



SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

Part 1: Where Have We Been?

Much of the time, our modern day lives force us to live only in the here and now. As a result we often think that what is happening right now is of very recent origin and fail to see that often there is a much longer history behind events unfolding right now. That is certainly true when we examine the current phenomena of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. This ritual is becoming increasingly common in the Roman Catholic world and many are inclined to see this only in terms of conditions as they exist today. That is to say that we see the current shortage of priests as the cause for needing this ritual and are inclined to think that this is the only explanation for its history when this has happened. Our most recent experience seems to indicate that our parishes have always had at least two, and many times, three, four or more priests to serve them and that this was always this way. A look at our history, however, tells us something very different.

At many times, and in many places, Christians have gathered on a Sunday for worship, without a priest to lead them in Eucharist. The earliest testimony comes from as early as the 4th and 6th centuries, where we learn of places where the Christian assembly had to gather on Sundays for liturgical services without a priest. Certainly in less desirable areas it was a common occurrence to celebrate Sunday services without a priest, since priests were frequently not available. In times of unrest and revolution, it was often these kinds of services that kept the Church alive.

In many places in this country, these were the kind of gatherings that took place on Sundays when the priest was not able to travel easily to each newly established parish, especially those in rural areas. In the minds of many of our oldest parishioners is the memory of coming to a meeting room sometimes above the local store to gather for prayers, songs and, of course, the Scripture readings. All of this led by one or several members of the community. They did this until a priest could be assigned to their new community.

In recent years, the Church's attention in this regard has turned to long established parish communities who find that they cannot, at this time, rely on having a priest available on a regular basis for the Sunday Eucharist. By the late 1980's, a survey of dioceses in the United States indicated that some dioceses, because of local situations, had already drawn up or were in the process of drawing up principles and guidelines for Sunday worship without a priest.

In 1988 in response to the need in the USA, as well as in other parts of the world, the Vatican produced a document entitled *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, setting forth the guiding principles for the development of these services. In the United States the Liturgy Secretariat of the Conference of Catholic Bishops produced a document, *Gathered In Steadfast Faith: A Statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy on Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest* (1991), which applied these principles to the US situation, and followed this in 1994, with a ritual book *Sunday*

Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Leader's Edition that was approved by the Vatican.

There are particular values or principles, outlined in the *Directory* and in *Gathered In Steadfast Faith*, that shape the development and guide the use of this ritual:

- The Eucharistic celebration is at the heart and center of Catholicism's liturgical life and nothing can replace it.
- Sunday is a day of special character in that each Sunday is a mini-Resurrection Day and is celebrated by the gathering of the assembly for the Eucharist. A Eucharist celebrated in a parish on another day of the week would not be the equivalent of the parish Sunday Eucharistic celebration.
- Every possible attempt needs to be made to participate in the Sunday Eucharist, even if this means that the faithful of a particular parish have to travel to a nearby parish.
- In the absence of a priest, there are good reasons for the local community to assemble to hear the Word of God and to pray together.
- In these situations, our trained deacons and lay leaders of prayer should participate according to the level of their training.

The ritual provided for two possible forms of worship service:

Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours

Introductory Rites

Psalmody

Liturgy of the Word: Sunday readings from the Lectionary for Mass

Act of Thanksgiving (canticle of Zechariah or canticle of Mary) and Intercessions

(Communion Rite, when Holy Communion is distributed)

Concluding Rite

Liturgy of the Word

Introductory Rites

Psalmody

Liturgy of the Word: Sunday readings from the Lectionary for Mass

Thanksgiving

(Communion Rite, when Holy Communion is distributed)

Concluding Rite

Such Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest were not meant as an ideal solution nor as a substitute for Sunday Eucharistic celebrations. They were viewed as temporary solutions intended to be held in those communities that await the presence of a priest. Of course, the only way to ease the current situation is for the Church to experience a substantial increase in ordinations to the priesthood. In the interim, this ritual will be the way in which an increasing number of parish communities will assemble on Sunday to hear the Word of God and to pray together (possibly also receiving Holy Communion) in anticipation of an eventual Eucharistic celebration when a priest can be available on a Sunday.

Part 2—The experience of the 1994 Ritual for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

Part 3—The revised 2007 Ritual: Morning or Evening Prayer

Part 4—The revised 2007 Ritual: The Liturgy of the Word

