

DIRECTORY FOR SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

PREFACE

1. From the day of Pentecost, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Church of Christ has always faithfully come together to celebrate the paschal mystery on the day called "the Lord's Day" in memory of the Lord's resurrection. In the Sunday assembly the Church reads in all the Scriptures those things that concern Christ and celebrates the Eucharist as the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord until he comes.
2. But a complete celebration of the Lord's Day is not always possible. There have been and still are many of the faithful for whom "because of the lack of a priest or some other serious reason, participation in the eucharistic celebration is not possible."
3. In some regions, after their first evangelization, the bishops have put catechists in charge of gathering the faithful together on Sunday and, in the form of a devotional exercise, of leading them in prayer. In such cases the number of Christians grew and they were scattered in so many and such widely separated places that a priest could not reach them every Sunday.
4. In other places the faithful were completely blocked from gathering on Sunday, either because of the persecution of Christians or because of other severe restrictions of religious freedom. Like the Christians of old, who held fast to the Sunday assembly even in the face of martyrdom, the faithful today, even when deprived of the presence of an ordained

minister, also strive to gather on Sunday for prayer either within a family or in small groups.

5. On other grounds today, namely, the scarcity of priests, in many places not every parish can have its own Eucharistic celebration each Sunday. Further, for various social and economic reasons some parishes have many fewer members. As a consequence many priests are assigned to celebrate Mass several times on Sunday in many, widely scattered churches. But this practice is regarded as not always satisfactory either to the parishes lacking their own parish priest (pastor) or to the priests involved.

6. In some local Churches, then, because of the conditions indicated, the bishops have judged it necessary to arrange for other Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest, so that in the best way possible the weekly gathering of the faithful can be continued and the Christian tradition regarding Sunday preserved.
It is by no means unusual, particularly in mission territories, for the faithful themselves, aware of the importance of the Lord's Day and with the help of catechists and religious, to gather to listen to the word of God, to pray, and, in some cases, even to receive communion.

7. The Congregation for Divine Worship has considered these matters, reviewed the documents already published by the Holy See, and acceded to the wishes of the conferences of bishops. Therefore the Congregation regards it as opportune to recall elements of the teaching on the meaning of Sunday, to lay down the conditions for the lawfulness of such celebrations in dioceses, and to provide guidelines for

carrying out such celebration correctly.

It will be the responsibility of the conferences of bishops, as circumstances suggest, to determine these norms in greater detail, to adapt them to the culture and conditions of their people, and to report their decisions to the Apostolic See.

CHAPTER I SUNDAY AND ITS OBSERVANCE

8. "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."
9. Evidence of the gathering of the faithful on the day which the New Testament itself already designates as the Lord's Day appears explicitly in documents of the first and second centuries. Outstanding among such evidence is the testimony of Saint Justin: "On this day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place." But the day of gathering for Christians did not coincide with the day of rest in the Greek or Roman calendar and therefore even the gathering on this day was a sign to fellow citizens of the Christians' identity.
10. From the earliest centuries pastors had never failed to counsel their people on the need to gather together on Sunday. "Because you are Christ's members, do not scatter from the church by not coming together ... do not neglect your Savior or separate him from his members. Do not shatter or scatter the Body of Christ...." Vatican Council II recalled this teaching in

the following words: "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'(1 Peter 1:3)."

11. Saint Ignatius of Antioch pointed out the importance of the Sunday celebration for the life of the faithful: "Christians no longer observe the Sabbath day, but live according to the Lord's Day, on which our life was restored through Jesus Christ and his death." In their "sense of the faith" (*sensus fidelium*) the faithful, now as in the past, have held the Lord's Day in such high regard that they have never willingly omitted its observance even in times of persecution or in the midst of cultures alien or hostile to the Christian faith.
12. The following are the principal requisites for the Sunday assembly of the faithful.
 - a. the gathering of the faithful to manifest the Church, not simply on their own initiative but as called together by God, that is, as the people of God in their organic structure, presided over by a priest, who acts in the person of Christ;
 - b. their instruction in the paschal mystery through the Scriptures that are proclaimed and that are explained by a priest or deacon;
 - c. the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, by which the paschal mystery is expressed, and which is carried out by the priest in the person of Christ and offered in the name of the entire Christian people.

13. Pastoral efforts should have this aim above all that the sacrifice of the Mass on Sunday be regarded as the only true actualization of the Lord's paschal mystery and as the most complete manifestation of the Church: "Hence the Lord's Day is the first holyday 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."
14. Such principles should be set before the faithful and instilled in them right from the beginning of their Christian formation, in order that they may willingly fulfill the precept to keep this day holy and may understand why they are brought together for the celebration of the Eucharist by the call of the Church and not simply by their personal devotion. In this way the faithful will be led to experience the Lord's Day as a sign of the divine transcendence over all human works, and not as simply a day off from work; in virtue of the Sunday assembly they will more deeply perceive themselves to be members of the Church and will show this outwardly.
15. In the Sunday assembly, as also in the life of the Christian community, the faithful should find both active participation and a true spirit of community, as well as the opportunity to be renewed spiritually under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this way, too, they will be protected from the attractions of sects that promise relief from the pain of loneliness and a more complete fulfillment of religious aspirations.
16. Finally, pastoral effort should concentrate on measures which have as their purpose "that the Lord's Day becomes in fact a

day of joy and of freedom from work.” In this way Sunday will stand out in today’s culture as a sign of freedom and consequently as a day established for the well-being of the human person, which clearly is a higher value than commerce or industrial production.

17. The word of God, the Eucharist, and the ministry of the priest are gifts that the Lord presents to the Church, his Bride, and they are to be received and to be prayed for as divine graces. The Church, which possesses these gifts above all in the Sunday assembly, thanks God for them in that same assembly and awaits the joy of its complete rest in the day of the Lord “before the throne of God and before the Lamb.”

CHAPTER II

CONDITIONS FOR HOLDING SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF PRIEST

18. Whenever and wherever Mass cannot be celebrated on Sunday, the first thing to be ascertained is whether the faithful can go to a church in a place nearby to participate there in the eucharistic mystery. At the present time this solution is to be recommended and to be retained where it is in effect; but it demands that the faithful, rightly imbued with a fuller understanding of the Sunday assembly, respond with good will to a new situation.
19. The aim is that the riches of Sacred Scripture and of the Church’s prayer be amply provided to the faithful gathered on Sundays in various ways even apart from Mass. For the faithful should not be deprived of the readings that are read at Mass in the course of a year, nor of the prayers of the liturgical

seasons.

20. Among the forms of celebration found in liturgical tradition when Mass is not possible, a celebration of the word of God is particularly recommended, and also its completion, when possible, by eucharistic communion. In this way the faithful can be nourished by both the word of God and the body of Christ. "By hearing the word of God the faithful learn that the marvels it proclaims reach their climax in the paschal mystery, of which the Mass is a sacramental memorial and in which they share by communion." Further, in certain circumstances the Sunday celebration can be combined with the celebration of one or more of the sacraments and especially of the sacramentals and in ways that are suited to the needs of each community.

21. It is imperative that the faithful be taught to see the substitutional character of these celebrations, which should not be regarded as the optimal solution to new difficulties nor as a surrender to mere convenience. Therefore a gathering or assembly 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 preceding Saturday evening, even if the Mass is celebrated in a different language. Nor is it right to have more than one assembly of this kind on any given Sunday.

22. Any confusion between this kind of assembly and a eucharistic celebration must be carefully avoided. 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.

23.The faithful are to understand that the eucharistic sacrifice cannot take place without a priest and that the eucharistic communion which they may receive in this kind of assembly is closely connected with the sacrifice of the Mass. On that basis the faithful can be shown how necessary it is to pray that God will “give the Church more priests and keep them faithful in their love and service.”

24.It belongs to the diocesan bishop, after hearing the council of presbyters, to decide whether Sunday assemblies without the celebration of the Eucharist should be held on a regular basis in his diocese. It belongs also to the bishop, after considering the place and persons involved, to see out both general and particular norms for such celebrations. These assemblies are therefore to be conducted only in virtue of their convocation by the bishop and only under the pastoral ministry of the parish priest (pastor).

25.“No Christian community is ever built up unless it has its roots and center in the eucharistic liturgy.” Therefore before the bishop decides on having Sunday assemblies without celebration of the Eucharist the following, in addition to the status of parishes (see no. 5), should be considered: the possibility of recourse to priests, even religious priests, who are not directly assigned to the care of souls and the frequency of Masses in the various parishes and churches. The preeminence of the celebration of the Eucharist, particularly on Sunday, over other pastoral activities is to be respected.

26.Either personally or through his representatives the bishop

will, by an appropriate catechesis, instruct the diocesan community on the causes requiring provision of these celebrations, pointing out the seriousness of the issue and urging the community's support and cooperation. The bishop is to appoint a delegate or a special committee to see to it that these celebrations are carried out correctly; he is also to choose those who are to promote these celebrations, and to see to it that these people receive the necessary instruction. But the bishop's concern is always to be that several times a year the faithful involved have the opportunity to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist.

27. It is the duty of the parish priest (pastor) to inform the bishop about the opportuneness of such celebrations in his territory, to prepare the faithful for them, to visit them during the week, and at a convenient time to celebrate the sacraments for them, particularly the sacrament of penance. In this way the communities involved will come to realize that their assembly on Sunday is not an assembly "without a priest," but an assembly "in the absence of a priest," or, better still, an assembly "in expectation of a priest."

28. When Mass cannot be celebrated the parish priest (pastor) is to ensure that holy communion be given. He is also to see to it that there is a celebration of the Eucharist in due time in each community. The consecrated hosts are to be renewed often and kept in a safe place.

29. As the primary assistants of priests, deacons are called in a special way to lead these Sunday assemblies. Since the deacon has been ordained for the nurture and increase of the people of God, it belongs to him to lead the prayers, to proclaim the

gospel, to preach the homily, and to give communion.

30. In the absence of both a priest and a deacon, the parish priest (pastor) is to appoint laypersons, who are to be entrusted with the care of these celebrations, namely, with leading prayers, with the ministry of the word, and with giving holy communion.

Those to be chosen first by the parish priest (pastor) are readers and acolytes who have been duly instituted for the service of the altar and of the word of God. If there are no such instituted ministers available, other laypersons, both men and women, may be appointed; they can carry out this responsibility in virtue of their baptism and confirmation. Such persons are to be chosen in view of the consistency of their way of life with the Gospel and in the expectation of their being acceptable to the community of the faithful. Appointment is usually to be for a definite time and is to be made known publicly to the community. It is fitting that there be a celebration in which prayers are offered to God on behalf of those appointed.

The parish priest (pastor) is to see to the suitable and continuous instruction of these laypersons and to prepare with them worthy celebrations (see Chapter III).

31. The laypersons appointed should regard the office entrusted to them not so much as an honor but as a responsibility and above all as a service to their brothers and sisters under the authority of the parish priest (pastor). For theirs is not a proper office but a supplementary office, since they exercise it “where the need of the Church suggests in the absence of

ministers.”

Those who are appointed to such an office “should do all of, but only, those parts which pertain to that office.” They should carry out their office with sincere devotion and the decorum demanded by such a responsibility and rightly expected of them by God’s people.”

32. When on a Sunday a celebration of the word of God along with the giving of holy communion is not possible, the faithful are strongly urged to devote themselves to prayer “for a suitable time either individually or with the family or, if possible, with a group of families.” In these circumstances the telecast of liturgical services can provide useful assistance.

33. Particularly to be kept in mind is the possibility of celebrating some part of the liturgy of the hours, for example, morning prayer or evening prayer, during which the Sunday readings of the current year can be inserted. For “when the people are invited to the liturgy of the hours and come together in unity of heart and voice, they show forth the Church in its celebration of the mystery of Christ.” At the end of such a celebration communion may be given (see no. 46).

34. “The grace of the Redeemer is not lacking for individual members of the faithful or entire communities that, because of persecution or a lack of priests, are deprived of celebration of the Eucharist for a short time or even for a long period. They can be moved by a deep desire for the sacrament and be united in prayer with the whole Church. Then when they call upon the Lord and raise their minds and hearts to him, through the power of the Holy Spirit they enter into communion with

Christ and with the Church, his living Body ... and therefore they receive the fruits of the Eucharist.”

CHAPTER III ORDER OF CELEBRATION

35.The order to be followed in a Sunday celebration that does not include Mass consists of two parts, the celebration of the word of God and the giving of holy communion. Nothing that is proper to Mass, and particularly the presentation of the gifts and the eucharistic prayer, is to be inserted into the celebration. The order of celebration is to be arranged in such a way that it is truly conducive to prayer and conveys the image not of a simple meeting but of a genuine liturgical assembly.

36.As a rule the texts for the prayers and readings for each Sunday or solemnity are to be taken from The Roman Missal (Sacramentary) and the Lectionary for Mass. In this way the faithful will follow the cycle of the liturgical year and will pray and listen to the word of God in communion with the other communities of the Church.

37.In preparing the celebration the parish priest (pastor) together with the appointed laypersons may make adaptations suited to the number of those who will take part in the celebration, the ability of the leaders (animators), and the kind of instruments available for the music and the singing.

38.When a deacon presides at the celebration, he acts in accord with his ministry in regard to the greetings, the prayers, the gospel reading and homily, the giving of communion, and the

dismissal and blessing. He wears the vestments proper to his ministry, that is, the alb with stole, and, as circumstances suggest, the dalmatic. He uses the presidential chair.

39. A layperson who leads the assembly acts as one among equals, in the way followed in the liturgy of the hours when not presided over by an ordained minister, and in the case of blessings when the minister is a layperson (“May the Lord bless us ...”; “Let us praise the Lord ...”). The layperson is not to use words that are proper to a priest or deacon and is to omit rites that are too readily associated with the Mass, for example, greetings — especially “The Lord be with you” — and dismissals, since these might give the impression that the layperson is a sacred minister.

40. The lay leader wears vesture that is suitable for his or her function or the vesture prescribed by the bishop. He or she does not use the presidential chair, but another chair prepared outside the sanctuary. Since the altar is the table of sacrifice and of the paschal banquet, its only use in this celebration is for the rite of communion, when the consecrated bread is placed on it before communion is given.

Preparation of the celebration should include careful attention to a suitable distribution of offices, for example, for the readings, the singing, etc., and also to the arrangement and decoration of the place of celebration.

41. The following is an outline of the elements of the celebration.

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

- b. Liturgy of the word. Here God speaks to his people, to disclose to them the mystery of redemption and salvation; the people respond through the profession of faith and the general intercessions.
- c. Thanksgiving. Here God is blessed for his great glory (see no.45).
- d. Communion rites. These are 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.
- e. Concluding rites. These point to the connection existing between the liturgy and the Christian life.

The conference of bishops, or the individual bishop himself, may, in view of the conditions of the place and the people involved, determine more precisely the details of the celebration, using resources prepared by the national or diocesan liturgical committee, but the general structure of the celebration should not be changed unnecessarily.

- 42. In the introduction at the beginning of the celebration, or at some other point, the leader should make mention of the community of the faithful with whom the parish priest (pastor) is celebrating the Eucharist on that Sunday and urge the assembly to unite itself in spirit with that community.
- 43. In order that the participants may retain the word of God, there should be an explanation of the readings or a period of silence for reflection on what has been heard. Since only a priest or a deacon may give a homily, it is desirable that the parish priest (pastor) prepare a homily and give it to the leader of the assembly to be read. But in this matter the

decisions of the conference of bishops are to be followed.

44. The general intercessions are to follow an established series of intentions. Intentions for the whole diocese that the bishop may have proposed are not to be omitted. There should also often be intentions for vocations to sacred orders, for the bishop, and for the parish priest (pastor).

45. The thanksgiving may follow either one of the ways described here.

1. After the general intercessions or after holy communion, the leader invites all to an act of thanksgiving, in which the faithful praise the glory and mercy of God. This can be done by use of a psalm (for example, Psalms 100, 113, 118, 136, 147, 150), a hymn (for example, the Gloria), a canticle (for example, the Canticle of Mary), or a litanic prayer. The leader and the faithful stand and, facing the altar, together recite the thanksgiving.
2. After the Lord's Prayer, the leader of the assembly goes to the tabernacle or other place where the eucharist is reserved and, after making a reverence, places the ciborium with the holy Eucharist on the altar. Then while kneeling before the altar he or she together with all the faithful sing or recite a hymn, psalm, or litany, which in this case is directed to Christ in the Eucharist.

But this thanksgiving is not in any way to take the form of the eucharistic prayer, the texts of prefaces or eucharistic prayer from The Roman Missal (Sacramentary) are not to be used, and all danger of confusion is to be removed.

46. For the communion rite the provisions given in The Roman

Ritual for communion outside Mass are to be observed. The faithful are to be frequently reminded that even when they receive communion outside Mass they are united to the eucharistic sacrifice.

47. For communion, if at all possible, bread consecrated that same Sunday in a Mass celebrated elsewhere is used; a deacon or layperson brings it in a ciborium or pyx and places it in the tabernacle before the celebration. Bread consecrated at the last Mass celebrated in the place of assembly may also be used. Before the Lord's Prayer the leader goes to the tabernacle or place where the Eucharist is reserved, takes the vessel with the body of the Lord, and places it upon the table of the altar, then introduces the Lord's Prayer — unless the act of thanksgiving mentioned in no. 45,2 is to take place at this point.
48. The Lord's Prayer is always recited or sung by all, even if there is to be no communion. The sign of peace may be exchanged. After communion, "a period of silence may be observed or a psalm or song of praise may be sung." A thanksgiving as described in no. 45,1 may also take place here.
49. Before the conclusion of the assembly, announcements or notices related to the life of the parish or the diocese are read.
50. "Too much importance can never be attached to the Sunday assembly, whether as the source of the Christian life of the individual and of the community, or as a sign of God's intent to gather the whole human race together in Christ.

"All Christians must share the conviction that they cannot live

their faith or participate — in the manner proper to them — in the universal mission of the Church unless they are nourished by the eucharistic bread. They should be equally convinced that the Sunday assembly is a sign to the world of the mystery of communion, which is the Eucharist.”

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