

Sunday Celebration of the Word and Hours: Its Genesis and its Principles

History

From the very beginning Christians gathered on Sunday. All four Gospels (Mt 28.1; Mk 16.2; Lk 24.1; Jn 20.6) and the Acts of the Apostles (20.6-12) describe the life and practice of the first Christians. They insist on the importance to them of the first day of the week, the day the Risen Lord has revealed to his disciples. From the Resurrection day itself (Jn 20.19; Lk 24.33), Christ's disciples have kept Sunday as a day to gather.

The first centuries of Christianity witness to the constancy of this practice. At the beginning of the second century, the Didache prescribed: "On the . . . Day of the Lord, come together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure." In the same period, the governor of Bithynia in present-day Turkey noted of the Christians of his region that "it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and to recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a God." Similarly, the Christian writer Justin in his *Apology*, a work written about 150 A.D., said that on Sundays Christians, whether they lived in the towns or in the countryside, gathered for worship in one place.

Linked from the beginning to the Resurrection, the Sunday assembly was a standard feature not only of the apostolic age, but also of the centuries which followed. Christians would accept martyrdom rather than forsake common Sunday worship: "We ought to be together," wrote one early Christian. "We cannot live without the Lord's meal; it is more important for us than life itself." Prior to the time of the Emperor Constantine, when Sunday was not yet a day of rest, Christians would gather for the breaking of the bread before taking up their daily work. In Canada, our own ancestors showed the same fidelity to Sunday worship. Especially in less populous areas, and even to relatively recent times, lay people frequently led the local community in Sunday prayer in situations where Mass might be celebrated only quarterly or even twice a year.

As these examples indicate, Christians have always considered the Sunday assembly indispensable. There they experienced both the encounter with the Risen Lord and the need of his active and life-giving presence until his return in glory. For this reason the Church

law has always affirmed the vital necessity of the Sunday assembly, which anticipates the heavenly liturgy, that new world in which God's people will be gathered and of which they have a part even now.

The traditional, primary, and normative Sunday gathering of the baptized is the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's life, 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. In this holy exchange, God's people leave themselves open to God's tender care. They recall and re-live the victory of God's wondrous deeds and steadfast love as they are nourished at "the table of God's Word and of Christ's body." (GIRM, 8) When Christians cannot be nourished at the table of Christ's Body, however, they can still be nourished at the table of His Word.

Vatican II

This twofold reference to both Word and Sacrament is important. Consequently, 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. Including also the singing of the Psalm which echoes the first reading, the acclamation to Christ present in the Word, the homily which brings word and life together, and the intercessions which spring forth from our listening, the liturgy of the Word forms a key moment in the dialogue between God and the gathered Church.

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. In pre-Vatican II days I fairly frequently formed part of a Sunday gathering in the absence of a priest, but it was the Rosary, and not the Word, that was central to our celebration in that period. Vatican II's restatement of the importance of the Word of God changed all that.

Four important factors

While Sunday gatherings of the assembly without a priest are by no means something new, and in fact have a long tradition, since Vatican II four new factors have made them a far more prominent feature of Church life. The first factor is, of course, the shortage of priests. In our situation this has been coupled with the demographic decline of the rural parish. In 1950, 61% of Canada's population lived in cities; by 2005, this had become 81% and is growing steadily. With fewer priests, the decline of rural population in both North America and Europe has led to a dramatic increase in the frequency of Sunday worship when no priest can be present. In mission countries conversely the shortage of priests has often been coupled with a huge growth in the Catholic population, which again means that in many rural mission situations also the assembly must gather without a priest and without the Eucharist.

A crucial second factor is that for the first time in its history the universal Church effectively institutionalized this development of the Sunday gathering of the faithful in the absence of a priest. Several documents were central to this process. The practice seems first to have been given recognition in the liturgy constitution of Vatican II, which included a general provision that bible services should be encouraged, *including on Sundays and holydays*. It went on to say: "They are particularly recommended when no priest is available; when this is the case a deacon or some other person authorized by the bishop is to preside over the celebration." (SC, 35. 4)

Paragraph 37 of the instruction *Inter Oecumenici* (1964), formally codified this practice, and in effect made it obligatory: "In places without a priest and where none is available for the celebration of Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation, a sacred celebration of the word of God with a deacon or even a properly appointed layperson presiding, *shall be arranged*, at the discretion of the local ordinary." This paragraph also included a brief outline of the order of celebration.

Canon 1248 § 2 of the *Code of Canon Law* of 1983 further codified this practice, although it watered down the language somewhat. It provided: "If it is impossible to assist at 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."

Finally this process of institutionalization became complete when the *Directory of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* was issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1988. The *Directory* did two important things; it codified the recognition of such Sunday celebrations, providing detailed conditions as to how and when they should take place, and it provided also concrete norms for the celebrations themselves, although it did not actually provide a detailed ritual. This document, which is very important to a proper understanding of all such Sunday celebrations, is contained in full at the very beginning of the Canadian ritual book.

If two important factors in recent times are the shortage of priests and the consequent institutionalization of Sunday celebrations when priests are absent, a third factor, closely related to the second, is that the form of such Sunday worship has now taken on the fixed character of a liturgical celebration of the word. This was suggested by Vatican II, outlined in *Inter Oecumenici*, "strongly recommended" by Canon 1248, and provided for in the *Directory*. Even before the *Directory*, *Inter Oecumenici* had already provided a broad form for this. It said that the plan of such a celebration would be "almost the same as that of the liturgy of the Word at Mass." It would include a homily, either prepared by a deacon, or prepared by the bishop or pastor and read by a lay person, and would end with general intercessions and the Lord's Prayer. Even as early as 1964, then, before the close of Vatican II, we can find Sunday celebrations defined as celebrations of the Word.

Locally in Canada, various diocesan, regional and national initiatives implemented these general provisions. I believe that the Diocese of Labrador City-Shefferville, under Bishop Peter Sutton, was one of the first in our country to make use of such celebrations on a widespread scale. The experience there and a survey of practices both in Canada and throughout the world was the foundation of the preparation in 1981 of a formal ritual by Father Len Sullivan of Regina, a former director of the National Office, as a project of the Western Liturgical Conference. This ritual, commonly known as the "Red Book", became an early standard for many dioceses both in Canada and the United States. Other dioceses sometimes issued their own rituals adapted from this. If there was any criticism of this ritual, however, it was that it appeared to be not so much a ritual for a liturgy of the Word in itself, as a modified ritual for the Eucharist with the particular eucharistic elements omitted.

Actually, it was here in the Diocese of St. George's that a more focused form of a genuine Sunday liturgy of the Word was prepared in 1992. This introduced the central element of the procession and

enthronement of the Word after the gathering rites, and it included also a whole variety of prayers of praise that were largely drawn from the Scriptures and were thus more appropriate to a celebration of the Word than earlier forms of praise, which were often adapted from a eucharistic context. It was the St. George's ritual, considerably expanded by the National Office under Father John Hibbard, which became the model and basis for the Canadian ritual, *Sunday Celebrations of the Word and Hours* issued by the CCCB in 1995. As the title indicates, this also included the form of the liturgical hours of Morning or Evening Prayer as an appropriate alternative form of the celebration of the Word, since they are almost totally based on the Scriptures.

And so we have the shortage of priests, the institutionalization of Sunday gatherings of the faithful, the development of a specific rite for the celebration of the Word as three major factors leading us to where we are today. The fourth factor, which is of equal importance, is the new provision, confirmed by the Papal instruction *Immensae caritatis* of 1973, that allowed the laity to distribute communion in various circumstances apart from the celebration of Mass. This meant that communion could take place in such circumstances on a regular basis even when the Eucharist is not celebrated. Though communion is not a part of the Sunday celebration of the Word as such, and whether it should or should not be added is a matter for real debate, when it has been added to such celebrations, it must be noted that this has had the significant effect of making them far more acceptable to parishioners, and probably far more widespread, especially in light of the fact that the worshipping populations of the communities in which Sunday celebrations take place are often much older than average.

Not a mini-Eucharist

In certain areas, then, due to the lack of priests, communities are unable regularly to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist. When they continue to gather on that day, they are not thereby any less responsive to the call of the Risen Christ, but their assembly is not lived out in its fullest form, which is the Eucharist. It is for this reason that we can, in a more particular way, speak, as is very common in French, of "Sunday Celebrations of the Word in anticipation of the Eucharist." This should not suggest that these are not authentic liturgical celebrations nor should it obscure the truth that every other liturgy finds its completion only in the Eucharist. At the same time it must be recognized that while such celebrations look forward to the day when the Eucharist will again be celebrated within the community, they also flow from the Eucharist and that they are the worship of a community which has been sustained by it. In this context, the particular

designation "in anticipation of the Eucharist" recognizes the hope of the assembly that it may once more, and soon, celebrate in all its fullness "the mystery of faith."

Looking at it from this perspective, the rich character of a Sunday celebration of the Word which anticipates a future eucharistic celebration should not lead us to overlook its limitations in contrast with the celebration of the Eucharist itself. Even with the distribution of communion, it is *not* the Eucharist, for it does not make present the fullness of Christ's saving action. Deacons or lay persons who lead it are not ordained to act in the person of Christ the head of the Body, as the priest or bishop does in the offering of the Eucharist, and thus one of the important modes of Christ's presence is absent. Other persons are thus unable to do, in Christ's memory, what He did - all those things brought together for us in the liturgy of the Eucharist - to take bread and cup, and having given thanks to God in blessing, to break the bread and offer the cup that those assembled might receive of them. We must never lose sight of the fact that even if at a Sunday celebration the eucharistic sacrament is shared, we are not celebrating the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is not only sacramental communion with Christ's body but the memorial and the renewing of Christ's Paschal sacrifice, thereby enabling the Church to make present anew Christ's gift of himself to the Father and to be one with him in his action.

Obviously something so new to most of the Church can easily lead to misunderstanding. Some would wonder whether this practice was not a significant move from our tradition as a Eucharistic Church toward a Church of the Word. Others would question whether by having other Sunday celebrations "in parallel" to the Mass, the Eucharist and the priesthood are not thereby devalued. For those more directly involved, there can be further areas of confusion. Although Catholics may readily understand that such celebrations and the Eucharist are "technically" different, they may have difficulty in appreciating the effective difference when what is for them the fullest mode of participation in the Eucharist, that is, the reception of communion, takes place in both. In terms of ministries, there is always a danger that the ordained priesthood, when it is not actively involved in the day-tot-day pastoring of the community, may be perceived as an intrusion in terms of the lay ministries in place. The reverse, too, is possible. Finally, there can be confusion about the status of communities: are those which are unable to celebrate regularly the Sunday Eucharist somehow second-class to those which do? It is because the possibilities for misunderstanding are so present in this situation that the greatest care must be taken in its implementation.

A true celebration of the Word

The Canadian ritual for Sunday celebrations which has developed in these circumstances is not an adapted form of Mass, but an authentic celebration of the Word of God, with its own proper features. It is characterized by an enthronement of God's Word, the full use of the Sunday readings and psalm, a homily that reflects upon the Word, intercessions that arise from having heard it, and a great prayer of praise to God in thanksgiving that comes normally from the Scriptures. This Sunday celebration of the Word is truly liturgy. It celebrates and makes present the saving action of Christ the Head among his people, and gives strength to the work of his Body, the Church. Gathered on that day when the Church throughout the world keeps memory of the Risen Lord, the faithful of a particular community proclaim the Father's glory, through the Son, in the communion of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, a particular assembly that gathers to celebrate God's Word always celebrates this liturgy in union with the Church universal. The assembly shows its veneration for the Word of God, the same kind of veneration, the Church teaches, that is due to the Body of the Lord, for in both cases it is Christ himself who is venerated. In the proclamation and hearing of the Word of God Christ becomes truly present to his people, for the Church teaches clearly that Christ is present in his Word, since it is always He himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church. Thus, even without communion, the presence of Christ is realized in both the assembly that celebrates and the Word that is proclaimed.

A community celebration

Even as we accept that Sunday liturgies celebrated when the Eucharist cannot take place are never the ideal, we must recognize also their positive effects. One has to acknowledge that they maintain and build up the community as the body of Christ and that they encourage the development of the co-responsibility of the laity within the Church. They contribute to the formation of the laity, and to their active participation in a variety of ministries and services, some of which go beyond the Sunday assembly. They enrich the prayer life of the community, and they bring to the gathered assembly the presence of Christ speaking through the word. In fact, by gathering to hear and reflect upon the same word of God that is proclaimed universally, the community renews its own communion in Christ, is connected to the larger parish and diocesan community, and is united to the Church

throughout the world. Even more to the point, a community unable to celebrate the Eucharist is still enabled, as part of the body of the risen Christ, to gather in the Spirit to offer its own Sunday worship and praise to God.

The rite for Sunday celebrations of the Word calls forth not only the ministry of lay presiding, but a whole variety of ministries within the community. The so called "Red Book" was actually entitled "A Ritual for Lay Presiders," but this was an unfortunate error, a little like calling the Missal "A Ritual for Priests." In fact, Sunday celebrations require an even greater variety of lay ministries than might otherwise be the case. Obviously the important liturgical ministries of hospitality, proclaiming the Word, cantor, choir and music leader, communion, acolyte, environment, etc., are still needed. For Sunday celebrations of the Word, however, some will be called to new ministries: the coordination of other ministries, the leadership of the liturgical assembly, and the preaching God's Word, all three of which are ministries that can be separated, and need not be exercised by the one person. In all these individual ministries the faithful are often helped to rediscover the priestly character of their baptism, which endows them with a mission to acclaim throughout the world the presence of the living God. From the teamwork which is essential to a community preparing such liturgies can flow a whole new sense of the whole celebrating community as the primary subject of worship: the Body of Christ, united by Him and animated by his presence and yet with its variety of persons and gifts.

Assessing the Community's Need

Of the questions that arise with regard to Sunday celebrations of the word perhaps the most general is when they should take place and when should they not. Because of the enormous variety of situations the answer to this question may not always be clear-cut. For this reason, both the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Directory* recognize the broad authority of the diocesan bishop to regulate this matter, and to decide in just what circumstances Sunday celebrations without a priest should take place. However the operative principle is both simple and clear: Sunday celebrations of the word can, and should, take place in any case where for a group of the faithful "participation in the celebration of the Eucharist is impossible" (Canon 1248 §2). As the *Directory* points out, and as the letter of John Paul II on the Lord's Day eloquently re-states, "the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life." The Sunday celebration of the Word is never an *alternative*, in any real sense of that word, to the Sunday Eucharist. The former should take place only in

circumstances where for good reasons the Eucharist cannot be celebrated, or where individuals cannot participate in Sunday Eucharist. Because particular situations can be very complex, the Church regards the bishop's judgment in this matter as both necessary and decisive.

However while the principle is simple and straightforward, the reasons that might influence the bishop's judgment can cover a wide range of circumstances. The degree to which a community is isolated is an obvious consideration, along with the difficulty of transportation, and economic considerations such as whether people have their own vehicles and what are the costs involved. In Canada, weather and geography can be real factors. So too can entirely different things like the general age and health of the group in question. The physical impossibility of people being able to get to mass nearby is clearly a valid reason, as for example in the case of prisoners, the hospitalized, and members of the armed forces who must remain on base. Language might also be a consideration in some circumstances. So must be the temporary absence of the clergy because of illness, vacation, or other good reasons. But almost none of these criteria is absolute, and usually they must be carefully weighed in combination with one another. What is called for here is a genuinely pastoral and prudent judgment that recognizes the real situations where people cannot, in practical terms, participate in the Sunday Eucharist, while never detracting from the ideal that participation in the Sunday Eucharist is central to the life of the Church and its members.

While for obvious reasons the celebration of Sunday liturgies of the word most often will be justified in rural areas involving large distances and scattered populations, even in the urban core there are situations where such celebrations can be warranted. Prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, and senior citizens complexes are cases in point. If a significant group of people cannot get out to take part in the Eucharist, and it is impossible for priests to celebrate Sunday Eucharist in these institutions, then the circumstances for Sunday celebrations of the Word would clearly seem to exist. The case for their approval in such instances would not be diminished by the fact, for example, that they had Mass on a weekday, or by the fact that a communion minister could bring communion on Sundays to the individuals in such situations. Even when there are other celebrations on weekdays, people still have a right and a duty to take part in Sunday worship and to hear proclaimed in their midst each Sunday the word of God in the Sunday readings. Moreover, when communion is distributed apart from Mass, it is the Church's clear preference, especially on Sunday, that the faithful be gathered in groups in which they can be nurtured

by the riches of the Sunday scriptures. Where possible, communion of the sick and others in similar circumstances will most fittingly take place within this context.

On the other hand, the indiscriminate use of Sunday celebrations of the Word in situations for which they are clearly not intended is a real disservice to the Church. Their use, for example, when a priest in an urban or suburban context is on holidays must be carefully considered. In drawing up a policy to address this situation, the bishop will certainly want to examine a whole range of facts, such as the time period involved, the possibility of clerical supply, distance, transportation, the age, economic circumstances, mobility and language of the community, the availability and times of mass elsewhere, and the capacity of other churches to accommodate larger numbers. But while all of these factors may need to be taken into account and weighed carefully, the automatic use of Sunday celebrations of the Word when a priest is absent from an urban parish should not be assumed.

It is sometimes said that the parish community should be kept together as a Sunday worshipping community. This is clearly true, and obviously an important value, but it is rarely likely to be an absolute. It must be weighed against the equally clear, and even more important, value of the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist for the life of the Church. It certainly is far less than absolute when many members of the same parish may already be very mobile in their choice of masses. Given a shortage of priests for supply, however, reciprocal arrangements among a cluster of parishes, with parishioners of a particular parish being formally hosted and welcomed by a neighbouring parish while their own pastor is unavoidably absent, may be a good solution in many situations. Ideally they would be able to return the same hospitality during the absence of the priest from a neighbouring parish. With some real preparation, and provided that things like distance, transportation, language, and space are not major problems, such arrangements can have the very positive effect of building communion and reducing unacceptable rivalries.

Weekdays

Whatever may be the considerations relative to Sunday worship, nothing in the relevant documents justifies applying to weekdays the liturgical provisions regarding the absence of a priest on Sunday. This would be the case for urban and rural areas equally. The *Directory*, for example, 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 on convenience. Again it should be said that what is of paramount importance here is that the celebration of the Word is not presented, nor does it come to be regarded, as an *alternative* to the Eucharist. On weekdays in urban areas, daily Mass is usually readily available in nearby parishes. If it is not, or if for any reason there is a need to provide a liturgical service other than the Eucharist on weekdays, Morning or Evening Prayer will always be fitting, whether the situation is urban or rural. Indeed, the daily parish Liturgy of the Hours is fully appropriate even when the Eucharist is celebrated.

Communion or Not

A further major question often arising from the more widespread use of Sunday celebrations of the Word concerns the distribution of communion. Indeed, this has been a matter of much debate. Neither the Liturgy Constitution of Vatican II nor the Code of Canon Law makes reference to communion, but only to liturgies of the Word. The instruction *Inter Oecumenici* in 1964 outlined an order of service that certainly did not include communion, but then there were no provisions allowing the laity to act as extraordinary ministers. Nevertheless, the *Directory* of 1988, which came after the provision for lay ministers, encouraged communion, although it does not make it in any way obligatory. The Canadian ritual book has a section that provides for communion, while rightly not including communion as an integral part of a liturgy of the Word.

Nevertheless, at least in places where Sunday celebrations of the Word regularly take place, the *sensus fidelium* often seems to demand communion. There are positive reasons for this. First of all, of course, communion provides a sense of "familiarity," especially for the many older Catholics who often form a significant portion of congregations in rural areas. Second, it provides a link to the Catholic eucharistic tradition and to the Sunday Eucharist celebrated elsewhere throughout the world. And finally, it comes from a sense that Catholics in areas where the Eucharist cannot be celebrated, especially if these are more remote, are no less deprived of communion through no fault of their own than are their fellow Catholics confined to hospitals, nursing homes and other similar situations.

Certainly, communion can be both a legitimate and proper component of such Sunday worship. If other views question its place, presumably they do so because the addition of communion clearly has an effect on people's long-term perception of such services. In other words, we must ask whether the regular provision of communion as part of the liturgies of the Word— which were initially proposed by the Council and

by Canon Law without mention of communion—effectively create, over time, an *alternative* to the Sunday Eucharist. To ask this question is really to recognize the centrality of communion to the Catholic tradition and to the Catholic psyche. In other words, is communion being used to fabricate a novel kind of Catholicism that finds its centre apart from the Eucharist?

While to raise this question is clearly reasonable—indeed, it is something those responsible for the sacramental discipline of the Church must evaluate over time—to raise it in such a way as to challenge the deep and valid convictions of those in the pews will almost certainly be unproductive. What may be more fruitful would be to seek to deepen people’s understanding of eucharistic communion. For in the truest sense there is never communion “outside mass” or “apart from mass.” Unfortunately we simply lack other language. However ultimately these commonly used terms are misleading. Eucharistic communion is always and inextricably linked to the eucharistic sacrifice. Indeed, this is recognized in the Church’s document entitled *Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharist outside Mass*, which states very clearly: “The celebration of the Eucharist in the sacrifice of the Mass is the true origin and purpose of the worship shown to the Eucharist outside Mass. The principal reason for reserving the sacrament after Mass is to unite, through sacramental communion, the faithful unable to participate in the Mass, especially the sick and the aged, with Christ and the offering of his sacrifice.”

Of course eucharistic communion is about receiving the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is also about being received by him, being made one with him and being given a part in that great paschal action by which he is raised from death to new life. Communion is also about “epiclesis”: the Holy Spirit is invoked upon those who share the sacramental body of the Lord to transform them into the one body of Christ, and to bring them into communion with one another. Communion is about our communion with our God; for even here on earth sacramental communion brings us into the divine life itself. Thus communion can never be static or passive. It is always a participation in the eucharistic sacrifice, in the Pasch of our salvation, it is always another mighty deed of God on our behalf, and it is always our own surrender to God and to others in Jesus Christ. To share communion is to enter into and to be linked to the celebration of the Eucharist. In that sense, the communion rite, whenever it takes place, is always the extension of the communion rite of the Eucharist itself.

It is notable that today many parishes explicitly indicate in some fashion that ministers are taking communion to the sick and shut-ins

to enable them to share in the eucharistic sacrifice. The converse of this is precisely the sense that must be developed when people participate in communion during a Sunday celebration of the Word. They should understand that their act of communion is not just the receiving of something, even something as important as the body of Christ, but it is an action that links them to the table of the Lord and to the great saving action of Jesus Christ celebrated and made present in the Eucharist. Actually, it is encouraging to see that many communities who frequently have Sunday celebrations of the Word take real care when they do celebrate the Eucharist to emphasize those elements of the communion rite that most convey its inherent connection to the eucharistic sacrifice: communion under both forms; a proper celebration of the breaking of the bread; the use, as the Church prescribes, only of the sacred species consecrated at that celebration.

Awareness of the connection between communion at a Sunday celebration of the word and participation in the eucharistic action is clearly something to be fostered. So too is whatever creates a yearning for the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. In more general terms, it will be always helpful to emphasize the connection between this celebration, this community, and the Sunday eucharistic worship of the wider Church. Initially some people feared that Sunday celebrations of the word might come to be mistaken for a Eucharist with a lay presider. It is true that there were occasional references to "Sister's mass," and perhaps in the early years prayers were sometimes used that were difficult to distinguish from the eucharistic prayers of the Missal. Today, especially with the evolution of the ritual forms, there is little danger of this. If anything, it seems that parishioners are able to make a very clear distinction between the two. Indeed, the most common complaint is that parishioners who feel less bound by the general precept to keep holy the Lord's Day than by the legal obligation to take part in the Mass, do not attend Sunday worship in their communities when the Eucharist is not celebrated.

Long Term Effects

If there is a major problem today it may be that communities who over the long term can celebrate the Eucharist only occasionally and for whom in practical terms the Sunday celebration of the Word is the norm and not the exception will come to view the latter as "normal." A related difficulty may have to do with the all-too-ready use of such services as an alternative to Mass, sometimes in circumstances far removed from those intended in the Church's documents. Such celebrations can never be introduced only as a matter of convenience. In one unfortunate turn of phrase, the *Directory* says: "it is imperative

that the faithful be taught to see the *substitutional* character of these celebrations." The context indicates, however, that it is precisely the opposite that is intended. The *Directory* wants Catholics to know that such services, although they meet a real pastoral need in some circumstances, are *never a substitute* for the Eucharist. Despite the best of catechesis, however, regular practice could deliver a different message.

Sunday celebrations of the Word can be a wonderful source of grace and blessing, but they are never the ideal. Provided that major concerns are adequately addressed, however, they will continue to fill a real pastoral need in a positive way. In Canada at least, the need for them is historical. In some areas at least, this need goes back for centuries, by far preceding the current priest shortage. To change that traditional situation would probably involve significant changes in the way priests are provided for small and isolated rural communities, if not in the discipline of the Church. The absence of a priest and the need for Sunday worship in such situations is nothing new to rural Canada. What is new is that the traditional need is now being met in an untraditional way. In a relatively short period, Sunday celebrations of the Word have met with general acceptance, and they have been productive of real good. But they are likely to be with us for some time to come, and because of that, whatever the good and valid reasons for them, the Church will have to consider their long-term effects.

In conclusion I would like to reflect on some insightful remarks on this issue made to the bishops of central France by Pope Paul VI even as early as 1977:

You are faced also with the issue of Sunday assemblies without a priest in rural areas. There the village forms a kind of natural unity, both social and religious, that it would be dangerous to give up or to scatter. We understand the sense of this very well and the advantages that can be gained for the participants' exercise of responsibility and the village's vitality. Today's preference is for communities that keep their human dimension, provided they have sufficient resources, are alive, and are not ghettos. We therefore say to you: proceed judiciously, but without multiplying this type of Sunday assembly, as though it were the ideal solution and the last chance! ... Furthermore, the goal must always be celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, the only true actualization of the Lord's paschal mystery.

I can only add that these same challenges seem destined to face the Church for some time to come.

