



An Introduction to the Sunday Celebration of the Word

Preface

One of the distinguishing marks of the Catholic Church is its sacraments, and for Catholics, the Eucharist (Mass) is the most regularly celebrated sacrament. It is central to the church's understanding of itself.

Many faith communities in Australia, and the world, are not blessed with a resident ordained leader and so are unable to celebrate the Eucharist. From the time of Vatican II (1962-65) onwards, the Church has recommended that such communities meet together on Sunday for prayer, led by a deacon or lay person authorised by the bishop.

This prayer is usually the Sunday Celebration of the Word. Archbishop Francis Carroll issued revised guidelines for this liturgy in our Archdiocese in 2001. This is a supplement for those involved in Sunday Celebrations of the Word.

Liturgical Background

From the very beginning of the Church, Christians linked three sacred concepts: Sunday ("the Lord's Day), the assembly (congregation/local community) and Eucharist (Mass).

Christian people gathered on Sunday to recall many ideas important in Christian life:

- God's creation (and so, the gift of life, reminds us that we are co-creators with God in our present world);
- the redemption of the world and resurrection (release from the slavery of sin into healing, hope and joy);

- Pentecost (the sending of the Holy Spirit, the foundation of the Church and the mission to go forth and tell the good news); and
- the need for adequate rest and relaxation in imitation of God's "resting": a need consistent with human dignity.

Sunday is the day when the Church is visible in local communities as the people of God. For the baptised, to gather on Sunday is essential.

**Sunday worship
in the absence
of a priest is a
vital action of the
Christian people
when Eucharist
cannot be
celebrated**

Andrew Chase

The **assembly** is a gathering of God's people, the baptised. God calls the local community together to celebrate God's goodness with praise, thanks and joy. It is the whole assembly, the faithful and their pastors, who unite with Christ to celebrate the Mass. The Bishops at Vatican II desired that members of the assembly be encouraged towards full, conscious and active participation in liturgy.

It is the same assembly, united and led by Christ, that celebrates the Liturgy of the Word on Sundays when no ordained minister is able to be present.

The celebration of **Eucharist** is the heart of Sunday and the centre of the church. It brings people together physically. The participation in the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist brings people together spiritually and sacramentally. The Eucharist bonds the people with each other and with Christ, the risen Lord, through the Holy Spirit. "The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church."

A Sunday Celebration of the Word is **not** a celebration of the Eucharist.

Participating in the local Sunday Celebration

When there is no Eucharist in the local community on Saturday evening or Sunday, there is a choice between participating in a Sunday celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, and travelling to another parish, thus joining with another community, to participate in the celebration of Eucharist. For many, this is a moral dilemma.

In making their decision the faithful should prayerfully take into account a number of factors.

The principal factors are:

- a) The fundamental Christian duty of observing Sunday as the Lord's Day, especially through communal worship;
- b) The Church's serious direction to participate in the Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation;
- c) In particular, the need of the local community to share regularly in a form of public worship in order to preserve and develop its Catholic identity, sense of belonging and vitality of mission. In a sense, unless there is a local and vital Catholic community, where traditions are celebrated and handed on, the church may "die" in that place.
- d) Moral considerations that may modify or excuse from the observance of the church direction, are for example, the distance to travel, age and health, work requirements, responsibilities for the welfare of others, care of the sick etc or for the legitimate needs of the community.

The faithful gather on Sunday to:

- acknowledge the importance of God in their lives;
- listen to and be nourished by God's word;
- pray God's word will influence/transform their lives;
- experience the grace of the covenant (God's union with the faithful, similar to the intimacy and love of marriage);
- intercede for the church and the world as a priestly people;
- praise and thank God for God's goodness and gifts; and
- encourage one another in the way of life explained and modelled by Jesus Christ.

The Importance of the Word of God

The Word of God began the universe. *God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. (Gen 1:3)*. It is the presence of the Spirit of God in all creation that calls it to life and sustains it in life.

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) are accepted as the inspired Word of God. The Word of God has always held a position of extraordinary reverence in the Christian tradition. A sixth century saint, Caesarius of Arles (died 543) said:

Brothers and sisters, here is a question for you. What to you seems the greater, the Word of God or the Body of Christ? If you want to give the right answer, you will reply that God's Word is not less than Christ's Body. Therefore, just as we take care when we receive the Body of Christ that no part of it falls to the ground, so should we likewise ensure that the Word of God which is given to us is not lost to our souls because we are speaking or thinking about something different. One who listens negligently to God's word is just as guilty as one who, through carelessness, allows Christ's body to fall to the ground.

The Scriptures are the written memory of God's people. Without this memory, the identity of the faithful would be lost.

God's Word is the basis of the covenant between God and humanity and when the faithful listen to God's word it is in the context of God as a loving parent, reconciling brother, passionate spouse. The Scriptures then, are a source of great grace, love, union, security, joy and hope.

All sacraments contain, and give a place of prominence to the reading of the Scriptures. It is God who speaks within the assembly. St Augustine said *"The Gospel is Christ's mouth. He sits in heaven and does not cease to speak on earth."*

Vatican II emphasised the extreme importance of holy scripture in the celebration of liturgy. The Council described the treasures of the bible as a lavish feast for the nourishment of the faithful at the table of the Word. In a sense, Christians "eat" the Word; they take it inside themselves and are nourished by it.

Reading God's word unites God, reader/s and listeners in the same way as reception of the Eucharistic bread and wine unite the faithful to God and each other. The practice of proclaiming and attending to the Word transforms the separate individuals present into the assembly of God.

Whether the Liturgy of the Word occurs inside the Eucharist, or as a separate liturgy, it is a dialogue between God and the People of God. The faithful listen to God's Word in the First and Second Readings, and Gospel. They reflect on it and respond as individuals and as community in the Psalm, Alleluia, Homily, Creed and Prayer of the Faithful.

In the beginning, God's word created the universe. Today, God relies on those who hear the Word to recreate the world as the Kingdom of God. God challenges the faithful to live out the Kingdom by lives of friendship, hospitality, social justice, reconciliation, peace-making and love for one another.

The Structure of Sunday Worship

The general pattern of any liturgical celebration is similar.

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| The Gathering | God calls together the faithful of the local church. |
| The Word | The faithful listen to, dialogue with, and reflect on God's word. |
| Praise and Thanks | The faithful respond to the Word in praise, thanks and intercession. |
| The Dismissal | The faithful are sent to live God's Word and actions. |

However, there are important differences between the Eucharist and the Celebration of the Word, especially in the third section – Praise and Thanks.

Differences:

| Eucharist | Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion |
|---|---|
| The Eucharistic Prayer: | There is no Eucharistic Prayer. There may be a Prayer of Thanks and Praise. |
| The Priest-celebrant together with the faithful take, bless, break and share in the Body and Blood of Christ consecrated at that celebration. | Holy Communion in the form of bread only is brought to the parish from another parish's Eucharist or a previous parish celebration. |
| The celebrant is a priest or bishop | The presider is a deacon or authorised lay person |
| The altar and presidential chair are used. | The presidential chair is not used. |

Sunday Gatherings without Eucharist

These Sunday celebrations are always held in anticipation of the day when Eucharist will again be celebrated in the community.

These gatherings serve three critically important functions:

- As the readings are always those that the church is celebrating in its liturgies throughout the world, the local community keeps its connections to the universal church.
- The Sunday celebration provides a small community of the faithful with a way of maintaining its unity and vitality.
- This Sunday liturgy is not Eucharist and is not designed to seem like the Eucharist. Hopefully, the celebration of the Word, while not replacing the Mass, will cause the faithful to desire the Eucharist even more.

A Sunday Celebration of the Word is a valid liturgical rite of the Church. It is the ritual prayer of the People of God, of Christ and those baptised into Christ, and should be prepared with the same care as a celebration of Eucharist by readers, presider, special ministers of the Eucharist, musicians and all concerned. Hospitality is just as important in this liturgy as is preparation of the environment, for example by banners, flowers and liturgical colours of the season.

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Lay Leaders of Prayer

A Sunday Celebration of the Word is a celebration of the whole community. Because Jesus is present whenever the community gathers for prayer, the ministry of leadership is also undertaken in Jesus' name.

If necessary, some people in each community will be called upon to lead their communities in Sunday worship, as lay leaders of the assembly or presiders at liturgy. These people (men and women) need:

- to be **baptised and confirmed**. Baptism not only names each person as a son or daughter of God but gives each the responsibility to spread the Good News, to be "God-bearers" to other Christians and to the world.
- to be **attentive to God in their own lives**. Prayer and God's everpresent Holy Spirit can help Christians see the presence of God in their lives, in the Christian community and the world.
- to be **part of the church community**. A good presider is one who, as a member of the community, comes to praise and thank God with the others in the community. The presider prays, sings, listens and keeps silence with the community, and does all this as one among equals. Presiders do not "lord it over others".
- to have **respect for the community gathered to pray, and respect for the liturgy through which the community worships**. Part of the presider's role is to gather the community and bring it to prayer.
- to be **known and well accepted in the community**. Presiders need to make all feel welcome, to unite the community, direct its celebration, support the other ministries and ensure reverence for the presence of God in the community.
- to be **discerned in prayer by the pastor and other members of the Parish Pastoral Council (at least)**. The role is too important for a parish simply to accept any volunteers who present themselves.
- initially to **have an adequate knowledge of the Christian faith**, enabling the role to be carried out competently. Later to be **willing to undertake some training and formation**. It is unfair both for those called on to lead the community's prayer, and for the community itself to expect these leaders to preside without training and formation.
- to have **basic communication skills**, some **organisational skills** and **flexibility** of approach.

- to be **willing to be part of a team** to plan liturgical services. It is necessary for presiders to orchestrate a variety of community ministries both in the planning stages and during the liturgy.
- to be **commissioned for the ministry** in the presence of the community.

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The Shape of the Sunday Celebration of the Word.

The following table outlines two options for Sunday Celebration of the Word. Full details are available in the ritual document of the Canadian Catholic Bishops' Conference: "Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours." The whole document is worth reading, particularly the pastoral notes in the opening pages. The "Pastoral Handbook for the Dioceses of Australia: Sunday Celebration of the Word, Sunday Celebration of the Hours" by the Australian National Liturgical Commission also offers some insights from an Australian perspective.

| Sunday Celebration of the Word | Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Introductory Rite</i> | <i>Introductory Rite</i> |
| Gathering of the Community | Gathering of the Community |
| Gathering Song | Gathering Song |
| Liturgical Greeting | Liturgical Greeting |
| Introductory Remarks | Introductory Remarks |
| Opening Rite | Opening Rite |
| Opening Prayer | Opening Prayer |
| <i>Liturgy of the Word</i> | <i>Liturgy of the Word</i> |
| Procession of the Word of God | Procession of the Word of God |
| First Reading | First Reading |
| Responsorial Psalm | Responsorial Psalm |
| Second Reading | Second Reading |
| Gospel Acclamation | Gospel Acclamation |
| Gospel | Gospel |
| Homily/Reflection | Homily/Reflection |
| Profession of Faith | Profession of Faith |
| General Intercessions | General Intercessions |
| Proclamation of Praise | Proclamation of Praise |
| | Sign of Peace |
| | <i>Communion Rite</i> |
| Lord's Prayer | Lord's Prayer |
| Sign of Peace | Invitation to Communion |
| | Communion |
| | Prayer after Communion |
| <i>Concluding Rite</i> | <i>Concluding Rite</i> |
| Announcements | Announcements |
| Collection | Collection |
| Blessing | Blessing |
| Dismissal | Dismissal |

Some Details of the Celebration

Ministries

A number of ministers share leadership of the assembly in a Celebration of the Word. The guiding principle is that no-one exercises two ministries at a liturgy.

Ministries include:

- leader of prayer;
- three readers (for the First Reading, Second Reading and the Gospel);
- cantor/psalmist to sing the verses of the Responsorial Psalm and the Proclamation of Praise;
- reader of the homily/shared reflection;
- reader to announce the intentions for the Prayer of the Faithful;
- musicians to lead the community in song;
- servers to carry the cross, candles, and incense;
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, if Communion is to be given;
- minister/s of hospitality;
- reader of announcements; and
- collectors.

The leader of prayer may sit towards the front of the sanctuary or s/he may choose to sit in the front pews and walk to a place at the front of the church or inside the sanctuary whenever addressing the assembly or leading prayer.

Other ministers move to and from their place in the assembly at the proper time.

Leadership of the assembly is accompanied by the appropriate gestures and postures (found in the Canadian document *Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours* in rubrics – the sections in red – which give directions).

For extra information see Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours (SCWH) Pastoral Considerations paragraphs 16, 39 and 42; Liturgical Notes 17, 30, 33, 37, 63, 71, 85, 92, 100, 120.

Church space and furniture

The ambo / pulpit is used for reading of the Scriptures and homily/reflection on the Word only, i.e. not for announcements.

The presider's (priest's) chair is not used. This indicates the absence of the leader of Eucharist.

The altar is stripped of adornment as a sign that this celebration is not Eucharist.

See also SCWH Pastoral Considerations 40; Liturgical Notes 4-5, 32, 122.

Veneration of the Word

After the opening prayer, the assembly remains standing and an appropriate song or acclamation is sung by the community.

During the hymn the Lectionary is carried in procession, accompanied by ministers carrying candles and incense (if it is used).

The servers with candles may walk on either side (if there is room) or in front of the reader carrying the Lectionary held high. The server carrying the incense walks in front of the procession, swinging the thurible.

The purpose of the procession is a visible sign of the unity of the assembly, gathered around Christ present in the assembly and in the reading of the Scriptures.

On arriving at the ambo, the reader continues to hold up the Lectionary for all to see.

After the hymn finishes, the reader places the Lectionary on the ambo and incenses it.

The servers return to their places.

See also SCWH Liturgical Notes 62-70.

Reflection on the Word

After the readings (and a short period of silence after each), a person authorised by the Archbishop or Parish Priest gives a reflection on the readings.

Alternatively, a member of the community reads the homily prepared for the day by the pastor or Archdiocesan nominee.

See also SCWH Liturgical Notes 92-5.

Communion

If Communion is to be given at the liturgy, after the sign of peace, the leader sits and special ministers of the Eucharist prepare the altar. They place the ritual book and a corporal on it. Candles at or near the altar may be lit.

The Blessed Sacrament should be brought formally into the assembly, either from another parish or from the tabernacle, and placed on the altar. Candles may accompany the procession of the ciborium. In this way, the Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion indicates that the community is about to share in a prior celebration of Eucharist in which Christ became sacramentally present to his Church.

The Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion stand at the nominated positions and administer holy communion in the normal way.

See also SCWH Pastoral considerations 34, 37. Liturgical Notes 130-156.

Music

Music, instrumental and choral, can help create an environment of prayer and meditation. It can move and inspire. The hymns and acclamations of the liturgy express the Christian response to their loving God. Singing is an essential and integral part of any liturgical celebration. It is a sign of love and joy, an expression of heart, body and mind. A text is more significant when sung.

Music has practical value too, accompanying processions and ritual actions, for example the gathering of the community and the three processions in this liturgy. It also expresses the involvement of the assembly and helps an understanding of the meaning of the liturgy.

Music/singing is normally used at the following places:

- during the gathering of the community,
- during the processions (including the Procession of the Word),
- Responsorial Psalm,
- Gospel Acclamation,
- Acclamations during the Proclamation of Praise,
- during the Communion Rite (where hymns chosen should relate to action resulting from Eucharist), and
- at the missioning/dismissal of the community.

See also SCWH Liturgical Notes 29, 66, 246-73.

Environment

Signs and symbols of worship and faith as well as banners and seasonal colours should be used to add to the celebration. These may be placed around the whole church building, not just at the front or in the sanctuary area.

A Checklist of things to AVOID in the Celebration of the Word

By comparison with the Eucharist, in the Celebration of the Word, NONE of the following should occur:

- inserting informal language, such as “welcome everyone”/ “good day”, into the ritual by the leader of prayer: the ritual begins with the movement of the presider to the sanctuary;
- use of greetings in the second person (“The Lord bless you and keep you.” RATHER the wording would be “May the Lord bless us”);
- use of the presidential (priest’s) chair;
- reading of the Eucharistic Prayer;
- washing of their hands before communion;
- breaking of the host;
- saying of “The Lamb of God”;
- placing of the collection money in the sanctuary area; or
- reading of announcements from the ambo.

Useful books

Archdiocese of Brisbane. *Lay Leaders of Liturgy with Sample Rites for Sundays, Weekdays and Funerals*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, 2004.

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours*. Ottawa: Tri-Graphic Printing, 1995.

Chase, A. *Remaining Faithful: Sundays without the Eucharist*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, 2004.

The Liturgical Commission. *Break Open the Word*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, every year.

The Liturgical Commission. *Ordo for the Dioceses of Australia and New Zealand*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, every year.

National Liturgical Commission. *Pastoral Handbook for the Dioceses of Australia: Sunday Celebration of the Word, Sunday Celebration of the Hours*. Brisbane: The Liturgical Commission, 2004.

Rosser, A R. *A Well-Trained Tongue*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996.

Trainor, M. *Befriending the Text: a beginner's guide to the Bible*. Adelaide:Collins/Dove, 1991

