



Diocese of Argyll and the Isles

Bishop's House,

Corran Esplanade, Oban.

PA34 5AB

Charity Registration No: SC002876

PASTORAL LETTER CONCERNING SERVICES OF WORD AND COMMUNION

To be distributed during all Masses during the weekend of 6th & 7th December 2025

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

The Eucharist is the centre of the Church's life

The Second Vatican Council described the Eucharist as the “source and summit of the Christian life”.¹ Jesus gifted us the Eucharist the night before he died. Therefore, from the very earliest days Christian communities assembled to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, the day the Lord rose from the dead. We gather to remember Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection being nourished by their transforming power, strengthened by God's Word and receiving his Body and Blood which is uniquely present in the consecrated bread and wine, proclaim that Jesus will return in glory when all his promises will be fulfilled before being sent out in mission.

In this Pastoral Letter I emphasise that our primary Christian act of worship is Sunday Mass. However, the reality is that remoteness means that some of our communities have rarely had the opportunity to participate in Sunday Mass. More recently the reduction of priests means that Sunday Mass, even in larger parishes, is not always possible either and the frequency of this will likely increase. I therefore want to provide guidance for when no priest is available for Sunday Mass.

Obligation

As Christians we are called to fulfil the precept of keeping Sunday holy and Catholics are obliged to attend Sunday Mass and Holydays of Obligation when it is reasonable to do so. If attendance at Mass is unreasonable (e.g. no priest is available, illness, excessive distance or extreme weather) the obligation ceases. We use an informed conscience to discern what is reasonable.

Alternative Acts of Worship

Sunday should always be sanctified, the pre-eminent worship being the celebration of the Eucharist. When we cannot attend Mass there are several alternatives. Firstly, the Church recognises the value of the community still gathering for worship and so recommends that parishioners assemble to be enriched by the Scriptures and, if possible, the reception of Holy Communion.² This is called a *Service of Word and Communion*. We must not see these Services as a substitute for Mass.

If you cannot or chose not to attend a Service of Word and Communion (which is perfectly permissible) you should set aside some time for personal or family prayer or even with several other families. Reading the scriptures is recommended but devotions such as the Rosary or Stations of the Cross are also beneficial. Watching an online Mass is another option but I emphasise that watching an online Mass is not the same as being physically present at Mass.

¹ Lumen Gentium, 11

² Congregation for Divine Worship: Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (1988)

Services of Word and Communion

Mass is the pre-eminent form of Sunday worship. When no priest is available and a supply priest cannot be found then Services of Word and Communion are permissible and encouraged. I hope that my guidelines provide clarity to both clergy and lay faithful.

- 1 Services of Word and Communion are permissible when a priest cannot celebrate Mass due to being ill and a supply priest is not reasonably available.
- 2 Due to geography and weather travel can often be unpredictable in our diocese. When a priest is prevented from reaching a Church (e.g. the cancellation of a ferry or sudden road closure) a Service of Word and Communion is permissible.
- 3 It is essential for a priest's wellbeing to go on holiday, make an annual retreat and sometimes take compassionate leave. Due to the pre-eminence of Mass, the Parish Priest must first make several approaches to arrange a supply priest. If this proves infeasible a Service of Word and Communion is permissible. No one should be deprived of a period of rest or compassionate leave, including our priests.
- 4 The Parish Priest must give expressed permission for a Service of Word and Communion to be celebrated.
- 5 Services of Word and Communion on a Sunday cannot occur if Mass has already been celebrated in the Church on that Saturday evening or Sunday.
- 6 A deacon is the Ordinary Minister for a Service of Word and Communion. He should preach a sermon.
- 7 If there is no deacon available the Parish Priest should prepare and appoint an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion to lead the Service.³ The Extraordinary Minister cannot preach but may read a reflection prepared by the Parish Priest. To lead the worship is not an honour but an act of service. Those exercising ministries such as readers, musicians, welcomers, Children's Liturgy should continue their role.
- 8 Detailed rubrics for Services of Word and Communion have been sent to each parish so that the Services comply with Church liturgical norms and are consistent across our diocese.
- 9 If Communion cannot be distributed then a Service of the Word is recommended, using the Scriptures allocated in the lectionary.
- 10 Although I recommend Services of Word and Communion the Parish Priest, after consulting parishioners, can decide whether or not to use them. Regardless of his decision each priest should prepare and publicly make known what is to happen if he unexpectedly cannot celebrate Sunday Mass.

I acknowledge and am grateful for the commitment of our priests who often travel long distances to celebrate Mass for their parishioners. I also rejoice in the love for our parishioners for the Eucharist. Please encourage a culture of vocation within your families and communities. I pray that our present challenges will help our hunger for the Eucharist grow.

+ Brian McGee

Right Reverend Brian McGee

Bishop of Argyll and the Isles

30th November 2025, First Sunday of Advent

³ For selection of suitable persons see the aforementioned Directory, 30