

Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest

Many people are familiar with what used to be called “Eucharistic Services”, today more often (and more accurately) known as “Services of Word and Communion”. These first started around the time of the 1973 *Rite of Distributing Holy Communion outside Mass*, which for the first time included a Liturgy of the Word as an integral part of the normal celebration. Many different types of services have flourished on an unofficial basis ever since, as a substitute for weekday Mass. This 1973 rite was envisaged for use in occasional circumstances, “when Mass is not celebrated or when communion is not distributed at scheduled times”.

In 1988 the Church provided further guidance on such services, which had started to take place occasionally on Sundays. The *Directory on Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, which in some respects supersedes and changes the provisions of the 1973 document, gave general guidelines, but left the details to be determined by local bishops (para 24) and Bishops’ Conferences (para 7). However, the Directory is quite clear on the value of communities gathering together on the Lord’s Day, even when Mass cannot be celebrated. If Communion is to be distributed, it should be brought from another Mass celebrated elsewhere in the locality on the same Sunday (para 47). This is in line with the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, which since 1969 has strongly recommended that Communion should not be distributed from the tabernacle but that everyone should receive from bread consecrated at the Mass at which they are present, so that it stands out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated (GIRM 1969, para 56h = GIRM 2002, para 85).

The Directory does not provide a complete rite, and does not refer to celebrations on weekdays.

Since 1988 there has been much debate throughout the worldwide Church about the wisdom of such services. There are two principal areas for concern:

(a) These services can tend to diminish or even remove in the minds of some people the connection between receiving Communion and the eucharistic action of the Mass itself. When Communion is available separately from Mass on a large scale, it risks no longer being seen as a culmination of the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, but simply as something to be obtained separately. Receiving Communion may become

personal, rather than an act of the whole community.

Theologically, the graces we receive from Communion outside Mass are not the same as the graces we receive from Communion as part of the celebration of Mass, though most people are unaware of this.

(b) These services can look very similar to Mass, and so cause confusion in the minds of some people. The 1988 Directory had already warned the Church about this (para 22). Our temporary diocesan version (2002) of an interim draft national rite (1996) encouraged people to make a real distinction between these services and the celebration of Mass.

The most recent Roman instruction on the subject, *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), says the following:

(1) “If participation at the celebration of the Eucharist is impossible on account of the absence of a sacred minister or for some other grave cause, then it is the Christian people’s right that the diocesan Bishop should provide as far as he is able for some celebration to be held on Sundays for that community under his authority and according to the Church’s norms. Sunday celebrations of this specific kind, however, are to be considered altogether extraordinary.” (para 164)

[The nature of such “extraordinary” Sunday celebrations is not specified.]

(2) “It is necessary to avoid any sort of confusion between this type of gathering and the celebration of the Eucharist. The diocesan Bishops, therefore, should prudently discern whether Holy Communion ought to be distributed in these gatherings.” (para 165)

[Therefore it cannot be said that anyone has the “right” to receive Communion at these services.]

(3) “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.” (para 166)

[This points us once again towards the centrality of Sunday Eucharist, rather than simply obtaining Communion outside Mass.]