

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

GUIDELINES

for the

Archdiocese of Hobart

Liturgical Commission,

Archdiocese of Hobart

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My Dear People,

There has been a growing need for some time to look more seriously at the situation where a number of Catholic Communities in Tasmania find themselves worshipping on Sunday in the absence of a priest.

For a considerable period of time, some communities in Tasmania have been assembling on a Sunday in the absence of a priest, demonstrating the importance of observing Sunday, the Lord's Day. The Archdiocese of Hobart is not the only diocese facing this reality; many dioceses around the country are confronted with the same dilemma.

The Universal Church, aware of this situation, has published a *Directory for Sundays in the Absence of a Priest*. Promulgated in 1988, the *Directory* prescribes what is to be done when real circumstances require the decision to have Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. Such celebrations require men and women to be called as lay leaders of Sunday gatherings.

As the Eucharist is at the very heart of what it means to be a Catholic, many of us, priests and people, realise that this situation is far from ideal. The fact that a growing number of Catholic communities in the Archdiocese do not have access to regular Sunday Mass is a cause of great concern.

In response to this serious need, the Archdiocese of Hobart, through its Liturgical Commission and Liturgy Office, will provide formation and training for lay leaders as well as catechesis for those communities facing these changing circumstances. A Manual for Lay Leaders of Sunday Assemblies will be provided as well as standard rituals for the various seasons of the Church Year.

The guidelines that follow provide the principles and criteria for the implementation of Sunday Assemblies in the Absence of a Priest in the Archdiocese of Hobart.

+ Adrian Doyle, Archbishop of Hobart

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The sacrifice of the Mass remains the only true way of making the Lord's Paschal Mystery present and showing forth the true nature of the Church. From the day of Pentecost, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Church has faithfully gathered on the 'Lord's Day'. The celebration of Mass, however, is not always possible.

The scarcity of priests has meant that not all communities can celebrate Mass on Sunday. It is not always satisfactory for the priests to celebrate many Masses in widely scattered churches. The Archdiocese is mindful that Church law limits a priest to celebrating Mass twice on a Sunday, including a Vigil (three times with permission). The health and spiritual well-being of the priests should also be considered.

The *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (DSCAP) affirms the centrality of Sunday for Christians and indicates that all communities must have an opportunity to gather on Sunday even when Mass cannot be celebrated. These ritual celebrations should reflect the liturgical seasons. The link between these celebrations and the parish Mass is always emphasised.

Pastoral effort should concentrate on making the Lord's Day a day of joy and freedom from work. Sunday is a holy day. It is a sign of freedom and a day established for the well being of the human person, having a higher value than commerce or industrial production.

Through catechesis and instruction worshipping communities will come to understand that lay led Sunday assemblies cannot be equated with the celebration of the Mass. Several times a year the faithful must have the opportunity to participate in the celebration of the Mass.

Sunday lay led assemblies cannot be held in Mass centres where Mass is already celebrated on Sunday, including the Vigil.

It is not right to have more than one lay led assembly in a Mass centre for any given Sunday (see DSCAP, Chapter 2, 21).

Because of the particular character of the Lord's Day, no other day can substitute for Sunday. Even if a weekday Mass is celebrated, the faithful would still gather on Sunday. A weekday celebration of the Mass will always take account of the liturgical calendar and the readings assigned to the day. The substitution of Sunday readings and prayers on a weekday cannot make this day a Sunday.

In the absence of a priest or deacon, lay persons are to be entrusted with the care of Sunday celebrations, leading prayers, proclaiming the Word and giving Holy Communion from the reserved sacrament. If there are no acolytes or readers who have been duly instituted for service at the altar or the Word of God, men and women whose lives are consistent with the Gospel may be appointed to lead worship by virtue of their baptism and confirmation. They are to be acceptable to the community and undergo appropriate formation. An appointment period which may be reviewed is determined and this is to be made known to the community.

Parish priests are to ensure that opportunities are provided for continuous formation of these lay persons (see DSCAP, Chapter 2, 30). Lay leaders should regard the office not so much as an honour but a service. They carry out their office under the guidance of the parish priest with sincere devotion and decorum demanded by such a responsibility, and rightly expected by God's People.

The celebration of the Word of God is particularly recommended for these gatherings, and completed, when appropriate, by Holy Communion. Alternatively, the Liturgy of the Hours (Morning or Evening Prayer) may be celebrated incorporating readings from the Sunday Lectionary.

When such celebrations are not possible, the faithful are strongly urged to devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time either individually, with a family, or if possible, with a group of families.

CRITERIA FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In an emergency situation

Sometimes unforeseen circumstances such as illness, travel difficulties or another emergency, may cause the unexpected absence of priest for Sunday Mass. Lay led Sunday assemblies may be held when:

- a. a supply priest is unavailable
- b. there is insufficient time available to notify the community of a change of arrangements
- c. there is a designated leader available who has undergone appropriate formation and training
- d. the community has received some formation regarding the nature and appropriateness of these assemblies

The celebration need not include Holy Communion. A Liturgy of the Word will always be appropriate but the giving of Holy Communion may not always be possible. Those rostered for the ministry of the Word should proclaim the readings as usual.

Scheduled short-term absences on Sunday

Where communities can prepare for short-term absences of their priest due to vacations, retreats, sabbatical or continuing education etc. these steps would be followed:

- a. Serious attempts should be made to obtain a supply priest so that Mass can be celebrated
- b. If Mass is celebrated in a nearby centre members of the community are to be encouraged to attend
- c. If either of these options is not possible, the community should assemble for Sunday worship under the leadership of those who have been appointed by the bishop and pastor.

Where there are a number of Masses normally scheduled for a Sunday in a given Mass centre one single lay led Liturgy of the Word with Communion is celebrated in the absence of a priest (DSCAP, Chapter 2, 18).

Sunday celebrations on a regular basis

Lay led Sunday assemblies may be held on a regular basis where an existing identifiable faith community would be seriously disadvantaged spiritually if they did not gather in some way for worship on a Sunday. The community would have trained lay ministers and be able to support and coordinate these Sunday celebrations.

Communities that find themselves in the situation where they will be celebrating Sunday Liturgies of the Word with Communion on a regular basis will require careful formation and preparation. Mass must be available to these communities periodically and special effort may be required around the central days of the Liturgical Year.

- a. Only the Archbishop can authorise a Sunday lay led assembly
- b. Only one of these celebrations may occur in a Mass centre on a Sunday (including a Saturday Vigil)
- c. A weekday celebration does not substitute for a Sunday
- d. Designated persons lead these celebrations
- e. After being chosen and accepted by the community, leaders are trained and commissioned to serve for a prescribed period of time.

Given the importance of Sunday for the faithful, those who are unable to gather with the community's lay led Sunday celebrations are urged to reflect on the Sunday readings and spend time in prayer. This could also occur in family or neighbourhood groups. In this way they are united with their local worshipping community and the Universal Church, of which they are part.

References:

Directory for Sundays in the Absence of a Priest, Congregation for Divine Worship, 1988

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Directory for the Dioceses of Australia, Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2004.