

# Appeals and Special Intentions in the Sunday Liturgy

Sundays are frequently marked by a special intention for the Missions, Education Sunday, World Day of Peace, Mothers Day, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity often with a collection. It would not be difficult to multiply a list of special intentions like this such that practically every Sunday in the year had its own 'worthy cause'. Many of the ministries or organisations within the Church or outside it are keen to promote their particular cause, and decide that the best and easiest way to get their message across is at the Sunday Mass when everyone is assembled.

However Sunday Mass is not just 'an opportunity for education'. The Church assembles for Eucharist on Sunday to celebrate something much more profound and fundamental than any particular theme or intention. To compromise what is essential about our Sunday assembly is to risk depriving ourselves of what is the source and summit of Christian life. On the other hand, the Sunday liturgy must not be divorced from daily life or from the work of the Church in the world. *The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well* (GS 1). This theme of the Vatican Council is taken up in our liturgical prayer: *Keep your Church alert in faith to the signs of the times, and eager to accept the challenge of the gospel...* (Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions).

How do we reconcile these differing expectations and ideas of what should happen at Sunday Mass? The following principles and practical guidelines on appeals and special intentions in the Sunday liturgy are offered as a useful supplement to the Cycle of Prayer used by the Church in England and Wales.

## What are we celebrating at Sunday Mass?

The Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II *Dies Domini* offers a clear answer to this question from its very first paragraph.

*Sunday recalls the day of Christ's resurrection. It is Easter which returns week by week, celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death, the fulfilment in him of the first creation and the dawn of 'the new creation'.* (DD 1)

*The eucharist feeds and forms the Church... The mystery of the Church is savoured, proclaimed, and lived supremely in the eucharist. This ecclesial dimension intrinsic to the eucharist is realised in every eucharistic celebration. But it is expressed most especially on the day when the whole community comes together to commemorate the Lord's resurrection.* (DD 32)

Therefore, at Sunday Mass, we do not so much talk about including the marginalised—we actually do it! We do not merely urge people to shape a more just society—we actually glimpse God's kingdom as we share in the heavenly banquet. We do not need to expound what we can show in a well-celebrated ritual.

*The Sunday celebration is the privileged place of unity: it is the setting for the celebration of the 'sacramentum unitatis' which profoundly marks the Church as a people gathered 'by' and 'in' the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* (DD 36) *Sunday after Sunday the Church moves towards the final 'Lord's Day', that Sunday which knows no end... This makes Sunday the day on which the Church... anticipates in some sense the eschatological reality of the heavenly Jerusalem.* (DD 37)

How can we respect the integrity of Sunday eucharist whilst also admitting the need to insert into the liturgy some recognition of various special themes, intentions and appeals?

## Some General Principles

1. The shape of the liturgy and the purpose and meaning of its parts are set out in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II and described in more detail in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. These should not be compromised.
2. Through the unfolding cycle of readings and prayers for the liturgical year, the Church presents to its eucharistic communities an opportunity to reflect on the Scriptures and the mysteries of Jesus' life. The texts provided in the Lectionary and Missal lead people to an encounter with God's word through the seasons of the Church's prayer. These readings and prayers determine the theme and spirit of the Sunday Mass.
3. The Mass is made up of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These parts '*are so closely interconnected that they form, but one single act of worship. For in the Mass, the table both of God's word and of Christ's body is prepared, from which the faithful may be instructed and refreshed*'. (GIRM 28) The Liturgy of the Word cannot be handed over to another purpose.
4. The responsibility of those who minister at the Sunday liturgy is to help unfold the riches which the liturgy offers the assembled people. In particular, the homily is 'a living commentary on the word', an integral part of the liturgy which increases the word's effectiveness. (cf. GIRM 9) We are informed by God's word to us, rather than informing it with our prior concerns.
5. Therefore if a particular theme or appeal overshadows the character of the Sunday Mass, or takes precedence over the prayers and scriptural readings for the Mass, then a disservice is being done both to the liturgy and to the community.
6. Many of the appeals and special themes which seek a place in the Sunday liturgy concern important aspects of the Church's life of faith, and express the Church's response of faith to the events of our world. The Mass may be an appropriate and realistic time to refer to them.
7. It is appropriate for a parish to make an informed about which Intentions or Days of Special Prayer it observe in a year. This will particularly need to be the case when more than one occurs on a given date or within quick succession. Care should be taken that where there are mandatory collections they are provided for.

## Some Practical Guidelines

1. Care should be taken with terminology. Names such as Home Mission Sunday or Education Sunday are not on the same level as Pentecost Sunday or Trinity Sunday. The former present intentions for our prayer but do not determine the character of the celebration as do the latter. In the Cycle of Prayer there is a preference for Home Mission Day or Day of Prayer for Education.
2. The Introductory Rites may refer to a special theme or appeal, but should avoid any suggestion that this is the reason for the Sunday assembly. The purpose of these Introductory Rites '*is to ensure that the faithful who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves to listen properly to God's word and to celebrate the eucharist worthily*'. (GIRM 46)
3. A clear distinction needs to be made between the homily and any appeal for money or statement on a special theme. The homily, given after the gospel reading, is a time for faith sharing and for comment and reflection upon the Scriptures. Sometimes an appeal or special intention can become a concrete application of the message of the homily and can be mentioned. But the homily is not about the appeal or special intention.
4. If there is to be an appeal it may take place before the collection is taken up at the preparation of the gifts. Information about a special intention may be given at the time of the notices after the Prayer after Communion. It may be appropriate that a lay person is the one to speak on a special theme or appeal.
5. The Prayer of the Faithful is an opportunity to pray for particular intentions or causes but it is not appropriate that the prayers of intercession are dominated by a single external or added theme.
6. Besides money, gifts in kind and other real gifts for the poor are appropriate, but not token items that will be retrieved and returned to ordinary use after the celebration. If it is intended to make use of things that symbolise of the particular work or identity of the assembly or occasion for celebration, these are best brought to the sanctuary as part of the Entrance procession and displayed near the altar or other suitable place. They should not be brought on the procession with the gifts of bread and wine. (*Celebrating the Mass* 180)
7. Other avenues for communication in the parish should be used in preference to speaking at Mass: bulletin notices, posters on the notice board, brochures or handouts, other forums and gatherings as appropriate.

## The Cycle of Prayer — Special Intentions in the Sunday Liturgy

# Notes for Church Agencies

*In the course of each year, various Church agencies both at national and diocesan levels prepare resources for parishes, including material for use during Sunday Mass. The Liturgy Office offers the following notes to guide those preparing such material in order that any references to special intentions will be well integrated with other elements of the Sunday liturgy.*

### Guidelines for Agencies in Preparing Material for Parishes

1. Material relating to a special intention should be seen in the context of the overall purpose of the Sunday celebration, as described, for example, by the Second Vatican Council: ‘*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 the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who “has begotten us again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3)*’ (SC 106). The purpose of the Sunday assembly is not to promote or educate people about a particular cause, however worthwhile it may be.

2. The texts of Scripture and the prayers that are proper to each particular Sunday are the key elements in that Sunday’s celebration in churches throughout the world. The message of these texts should not be replaced by references to special intentions, for instance by the substitution of prayers or Scripture passages related to these intentions.

3. It may be appropriate to refer to the special intention in the **words of welcome** at the beginning of the celebration. Agencies could provide a short text giving an example of such introductory words, without implying that the Sunday celebration is ‘about’ the special intention, and without ignoring the day or season.

4. It does not seem appropriate to link the petitions of a penitential rite with a special intention, the focus of the penitential rite should be on the merciful Christ rather than on some particular theme.

5. Special intentions can be recognised during the **homily**. While the message of the homily is normally based on the Scriptures for the day, the special intention can be referred to in the course of the preaching, but this should flow from the proclamation of the word. Agencies may wish to provide a brief text (perhaps of one or two paragraphs or a series of notes) which the homilist could use as the basis for a refer-

ence to the special intention. A full sample homily gives the impression that the priest is being invited to preach on a particular cause or intention.

6. The special intention could be mentioned during the **Prayer of the Faithful**. Whilst it would not be appropriate for a particular intention to dominate these intercessions, it would be appropriate to include a petition or two related to the special intention as one of the elements in the parish’s prayer. Agencies may wish to provide a few examples of texts for such a petition, but not a complete set of intentions—this would give the impression that one intention alone was important to the exclusion of all others.

7. There might also be mention of the special intention in the **brief notices** at the end of Mass. Agencies might provide a text for such a notice.

8. In addition to these references within the liturgy itself, there are other avenues that can be employed to publicise a special intention. These include a notice for the parish bulletin and posters for display in the church foyer. Agencies may wish to provide these items amongst the resources they send to parishes. Study materials for use outside the Sunday Mass in homes or small groups are, of course, always a welcome possibility.

### A Checklist

*Here is a checklist of the liturgy material that agencies could send to parishes in relation to special intentions. Agencies might send some or all of these items:*

1. An example of **words of welcome** to be used at the beginning of the celebration, including a reference to the special intention.
2. A text (one or two paragraphs) which the homilist could use as the basis of a reference to the special intention within the **homily**.
3. One or two petitions to be included in the **Prayer of the Faithful**.
4. A message to be included in the brief, spoken **notices** at the end of Mass.
5. Notes for the **parish bulletin**, perhaps with illustrations.
6. **Leaflets** to be distributed, perhaps as inserts in the parish bulletin.
7. **Posters** to be displayed in the church foyer.

*By providing such resources, Church agencies will be helping parish communities to be aware of special needs while also respecting the integrity of the parish’s Sunday liturgy.*