

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest



An Overview

The purpose of this four part series of bulletin inserts will address the many issues that are involved in *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*. The inserts will discuss the importance of the Eucharist; what Eucharist means; and how these celebrations differ from Mass. They will provide information about who leads the gathered assembly when a priest is not available; the various forms the rite can take; and the various occasions that a parish may find it necessary to implement this rite. Hopefully all will gain a deeper understanding of this rite so that our Sunday celebrations will continue to give praise and thanks to God.

What is Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest?

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, is a rite provided by the Church as a response to the need of the faithful to gather for Sunday worship even in the absence of a priest. Assemblies of this kind should not diminish but rather increase the desire of the faithful to take part in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Whether deacons or lay persons, those chosen for this ministry are to be called “leaders.” Lay persons called forth from the assembly are appointed and commissioned as leaders. They should regard the office entrusted to them not so much as an honor but as a responsibility, and above all, as a service to the parish under the authority of the pastor.

Those chosen for this ministry should not merely be “volunteers.” Leaders of prayer are persons who exhibit:

- a deep reverence for the Eucharist
- a living appreciation of scripture
- a strong desire and ability to foster participation in worship
- a life consistent with the Gospel
- an exemplary moral life in good standing according to the laws of the Church
- an active prayer life
- active involvement in the pastoral life of the community
- a spirit of cooperation with the members and pastoral leaders of the parish
- acceptance by members of the community
- a willingness to be trained and receive continued instruction for this ministry

Next week:

Sunday Worship: Mass vs Celebrations Without a Priest

Sources:

Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, 1988.
Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 1963.

Why does the Church gather on Sunday?

The apostles counseled people to gather on Sunday as members of Christ's body. St. Ignatius of Antioch observed that in the early Church the faithful held the Lord's Day in such high regard that they never willingly omitted its observance even in times of persecution.

The Second Vatican Council reiterated this teaching that the faithful must come together in observance of the Lord's Day. By hearing the Word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, the passion, resurrection, and glorification of the Lord Jesus is remembered and thanksgiving is offered to God for a living hope through the resurrection of the Lord.

The assembly of the faithful manifests the Church as called by God to celebrate oneness in Christ. Together the faithful receive spiritual formation and instruction in the Paschal Mystery through the scriptures and homily. The celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice expresses the one sacrifice by Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Hence, the Lord's Day is the primary holy day and should be celebrated in as complete a way as possible. Other celebrations should not have precedence over the Sunday celebration of Mass.

When does a parish celebrate this rite?

The Archdiocese of Dubuque recognizes that in the exceptional case when a parish priest is absent due to sickness or some other emergency, and when another priest cannot take his place, a complete celebration of the Eucharist on Lord's Day may not be possible. When Mass cannot be celebrated on Sunday, the first thing to be ascertained is whether the faithful can attend Mass at a nearby church. When the archbishop or his delegate judges it to be impractical or impossible for the community to participate in Sunday Mass at a church nearby, it remains important for the faithful to gather in prayer and celebration on Sunday.

A gathering of this kind can never be held on a Sunday in places where Mass has already been celebrated or is to be celebrated or was celebrated on the previous Saturday evening, even if the Mass is celebrated in a different language.

How is the rite celebrated?

The riches of Sacred Scripture and of the Church's prayer may be amply provided to the faithful in various ways apart from the Mass. A celebration of the Word of God is particularly recommended, and may include communion, preferably brought from a celebration of Mass earlier that same day at a nearby parish.

Two options are provided for Sunday worship in the absence of a priest:

1. a celebration of Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours
2. a celebration of the Liturgy of the Word

Both options may include the distribution of Holy Communion. These options should not be regarded as the ideal solution nor as a surrender to mere convenience. There should normally be only one assembly of this kind in each place on any given Sunday.

Who are the leaders of prayer for the rite?

Through ordination the deacon has the responsibility of leading the prayer of the assembly; therefore, preference is given to the appointment of deacons as presiding ministers when the parish gathers for a *Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest*. A lay person who has been appointed, trained and commissioned by the bishop or his delegate may be given the responsibility of leading worship in the absence of a priest or deacon. A lay person leads the prayer of a community by virtue of that common priesthood which each Christian shares through baptism and confirmation.