

**MAKING DO WITH LESS:
SUNDAY WORSHIP WITHOUT A PRIEST**

**A Letter From
the
Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin**



September 22, 1994

MAKING DO WITH LESS: SUNDAY WORSHIP WITHOUT A PRIEST

To the Faithful of the Dioceses of the State of Wisconsin:

Dear Friends in Christ:

1. Every age seems to complain about the shortage of priests. The statement that Jesus himself made, that "the harvest is plenty but the laborers few," has been verified over and over again. In the early history of our dioceses in the State of Wisconsin that refrain was echoed many times by the bishops. The priests took circuit-riding for granted, since they often had to minister to many parishes that were located considerable distances one from another. But the hope of each congregation was that eventually the bishop would appoint a resident pastor for them.
2. Our age is now experiencing an acute shortage of priests. It would seem that the situation will not be improving for some time. It is our duty as bishops of the State to alert you, the faithful, to the crisis and to find ways of helping you to maintain the vitality of your faith and the strength of your parish life in light of that shortage.
3. We hope in this document to give some reflections and guidelines to help you in this difficult period. We wish to touch only on one aspect of that shortage and its effects, namely, Sunday and weekday celebrations without a priest presiding. Other aspects of the challenge will be taken up as needs demand and on a diocesan level.
4. We are grateful for the support our people have shown their priests in the past. We have become accustomed to the fullness of priestly services in the last decades, usually just taking them for granted. We will all experience now the decrease of these priestly services very much. As that shortage continues, we will also have to make some adjustments so that our priests will not suffer burnout and our parishes will not become less vital for lack of ministry.
5. Our first plea to you, all the faithful, is to increase your prayers for vocations to the priesthood. We ask that you encourage vocations as much as possible, both in the family and in the parish. We are aware that there are many obstacles to overcome, but we should not hesitate to face them. Often young men think about becoming priests but no one knows of that desire. They are not invited to present themselves for such a calling. We also ask the faithful to cooperate with your Diocesan Office for Vocations on programs that are helpful in discerning possible candidates.
6. Secondly, we ask our people to support and encourage our priests in their ministry. We are aware that their role is not an easy one. They need

expressions of our gratefulness and promise of understanding and support. We know that we are a people who rely on the ministry of priests for the fullness of sacramental life that has marked our identity, for baptism and all the sacraments, but most especially for the Eucharist. We need priests for proclaiming the Word of God (the scriptures) and for bringing the gospel to bear on our contemporary lives. We need their counseling and advice in times of joy, such as baptisms, weddings and other family celebrations, and in times of sorrow, such as illnesses and deaths of loved ones.

7. For all these reasons, we bishops frankly admit that no guideline proposed here about Sunday or weekday worship in the absence of a priest is adequate. Such suggested measures cannot be seen as solutions, since only access to the fullness of the sacramental life of the Church can be our goal. Any solution short of that fullness will involve risks to Catholic identity and tradition. We bishops do not propose here alternate solutions but, rather, point out sacrifices that we all will be called to make while we work toward the fullness of sacramental life in the local church. These guidelines are, thus, not meant to be normative. We present them to you as inadequate, necessary, and, we hope, temporary measures.

8. Our document discusses first the vision of the Church that should be ours as we propose these intermediate guidelines. Thus, it discusses the importance of Sunday as a day of worship and of the nature of a community of faith gathered on Sunday around the Eucharist. It talks about some of the possibilities open to the community as it worships on Sunday without a priest and specifically about lay leaders of prayer. Since the phenomenon of weekday celebrations without a priest is also common now, some reflections on that practice are included.

9. We have relied on the following documents for this letter: Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest by the Congregation for Divine Worship (CDW), 1988, Gathered in Steadfast Faith: Statement on Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), July, 1991, and the Code of Canon Law (CL).

10. Each diocese will issue a separate document containing regulations responding to its needs and customs. This letter to you is meant to form the background and basis for those regulations which will be of a more technical nature and directed to those involved.

I. The Importance of Sunday:

11. Part of the identity of the early Christians was their bold decision to worship on Sunday instead of Saturday. They did so in commemoration of the Resurrection. That feast was the center of their worship and each Sunday came to be a renewal of Easter for them.

12. In our age it is often difficult to keep Sunday as the Lord's day, a day for prayer and worship. It will require discipline and sacrifice on the part of all of you and a willingness to be countercultural in this regard. In your family life, in particular, you will have to make sacrifices so that all the members are able to worship together. This sacrifice will be a sign that you have a sense of what is most valuable and important to you, that God counts in your lives, and that God takes precedence over human work and leisure (CDW 14).

13. The image that is put before you is that of the Risen Christ calling you, through the Church, to gather together on Sunday to worship as a united faith community. There you hear the scriptures proclaimed and explained to you. The celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the fullest expression of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord, is offered by the priest in the person of Christ and in the name of the entire Christian people (CDW 12).

14. Participating at Mass on Sunday is indeed a personal devotion, but it is, before all else, a way of demonstrating that you belong to the Church. It is a sign that you accept God's call to be a member of the community of faith. At this moment of history it becomes also a way of making your Catholic identity more clear to yourselves and to others. This practice is expressed in the Code of Canon Law as follows: "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass; they are also to abstain from those labors and business concerns which impede the worship to be rendered to God, the joy which is proper to the Lord's Day, or the proper relaxation of mind and body (CL 1247)."

15. Writers in the early Church did not hesitate to point out that by attendance at Sunday Mass the faithful show their belief in the final resurrection, in the final judgment, and in the hereafter (NCCB 15, CDW 17). The Eucharist was always celebrated with the understanding that it was to be done "till the Lord comes again in glory."

16. More recently, we believers have also come to see that the celebration of Sunday and the gathering together of the faithful can be a way of strengthening the members of the Church in their mission to the world. True celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday leads to further love and service in society and especially to a concern for those most in need (NCCB 14).

17. In the light of this tradition and its theological basis, it is clear that there can be no substitute for Sunday as the day of communal worship and prayer. Current practice has returned to the older custom of accepting Saturday night as a part of that Sunday celebration. If a group (one can think, for example, of those in nursing homes or of a community visited on occasion by a priest circuit-rider) is able to participate in the Eucharist

only on a specified weekday, these celebrations are indeed life-giving and full of graces for those present, but they are not considered the norm for the future practice of the entire community.

II. The Importance of the Mass:

18. The Catholic Church is not a church of the Word alone. It has never separated the proclaiming of the Word of God from the sacraments. The Mass, in particular, draws these two elements together in the most perfect fashion. The scripture is proclaimed, explained, and made real for those gathered at any particular assembly. After they have prayed and listened to the Word of God, through the ministry of the priest they do as Jesus commanded them to do: they take, bless, break, and share. The offering of themselves through this act is united to Christ's offering of himself.

19. For these reasons the celebration of Mass is the central event of the Church's worship. It is called the "high point" of the work that Jesus accomplishes in us for our salvation. Traditionally the reception of Holy Communion outside of Mass was reserved for special moments such as for those in danger of death. It was never meant to be normative for Catholics. One cannot emphasize strongly enough that the reception of Holy Communion outside of Mass is not the same as the celebration of Mass itself. Such a way of worshiping can be helpful and devotional, but it is not a true substitute for the Mass.

20. It is important that we bishops emphasize in this letter the unique importance of the Mass, so that the reception of Holy Communion will not become normative in our minds or be seen as an adequate substitute for the Mass. Moreover, the Mass is not just a private devotion but truly the prayer of the entire community. Any substitute is inadequate. "It is imperative that the faithful be taught to see the substitutional character of these celebrations [those without a priest], which should not be regarded as the optimal solution to new difficulties nor as a surrender to mere convenience (CDW 21)." Rightly all documents state that any confusion between an assembly in which the full Mass is celebrated and a non-Eucharistic celebration must be carefully avoided.

21. The Mass is also the sacrament of unity in the Church. Early Church writers did not hesitate to say that it is the Eucharist that unites the members of the Church to Christ and to one another. The Mass, thus, builds up the Body of Christ. The one same Spirit that is invoked at the consecration to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is asked to unite into one all those who partake of the Eucharist. All aspects of the Mass are, thus, linked and form together a whole.

III. Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest:

22. If a priest cannot be present for the celebration of Mass on the Lord's Day, we bishops want to emphasize that it is most important that you, the faithful, gather as a community and worship together. Keeping Sunday holy is still an important value; praying together as a community is indicative of Catholic identity and a means of spiritual growth. These gatherings should be seen by you, not as a celebration without a priest, but as a celebration "in expectation of a priest (CDW 27)."

23. "If because of lack of a sacred minister or for other grave cause participation in the celebration of the Eucharist is impossible, it is specially recommended that the faithful take part in the Liturgy of the Word if it is celebrated in the parish church or in another sacred place according to the prescriptions of the diocesan bishop, or engage in prayer for an appropriate amount of time personally or in a family or, as occasion offers, in groups of families (CL 1248.2)."

24. After consultation, it is up to each of us bishops to decide if it is better for the members of your parish to travel to a nearby church in the event no priest is available or to remain as a worshipping community with a deacon or lay leader of prayer. Various factors will affect this decision. For example, it might be made on the basis of whether the absence of a priest is foreseen to extend over a long period of time or will be just an occasional phenomenon. It might also be dictated by practical questions such as the viability of the parish and the need to merge or consolidate. "It belongs to the diocesan bishop, after hearing the council of presbyters, to decide whether Sunday assemblies without the celebration of the Eucharist should be held on a regular basis in his diocese (CDW 24)."

25. If the bishop of the diocese decides that the integrity of your parish is to be maintained in the expectation of a permanent priest pastor, then the obligation to travel is not present and the obligation of attending Mass is not binding. It is recommended by us bishops in the strongest way possible that those of you so affected participate in whatever prayer service is provided in order to bring the members of your parish together on Saturday night or Sunday to bear witness that you are a faith community.

26. The mind of the Church is that such celebrations without a priest are not to be held if Mass has been or is to be celebrated in that same church on that same day, including the anticipated Mass on Saturday evening (CDW 21). The point that this regulation makes is that the impression should not be given that parishioners are being offered a choice between the Mass or some other service. Rather, it is being emphasized that the Mass is normative. It may be difficult to retain this ideal if the scarcity of priests increases. Many parishes in our cities are so large that all the faithful simply cannot gather at one celebration. This more restrictive note,

however, is helpful in another way, since it forces each parish to look more carefully at its schedule of Masses to make sure that there is maximum attendance at all of them (CDW 25).

27. Through their ordination, deacons have the responsibility of leading the community in prayer. "For this reason, all things being equal, the diocesan bishop should give preference to the appointment of deacons as presiding ministers at Sunday worship in the absence of a priest (NCCB 26)." "Since the deacon has been ordained for the nurture and increase of the people of God, it belongs to him to lead the prayers, to proclaim the gospel, to preach the homily, and to give Communion (CDW 29)."

28. The documents also indicate that lay leaders of prayer can be designated by the bishop, after consultation with the pastor (NCCB 27), or they may be named directly by the pastor (CDW 30). Each diocese will have to determine who does such appointing. This responsibility of leading prayer on the part of the laity is assumed by virtue of Baptism and Confirmation (CDW 30). If a parish has a lay parish director appointed by the bishop, under normal circumstances that person will also be considered among the leaders of prayer in the absence of a priest, but not exclusively so. It is important that all such leaders see themselves as supplying a need in the absence of the priest and not as performing a stable and new ministry in the Church.

29. Lay leaders of prayer are to be chosen from among you for the exemplary quality of their lives and with an eye toward their acceptability by the community. They are to be appointed for a limited period of time. Each diocese will lay down its regulations for the selection of such candidates.

30. Leaders of prayer should also be trained for this task. In addition to presiding on Sundays for the prayer service, they may be called upon to pray at wakes and other devotional services. It is most important that they be trained in public speaking and a sense of liturgical gestures and movements.

31. In this letter it is not necessary to go into detail about how such a leader of prayer should conduct the service. A few points are made here to give you, the faithful, an idea of what is possible and what you might expect.

32. The services should help those present insert themselves into the liturgical year and the feasts of the Church. Two possibilities are presented: a Liturgy of the Word or the celebration of Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours. In both cases the distribution of Holy Communion is added.

33. If a Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated, it is best if the readings are those of the Sunday in question. An explanation of the reading may be given by the lay leader (CDW 43). Nothing is to be done, however, to give the appearances of a Mass. For example, elements such as the presentation of the gifts are to be omitted (CDW 35). Other liturgical ministers such as readers and Communion distributors continue to function in their roles. It is also important that the music and decorations be given careful attention so that a prayerful atmosphere be maintained.

34. The bishop is to determine what vesture, if any, the lay leader is to wear. Most documents say that the leader should not use the presidential chair but sit outside the sanctuary to indicate that it is not a Mass. The deacon, on the other hand, may use this chair. The altar is not to be used until the distribution of Holy Communion (CDW 40). All of these regulations are meant to avoid confusion and to remind the people gathered that they are not attending a Mass.

IV. Weekday Celebrations Without a Priest:

35. In many of our parishes today the number of priests has been greatly reduced. Sometimes the many funerals and weddings and other commitments in the parish make it impossible for the priest to schedule regular weekday Masses.

36. When a priest cannot be present for a weekday Mass, it is strongly encouraged that a Liturgy of the Word, or Morning or Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours be celebrated, followed by the distribution of Holy Communion and led by a deacon or lay leader. Again, every effort must be made to see that no confusion arises in the minds of those present through ceremonies that give the appearance of a Mass.

37. Deacons by reason of their ordination are appropriate leaders of such prayer. The pastor may commission others as well. It can generally be assumed that a lay parish director also has been designated by the bishop to hold such services and that he or she may, in turn, designate others. The criteria established by the bishop for Sunday leaders of prayer in the absence of a priest should also be followed for those who lead during the week.

38. Because children need to be formed in the proper understanding of the Mass, under no circumstances should services with the reception of Holy Communion outside of Mass be provided for them. They could too easily be confused and not understand the difference between Mass and reception of Communion.

Conclusion:

39. We call on all of you to intensify your prayers for the whole Church and for the Church in this State of Wisconsin during this period of adjustment. Not having priests in sufficient number to minister to you as in the past will demand sacrifices of all of you. In trying to adjust to the shortage of priests you must still retain a clear vision of the nature of the Church and your Catholic traditions. We beg your understanding, cooperation, and good will as you accept these inevitable sacrifices. If you do so with courage, know that God's blessings will be abundant.

40. We are aware that this year is the year of the family. It affords a wonderful opportunity for the whole family to share in common prayer at home and to celebrate the Eucharist together. Intensifying prayer at home is the best preparation for worship in community. Renewal must take place on all levels of our life, at home and in Church, in society and in one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

41. Although we bishops are keenly aware that our generation is now called upon to do with less than what is ideal, we do not want you, our people, to lose the fullness of our Catholic sacramental tradition. In particular, we know that we are a Eucharistic community, that is, one that is formed into God's people by the sacrifice of the Mass and that gathers strength from the celebration of the mysteries of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We also firmly believe that God's providence will not be lacking to us as Church, as we seek ways of keeping our faith and the faith of our flock alive in the coming decades. We ask you to pray that God will be good to us leaders and give us light and guidance.

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