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Kristyn Demers

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ABSTRACT:
This essay explores instances of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest, specifically within the rural context where the effects of the priesthood shortage are felt most strongly. Additionally, this paper examines the role that women play in the church, especially the rural church, and calls for the church to respond by creating more equitable roles for women within church leadership and ministry.

Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest and Women’s Role in Presiding

by Kristyn Demers

Rural communities are one of the most disadvantaged populations in the priest shortage crisis. These communities already struggle with isolation from other communities. With decreased priest numbers throughout the diocese, the resident pastors are often relocated to bigger communities and commute into the smaller towns, further isolating the rural areas. The church, an iconic landmark within a rural community,
represents a place for community and unity. When, due to the lack of priests, these churches face the risk of closing or are no longer regularly used worship spaces, the community begins to suffer. Sunday represents a day of rest and worship. Rural faith communities should not be deprived of the spiritual benefits of gathering each week. Therefore, substitutions and other celebrations and services ought to be offered and used within these communities when a priest cannot be made available. Additionally, within these services, women should be uplifted as leaders within the church community, for many women are ready to respond to their baptismal call to serve the church.

Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion is one option for a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest. This service offers a close comparison to the “typical Sunday Mass” as it follows a similar structure to that of a Mass. The Liturgy of the Word includes readings from Scripture and helps connect the modern church to the events in the Old and New Testaments. The congregation is “instructed in the paschal mystery by the Scriptures which are proclaimed and which are then explained in a homily by a priest or deacon.” This apostolic connection to tradition is one of the four marks of the church and ought to be upheld as a staple in the faith. Holy Communion is recognized not only as the actualization of the sacrifice of Christ but also as the gathering of community in one act of worship where all present are active participants in the sacrament, being led by the priest who makes the presence of Christ real. When a priest is not able to be present, the communal aspect of gathering should still be emphasized. There are other options for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest including Liturgy of the Hours, namely Morning or Evening Prayer either with or without Holy Communion. However, since both Liturgy of the Word and the Communion Rite are important components of the Sunday Mass and both help nourish the soul and provide opportunities for communion and togetherness, Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion is the option I suggest as the replacement for Mass when a priest cannot be present.

The format and ritual of Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion can be found in a revised edition of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* published in 2007 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The general overview of the liturgy includes Introductory Rites, a Liturgy of the Word, a Communion Rite, and a Concluding Rite. Within the Introductory Rites, it is important for the person presiding or leading the liturgy to explain that the service is a Liturgy of the Word and is different from a Mass. The presider should also state that the priest is absent from the service but that the community is still united with the global Church during this service. Then, the celebration opens with an invocation of the Trinity followed by an opening prayer.

After the Introductory Rites, the celebration continues into the Liturgy of the Word. In this Liturgy, it is important that other lay readers and lectors are given an opportunity to participate in the celebration by completing the first and second readings as well as the responsorial psalm, which can be recited or sung. The Gospel is then read, either by a deacon or by a layperson. If being read by a layperson, the greeting “The Lord be with you” is omitted. After the Gospel is read, there is an opportunity for a homily to be read by a deacon or appointed layperson. Alternatively, if no one has been appointed by the bishop to preach at this service, a person who has not been ordained can read a text or homily prepared by the pastor or priest. After a period of silent reflection, the profession of faith is recited in either the form of the Nicene Creed or the Apostles’ Creed, followed by the prayers of the faithful. This is the end of the Liturgy of the Word.

The Communion Rite, if Holy Communion is to be shared, follows. This is where most differences from a regular Mass service can be noticed. The presider goes to the tabernacle, genuflects, and takes the ciborium to the

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2 Catholic Church, 19. Note, in this essay, I use the term presider to refer to whoever is leading the prayer or Sunday celebration, be it a deacon or a layperson. While this term is often used to denote an ordained minister, in the context of this essay, I am using the term in a more universal manner to reference whoever is leading prayer and preaching.

3 Catholic Church, 149.

4 Catholic Church, 159.

5 Catholic Church, 161.

6 If Holy Communion is not to be shared, the presider would continue directly into the Concluding Rite.
The presider then leads the community in the Lord’s Prayer. After the Lord’s Prayer, there is no Sign of Peace, but rather the celebration turns to an invitation to communion, where the minister raises the host above the ciborium and says, “This the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” After the response from the people, the presider consumes the Body of Christ. If there is a need for more extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion than the one presider, they also receive the Body of Christ at this time before going to the communicants. After Holy Communion is shared, any remaining hosts will be returned to the tabernacle. After a period of silent prayer, the presider leads an Act of Thanksgiving, using a psalm, canticle, litany of praise, or other prayer. Multiple options for these prayers are provided in the *Sunday Celebrations* book.

After the Act of Thanksgiving, the Concluding Rites begin. There is a period for announcements and collection of monetary offerings, followed by a prayer for vocations to the priesthood. This is an important component of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest as it allows the congregation to recall why they are not celebrating Mass and invokes God’s help in fostering the call for more vocations for the priesthood. After this prayer, there is a blessing. When performed by a deacon, he blesses using a gesture and invoking the Trinity. When a layperson is leading the service, they do not use a gesture but say, “May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil, and bring us to everlasting life.” A sign of peace is then offered to conclude the service.

Regulations for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest have been established by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. These celebrations arose from the needs of the church when “because of the lack of a priest or some other serious reason, participation in the eucharistic

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7 Catholic Church, 171.
8 Catholic Church, 173. Note, this Rite was written before the liturgical changes to the Roman Missal in 2011 and therefore uses the former language before this change. Updated versions of the Communion Rite may use the updated language which here starts with “Behold the Lamb of God.” This and other changes within the phrasing of the rites indicates that it may be time for another revised version of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* to be published.
9 Catholic Church, 175.
10 Catholic Church, 187.
celebration is not possible.”\(^\text{11}\) Besides the priesthood shortage, this need may be due to rapid growth in a community due to new evangelization or because of persecution. For celebrations in the absence of a priest to be held, it must be determined that there are no churches nearby that are offering Mass. This is the preferred solution to the priesthood shortage. If this is not possible, a Sunday celebration may be authorized. It is clear from reading the “Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest” and the Introduction to the *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* text that these types of celebrations are to be the exception and not the norm, due to the theological implications they hold.\(^\text{12}\) Ultimately, however, it is the bishop’s decision to determine how these celebrations will be regulated and used based on the needs of his community in his diocese.\(^\text{13}\) In the context of the United States, most often these celebrations occur due to the priest shortage.

According to a CARA report in 2015, there are over 3,400 parishes without a resident pastor in the United States.\(^\text{14}\) Nine out of the top ten United States dioceses with more parishes than active priests are in the Midwest. These dioceses are in parts of the United States that are typically identified as rural or are areas where there are many small towns and rural communities.

The Diocese of Saint Cloud was identified in this 2015 CARA report as being one of the top ten dioceses in the United States with more parishes than active diocesan priests. The Diocese of Saint Cloud’s Director of Pastoral Planning, Brenda Kresky, provided some updated statistics on the current numbers in the Diocese. While there are still 131 parishes in the Diocese, pastors only live in 43 of the rectories, leaving 88 parishes without a resident pastor.\(^\text{15}\) This is a dramatic decrease in the number of pastors and an increase in parishes without resident pastors compared to the 2015 report which showed 60 priests living in rectories while 71

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11 Catholic Church, 375.
12 Catholic Church, 17, 383.
13 Catholic Church, 377.
15 Brenda Kresky, email message to diocesan offices, December 13, 2023.
parishes did not have a resident pastor. One reason for this dramatic shift in numbers may be because of the recently established Area Catholic Communities which grouped parishes together to share resources. When grouping parishes, pastors may have been moved or removed from their rectory for financial reasons or as part of the consolidation. Additionally, Kresky revealed there is one parish (St. Donatus in Brooten) within the Diocese that does not hold any weekend liturgies, but she affirmed that this parish has a weekday Mass each week. While there are not currently any Parish Life Coordinators activated under Canon 517.2 in the Diocese, this canon has been used in the past, and the former Parish Life Coordinators “were well received in these communities.” The Diocese has not granted a parish permission to use a Sunday celebration in the absence of the priest in any permanent or consistent way. However, there have been a few emergency instances in the past in which these types of services have been used. Finally, Kresky shares that the Diocese does not have any official doctrine or statement on the use of Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion as a substitution for Mass as “for the most part one can find a Eucharistic liturgy to attend within a reasonable distance. We may not need this option for most of the Diocese.”

Some theologians and liturgists raise concerns about the regular use of these services in the absence of a priest. Michael Prendergast writes about the need for proper catechesis explaining to the parishioners what the rite entails and how it differs from a standard Sunday Mass. Prendergast fears improper knowledge of the liturgical implications of utilizing Communion services may lead to misconceptions about the role of the Mass and the consecration of the Eucharist. He also expresses concerns about the concept of the call to action from participation in the

16 “When Parishes Outnumber Priests.”
17 Brenda Kresky, email correspondence.
18 Brenda Kresky. Canon 517.2 allows the bishop to name a Parish Life Coordinator as a pastoral caretaker for a parish. This person becomes the point person for pastoral needs until a priest is able to provide needed services.
19 Brenda Kresky, email correspondence.
Eucharist and the mindfulness of the Presence held within consecrated hosts compared to the “reservation of the Eucharist.” The Eucharist is not meant to be reserved, but it is consecrated for consumption by the faithful. Therefore, if the norm becomes to “reserve enough hosts” at a Mass for later Communion services, parishioners who are not active participants in the liturgical decision-making might forget the purpose of the Eucharist and the call to action for each receiving person. There is also a concern that Communion services take away the divine remembrance and communal aspects of the Eucharistic prayers said at Mass.

Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ, also investigates multiple questions about the theological and pastoral issues of these services, each under a different category. Some linguistic challenges surround not only the language being used within the rite replicating too closely the language used in the Sacrament of Holy Communion but also questions as to how to best define and name the celebration. The linguistic decisions made surrounding this service alter how people interpret and think about the service. Ecclesiological and pastoral questions that have been raised refer to the dynamics at play within the local church communities and between the churches and the bishops as a result of the continued use of these Communion services. The prayer leader’s relationship with the community they are serving is different from that of a priest or pastor. There are also sacramental questions surrounding the implementation of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest, including how the Eucharistic celebration of the Paschal mystery on Sundays cannot and should not be replaced by a celebration that lessens the view of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist or of the importance of celebrating

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21 Prendergast, 73.
the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Liturgical questions surround the proper wording of the service and the logistical questions as to what gestures to use and what liturgical rules “apply” to these services have also been considered. Hughes ends with sociological concerns, referencing the changes in ministerial roles and training and even expressing the possibility for women to have a larger role in ministry, which she notes as a positive implication.

While these theological implications raise valid concerns, some of these concerns relate in large part to issues within the Catholic Church as a whole and are not specifically secluded to Communion services. Concerns regarding catechesis and formation for all ages and incorrect views on the purpose or efficacy of sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are oft-expressed areas of insecurity within the Catholic Church. Sunday celebrations with the absence of a priest provide another framework for these concerns to be reevaluated and raised but are not the cause nor the foundation of these issues. It is, however, healthy and good to consider the possible misconceptions parishioners may have about Sunday celebrations in the absence of the priest. If anything, utilizing these types of services will provide opportunities to address these concerns for catechesis, formation, and misconceptions about the Sacraments in a practical way.

In some rural communities around the world, women play the predominant role in the local church as priests are sparse and unavailable. Sister Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso, a nun working in the Amazon communities of Brazil, is a prime example of this. She does work often delegated or reserved for priests, including baptisms and marriage ceremonies for communities where priests may only visit once a year. Sister Pereira Manso recently went to Rome to meet with Pope Francis to discuss the ecological problems in the Amazon as well as the role of women in the church. Sister Pereira Manso says, “in the

24 Hughes, 117.
25 Hughes, 118.
new church and in the new society it is necessary to make visible and recognize the service that we women already provide.” She emphasizes that women already act in a way akin to that of a diaconal role within different local churches around the world. Women play a large role within the church, but they are not recognized nor are they given the same leadership positions. However, they continue to have a strong desire to serve in their church communities.

Sister Pereira Manso isn’t the only example of women playing a bigger role within local rural churches. Sister Elizabeth Young works with the rural communities in South Australia. She was recently appointed as a Parish Life Coordinator, under Canon 517.2, where she is authorized to provide pastoral and spiritual care and “conduct liturgies, including Sunday celebrations, baptisms, and funerals.” In preparation for this role, Sister Young was formally instituted as a Catechist which has given her the training, authority, and graces needed to perform this ministry. This aligns with Pope Francis’ recent Apostolic Letter Spiritus Domini, where women have been permitted to be instituted in the roles of lector and acolyte. Pope Francis’ recognition of the need to formally institute women in leadership roles in the church shows the potential within the church for changes that allow for greater ecumenicalism and a balance within church leadership and hierarchy for women.

Casey Stanton, co-founder of Discerning Deacons, a group working to educate the church on the role of women and the diaconate, reflects on the role of deacons in the church, stating, “the diaconate itself is a ministry of bridge-building by means of listening and creative response. Deacons are called to pay particular attention to those on the peripheries—those left out of the distribution of bread—to recognize that


no one is in God’s blind spot.” In this statement, Stanton emphasizes the important role deacons play within the Communion Rite. Not only does this role as a deacon/deaconess come with liturgical duties for Mass but these duties and roles can also be applied to both religious and lay women who wish to serve the church in a leadership position through Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest.

Women are underrepresented within leadership in the Catholic Church. However, the work they do is prevalent and sustains the church locally and globally. Although many women are not instituted into official leadership roles within the church, they are persistent and continue to do the necessary work as a response to their baptismal call to serve the church and the world. Women are ready and willing to commit to working for the church. It is time for the church to recognize women’s desire to serve the church. One way to do this would be to institute women as the main presiders and preachers for Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest. The main responsibilities of the presider are leading prayers, preaching, and acting as an extraordinary minister. Women, as instituted acolytes and in non-instituted positions with the church, already perform some of these tasks regularly throughout different liturgies. Advocating for women to act as the leader of Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest is a small but impactful next step in recognizing the role of women in liturgy.

The Catholic Church is deeply sacramental, meaning the efficacy of God’s grace through the ritualistic nature of the sacraments is essential to the Catholic Church’s identity. Communion services and other Sunday celebrations in the absence of the priest ought not to be seen as a replacement for the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but their use should not be discounted because of preexisting catechetical and sacramental misunderstandings. Furthermore, women are responding to the call for greater leadership and agency within the church. Providing them with an instituted and formally acknowledged role as leaders of prayer services will not only alleviate some of the stress of the priesthood shortage crisis but it will also empower more members of the church to be active

30 Stanton, “A nun makes the case for women deacons to Pope Francis.”
participants in the faith and to take an active role in the caretaking of their parish. Rural communities, where the implications of the priesthood shortage are felt the most, provide an excellent starting place for the use of these Sunday celebrations in the absence of a priest and the role of women in leadership within the church.


