

# *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest:* Policy for the Diocese of Stockton

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## **Introduction**

“By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord’s Day.” (SC 106) The celebration of the Mass on Sunday, the Lord’s Day, is central to the life of the Church and the life of the parish; it is the sacrament of unity that builds up the Body of Christ.

However, for a number of reasons such as inequitable number or distribution of priests, or sudden illness, there are places and occasions where the celebration of the Eucharist is not possible. The diocesan Bishop, together with his priests, must find ways to help the faithful gather together to maintain the vitality of their faith and the strength of their parish life. In considering appropriate solutions, and where no substitute priest or nearby celebration is available, the Bishop gives permission for the implementation of the ritual *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, hereafter called “Sunday Celebrations”.

## **Background**

In 1988, in response to the growing phenomenon of “priestless Sundays,” the Holy See released the *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of A Priest*. “The fundamental point of the entire *Directory* is to ensure, in the best way possible and in every situation, the Christian celebration of Sunday. This means remembering that the Mass remains the proper way of celebrating Sunday, but also means recognizing the presence of important elements even when Mass cannot be celebrated.”

In 1992, the Bishops of the United States developed a ritual book for this celebration, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*. The intent of the *Directory* was “not intended to encourage, much less facilitate unnecessary or contrived Sunday assemblies without the celebration of the Eucharist. The intent is simply to guide and to prescribe what should be done when real circumstances require the decision to have Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest.”

## **Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest**

When the Bishops of the United States implemented this document in 1994, they wrote, “Before Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest are begun in any diocese or parish, it is essential that there be diocesan-wide catechesis on the nature of these celebrations and the necessity of fostering vocations to the priesthood so that eventually no community will be denied the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist each week.”

The earlier ritual book for the *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* has been revised in light of 13 years of pastoral experience and published in 2007. It affirms the following values:

- 1) the preservation of the Christian tradition of Sunday, the Lord's Day;
- 2) the Celebration of the Eucharist as the central, constitutive element in the life of the Church
- 3) the differences between the Celebration of the Eucharist and the Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest;
- 4) the importance of the weekly local gathering of the faithful;
- 5) the affirmation of the priesthood of the faithful and lay ministries;
- 6) the Lord really present when the community gathers;
- 7) the Lord really present when his word is proclaimed and preached;
- 8) the urgency of fostering and praying for vocations to the priesthood;

*Note: The practice of distributing Holy Communion to the assembly from the reserved Eucharist at Mass obscures the difference between Mass and "Sunday Celebrations" and must be avoided. Distributing Holy Communion from the tabernacle at Mass has been discouraged in Vatican directives since 1742, and in the Diocese of Stockton is only allowed after all the hosts consecrated at the Mass have been distributed.*

## Policy

*Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* may be used in the Diocese of Stockton, provided the following directives are observed.

- 1) Parish catechesis must be provided so that all parishioners understand that "although these celebrations substitute for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, they should not be regarded as the ideal solution to present circumstances nor as a surrender to mere convenience" (*Directory*, 11). "Sunday Celebrations" does not replace the celebration of Sunday Mass but provides an opportunity for the people to gather in a Sunday assembly when Mass is not available.
- 2) When there is to be no priest available, the decision to implement *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* is to be made using the **criteria in Appendix I**.
- 3) If a community cannot participate in the celebration of Mass nearby, they should assemble for Sunday worship in their own community, under the leadership of those who have been designated, formed, and commissioned by the Bishop.
- 4) While there should normally be only one liturgical assembly of this kind in each place on a given Sunday, and not in a location where a Mass was celebrated that weekend, particular situations may call for adaptations of this norm, e.g. the size of a parish, the number of masses, and the lack of advance notice.
- 5) In the absence of a priest, a deacon assigned to the parish is to conduct the celebration, using the 2007 Rite. As a minister of the Word, the deacon is called in a special way to lead these Sunday assemblies. Candidates for diaconal ordination will receive special training to prepare them for this

ministry; those already ordained will attend diocesan training to ensure they have received the most current information applicable.

- 6) In the possible absence of a priest or deacon, “upon the request and recommendation of the pastor,” the Bishop will appoint lay persons to prepare and lead these celebrations. In the Stockton Diocese, the following requirements are established for lay leaders of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*:
  - They should be trained as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion in the parish;
  - They must be nominated by their pastor; at least two persons should be nominated for training;
  - They must be trained and approved for this ministry, preferably in the Pastoral Ministry Leadership Formation Advanced Theology for Ministry program, or have comparable education and/or experience;
  - The lay leaders of prayer are to be made known to the community and commissioned at a parish liturgical celebration;
  - The appointment and delegation is made by the Bishop for a definite period of time; (three years) and for a specific place.
  - There is a commitment to regular ongoing Scripture preparation (weekly or bimonthly). They should have a basic knowledge of scripture and be adequately prepared to offer a reflection on the Sunday readings.
  - *See the qualities listed in the Appendix II “Discernment for Lay Leaders of Prayer”.*
- 7) The deacon or lay leader is to be assisted by other ministers, e.g., lectors, cantors, musicians, servers, hospitality and environment ministers, and extraordinary ministers of Eucharist as needed.
- 8) After the Gospel, a homily is given by the presiding deacon or a reflection is given by the lay leader of prayer.
- 9) As its name implies, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* is to be used **only** for the Lord’s Day. It is **not** for use on weekdays.
- 10) As soon as a priest knows he will be unable to preside at Sunday Mass due to illness or some other serious reason, he should attempt to find a priest-substitute. If the priest is unable to do so, he should contact his Dean, or the Vicar for Clergy to determine the availability of a priest-substitute from outside the deanery. If no priests are available, then *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* may be used, with the deacon assigned to the parish presiding, or, in the absence of a deacon, a trained lay leader.
- 11) **Vesture:** deacons shall wear the liturgical vestments proper to the order (alb with stole, and the dalmatic if available); lay leaders of prayer wear an alb when presiding.

**The Ritual text that is always to be used is:** *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*. Washington DC, United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

# Appendix I: Implementation of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*

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## Preliminary Requirements

- 1) Catechesis to the community:
  - on meaning and importance of Sunday
  - on major differences between Mass and “Sunday Celebrations”
  - on presence of Christ in gathered community and in Scripture proclaimed
- 2) Post/announce times of Masses available in neighboring parishes
- 3) Officially recognize trained leaders of prayer at parish liturgies

## Criteria for Use

- 1) “Sunday Celebrations” are not permitted when:
  - A priest is unavailable but there is adequate time to provide notice of Mass times in other parishes.
  - A Mass is available at another time in the same church on Saturday evening or on Sunday, or is readily available in a neighboring church.
- 2) “Sunday Celebrations” can be used when the assigned priest is prevented from presiding at Mass and **no substitute priest is available** due to the following:
  - Attendance at a continuing education workshop or retreat
  - Conducting a workshop, retreat, or mission
  - Celebrating a baptism, wedding, or funeral away from his assigned parish/mission
  - Vacation or extended leave
  - Hospital stay or recuperation time away from the parish/mission
  - Other circumstances, if no substitute priest can be found after a reasonable effort
- 3) “Sunday Celebrations” may also be scheduled when the assigned priest is prevented from presiding at Mass due to the following (and presuming that **no substitute priest is available**):
  - Sudden illness of the priest
  - Emergency in the priest’s family
  - Weather conditions make travel inadvisable
- 4) In an emergency situation, when there is not a deacon or approved Lay Leader of Prayer available, the Pastor may designate a leader for “Sunday Celebrations” for a single occasion. In such circumstances, there is to be a period of silence in place of the homily or period of reflection that follows the Gospel.

- 5) The use of “Sunday Celebrations” for the following groups is at the discretion of the Diocesan Bishop on a needs basis:
  - The priest serves a special needs community, including but not limited to a prison population, migrant workers, campus ministry, or elderly care centers
  - Only one priest is serving two or more parishes
- 6) Note that these policies apply only to “Sunday Celebrations”. When a priest is not available to celebrate a regularly scheduled weekday Mass, a deacon or designated lay leader may conduct the Rite of Distributing Holy Communion Outside of Mass. The Liturgy of the Hours may also be celebrated.

### **Steps to Take Before Using “Sunday Celebrations”**

- 1) Exhaust all reasonable means of finding a priest, including contacting all neighboring parishes, religious order priests, the Dean, and the Vicar for Clergy for assistance.
- 2) Find the nearest available Mass(es) and ensure the information is posted in a convenient and accessible place at the church.
- 3) Invite a deacon assigned to the parish or a trained lay leader in the parish to preside.

### **Which Form of the Rite Should be Used?**

- 1) The Liturgy of the Hours – Morning /Evening Prayer – is the official Prayer of the Church and is sufficiently different from Sunday Mass to not confuse the faithful as to whether Mass or another celebration is taking place. However it is less familiar to many and requires some catechesis and explanation.
- 2) The Liturgy of the Word option is easier to lead and more familiar to the people. However it is more like Mass and requires great care so that people do not confuse the celebration with Mass.
- 3) Either option can be celebrated with or without the distribution of Holy Communion.

## Appendix II: The Ministry of Presiding at Prayer

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As a minister of the Word, the deacon is called in a special way to lead these Sunday assemblies. When the community does not have a deacon assigned to it, or when the possibility exists that the deacon may not always be available, the pastor may select a few lay leaders to be trained and commissioned for the role.

### **Discernment Process for Selecting a Lay Leader of Prayer**

Because the service of Leader of Prayer is a liturgical and public ministry of the Church, it is important to choose qualified candidates to be formed and commissioned for this role. The discernment should include consideration of the following qualifications of possible candidates.

A Catholic in good standing who:

- visibly practices the faith
- has an active prayer life
- has a profound appreciation of Scripture
- is involved in the pastoral life of the parish
- has a collaborative spirit
- possesses leadership and public speaking skills
- has completed the Advanced Theology for Ministry program or has equivalent education and formation in their background
- is willing and able to enter the diocesan training program
- can commit to the ministry and is available to exercise it
- has an ability to offer a shared reflection on the Scriptures
- will be accepted and affirmed by the parish leadership and community

After approval by the pastor, the names of candidates are to be submitted to the Bishop via the Office for Worship.

Upon approval from the Bishop, their appointment is to be made known to the community by means of a liturgical celebration. The Order for the Blessing of Those Who Exercise Pastoral Service contained in the *Book of Blessings* may be used for this purpose.

# Form for Requesting Approval for a Lay Leader of Prayer

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Most Reverend Stephen E. Blaire  
Bishop, Diocese of Stockton  
212 N. San Joaquin Street  
Stockton, CA 95202

Dear Bishop Blaire,

I am requesting permission for \_\_\_\_\_ to be designated as a Lay Leader of Prayer for *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* for three years' time beginning on \_\_\_\_\_. When approved, he/she will be blessed at Sunday Mass utilizing the blessing for "Those Who Exercise Pastoral Service" contained in the Book of Blessings.

This individual meets the following criteria:

- visibly practices the faith
- has an active prayer life
- has a profound appreciation of Scripture
- is involved in the pastoral life of the parish
- has a collaborative spirit
- possesses leadership and public speaking skills
- has completed the Advanced Theology for Ministry program or has equivalent education and formation in their background, specifically \_\_\_\_\_
- is willing and able to enter the diocesan training program
- can commit to the ministry and is available to exercise it
- has an ability to offer a share reflection on the Scriptures
- will be accepted and affirmed by the parish leadership and community

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parish: \_\_\_\_\_

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Bishop:      *Approved*      \_\_\_\_\_      *Not Approved*      \_\_\_\_\_

*Date:*      \_\_\_\_\_      *Initials:*      \_\_\_\_\_