

WHAT TO DO ON THE OTHER SUNDAYS

Guidelines for Communities without a Resident Priest

Diocese of Palmerston North – June 2002

Background

Together, we have done much in recent years to ensure that, even with fewer priests, the ministry of priests continues to be available to all. Our planning includes

- the clustering of parishes and eucharistic communities, including Catholic marae, into pastoral areas and providing priestly ministry across parish boundaries;
- entrusting to lay people more responsibility for their local parishes and eucharistic communities, including Catholic marae;
- providing theological and pastoral formation for lay leaders;
- providing resources to fund the formation and remuneration of lay leaders;
- promoting vocations to the priesthood;
- taking care not to overburden the priests we have.

This forward planning

- *recognises* the reality of fewer priests;
- *recognises* that through baptism/confirmation we all share responsibility for the life and mission of the Church;
- *builds on* the renewal that is taking place in the Church;
- *anticipates* growth and development, including the emergence of new vocations, as the fruits of this renewal.

In the spirit of Pope John XXIII we expect a kind of new Pentecost, and with Pope John Paul II we already recognise the signs of a new springtime. A time of pruning and renewal is not to be mistaken for a time of diminishment.

Re-scheduling

Re-scheduling the times and places of Sunday Masses is

inevitable if we are to care for our priests, and
desirable if people are to experience Sunday worship in the way the Church wants it to be.

This involves some adjustments both for those communities in which Mass can no longer be provided every Sunday, and for those communities in which Mass will still be provided every Sunday. It also involves some big adjustments for the priests of our diocese. We need to support one another.

The question arises: where Masses have been reduced from every Sunday to once a fortnight or once a month, what should people do on those other Sundays?

The Meaning of the Christian Sunday

Our approach to the question “what should we do on the other Sundays?” needs to start from the meaning of the Christian Sunday. All other considerations, such as Mass times, location, local custom, distances, etc need to be taken into account, but they will all take second place to the meaning of the Christian Sunday.

What Sunday means to Christians is reflected in what they did on Sundays. By the year 150, St Justin was able to describe the customary practice this way:

On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members whether they live in the city or in the out-lying districts. The recollections of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray. On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent by saying ‘Amen’. The Eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.

The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution, and they themselves decide the amount. The collection is placed in the custody of the president, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress, or away from home. In a word, he takes care of all who are in need.

We hold our common assembly on Sunday because it is the first day of the week, the day on which God put darkness to flight and created the world. And because on that same day our Saviour Jesus Christ rose from the dead. For he was crucified on Friday and on Sunday he appeared to his apostles and disciples and taught them the things that we have passed on for your consideration.

This little glimpse of Christian history echoes something we find already in the earliest days after Jesus’ resurrection: *they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the community, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers* (Acts 2:42).

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council summed up our ancient tradition this way:

By an apostolic tradition which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery every eighth day; with good reason then, this bears the name of the Lord’s Day.

On this day, Christ’s faithful should come together in one place, so that by hearing the Word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they might call to mind the passion and the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who “has begotten us again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3).

Hence the Lord’s Day is the original feast day..... (Constitution on the Liturgy, n.106).

So, in the Church’s understanding, the resurrection of Jesus, the Sunday assembly, and the celebration of Eucharist are linked. They belong to our very identity as Christ’s followers. In the celebration of Eucharist we are gathered into union with the risen Christ and with one another.

This is why from the beginning Christians were urged not to be absent from the assembly (Heb. 15:25) and why the Church later spoke of a “serious obligation” to be there. Another early Church document says that those who are absent are *depriving the body of Christ*, i.e. depriving one another.

What follows from this?

It follows that the Sunday gathering for Mass is the *norm*, and alternative arrangements are *exceptions from the norm*.

Alternative services, such as non-eucharistic services on a Sunday, and Mass on a weekday instead of Sunday, fall short of the ideal, even though they are sometimes the best we can manage.

The same is true of Sunday gatherings that do not reflect the breadth and diversity of *the body of Christ*. St Justin, quoted above, spoke of *a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts*. After the Second Vatican Council, the Church discouraged “group Masses” and even convent Masses, on Sundays in favour of the parish Mass.

The point here is not merely numbers (because a small assembly is just as important as a big assembly). The point is that “the body of Christ” is more fully reflected in an assembly that brings us together in all our diversity of age, social and economic backgrounds, culture and race. The body of Christ is less fully manifested in smaller and less diverse gatherings.

Moreover, smaller spread-out communities are in danger of becoming isolated from the wider aspects of parish life if they do not fairly frequently participate in the Sunday gathering of the wider community.

However, there will be times when these alternatives *are necessary*. For example,

1. Where the cultural differences are so great that some would be prevented from worshipping in the ways that are natural to them if they always had to worship within another group’s culture. For this reason, we consider Masses on Catholic marae to be on an equal footing with other Masses in the parish.
2. Where travel from smaller, more isolated communities to neighbouring parishes is difficult. In these circumstances it can be appropriate to celebrate services which nurture the local community’s faith. However, they are not true substitutes for Mass.

However, Catholics should not limit their experience to these alternative services. The experience of being *one body, one spirit, in Christ* (Eucharistic Prayer II) is more profound when it involves all the diversity of Christ’s body, and this more easily happens in a *common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or in the outlying districts* (St Justin). And if travel can be expected of people from “outlying districts” it can be more expected of people from other parts of the same city. *Mass is the norm, and is to be chosen where possible*.

Every liturgy, whether it is Mass or an alternative service, needs to be an experience of *God’s presence in the community*. It is God who convokes the assembly, is present in the assembly, speaks to the assembly, and sends the assembly out to be a people set apart for his own purposes, which is to reconcile the world to himself (cf 2Cor 5:17-20). This experience, and how we respond to it, especially in postures and gestures that express our unity and our involvement, is able to be a life-giving experience. There is *much more to this than just “attending” Mass, or fulfilling an obligation, or doing what we “have always done”*.

Mere routine attendance or routine performance is not experienced as life-giving. It can wear people's faith down, and young people can find it "dead". It can also wear the priest down if he is under pressure from the number of Masses expected of him on the same day, or if the response of the congregation is "heavy" and disheartening.

Even though the value of celebrating liturgy is never merely about "what we get out of it" or "how we feel about it", nevertheless, we owe it to ourselves and to the other members of the assembly, and especially to our children, to make it a life-giving experience as far as possible. It is up to all of us to try to make it like an experience of meeting the risen Christ – in the body of Christ.

Authorised alternative services

It is for the bishop of the diocese to authorise these alternatives. Also, only books authorised by the bishop are to be used.

The services themselves are services of the word. These can take either of two forms:

1. The Church's official Morning or Evening Prayer (which uses the Psalms, a scripture reading and intercessions;
2. A service based on scripture readings and prayers; and on special occasions, such as Sundays, Holy Communion is also included.

The role of the authorised lay leader is to facilitate the worship of the whole assembly. Having more than one leader involved can help to offset the impression that the lay leader is substituting for the priest.

Lay leaders do not normally wear special garments. But where this is done, these are not to be, or to resemble, the vestments of ordained priests.

Lay leaders preside from the lectern, and use the altar only for Holy Communion.

Those parts of any service of the word that involve "presiding" are led by lay leaders when the priest is absent, and are led by the priest when he is present. These parts include the greeting which convenes the assembly, and those prayers which involve speaking *on behalf of the assembly*.

Preaching should not take the form of a sermon, nor even a catechesis based on the scripture. Rather, it should be a brief reflection, which so to speak, holds God's word up to us like a mirror where we can see how God works in people's lives, including our own lives. It should be prepared by a group during the week beforehand. On some occasions it might be best just to repeat one or two of the scripture's verses reflectively, allowing God to speak to the assembly in the silence that follows.

APPENDIX I

Sunday Rest

The Sunday vigil Masses are Sunday Masses in the sense described above.

But they are not meant to result in Sunday itself becoming just like another secular day. That would contradict the meaning of the Christian Sunday.

Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a 'weekend', it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see 'the heavens'. (Pope John Paul II, *Keeping the Lord's Day Holy*, n. 4)

Our social and economic lives are meant to be arranged so that Sunday can be different from every other day of the week. The Canadian bishops have expressed this well:

Sunday should be "a day of playfulness and simplicity, of contemplation and wonder, of praise and enjoyment of life. Rather than doing different things on Sunday, we should consider **doing** less and **being** more. On Sunday, we should rest from our day-to-day efforts to change the imperfections of our world and instead rejoice in the beauty and splendour of creation." (*The Meaning of Sunday in a Pluralistic Society. Pastoral Reflections by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 1986, n.15).

Appendix II

Other Occasions Resulting from Fewer Priests

We are doing our best to ensure that priests will still be available for baptisms, weddings and funerals. But it is wise to be prepared for times when a priest might not be available. So we have made the following provisions:

Baptisms

When a priest is not easily available from one of the other parishes in the Pastoral Area, and it is difficult to arrange a different date, a Lay Pastoral Co-ordinator is authorised to celebrate the baptism (and our Lay Pastoral Co-ordinators have been trained for this.)

Marriages

Because arrangements for weddings are supposed to be made several months in advance, it should not be too difficult to arrange a date when a priest will be available. But the bishop is able to authorise qualified Lay Pastoral Co-ordinators to preside at marriages when necessary.

Funerals

Lay Pastoral Co-ordinators, and Minita o Tangihanga are authorised by the bishop to lead funerals that do not involve a Mass.

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Sometimes when the Second Rite of Reconciliation has been arranged and advertised, it can happen that insufficient priests are available for the size of the congregation, and that the ceremony is likely to become too drawn out. If this happens, then people's desire for sacramental forgiveness justifies recourse to the Third Rite.

On such occasions, an accompanying catechesis should explain that forgiveness only happens when we are genuinely sorry for our sins and intend to do our best to turn away from them. Without those dispositions, absolution, whether in Rite I, II or III, does nothing.

It should also be explained that any serious sins forgiven during Rite III should be confessed on the occasion of one's next confession. Identifying and naming our sins offsets that subtle tendency we have to not quite name sin for what it truly is, to rationalise it, to justify ourselves – in a word, to not believe we need God's mercy. Confessing our sins also gives us the experience of discovering that in spite of making our sins known, we are not thought less of, but, on the contrary, are welcomed, loved and forgiven. We all need this experience. Having fewer priests should not deprive us of it, because our pastoral planning involves making our priests more available for their ordained ministry.