

Masses on the Weekend

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© January 12, 2005

One of the aspects serving as a motivation for the review of parishes in the Toledo diocese is the effective and adequate service provided by our priests. We must admit that a fewer number of priests in the diocese and the added responsibilities many of them undertake has caused great concern for their personal health and service of others. Are there ways in which the people of God are served adequately in our parishes and the ministerial demands placed on our priests such that they are healthy and wholesome in their service of the Church? I suspect there are various ways to proceed in answering the question.

One perspective that arises in this conversation is the angle offered by church law and liturgical tradition. Canon law expresses that “A priest is not permitted to celebrate the Eucharist more than once a day except in cases where the law permits him to celebrate or concelebrate more than once on the same day.” (CIC, c.905, 1) Those occasions include the circumstance when the diocesan Chrism Mass is celebrated on Holy Thursday and a priest is to celebrate at the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, at the Easter Vigil and the second Mass of Easter, at the three Masses of Christmas, and at concelebrated liturgies with the bishop or a meeting of priests and another Mass celebrated for the benefit of the people. Further, the directive states “If there is a shortage of priests, the local ordinary (Bishop) can allow priests to celebrate twice a day for a just cause, or if pastoral necessity requires it, even three times on Sundays and holy days of obligation.” (CIC, c.905, 2) Commentaries express several reasons why a limit is placed on the number of Masses a priest may celebrate on a given day. Aside from the energy required of the priest celebrating multiple Masses, the integrity of the celebration of Mass (becoming too hurried or routine) is of great concern.

Theologically and pastorally, the number of Masses in a given parish says something about the community gathered together. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is not a personal encounter of faith, but an action of the whole Church expressing its faith in God. The Sunday Eucharist is what makes the Church a community of believers. It is the pillar of parish life. It should be the motivation and drive that prompts life in the parish. Without it, we are nothing. The Sunday celebration of Mass is not for the sake of convenience, but the privilege of committed Christians to be one with each other and with God.

In the Diocese of Toledo, the sense and protocol of the liturgical day is the perspective used in determining the number of weekend Masses celebrated in our local parishes; that is, a 24 hour period from late afternoon on Saturday to late afternoon on

Sunday. Masses (other than weddings with special dispensation from the Diocesan Bishop) that are celebrated on Saturday afternoons after 4:00 PM in the Diocese of Toledo are considered Sunday Masses. They fulfill the Sunday obligation to attend Mass. Clerics and religious know this sense of liturgical time and the day as they pray the Liturgy of the Hours. The observance of Sunday, the Lord's Day, begins with Evening Prayer I on Saturday and concludes with Evening Prayer II on Sunday. Applying this protocol to the local experience in a parish in the Diocese of Toledo, a priest who offers a Sunday Mass on Saturday evening and two Masses during the day on Sunday has reached the limit of three Masses prescribed by church law.