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WORD AND WORSHIP

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Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Theological, Pastoral, and Liturgical Observations

After requests from local churches throughout the world, the Vatican addressed the issue of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest (SCAP) and promulgated the *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* in 1988. The central premise of the *Directory* is to “ensure, in the best way possible and in every situation, the Christian celebration of Sunday” (Introduction). While the *Directory* provides a general outline of the order of celebration, it leaves the details to the local conferences of bishops or even the local bishop himself (no. 41). In 1991 the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) issued the pastoral statement *Gathered in Steadfast Faith* that acknowledged the need for SCAP while at the same time reaffirming the “constant teaching of the Church concerning the primacy of Sunday [and] its intimate connection with the celebration of the eucharist” (no. 7). The U.S. bishops went on to prepare and publish a bilingual ritual book in 1994, for use in dioceses where the local ordinary had given authorization for the use of SCAP.

The need to revisit the ritual for SCAP soon became apparent. From 2001–2003 a task force of the BCL, chaired by Bishop George Murry, S.J., a bishop-member of the BCL, and Monsignor Anthony Sherman, staff member of the secretariat, met to address pastoral, liturgical, theological, and ecumenical concerns raised by the 1994 ritual book. The result of the consultation was the publication of a new ritual in the spring of 2007.

The 1994 Ritual Book

The ritual book was warmly welcomed in many dioceses that had been experiencing the phenomena of SCAP for a number of years. The ritual and its pastoral introduction stressed the importance of gathering on Sunday (no. 10) and of holding only one such celebration in each place on any given Sunday (no. 11). It encouraged that the eucharistic bread used for Holy Communion come from a celebration of the Eucharist elsewhere on the same day (no. 47) and arranged for the celebration of the Liturgy of

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the Hours with the Sunday Liturgy of the Word, with or without the distribution of Holy Communion (nos. 25–26).

After only a few years of use bishops, theologians, diocesan staff, and faith communities had identified several problems with the 1994 SCAP. The pastoral introduction to the ritual stressed that “any confusion in the minds of the faithful between this kind of assembly and a eucharistic celebration must be carefully avoided” (no. 12). However, the ritual was riddled with problems—a penitential litany, acts of thanksgiving that closely resembled a eucharistic prayer (including the hymn text of the *Didache* as an option), but most notably the prayers after Communion taken directly from the Roman Missal. These texts, filled with sacrificial language, were to be prayed at the “Communion service,” and yet no sacrifice was being celebrated. Thus, the biggest criticism of the 1994 ritual book is that it “looked too much like Sunday Mass.”

The 2007 Revised Edition

The revision of SCAP sought to build on the strengths and address the problems of the previous version. Just as in the 1994 ritual, the U.S. bishops recommend a celebration of a Liturgy of the Hours or Liturgy of the Word with or without the distribution of Communion. Thus, the 2007 ritual allows for at least six options: Morning Prayer with Liturgy of the Word with or without the distribution of Communion; Evening Prayer with the Liturgy of the Word with or without the distribution of Communion; and Liturgy of the Word with or without the distribution of Communion (see Hughes, 9–11, for a summary and pastoral observations).

The revised ritual includes several new elements. Normally only one such celebration may occur in a given community on a Sunday and never if Mass has been celebrated that weekend (no. 15); the pastor is to provide frequent opportunities for Mass and renew

consecrated hosts often (no. 22); deacons may not use the presidential chair (no. 24); nine additional paragraphs have been included about the role of the lay leader of prayer (nos. 26–30 and 35–38) including four paragraphs on preaching (nos. 31–34); Holy Communion is permitted but not required (no. 41); one psalm and one canticle may be omitted in Morning and Evening Prayer (no. 123); the act of thanksgiving for celebrations of the Hours is the *Benedictus* (Morning Prayer) or *Magnificat* (Evening Prayer) and follows the Communion rite (nos. 46, 51); the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word includes new opening prayers with seasonal inserts based on *Dies Domini* of John Paul II (no. 189); the acts of thanksgiving now number only 17 (nos. 46, 51, 58–9) and, if there is Holy Communion, follow it; the opening prayers from Roman Missal are included in Appendix 3 of the ritual and are suggested as a conclusion to the Prayer of the Faithful (nos. 133, 201). A new text at the beginning of the celebration reminds the assembly that the service is conducted in the absence of a priest and that, while it is unfortunate “we are not able to celebrate Mass,” the assembly is invited to “be united in the spirit of Christ with the Church around the world” (no. 119). There is no procession or opening song at the Liturgy of the Word, and the same greeting is used by the deacon and lay leader of prayer. Thankfully the prayers after Communion from the Roman Missal have been removed. The service now ends with a prayer for vocations to the priesthood (nos. 148, 213), concluding blessing (nos. 149, 214) and a sign of peace (nos. 150, 215). A concluding song, instrumental music, or a choral anthem is optional (nos. 151, 216). Finally the introduction to the ritual book includes a new section on articles for the celebration (nos. 66–67); the liturgical year (including the Triduum) (nos. 68–108); music (nos. 109–116), and silence (no. 117) (see further analysis and charts in Henchal and Prendergast).

Pastoral Issues

It is clear that through most places and times, Catholic Christians have wanted to keep three things together: their assembly—on Sunday—for the Eucharist. With the release of a new ritual book, we need to keep asking the difficult questions: How will our children be formed in the tradition? Will we continue to be a sacramental church of the “assembly” on “Sunday” for “Eucharist”? Malloy and Leonard suggest that we may “end up with assemblies that are not sacramental . . . [since] they’ve learned throughout the years, that their part in the liturgy is to receive the sacrament, not to make it” (238).

Bishop Donald Trautman, bishop of Erie, Pennsylvania, and current chair of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, has repeated the mantra over the past years: “Catechesis, catechesis, catechesis.” In view of SCAP, Sister Linda Gaupin also stresses the importance of “better catechesis on the nature of the Eucharist in general, and on the meaning of the eucharistic prayer in particular” (12). Therefore, in dioceses where Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest is held, the first concern before all else should be the development and implementation of a thorough catechesis, not only on the nature of the rite, but also on how it is substantially different from the nature of the celebration of the Eucharist. Both the Roman *Directory* (no. 21) and *Gathered in Steadfast Faith* (no. 57) are very clear about the obligation to catechize the faithful so that the difference between a Communion service and the celebration of the Eucharist is vividly apparent not only in and through the actual ritual celebration but on the level of understanding and appropriation as well.

One of the key pastoral issues we face is the practice of communicating the assembly from the reserved sacrament at the celebration of Sunday Mass. The practice of regularly communicating the faithful at Mass

from the tabernacle has, at times, obscured the differences between Communion services and the celebration of the Eucharist in the minds of many of the faithful. I believe one of the most important rubrics in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* is no. 85, which states, “It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord’s body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass and that, in the instances when it is permitted, they partake of the chalice, so that even by means of the signs of Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.” We must be careful not to blur the difference between the action of the Eucharist and the reservation of the Eucharist.

Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest provides us with perhaps the best possible response to the pastoral reality that we face today: the ever-growing phenomenon of faith communities without a priest to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist. Yet, as Kathleen Hughes has pointed out, “Let us hope that *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* is not a ritual that will be subject to further revision but, rather, a ritual that soon will no longer be necessary” (11).

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