 11 and 332 [DOL 208, no. 1401 and 1722].
32. SC, art. 26 [DOL 1, no. 26].
33. *Ibid.*, art. 28 [DOL 1, no. 28].
34. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, nos. 273-277 [DOL 426, nos. 3703-3707].
35. SC, art. 30 [DOL 1, no. 30]. GIRM, nos. 23, 56, and 121 [DOL 208, nos. 1413, 1446, and 1511].
36. CIC, can. 767, §1.
37. *Ibid.*, can. 766.

38. In some circumstances it may be desirable for the pastor to send a recorded message or homily to the community.

39. See the statement of the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1982), which offers a brief yet thorough introduction to the task and method of preaching.

40. GIRM, Introduction and chapter 1 [DOL 208, nos. 1376- 1396].

41. HCWEOM, no. 17 [DOL 266, no. 2095].

42. HCWEOM, no. 15 [DOL 266, no. 2093].

43. EM, no. 3 [DOL 179, no. 1232].