

Priestless Sunday Services

I. SUNDAY

It was on the first day of the week, our Sunday, when the Lord rose from the dead. On the same day he appeared to his disciples; he went out to meet those who were on the way to Emmaus. With them he broke the bread. On the same evening he met the Eleven in the Cenacle; he ate and drank with them. Again on a Sunday, he appeared to the apostles, who had, this time, Thomas in their midst. These coincidences created the impression among the apostles and first disciples that the Risen Lord wanted to meet them on this particular day of the week.

Therefore, they continued to come together on this same day, even after the Lord had left them in his visible, glorious presence. Paul ordered his Christians to take up the collection for the poor community in Jerusalem on Sundays (1 Cor 16,2). He himself held the Sunday celebration at Troas (Acts 20,7). These testimonies from Sacred Scripture caused Vatican II to say: "By an apostolic tradition which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery every eighth day; with good reason, this, then, bears the name of the Lord's day or the Day of the Lord. For on this day Christ's faithful should come together in one place so that, by hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the Passion, the Resurrection and Glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who 'has begotten us again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto a living hope' (1 Pt 1,3). Hence, the Lord's Day is the original feast day . . ." (Const. on the Lit., art. 106).

This text makes it clear that the full form of the Sunday celebration is the Mass, the eucharistic sacrifice. We are fully justified to

praise and recommend this form of the Christian assembly. Canon Law demands that our faithful participate in this form of Sunday celebration. On the other hand, we all know, that in our present situation, which, at least in the foreseeable future will not improve—it will even become worse—it is impossible to give to all of our faithful, particularly to those in the barrios and out-stations, the opportunity to attend the Sunday Mass regularly. Until now we had to be content with the excuse: "Ad impossibile nemo tenetur." There is no law which obliges the faithful to attend Sunday Mass in these or similar situations.

2. REASONS FOR PRIESTLESS SUNDAY SERVICES

But it is wrong to praise the Sunday Mass on the one side, and to overlook the fact, that, where the full form of the sanctification of the Lord's Day is not possible, we could look for another, less perfect form of the sanctification of the Sunday. As the Council said: at the Sunday Mass two tables are served for the people, the table of the Word of God and the table of the Eucharistic Banquet. Many of our people cannot take part in the regular eucharistic celebration on Sunday. Should we then not try to prepare for them the Table of the Word of God? If holy Communion with the Lord in the Eucharist is not possible, then the communion with him in his Word should be made available for them. He is not only present in the Eucharist, he is also present in his word (Const. on the Lit., art. 7).

It is true, until now we had no priestless Sunday services—at least not on a larger scale. There was no need, it may be said. But there is need now. Our faithful are now exposed to influences, many of them detrimental to their faith. We have only to mention the efforts of various sects and of the Iglesia ni Manalo. These sects offer regularly to the members of their congregations the spiritual food they need. They have Bible lectures, give sermons, pray together and sing hymns. Is it then to be wondered that in areas, neglected by parish priests, Catholics begin to attend these sectarian services in order to satisfy their spiritual desires? We have, therefore, to do something. As long as there was no "competition" we could eventually remain complacent. But now we simply have to look for possibilities to strengthen the faith of our people,

since that faith is frequently not very strong. Only too often our Catholics reach adulthood with a minimum of religious instruction; the knowledge they have is almost always imprecise and confused. Baptized as infants, soon afterwards confirmed, then only initiated into the rudiments of the Catholic faith, they are admitted to the Sacraments of Penance and holy Communion. Upon this fragmentary initiation into their Christian life there follows a youth of spiritual ignorance and the abandonment of religious practice, especially among men.

It is impossible to change this situation from one day to another. But we should have a plan, and start with it, so that things can finally change for the better. One such plan would at least include the regular priestless Sunday service in places which cannot be reached by priests. This gives to the people the opportunity for their religious education and for the sanctification of the Lord's Day.

3. PRIESTLESS SUNDAY SERVICES ARE TRADITIONAL

In the course of history priestless Sunday services played an important role at certain times and places, especially in mission territories. Obviously, these services varied greatly both in content and form. They were conditioned by the aim they wanted to reach. Often the catechetical aim stood in the foreground. On Sundays people came together, prayed the most important Christian prayers (the Our Father, the Credo, the Hail Mary), said in common the Ten Commandments and the five commandments of the Church. They read a chapter from the catechism, or a passage from the Bible. The catechist gave an explanation. At suitable intervals hymns and additional prayers were inserted. This type of priestless Sunday service was of great importance for the religious knowledge of newly converted Christians. A great revival of priestless Sunday services set in shortly after World War II when millions of Catholics from Eastern Europe (Poland, Germany) were displaced. They came often from purely Catholic regions and had to settle down frequently in nearly exclusively Protestant towns and villages. It was clear to all concerned that it was impossible to have a Mass in all these places with only 30, 50 or also 100 Catholics every Sunday. Priests were also aware that for these Catholics the greatest danger was not a falling away from the Catholic faith to Protestantism. They

lived now in a Communist country which openly propagated atheism and often used, to attain its aim, economic sanctions. In such a situation it was indispensable that the faithful got continuous religious instruction. It was necessary that they experienced themselves as members of a Christian community; they had to be brought out of their week-long isolation. Ways had to be found to bring them together at regular intervals. But Mass was not possible. The solution was the priestless Sunday service.

4. THE ECCLESIAL DIMENSION AS A NECESSARY PRECONDITION OF THE PRIEST-LESS SUNDAY SERVICE

This service was normally patterned after the Scripture service of the Mass. But this was not enough. Not only the intellect had to get its spiritual nourishment. There had to be prayer too. It was to be the answer of the assembly to the Word of God.

During the Sunday meeting these Christians had to become aware that they are "brothers and sisters in Christ". For this purpose they had to come together. The word of God has to be proclaimed "in medio Ecclesiae". Then they get the experience of their "fellowship in the Holy Spirit". It is not enough to "go to one's room, to close the door and pray to the Father who is unseen." As Christians we are not only individuals. We are Church. This has to be made manifest in coming together. "The fact that the Christians assembled periodically for prayer was judged from the beginning of the Church as characteristic of their way of life by the authors who described it to the pagans. With remarkable insistence the acts of the apostles frequently refer to the community united in prayer" (A.G. Martimort, Introduction to the Liturgy. Vol. I (1968) p. 80). When Christians come together, to hear the Word of God and to pray, there the Church is made manifest; there the Church becomes an event. The small community, gathered together in the room of a private house or a simple chapel has to become aware of being Church, of being "in unitate Spiritus sancti".

A great help for the strengthening of this ecclesial dimension is the knowledge of the people that the leader of the group is appointed by the parish priest. The priest has certainly to be very careful in making the right choice. Once this has been made, the leader should

be introduced officially. Then all know, that through their appointed leader they are a part of the greater community of the parish. These leaders should be given a suitable training, not only as a once-occurring affair; it should be continued at regular intervals. It would be best if this training could be organized on a diocesan level. The result would be a better training, mutual knowledge of the leaders, their experiences and difficulties. They would also learn to know the bishop personally. This would be a great help for their becoming aware that they are the Church united with their parish, united with their bishop and through their bishop with the whole Catholic Church spread all over the world. "The liturgical life of the parish and its relationship to the bishop must be fostered in the thinking and practice of both laity and clergy" (Const. on the Lit., art. 42).

Leaders and faithful gathered together and aware of their being Church, would also be more eager to listen to the Word of God for those whose ears have not yet been opened to the Word or for those whose ears have become deaf to this World.

5. STRUCTURE OF THE SUNDAY SERVICE

The priestless Sunday service together with its structure gained "canonical" status when Vatican II said: "Bible services should be encouraged, especially... on *Sunday and feast days*. They are particularly to be commended in places *where no priest is available*; when this is so, a deacon, or some other person authorized by the bishop should preside over the celebration" (Const. on the Lit., art. 35,4). The first Instruction on the Constitution on the Liturgy gave rules for these celebrations: "The pattern of these celebrations shall be *almost* the same as the liturgy of the Word in Mass: ordinarily the epistle and the gospel of the Mass of the day shall be read... with chants, especially from the psalms, before the lessons and between them; the one who presides should give a homily, if he is a deacon; if not a deacon, he shall read a homily indicated by the bishop or the pastor; and the whole celebration shall be closed with the common prayer or "prayer of the faithful" and with the Lord's prayer" (art. 37). Since the center of this service is the Word of God, it should eventually open with special honor given to the Word of God, perhaps in a style similar to that

held every morning in the Council Hall of Vatican II: a rather large book of the Bible could be carried to the center of the altar and laid open on a book stand between two lighted candles. This would give the Word of God a place of honor from where it would be taken for the readings and returned to remain there as a symbol for the presence of the Lord in the midst of the congregation. By this practice the assembly is also made to realize that, although Christ is not present in the Eucharist, due to the lack of a priest, he is present in their midst also through his Word.

This introductory rite would be omitted, however, if, in line with the latest concessions, holy Communion could be distributed in the course of this celebration. In this case the service would only begin, when the leader coming from the parish has brought the *Bl. Sacrament* with him.

A. PREPARATORY RITES

The celebration begins with a greeting and a short introduction into the liturgy of the day. It is to direct the attention of the faithful present to the main theme of the respective Sunday or feast day; it is to prepare the congregation for a personal encounter with Christ through faith. This introduction is concluded with the collect of the day.

B. SERVICE OF THE WORD

As the Instruction of Sept. 26, 1964 said, one may here simply follow the readings of the Sunday Mass, especially those found in the reformed lectionary. There could be three readings, or two, or eventually only one. It may easily be best for a barrio to begin with one reading only. Each reading should be introduced with a sentence or two and should be followed either by meditative singing (psalms in responsorial form) or by meditative prayer; if no other prayer formularies should be available a decade of the Rosary (fitting to the occasion) could also be inserted.

If only one single reading is chosen one may take, as the Breviary does at Matins, longer lessons from the Old or New Testament which form a unit. This unit is then subdivided into three sections. After each of these sections there follows meditative prayer or singing

as explained above. Also here it seems advisable to introduce each section of this longer reading with a short sentence, eventually in the style found in the revised lectionary. This makes the particular character of this service of the Word clearer, and shows, that three sections proclaim one and the same message. An example of such a selection could be in a Lenten service Luke 15, 1-32 under the theme "God seeks the lost." The first section would be Lk 15, 1-7: the parable of the lost sheep; the second would offer Lk 15, 8-10: the parable of the lost drachma; the third would be Lk 15, 11-32, the parable of the prodigal Son. Similar units can be selected from the Old Testament (the book of Jonas) and from the epistle of St. Paul (chapter 15 of 1 Cor during Easter season).

The reading(s) should be followed by an explanation. If the leader is not able to give a homily of his own, he may read a prepared text. It could be prepared by the parish priest or by a diocesan center. The latter proposal would be the best. On Sundays these homilies should then be followed by a communal recitation of the Creed.

C. PRAYER SERVICE

A proper prayer service should follow the Creed. If possible, it should follow the ancient Christian and synagogal pattern of praise and thanksgiving, petition and doxology. The proposal of the first post-conciliar instruction on the liturgy is here insufficient. It is too short, compared with the length of the whole service. It would be a poor prayer education, to restrict oneself exclusively to petitions.

Also in the prayer service the people have to become aware of being members of the Church, of their "fellowship in the Holy Spirit". Prayer should remind the whole congregation that all are *one* in the Holy Spirit.

First they have to remove the obstacles of this oneness. The main hindrance is sin, especially the sins against fraternal charity. This is the reason why the priestless Sunday service in its full form should also contain a rite of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another" (Jas 5, 16).

The "unity which the Spirit gives" (Eph 4,3) should also be made manifest in a positive sense. They could show their appreciation for having received forgiveness from God and their fellowmen by coming forward and showing that they are ready to prove their faith by positive charity: "The only thing that counts", says St. Paul, "is faith active in love" (Gal 5,6). Here the faithful, also in the barrios, can accept their share of responsibility within the fellowship of the Church. They help and assist their neighbor and show in this way their love for one another. They contribute something in order to enable the Church to continue its mission in the world until the Lord comes again. Since cash is often scarce in the barrios we have eventually also to think of things in kind, especially after the harvest. But a proper way has to be found for a reliable accounting. The people have the right to know for what gifts are used.

D. CONCLUSION

In the concluding part of the service eventual announcements may be inserted. Then the leader asks for God's blessing, and a hymn may conclude the celebration.

6. LAST DEVELOPMENTS: PRIESTLESS SUNDAY SERVICES WITH COMMUNION.

In a number of articles, even before Vatican II began, bishops and liturgists speaking and writing on priestless Sunday services, had expressed the wish that this kind of Sunday service could be complemented by the administration of the Eucharist, by the distribution of holy Communion. The first hopes for such a concession were placed on the introduction of the permanent diaconate of married men in the Latin Church. The Council gave us the permanent diaconate. But, as a matter of fact, the actual development went into another direction. The Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharist of May 25, 1967 took notice of a development which had started two years earlier in the Communist-occupied Eastern part of Germany. In spring 1965 the bishops of that territory had asked the Apostolic See to grant to the lay leaders of the priestless Sunday service in their out-stations the permission, to bring holy communion from the parish church, and to distribute, as the climax of the celebration, holy Communion to the

people. Rome willingly granted this petition "ad experimentum et ad annum". In 1966 the same concession was given for three more years. During this time (1967) the Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharist stated that "if Mass cannot be celebrated because of a lack of priests, and communion is distributed by a minister who has the faculty to do this, by the Apostolic See, the rite laid down by the competent authority is to be followed" (Eucharisticum Mysterium, art. 33, c).

When the three years were over, in 1969, in view of the experience, the Congregation for the discipline of the Sacraments issued the Instruction "Fidei custos" concerning the distribution of holy Communion by lay people in certain circumstances (April 30, 1969) to which later on an extension of faculties has been granted (Bol. Ecl., March 1970, 182-184). According to this document "before holy Communion is distributed, especially on Sundays and Holy Days of obligation, a *celebration of the Word of God* is held, arranged more or less like the liturgy of the Word in Mass: the epistle and gospel of the Mass of the day are read, and songs, preferably psalms, are sung before and between the readings. He who presides may read a homily assigned by the bishop or parish priest. Then comes the prayer of the faithful. After the prayer of the faithful all pray the Our Father, and either the Confiteor (best to use it in the form of the new order of the Mass) or the act of contrition that is used locally. Then the minister says: "This is the Lamb of God..." to which all respond once: "Lord, I am not worthy..." Before giving Communion to others, the minister may take holy Communion himself, saying in a low voice: "May the body of Christ bring me to everlasting life." Then he gives holy Communion to others, saying to each communicant: "The Body of Christ" and they answer "Amen." The rite is concluded with a song or with a prayer of thanksgiving" (Liturgical Information Bulletin of the Philippines, May-June 1970, pp. KL). According to this document the bishops of the whole world have the opportunity to avail themselves of this possibility. They have only to ask Rome. A number of the bishops of this country applied and gave to the priests of their dioceses the right to ask for the same faculty from their bishops.

The leaders of these communities where holy Mass cannot be celebrated regularly and hold these priestless Sunday services, event-

ually with holy Communion, need solid instruction. The bishop should introduce them into their office. "Fidei custos" provides two "Rites for commissioning the minister who is entitled to give Holy Communion according to the norms of the Instruction 'Fidei custos' (Lit. Inform. Bull., May-June 1970, pp. JK).

We have to be grateful for this latest development. It makes it possible for a large number of our faithful to sanctify the Sunday properly. If performed in the right way and with perseverance, the priestless Sunday service can become one of our most important means of evangelizing our barrio people. From this will follow a new appreciation of the Word of God, a nourishment of faith, and an indispensable preparation for the reception of holy Communion,

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