Preparing the Christmas Mass Schedule in 2023

From time to time, the liturgical laws governing the Church’s calendar give rise to consecutive solemnities, or high feast days that follow in successive days. Given that the celebration of a solemnity begins on the preceding evening, questions often arise concerning which Mass texts and readings should be used on the evening when the consecutive solemnities overlap. For example, in 2023, the Fourth Sunday of Advent will be celebrated on December 24, and the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas) falls on the very next day. Catholics may wonder which celebration they will encounter if they attend Mass on the evening of December 24: the Fourth Sunday of Advent or Christmas Eve?
These types of questions may be answered by consulting the Church’s Table of Liturgical Days and giving precedence to the higher-ranking day. For example, in the case of the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas in 2023, both are days of precept [obligation], but Christmas occupies a higher place on the Table of Liturgical Days. Therefore, at Masses scheduled on the evening of Sunday, December 24, the Vigil Mass for the Nativity should be celebrated.

In these types of situations, pastors will also frequently receive questions concerning the fulfillment of the obligation to attend Mass. In the opinion of most canonists, the obligation for each solemnity (in this case, one for the Fourth Sunday of Advent and another for Christmas) must be fulfilled with a separate Mass. The fulfillment of the Mass obligation does not depend on which Mass prayers and readings are used in the celebration, but rather, on the time of day at which one attends Mass. For example, the obligation for the Fourth Sunday of Advent may be fulfilled at any Mass from the evening of Saturday, December 23 and throughout the entire day of Sunday, December 24. That is, one may attend the anticipated Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, or any Mass (even a Vigil Mass for Christmas) on that Sunday in order to fulfill the first Mass obligation of the weekend. The second obligation (for Christmas) may be fulfilled from the evening (after 4pm) of Sunday, December 24 and throughout Monday, December 25.

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<tr>
<th>Fourth Sunday of Advent</th>
<th>Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)</th>
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<td>Obligation may be fulfilled from the evening (after 4pm) of Saturday, December 23 and throughout Sunday, December 24</td>
<td>Obligation may be fulfilled from the evening (after 4pm) of Sunday, December 24 and throughout Monday, December 25</td>
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<td>Obligation may be fulfilled at:</td>
<td>Obligation may be fulfilled at:</td>
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<td>• Anticipated (Saturday evening) Mass or Mass of the Fourth Sunday of Advent</td>
<td>• Any evening Mass (after 4pm) on December 24</td>
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<td>• A Vigil Mass for Christmas on December 24</td>
<td>• Any Mass on December 25</td>
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This admittedly complex arrangement should be taken into consideration by parishes when planning a holiday weekend Mass schedule that will accommodate the fulfillment of both Mass obligations. It is also worth noting that canon 1245 and archdiocesan particular law allows for pastors and incardinated priests to “grant in individual cases [but not for an entire parish or larger group] a dispensation from the obligation of observing [this precept].” As well, while the need to fulfill both obligations is a prevailing canonical opinion, confessors should take into account the existence of a canonical doubt on this issue when attending to this matter in the confessional.

In arranging priest coverage for the Mass schedule during this weekend, pastors will want to keep in mind the canonical rule (canon 905) that priests ordinarily are permitted to celebrate the
Eucharist only once a day, but have been given permission to celebrate Mass twice on weekdays and three times on Sundays and Holy Days of obligation for the sake of pastoral need. As such, in 2023, a priest may celebrate up to three Masses on both December 24 and December 25, respectively.

One last consideration concerns the timing of a Vigil Mass for Christmas. As described above, the Code of Canon Law permits the fulfillment of a Mass obligation on the evening of the preceding day (canon 1248). As to what constitutes “evening,” the Code does not establish a definitive time. The most recent statement by the Holy See on this question is Pope Pius XII’s apostolic constitution Christus Dominus (1953), which set the hour of 4pm as the earliest time for anticipated and vigil masses. Some readers may recall that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a special concession was made to allow for Christmas Masses to be scheduled earlier than 4pm so that churches would not be overly crowded and to allow for the practice of “social distancing.” This permission has not been renewed in the intervening years, and so, the earliest start time for a Vigil Mass for Christmas in 2023 is 4pm.

First Annual Archdiocesan Parish Musicians’ Breakfast, Honoring Rev. Anthony Sorgie - Saturday, October 28

Parish musicians are invited to the First Annual Archdiocesan Parish Musicians’ Breakfast, to be held on Saturday, October 28, from 9-11am, at Saint Joseph’s Seminary, Yonkers. Musicians will have an opportunity to meet in fellowship with colleagues, listen to performances by Saint Joseph’s Seminary’s schola cantorum and young musicians who study in the archdiocesan Vocalist and Organist Training Programs, and pay tribute to Rev. Anthony Sorgie, pastor of the Parish of Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Our Lady in Tuckahoe and former Professor and Director of Sacred Music at Saint Joseph’s Seminary, who will be the first recipient of the Saint Gregory the Great Award for Distinguished Service in Sacred Music. Musicians, parishioners, friends, family, and all musical enthusiasts are welcome! Online registration may be found at the enclosed link.
New Liturgical Texts Approved

The USCCB’s Committee on Divine Worship and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions have announced that the Holy See’s Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments recently confirmed several new and newly translated texts for liturgical use in the dioceses of the United States of America.

Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass

On March 7, 2023, the Dicastery confirmed a new English translation of Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass, which contains descriptions of the rituals for bringing Communion to the Sick, Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction, Eucharistic Processions, and Eucharistic Congresses. In its confirmation, the Dicastery approved several US adaptations to the Order of Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction, with the goal of harmonizing the book with existing customs for Eucharistic Adoration in this country.

Expanded Mass Formulary of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha

On May 26, 2023, the Dicastery confirmed an expanded Mass formulary for the Memorial of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, which is celebrated on July 14. This formulary was approved in English and Spanish at the November 2016 USCCB plenary meeting. The Entrance and Communion Antiphons for this Mass formulary were selected from among the options given in the Common of Virgins. The collect was slightly revised to highlight Saint Kateri’s importance in both the United States and Canada. The Prayer over the Offerings and Prayer after Communion are newly composed.

The Mass formulary in both English and Spanish has been made available for free PDF download at the USCCB’s website.

Liturgical Texts for Saint Paul VI and Our Lady of Loreto

In a decree dated May 29, 2023 (Prot. n. 333/23), the Dicastery confirmed proper liturgical texts for the memorials of Pope Saint Paul VI and Our Lady of Loreto. These texts – each consisting of a collect, Lectionary readings, biography and Second Reading for the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours, and Roman Martyrology entry – were approved by the USCCB at their November 2022 plenary meeting.

The Optional Memorial of Saint Paul VI is on May 29, and the Optional Memorial of Our Lady of Loreto is on December 10. Both sets of newly
approved texts have been posted on the USCCB's website [Saint Paul VI - Our Lady of Loreto].

Readings for the Mass for Chastity

On March 20, 2023, the Dicastery also promulgated a new set of suggested readings for the “Mass for Chastity,” which is found within the Masses for Various Needs and Occasions in the Roman Missal. Until recently, this Mass had not been assigned a set of accompanying readings, as with most other Mass formularies of the Missal. The USCCB explained the impetus behind the formulation of this special set of readings in this way:

To live in chastity, or continence, frees the baptized Christian to put on Christ, fight every form of evil, and realize that his or her body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, a means to glorify God by following the path of life in step with the Spirit. The chaste Christian, having received a new heart and a new spirit, offers his or her body as a living sacrifice to God, observes the divine commandments, and seeks to not offend God by clinging to the desires and works of the flesh.

These themes of identifying with Christ, laying aside harmful practices, and respecting one's body as an expression of the goodness of God's creation are clearly presented in the given readings, which may be downloaded from the USCCB website.

Liturgical Q and A: Blessings During the Distribution of Holy Communion

The Liturgy Office frequently receives questions from clergy and laity alike concerning the expanding practice of offering blessings to individuals during the distribution of Holy Communion. What follows is a timely commentary recently provided by the archdiocesan Office of the Vicar General on this very issue:

What exactly is the policy of the Church regarding the blessing of non-communicants at Mass? Since this practice is not provided for in liturgical books, and canon and liturgical law prohibits anyone from introducing new elements, it is a sticky subject to address.

The beginning of this custom is a bit hard to pin down; it seems to have started in the late 1980s out of a desire to help those who cannot receive Holy Communion feel included. It is a well-intentioned gesture and is growing rapidly, especially as a way of avoiding or lowering sacrilegious communions. And while some priests encourage it, especially at the time of a funeral or wedding, and among children, there are many good reasons why others do not follow this trend.

In some churches, children and non-Catholics are instructed to come with arms crossed to receive a blessing from the minister of Communion, whereas in other parishes, they
might be asked to remain seated.

Parents often bring very young children with them on the Communion procession because it would be unwise to leave them behind. Over the years, it has become a custom for these children to receive a blessing. Children have been carried or walked in the Communion procession for centuries without feeling neglected because a blessing was not given. But today, children in line will look up expectantly at the person distributing Holy Communion.

The blessing given to both children and adults varies greatly from place to place. Some ministers respond by speaking or making the gesture of the sign of the cross, patting or touching the individual's head in a sign of blessing, marking the forehead with a sign of the cross, or even blessing them with the Eucharistic host. As well intentioned as these practices may be, in the context of the liturgy, is the Communion procession really the time for a blessing of children or adults who are unable to receive? Is there a need to hallow only some members with a special blessing when the entire congregation is blessed by the priest moments later at the end of Mass?

Another consideration is that touching people's hair, faces and garments while serving Communion (or any other food for that matter) has to be a violation of health and safety regulations somewhere, not to mention poor manners. This practice could be off-putting to the next person in line who may wish to receive on the tongue.

Furthermore, is it appropriate to substitute the reception of Communion for the laying on of a hand or hands – which has its own sacramental significance?

One last consideration is that, over time, the practice of giving blessings to non-communicants could create a new perception or mentality regarding Communion itself that makes it somehow equivalent to a blessing, thus weakening the special value that Communion should have for Catholics. This danger could be especially present in a school environment with a high proportion of non-Catholics who receive only a blessing. These ritual gestures might cause confusion, especially to the Catholics present.

For all these reasons, it is a best practice to reserve the Communion procession for the distribution of Holy Communion as much as possible and not to invite others forward for a blessing with a general announcement.

Even when this step is taken, some adults and children will still present themselves for a blessing in the Communion line. Since the alternative is sending someone away disappointed and possibly angry and disaffected, here is a suggestion offered from various places around the country as a resolution to the issue of blessings in lieu of Communion while avoiding the appearance of being unwelcoming.

Without making a gesture with the hand, the priest or deacon may simply bow his head...
sightly and say quietly but audibly, “Receive Christ spiritually in your heart.” This is not a blessing, but an invitation to worship, so no actions are taken. And since children and babies do not understand the concept, it is not necessary to do anything more.

Regarding Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC), they are deputed to assist the priest with the distribution of the Eucharist in moments of necessity. They should not give blessings to anyone in the Communion procession. They have no liturgical duties besides the distribution of Communion. There are other times in the liturgical year when the laity assist in specific acts such as the blessing of throats or the distribution of ashes, and these are clearly indicated in the Book of Blessings.

It goes without saying that priests and deacons should be available to give individual blessings happily and readily to anyone who wishes after Mass while shaking hands and greeting people exiting the church. This kind of warm spiritual hospitality is always appreciated by parishioners and guests alike.

Publication of the Divine Office Hymnal
The USCCB’s Committee on Divine Worship has recently announced the publication of the Divine Office Hymnal. This new resource contains English translations of the official hymns of the Liturgy of the Hours, which were approved by the USCCB in 2019.

Readers who regularly celebrate the Divine Office are likely aware that the hymns contained in the current English translation approved for use in the United States are more varied than those which are found in the official Latin edition of the Liturgia Horarum. This expanded listing of hymnody includes modern hymns and songs, a number of which are now only rarely used due to their somewhat dated musical style. By contrast, in the forthcoming English translation of the entire four-volume Breviary (anticipated in 2025-2026), the included hymns will be more limited in number and will correspond directly with the official 294 hymns found in the Latin typical edition.

The Divine Office Hymnal serves as a preview of the translation work of the forthcoming edition of the Liturgy of the Hours by offering the full text of these hymns. Each hymn is also set to two different melodies, either of which may be chosen in light of the musical needs and abilities of a given assembly. One melody is based on the chant of the Gregorian repertoire (adapted from the Liber Hymnarius and presented in modern musical notation on a 5-line staff), and the second is set to a well-known metered hymn tune. The inclusion of a metrical setting is meant to encourage
the singing of these hymns by groups that may not be as familiar with the chant repertoire, such as parish communities.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of these newly translated hymns is that they do not follow a formal rhyme scheme. This is by design, as the Latin texts themselves do not strictly rhyme, although they do on occasion reflect a natural assonance that is the result of Latin being an inflected language (i.e., words in the same case may end similarly, such as -us, -i, or -um). In the process of translating the hymns, the decision was made to forgo the kind of rhyming that typifies English-language songs in favor of preserving the Latin texts’ meter and rhythm in an effort to capture the unique presentation of their spiritual content.

The resulting character of these newly translated hymns is rich and evocative, and will likely be striking to those who have never encountered these texts before. Consider, for example, the following stanzas from the hymn ascribed to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord:

   Observing fully rites prescribed by Moses’ pen,
   Christ deigned to follow precepts of the sacred Laws,
   who rule and governs in the Father’s citadel
   resplendent orders, rank on rank of angel hosts,
   and made the cosmos, earth and sky and teeming sea.

   His blessed Mother in her chaste and holy arms
   brought to the Temple God beneath a veil of flesh;
   her sweetest kisses pressed the closed and silent lips
   of him, all-holy, who in truth is God and Man,
   by whose commanding all created things were made.

   This light of nations shining forth before their eyes
   is radiant glory for the house of Israel;
   this child is destined for the fall of those who sin
   and for salvation offered ev’ry tribe and tongue,
   till all the secrets of the heart have been revealed.

The new *Divine Office Hymnal* is being published by GIA and may be ordered now for $25 (pew edition) or $100 (accompaniment edition) directly from the GIA website.

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