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## POLICY OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND SUNDAY CELEBRATIONS IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST

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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*.

### 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;

N.B. The practice of communicating the assembly from the reserved Eucharist at Mass obscures the difference between Mass and SCAP and must be avoided. Though common practice in most churches, distributing communion from the tabernacle undermines the significance and meaning of the Eucharistic liturgy and has been proscribed in Vatican directives since 1742. (*See the attached "Five Questions on the Distribution of Communion from the Tabernacle" by the USCCB*)

## POLICY

- 1) *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* may be used in the Diocese of Richmond, provided the norms that make up this policy are followed.
- 2) 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). The celebration of the Eucharist cannot take place without a priest; even though Holy Communion may be received at such celebrations, it is not equal to the Mass.
- 3) 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**.
- 4) 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.
- 5) The pastor/pastoral coordinator is to inform the bishop about the need for such a celebration, to catechize and prepare his community for it, to visit the faithful and to celebrate the sacraments with them when possible.
- 6) 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.
- 7) 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.
- 8) In the possible absence of 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 Richmond 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/pastoral coordinator and affirmed by the parish leadership; 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 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 finite period of time; (three years) and for a specific place.
  - There is a commitment to regular ongoing Scripture preparation (weekly or bimonthly), preferably as a group.\*
  - *See the qualities listed in the Appendix II “Discernment for Lay Leaders of Prayer”*
- 9) A 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 if needed.
  - 10) After the Gospel, a homily is given by the presiding deacon or a reflection is given by the lay leader of prayer. In the absence of a priest or deacon, a lay leader is delegated by the bishop to preach at Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest.
  - 11) 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.
  - 12) These celebrations should help those gathered insert themselves into the liturgical year and the feasts of the Church. Two possibilities are presented: Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, or a Liturgy of the Word. In both cases the distribution of Holy Communion may be added, if sufficient consecrated hosts are available.
  - 13) 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 regional Vicar, or the Vicar for Clergy to determine the availability of a priest-substitute from outside the vicariate. 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 of prayer.
  - 14) Whenever *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* is used, the appropriate Vicar and the Vicar General should be notified the following week.
  - 15) **Vesture:** deacons shall wear the liturgical vestments proper to the order (alb with stole, and the dalmatic if available); lay persons may wear an alb or other suitable attire.

**Ritual text:**

*Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest.* Washington DC, United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007

\* *Resource materials is available from the Office of Worship for weekly and ongoing preparation, both on its website and from the office. [www.Worship.RichmondDiocese.org](http://www.Worship.RichmondDiocese.org)*

## APPENDIX I IMPLEMENTATION OF SCAP

### PRELIMINARY REQUIREMENTS

1. Catechesis to community
  - on meaning and importance of Sunday
  - on major differences between Mass and SCAP
  - 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

### **MAY SCAP BE USED? CRITERIA:**

#### **Yes: EMERGENCY**

- Priest is sick OR unaccountably absent, AND
- no other priest is available, AND
- there is insufficient time to give notice of Masses in other places, OR
- Masses in other places are inaccessible due to travel time or distance.

#### **No: CONVENIENCE** (of either the priest or parishioners is not a sufficient reason to employ SCAP)

- priest is unavailable, BUT adequate time exists to provide notice of Mass in other churches; OR
- priest is available for one Mass, BUT the time is not convenient in the estimation of some.

*NEITHER of these situations is an EMERGENCY*

#### **Maybe: HOME MISSION PARISHES**

- closest Mass more than reasonable traveling distance\*
- serves special needs group, e.g. prison population, migrant workers, campus ministry, elderly, etc.
- only one priest serving more than two parishes

### STEPS TO TAKE

1. try to find a priest-substitute
2. find nearest available Mass
3. invite trained parish leader of prayer to preside
4. invite outside trained leader of prayer

### WHICH FORM OF THE RITE?

1. Liturgy of the Hours – Morning /Evening Prayer (*official Prayer of the Church*)
  - first option
  - different from Sunday Mass
  - less familiar
  - without Communion - complete in itself;  
- insufficient # hosts
  - with Communion
2. Liturgy of the Word
  - easier to lead
  - more like Mass
  - without Communion - complete in itself  
- insufficient # hosts
  - with Communion

\* *Determined by how far one is willing to travel for work, shopping, and entertainment*

## APPENDIX II

### THE MINISTRY OF PRESIDING AT PRAYER 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
- is willing and able to enter the training program
- can commit to the ministry and is available to exercise it
- will be accepted and affirmed by the parish leadership and community

After approval by the pastor, pastoral staff and council, the names of candidates are to be submitted to the Bishop via the Office of Worship.