



Policy and Procedures for Lay/Deacon Led Liturgies of the Word and Holy Communion April 30, 2025

In 1988 the Congregation for Divine Worship issued the Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest. The Directory recommends a Liturgy of the Word, Morning or Evening Prayer, or occasionally the celebration of a sacrament or sacramental, each of which should include the Sunday readings. In response to this Directory the CCCB issued the Sunday Celebration of Word and Hours published in the 1990s. We begin by highlighting the essential elements of this ritual.

1. Assembly on Sunday

From the very beginning Christians gathered on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day the Risen Lord was revealed to his disciples. From the beginning, the Sunday assembly was a standard feature and Christians have always considered the Sunday assembly indispensable.

2. Importance of Eucharist

The traditional, primary, and normative Sunday gathering of the baptized is the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's activity, which Christ commanded us to do in his memory. In the Eucharist, in celebrating Christ's death and resurrection, Christians truly encounter Christ in a form of dialogue that includes listening, silence, contemplation as well as intercession, praise, and thanksgiving. However, when Christians cannot be nourished at the table of Christ's Body, they can still be nourished at the table of His Word.

3. Power of the Word of God

The Second Vatican Council restored to the Word of God and to the Liturgy of the Word that same importance it held during the first centuries of the Church. It recognized that the readings from the Old Testament, from the Gospels, and from the other New Testament writings, together spread before the people of God a marvelous feast, breaking open for them the mystery of salvation in its entire splendor. It recognized also that the proclamation of the Word, together with the assembly, the priest, and the sacrament of the Eucharist itself was one of the forms of Christ's real presence to his people. It is out of this new recognition of the importance of the Word of God that the present form of Sunday Celebrations of the Word and Hours has emerged.

Moreover, the Code of Canon Law has acknowledged the possibility of lay/deacon-led Liturgies of the Word. Can. 1248, §2 states: "If it is impossible to participate in a Eucharistic celebration, either because no sacred minister is available or for some other grave reason, the faithful are strongly recommended to take part in a liturgy of the Word, if there be such in the parish church or some other sacred place, which is celebrated in accordance with the provisions laid down by the diocesan Bishop; or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family or, as occasion presents, in a group of families."

This second paragraph of the canon focuses on a very contemporary problem. The essential elements of this canon include: the significance of Sunday, the gathering of the community into an assembly on Sunday, the ministry of the laity in the absence of a priest or other sacred minister and the liturgy of the Word which is to be celebrated.

The second paragraph is a recommendation, not a binding obligation, directed toward Catholics who are not able to participate in the Sunday Eucharist due to the absence of a priest or another grave cause. The recommendations given are not alternative ways for fulfilling one's Sunday obligation; rather, the obligation morally ceases to bind when it is impossible to fulfill it.

4. Distribution of Holy Communion

When one considers the possibility of distributing communion at these liturgies, serious issues arise. When the giving and receiving in Holy Communion is disconnected from the blessing and the breaking, the integrity of the Eucharistic rite, in faithfulness to the Lord's command, is compromised. The Church cannot envisage, as normal, the holy Communion of the faithful gathered in assembly taking place apart from their concurrent celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We need to acknowledge the shortcomings of these Sunday celebrations when they include the distribution of Holy Communion: the diminished role of the Eucharistic celebration in the life of the parish, the separation of Holy Communion from the Mass, and the possibility that Mass will be seen only as the means for providing consecrated hosts for Communion services. Other potential problems include the danger of growing "congregationalism" – the view of the church as local community with little or no direct connection to, in some cases, the broader parish, or to the diocese and universal Church; and the fear that local parishes will develop a self-sufficiency that sees little or no need for priests. We need to recognize that critical reactions to Sunday liturgies without priests have been expressed by many people, especially in relationship to having the distribution of Holy Communion at these services. In spite these shortcomings, non-Eucharistic liturgies led by deacons and laypersons represent a good response to the phenomenon of "priestless Sundays".

What are the options? The daily prayer of the Church consists in the celebration of the Eucharist with its cycle of readings and prayers and the Liturgy of the Hours (especially Morning, Evening and Night Prayer). Just as there is a given cycle of texts for the celebration of the Eucharist for each day, so too, there are given 'hours'; a given cycle of hymns, psalms, readings and prayers to be prayed at different times of the day. Furthermore, a parish might organize a liturgy of the Word or a holy hour with adoration and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. We need to recall that the Lord is present when people gather for prayer, for He said: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Mt 18:20). Similarly, He is present when the scriptures are read, for when the scriptures are read in sacred assembly, God speaks to God's people and Christ, present in His Word, proclaims the Gospel. When the Church gathers to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours (especially Morning or Evening Prayer) or the Liturgy of the Word, which has been assigned to a particular day, the Lord truly is with His people. He is teaching them. He is nourishing them. He is sustaining them. He is increasing their appetite for their communion with Him in the taking, the blessing, the breaking, the giving and receiving at the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Mass, especially on Sundays.

When a parish does not have the celebration of the Eucharist on weekdays, people who wish should continue to gather and encounter the Lord in His Word and in the assembly. Such gatherings help to sustain the faith life of the community and support one another. These gatherings celebrate God's Word in all its richness, in good proclamation and liturgical song, and so help to build up and enhance the greater celebration and breaking open and witness to God's Word.

Moreover, the Church has provided some assistance regarding the discernment needed for lay/deacon-led liturgies. In 1997, the Instruction *Ecclesiae de Mysterio* makes reference to Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest (Art. 7). The thrust of the Instruction is to narrowly restrict the occasions and pastoral circumstances in which the non-ordained exercise ministries that are normally exercised by the ordained. In 2004, the Instruction *Redemptoris Sacramentum* stated: "It is necessary to avoid any sort of confusion

between this type of gathering [lay/deacon-led gathering] and the celebration of the Eucharist. The diocesan Bishops, therefore, should prudently discern whether Holy Communion ought to be distributed in these gatherings.[...] Likewise, especially if Holy Communion is distributed during such celebrations, the diocesan Bishop, to whose exclusive competence this matter pertains, must not easily grant permission for such celebrations to be held on weekdays, especially in places where it was possible or would be possible to have the celebration of Mass on the preceding or the following Sunday” (Redemptoris Sacramentum, 165-166).

5. Conclusions

The Church has highly emphasized lay/deacon-led services, when priests are not available for the celebration of Sunday Mass. The 1988 Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest and the CCCB Sunday Celebrations of the Word and Hours help to guide these celebrations. However, the Church recommends that the Bishop “must not easily grant permission for such celebrations [communion service] to be held on weekdays.” The Directory quite clearly envisages only the situation of Sunday, where people would otherwise be deprived of the opportunity to celebrate the Lord’s Day liturgically. The Directory’s provisions for Sunday are based on the assumption of a real and serious need, not only convenience.

The Bishops of Kansas as far back as 1995 stated that, in light of their experience, that they “had come to judge that Holy Communion regularly received outside of Mass is a short-term solution that has all the makings of becoming a long-term problem,” i.e., confusion between the Mass and a Communion service, the possibility of Communion services eventually becoming the norm, the need for a priest and the need for the Eucharist are no longer acutely felt.

Those who are leading these services should have an appreciation for Scripture, a deep reverence for the Eucharist, an active prayer life, a spirit of cooperation with the laity and clergy of the community, an acceptance by parishioners, an active involvement in its pastoral life, and a strong desire and ability to foster the people's participation both as members of the assembly and in other liturgical roles. They should have the necessary skills in public speaking and a requisite sense of presence called for in the movement and gesture of prayer. There should be evidence of the persons’ commitment to this ministry and of their availability to exercise it. They should be able and willing to integrate within a solid spirituality the exercise of their ministry with personal and family obligations.

In the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth, a Liturgy of the Word with the distribution of Holy Communion may be celebrated by a deacon or lay-minister under the following circumstances:

1. In nursing homes and hospitals;
2. With the permission of the diocesan bishop, in a parish church when there is an absence of a priest for a period of time and there is pastoral necessity;
3. With the permission of the diocesan bishop in other particular circumstances.

The inclusion of the diocesan bishop in this policy is to allow him the opportunity to be aware of the unique pastoral needs of parishes throughout the archdiocese and to participate in the needed discernment. In light of the above reflections, parishes will need to consider other forms of lay/deacon-led liturgies for Sundays so that the faith can continue to be nurtured in individual communities. Parishes must also consider if there are ways to bring separate communities within a larger parish together for the Lord’s Day. While there may be reasons why parishes would like to have lay/deacon-led communion services, these reasons are most often not sufficient to permit regular Sunday lay/deacon-led communion services, especially in light of the various documents of the church