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## Short-Term Solution, Long-Term Problem: The Rite of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest and its Use in the United States of America

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Short-Term Solution, Long-Term Problem:  
The Rite of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest  
and its Use in the United States of America

by

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY·SEMINARY  
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Director

Short-Term Solution, Long-Term Problem:  
The Rite of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest  
and its Use in the United States of America

Description: The Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest (SCAP) has become a common part of the American Catholic experience as dioceses continue to struggle with ways to deal with the shortage of available ordained priests to celebrate Eucharist. In this paper, I look at early church history (in the pre-Nicene church as well as the Middle Ages) to find historical and theological justification of the rite. I examine relevant background information data from American history on the availability of Eucharist and Eucharistic piety, and then outline the 20<sup>th</sup>-century movement which restored frequent reception of Communion to the laity, to explain how the current situation developed in the USA. I trace the development of the SCAP rite, from 1973's *Holy Communion Outside of Mass* to the 2007 revision of the SCAP rite. I then consider a number of the most pressing criticisms of the SCAP from a variety of vantage points, including sacramental, ecclesiological, theological, and sociological.

*This paper may be duplicated.*

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August 8, 2011

## I. Introduction

During the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic church experienced what Robert Taft has called the greatest and most successful liturgical reform in Catholic history: the restoration of frequent reception of Holy Communion by lay people. A great pastoral initiative turned around fifteen centuries of devotional history in fifty years.<sup>1</sup> However, this increased reception of Communion now coincides with a sharp decrease in the number of available priests to preside at Mass and consecrate the Eucharist, particularly in the United States of America. Canon law requires the faithful to participate in Mass every Sunday and holy day; many choose to receive Communion as part of their participation. But canon law also limits each priest to presiding at three Masses on a Sunday.<sup>2</sup> Statistics from 1965 and 2009 reveal that there are now about a third fewer priests in the USA than there were 44 years ago. These priests serve slightly more parishes and have the responsibility for many more parishioners. The number of priestly ordinations in 2009 was half of what it was in 1965. Over 3,400 parishes across the country have no resident priest.<sup>3</sup> If the demographics of this group of priests are similar to what they were a few years ago, then over a quarter of these priests are retired, the average age of the group is about 60, and more of these men are over 90 than under 30.<sup>4</sup>

How can this situation be resolved? One of the ways that most people have noticed is the increasingly urgent prayers for vocations to the priesthood. Lay people are also undertaking a wide variety of roles that in previous generations were reserved strictly to priests, such as hospital visits, catechetical instruction, and business matters. Many dioceses have been

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Taft, "The Frequency of the Celebration of the Eucharist Throughout History," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell Johnson, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1989), 384, 296.

<sup>3</sup> Mary L. Gautier, ed. "Frequently Requested Church Statistics." *The CARA Report*: 15, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 5.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Feuerherd, "Just how bad is it? Priest shortage worse than experts predicted..." *National Catholic Reporter*, October 17, 2003.

undergoing restructuring to close some parishes and to cluster or combine others, resulting in fewer, larger parishes. Many dioceses have invited foreign-born priests to serve in their parishes. However, another solution for this challenging situation is a recently-created rite now known as the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest, or SCAP. Use of this rite is fraught with theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications for the Roman Catholic Church today, making its continued use controversial. In this paper, I will review precedents for lay-led Eucharistic celebrations in church history, which will explain the historical and theological justification for the SCAP rite. I will look at American history to briefly examine the availability of the Eucharist and the development of Eucharistic piety, and then trace the movement towards restoration of frequent reception of the Eucharist by lay people, to explain how the current situation has come about. I will next examine the development of this rite and its antecedents, particularly in the United States, and finally consider critiques of the use of this rite.

## **II. Lay-led Eucharistic celebrations in the early church**

Even today, it is not uncommon for Roman Catholics to receive the Eucharist without attending Mass. Two recurring examples of this are the Good Friday liturgy, in which hosts consecrated on Holy Thursday are distributed, and taking Communion to those who cannot be present at Mass with the community. Both are situations where a priest is not necessary, but is customary (in the first case) and has been expected (in the second.)

However, there have been times in history in which Roman Catholics were able to receive the Eucharist from the hands of someone other than a priest. There are Roman frescoes from the first couple centuries depicting small boxes, or *arcæ*, which were probably used to hold valuable items such as jewelry, cosmetics, or consecrated hosts. These would have been taken to

people unable to attend the usual Sunday gathering.<sup>5</sup> It is likely that these hosts were stored in people's houses in closets, chests, or cupboards.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Justin describes the practice of taking consecrated elements home from the Eucharistic liturgy for the faithful to consume themselves on days when the Eucharist was not celebrated.<sup>7</sup> In the pre-Nicene Church, there is evidence that the bishop was the normal and nominal presider at the Eucharist. However, Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century, delegated the role to presbyters.<sup>8</sup> In a similar fashion, the *Apostolic Tradition*, once attributed to Hippolytus, permits a deacon to preside at the agape meal which followed Eucharist, suggesting that it was possible for normally presbyteral functions to be delegated to others. In the early third century, Tertullian noted that even a layman could preside at the Eucharist in the case of emergency.<sup>9</sup> He wrote, in translation, "When there is no hierarchy, you yourself offer the sacrifice, you baptize, and you are your own priest. Where two or three are gathered together, even though they may be lay persons, there is a church."<sup>10</sup> Following Constantine's endorsement of Christianity as the official state religion, the need for deacons and laity to preside at Eucharistic services decreased sharply.

Over the following centuries, a noticeable disconnection between the reception of Communion and the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy<sup>11</sup> set in, the result of many factors. This evolution was noticeable by the seventh century, when Isidore of Seville wrote that the Eucharist was no longer a corporate gift of thanks, but was instead a gift of grace given to the

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Foley, OFM, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Ton van Eijk, "Communion Services after Vaticanum II," trans. D. Mader, in *Bread of Heaven: Customs and Practices Surrounding Holy Communion*, ed. Charles Caspers, Gerard Lukken, and Gerard Rouwhorst (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), 232.

<sup>8</sup> James Dallen, *The Dilemma of Priestless Sundays* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Dallen notes there is concern with using Tertullian as a source here. It is unclear precisely when Tertullian became a Montanist. His conflicts with church officials may make this testimony questionable.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Both of these terms are multivalent. For the purposes of clarity in this paper, I will use the term "Eucharist" to refer primarily to the Eucharistic celebration, the Mass, and "Communion" or "Holy Communion" to refer to the consecrated hosts from such a celebration.

one who celebrated it (or who caused it to be celebrated). Isidore's view influenced many; Mass came to be seen as a good work for the personal and individual salvation of one's soul.<sup>12</sup> The Eucharist became reified – that is, regarded as a thing, as the faithful focused more on the consecrated hosts than on the act of celebrating Eucharist together. Lay people stopped receiving Communion during the liturgy and began receiving afterwards. Communion changed from the integral part of the Eucharistic liturgy to something added to it. This distribution of Eucharist after Mass would persist into the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

From the time of Gregory the Great (Pope from 590 to 604 CE) and continuing into the Middle Ages, there were parishes and monasteries without a resident priest. While there is confusion about precisely which acts are liturgical public ones and which are devotional in nature, many believe that documents from that era describe rites for administering Holy Communion without a priest. Jean Leclercq has described a couple of these ceremonies in detail.<sup>14</sup> One such ceremony was recorded in an eleventh-century text copied at Monte Cassino. The liturgy consisted of three psalms, a Kyrie, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, and a Credo, all of which were to be "chanted" as opposed to recited.<sup>15</sup> A penitential rite of sorts followed: a statement of general confession plus a prayer to obtain pardon from sins. Next, verses from the psalms effected a transition from penitence to thanksgiving. Next, there was a lengthy prayer to each member of the Holy Trinity.<sup>16</sup> Finally, there was the moment to receive (or, rather, take) Holy Communion; this act was both preceded and followed by a threefold repetition of prayers ("Lord, I am not worthy," and a longer prayer of Thanksgiving afterwards). The conclusion of

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<sup>12</sup> Gerard Austin, "Communion Services: A Break with Tradition?" in *Fountain of Life*, ed. Gerard Austin (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1991), 203.

<sup>13</sup> van Eijk, "Communion Services after Vaticanum II," 233.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Leclercq, "Eucharistic Celebrations Without Priests in the Middle Ages," in *Living Bread, Saving Cup*, ed. R. Kevin Seasoltz (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.



this ritual included a prayer of thanksgiving, plus a prayer for the disappearance of the consequences of sin that remain after its remission.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the singular pronouns for this manuscript are all in the feminine, suggesting that it was used by communities of nuns.<sup>18</sup> Leclercq notes that those who compiled these ceremonies seem to make a great effort to avoid copying the Mass; there are no prayers that are priestly or presidential, there is no institution narrative, and there is not even a liturgy of the Word.<sup>19</sup> He proposes that these services reflect the lack of availability of a priest.<sup>20</sup>

### **III. Eucharistic Availability and Piety in the United States of America**

The shortage of Roman Catholic priests in the United States of America is nothing new. In the early days of the republic, the nation was mission territory. A report to Rome in the year 1780 states that Maryland had almost 16,000 Catholics (including three thousand slaves) but only nineteen priests. New York City had 1500 Catholics, and no priests.<sup>21</sup> The priests ministering in the young country, including the first American bishop, John Carroll, were constantly on the move from one small community to another, conferring baptism and confirmation and witnessing marriages as quickly as possible.<sup>22</sup> The dire situation often led these priests to be lenient in applying canon law. As one example, Carroll decided that Mass could start as late as 1 p.m., instead of the canonically-stated noon. Not only were many people travelling long distances to attend a Mass, but each needed to go to confession before receiving Holy Communion, and priests needed hours before each Mass to hear these confessions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>21</sup> James O'Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

Many Catholics had to find other ways to celebrate their faith without regular celebration of the Eucharist. Some built chapels, even though they were seldom used.<sup>24</sup> Some joined local Protestant churches, or at least worshipped with them; Bishop England of Charleston complained in the 1830s of “leakage” because of the lack of priests and unavailability of Mass.<sup>25</sup> Many priests counseled people to gather with their fellow Catholics, read the gospel together, recite prayers, and teach their children the basics of the faith. Many lay Catholics owned manuals – prayer books – that often were based around the church year. Because most Catholics would have owned a bible, these manuals did not have the full text of the scriptures, but often just a verse. One example was John Gother’s *Prayers for Sundays and Festivals, Adapted to the Use of Private Families and Congregations*. There was a short explanatory paragraph of each celebration, and then somewhere between 6 and 25 short prayers that were to be read by “the head of the family.” There is no reason that this family head could not have been a woman.<sup>26</sup> Many of these manuals advocated “spiritual communion” of the faithful in lieu of receiving the Eucharist. Since receiving the Eucharist was such a rare occurrence for many, Pacificus Baker recommended three days of prayers before and after receiving the Eucharist, and a similar ritual when receiving “spiritually.”<sup>27</sup> In some communities, groups elected someone to lead their assembly; the city of Savannah, Georgia, appointed one John Dillon “to read the prayers for the Mass on Sunday.”<sup>28</sup>

The American Roman Catholics “churchified” in the early to mid-nineteenth century. A priest travelling the United States in the early nineteenth century wrote to papal officials about a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, “Eucharist or Communion Service?” *The Way* 38 (October 1998), 367.

<sup>26</sup> O’Toole, *The Faithful*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 32.

near-obsession with constructing new church buildings.<sup>29</sup> With a building boom of new churches and an influx of new priests, it became possible to approach the ideal of Mass every week. However, to do so, many priests had to be given permission to say two Masses on Sunday (instead of the canonically-approved one), not so much because of a lack of priests as because of a lack of spaces large enough to accommodate an entire congregation at once.<sup>30</sup> Soon Sunday evening vespers, concluding with Benediction, also became common. Parishioners were strongly encouraged to return in the late afternoon for vespers, although failure to do so was not considered a serious sin.<sup>31</sup> Despite the exhortations of clergy, these devotions never garnered the same attention as Mass, but still contributed to a culture wherein American Catholics were expected to gather weekly or even more frequently.<sup>32</sup>

There was a dramatic growth in Eucharistic devotions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of this can be explained by Irish piety, brought to the United States by the waves of Irish immigrants. Archbishop Paul Cullen, who led the Dublin archdiocese late in the nineteenth century, encouraged these communal devotions, which were well-suited to the United States where many Catholics lived together in neighborhoods around a parish.<sup>33</sup> Among the most popular devotions was the 40-hour devotion, introduced in the United States by Philadelphia bishop John Neumann in 1853 and endorsed by the bishops a generation later. The simple format – forty hours of continuous exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, bracketed by liturgies and often including a series of talks – was easy to imitate. Even small parishes were encouraged to “go all-out” for these events, strongly encouraging every able-bodied Christian to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret M. McGuinness, “Let Us Go to the Altar: American Catholics and the Eucharist, 1926-1976,” in *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. James M. O’Toole (Cornell University Press, 2004), 201.

participate.<sup>34</sup> Around the same time, Eucharistic adoration during the night hours became common, spreading rapidly among American Catholics. This devotion was open solely to men and boys, likely largely for cultural reasons and safety.<sup>35</sup> Devotions such as these became a way for Catholics to distinguish themselves from their Protestant neighbors.<sup>36</sup> They also fostered an impression shared by many Catholics, namely, that receiving Communion frequently would be presumptuous. It was a common idea that no one should receive more often than prescribed because people were so unworthy and sinful.<sup>37</sup>

In 1905, Pope Pius X promulgated *Sacra Tridentina Synodus*, which encouraged frequent, even daily, Communion for all Catholics who were free of mortal sin. This led to lengthy campaigns, precursors of modern advertising efforts, to encourage Catholics to receive more often. For example, at the University of Notre Dame, prefect of Religion John O'Hara encouraged the male students to receive Communion frequently and thus become "better men, better students, and better athletes."<sup>38</sup> During World War II, a Msgr. DeSegur wrote "The Church does not make you receive because you are worthy of Communion, but because you need it in order to be less unworthy of your most holy and indulgent Master."<sup>39</sup> DeSegur also argued for the separation between confession and Communion. Arguments such as these slowly worked to counter long-held Catholic beliefs. It took time for the teaching to work its way throughout the Church; the 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*, for example, maintained that it was not integral to the celebration for the faithful to receive Communion.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>40</sup> van Eijk, "Communion services after Vaticanum II," 231.

In the 1940s and 1950s, some practical changes in the discipline of Communion made it easier for more people to receive it. During World War II, a number of workers normally worked after midnight and thus had trouble observing the customary fast on the day of receiving Communion. As a result of petitions to the Holy See, in 1946 the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments declared that those who worked at night, who consumed no alcohol, and who could fast from food for four hours could receive the Eucharist on Sunday. In 1953, *Christus Dominus* was issued, which allowed aspiring communicants to drink “natural” water (i.e., not mineral water) without breaking the fast.<sup>41</sup> While seemingly a small change, this change affected a large number of people and allowed them to receive more often. The profundity of this change may be demonstrated by the members of a parish in Columbia Heights, Minnesota, who wrote a letter to the pope to thank him for this change; members were said to sign this letter joyfully, even tearfully.<sup>42</sup> Four years later, Pius XII issued, *motu proprio*, *Sacrem communionem*, which reduced the fast before Communion to three hours for food and one hour for liquids besides water. These rule changes had noticeable effects on the number of people receiving Communion, although still less than anticipated.<sup>43</sup>

As reception of Communion became more frequent, Eucharistic devotions began to wane. It would be impossible to say that the former directly caused the latter; far more likely is that both reflected the ongoing changes in American society. However, Margaret McGuinness is adamant that the frequent reception of Communion is a major reason behind the decline of Eucharistic devotions. The teaching that Americans were no longer unworthy to receive the

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<sup>41</sup> McGuinness, “Let us Go to the Altar,” 213.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Eucharist was simply not taught any longer.<sup>44</sup> The young children who were taught to receive Communion frequently after *Sacra Tridentina Synodus* was promulgated grew up and became the next generation of catechists. However, even in 1963, fewer than 29% of Mass attendees were receiving Communion.<sup>45</sup>

Following the Second Vatican Council, additional changes encouraged all Catholics to receive frequently and changed the way that they viewed receiving the Eucharist. In 1964, Paul VI reduced the fast before Communion to one hour, which because of the length of Mass virtually eliminated it.<sup>46</sup> Days later, on the first Sunday of Advent, 1964, many Catholics no longer knelt to receive the Eucharist, instead standing in a double line.<sup>47</sup> *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, a 1967 instruction, recommended that frequent, even daily, reception of the Eucharist as a normal part of Catholic life after Vatican II.<sup>48</sup> Within a few years, many dioceses began to experiment with the practice of permitting Catholics to receive Communion in the hand.<sup>49</sup> This led to a highly contentious debate among the church leadership, one not officially resolved until 1977, when official permission for this practice was granted.<sup>50</sup> A landmark 1973 document, *Immensae Caritatis*, allowed for lay ministers of Holy Communion, completing a startlingly quick process in which lay people went from not being able to even touch Holy Communion with their hands to being able to distribute it. By 1976, over half of Mass attendees were receiving Communion.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>48</sup> John Thomas Lane, SSS. "Communion Services (Part 2): Weekday Celebrations," *Emmanuel* (March/April 2006): 169.

<sup>49</sup> McGuinness, "Let us Go to the Altar," 225.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 221.

### III. The Development of the SCAP

While Holy Communion was being received more frequently in many parts of the world, there was a growing awareness of the lack of Eucharist elsewhere in the world. Lacking priests, some Madagascar dioceses required the faithful to attend services with only the Liturgy of the Word as early as 1959.<sup>52</sup> Evidence suggests that services without priests began to multiply in the late 1960s and 1970s. For example, there was a need for such services in communist East Germany; many Catholics had fled after World War II, and the remaining East German pastors had the responsibility of caring for a number of outlying parishes.<sup>53</sup> After 1950, the number of parishes without priests in countries like France and Austria skyrocketed.<sup>54</sup> Some have countered that there has always been a need for Sunday liturgies not led by priests, particularly in mission lands, and it was in this era that the problem became visible in “first-world” Catholicism.<sup>55</sup> Responding to a growing need, in 1973-1974, the Vatican promulgated *Holy Communion Outside of Mass*, providing a new ritual for what was becoming an increasingly common situation. This rite is not limited to Sundays, and in fact remains in force as the only rite usable for weekday celebrations at which Holy Communion is shared.<sup>56</sup> This rite was to be used “in extraordinary situations.” Structurally, this rite is very similar to a daily Mass without a Eucharistic prayer. There is no prescribed time, so it could be offered at the same time a Mass is offered. There is no rule over where the leaders of the celebration should stand.<sup>57</sup> The ritual is

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Henchal and Michael Prendergast, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: A Pastoral Liturgical Commentary* (Washington D.C.: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions), v.

<sup>53</sup> Helmut Büsse, “Sunday Worship Without a Priest,” trans. Thaddeus A. Schnitker, *Studia Liturgica* 26, no. 1 (1996): 106.

<sup>54</sup> Henchal, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, vi.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest: Some Disquieting Reflections,” *New Theology Review* 8, no. 1 (Feb. 1995): 46.

<sup>56</sup> Lane, “Communion Services (Part 2),” 169.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

also silent on whether or not multiple Communion services are permitted on the same day.<sup>58</sup> The absence of any Eucharistic prayer, and lack of any rules to the contrary, even inspired some to write their own prayers in the style of Eucharistic prayers for use at these services.<sup>59</sup>

Members of the church hierarchy have always been ambivalent about the need for these services. The Congregation for Divine Worship published the *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* in 1988. The document begins by noting that these situations were already occurring, and that several groups of conferences were asking the Holy See for assistance. The *Directory* seeks “not to encourage, much less facilitate unnecessary or contrived Sunday [celebrations].”<sup>60</sup> The United States bishops followed with a letter called “Gathered in Steadfast Faith: Statement of the Bishops’ Committee on Liturgy on Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest” in 1991.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, this document states that the current shortage of priests “raises the possibility of creative solutions in the redistribution of ordained priests within and among dioceses and of new approaches in the discernment and nurturing of vocations to the priesthood. Until such new approaches bear fruit...”<sup>62</sup> This ambivalence reflected the mindset of United States bishops; many bishops, particularly in the northeast and the midwest, believed that there was no need for such a ritual, and that the “issue” of a shortage of priests could be solved by a focus on new programs for vocations to the priesthood.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>59</sup> For examples of these newly-composed prayers, see Sydney Condray, *Assembled in Christ*. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> “Directory for Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest,” in *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), 371.

<sup>61</sup> For a caustic critique of “Gathered in Steadfast Faith,” see William Freburger, “Doing liturgy without a priest in the house: Priestless liturgy document falls short,” *National Catholic Reporter* (December 11, 1992): 14-15.

<sup>62</sup> “Gathered in Steadfast Faith” in *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), 371.

<sup>63</sup> John Thomas Lane, SSS. “Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (Part I),” *Emmanuel* (May/June 2006): 249.



These two documents provided little further in the way of strict standards. This not only reflected a wide diversity of practices in the SCAP in the United States, but it also helped to perpetuate this diversity. In a survey conducted shortly after these documents were promulgated, Kathleen Hughes found a disturbing array of practices. “[Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest] is called by at least twelve different names; training may be as extensive as two years or as minimal as one day; lay presiders are both obliged and forbidden to wear liturgical vesture; preaching is encouraged in some places and discouraged or proscribed in others....”<sup>64</sup>

The revised rite of *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* was issued in 2007. It provides rites for lay-led Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and a Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, each with the option of Holy Communion. However, the differences between these rites and Mass is much more explicit, particularly in the Liturgy of the Word. There is a spoken introduction that explicitly says that the celebration will not be a Eucharist. The opening prayers provided are longer than the short collects at the beginning of Mass. An extensive act of Thanksgiving is recited by the leader after Communion. And in the concluding rite, there is an explicit invitation to pray for an increase in vocations to priesthood. This rite does more than its predecessors to stress that it is not a Mass.

#### **IV. Issues raised by SCAP**

The use of SCAP raises a host of questions – ecclesiological, sacramental, sociological, economic, and more. Many issues fall in multiple categories. In following discussion, I will outline some of the major challenges.

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<sup>64</sup> Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest,” 48.

One of the greatest challenges raised by the rite is that a SCAP is not what it replaces. As Gerard Austin points out, a Communion service is not what Jesus referred to when he said “Do this in memory of me.” There is a great loss in these services when the Eucharistic prayer is not prayed – a prayer that tells the very story of salvation of the Christian people. A Communion service is not a communal action, as a Eucharist is, but rather an individual action done communally. This individual action is something that could be done in a person’s home.<sup>65</sup> These services distort the original purpose behind Eucharistic reservation, namely, to bring Communion to the sick and those who could not attend the liturgy.<sup>66</sup> Edward Foley states that without the act of celebrating Eucharist, receiving Communion can be reduced to “a vaguely social-religious occasion or a liturgical happy meal.”<sup>67</sup>

Why is the act of celebrating Eucharist so important? Receiving Communion outside of Mass can support a viewpoint that it is only the priest who celebrates the Eucharist – and not the entire assembled body.<sup>68</sup> The prayers of epiclesis – prayers which call upon the Spirit – are meant not simply to transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, but also transform the Body of Christ, the baptized participating in the Eucharist, more fully into what they already are, the Body of Christ. Because a SCAP does not include these prayers of epiclesis, it does not constitute the church in the way that Eucharist does.<sup>69</sup> Another great loss at these services is the lack of opportunity to receive the precious blood. The doctrine of concomitance notwithstanding, there is a large difference between receiving the body and the blood of Christ because the imagery is very different. As Foley proposes, the consecrated host shows what we

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<sup>65</sup> Austin, “Communion Services,” 206-7.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Foley, “Communion in the Liturgy of the World: Distinguishing Between the Fruits of Mass and the Fruits of Communion,” *Emmanuel* (July/August 2003): 233.

<sup>68</sup> Austin, “Communion Services,” 209.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

are to become; drinking of the precious blood shows how this is to be accomplished. This blood, poured out for the many, is a call to sacrificial living in the world.<sup>70</sup>

Another challenge raised by the SCAP is that it can lead to a mentality where the only important rite of the Roman Catholic Church is Eucharist. Some fear that the word of God is shortchanged in a SCAP with Communion, and not truly appreciated for the real and effective presence of God that it itself is.<sup>71</sup> Receiving Holy Communion has become so common that there have been reports of parish groups receiving Communion to end rosaries, benediction, or even committee meetings.<sup>72</sup> John Thomas Lane wonders if “Communion on demand” is watering down the importance of Eucharist. In a world where many do not have access to the Eucharist regularly, he wonders if we are “gorging ourselves on the Eucharist” when we would be better served by fasting in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world.<sup>73</sup>

The use of the SCAP rite also raises important ecclesiological issues. Even the title of the service raises some questions: why is it titled the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a *Priest*, as opposed to the absence of Eucharist? As Thomas O’Loughlin asks, which is the center of the community, then: the priest or the Eucharist? He proposes that since the Council of Trent, the answer has been the priest: sending a community a suitable priest means that they will then have the Eucharist.<sup>74</sup> Looking at the practice of the early church, from the second century onwards, he notes that many priests were called from their local communities.<sup>75</sup> From this history, he proposes that it is the need for Eucharist which produces priests. Any group of Christians that the Spirit has called together, no matter how small, must have at least one who is fit to lead them.

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<sup>70</sup> Foley, “Communion in the Liturgy of the World,” 239.

<sup>71</sup> Austin, “Communion Services,” 211.

<sup>72</sup> John Thomas Lane, SSS. “Communion Services (Part I),” *Emmanuel* (January/February 2006): 272.

<sup>73</sup> Lane, “Communion Services (Part II),” 171.

<sup>74</sup> O’Loughlin, “Eucharist or Communion Service?,” 368.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

Thus, in his view, a “vocations crisis” is impossible in Catholic ecclesiology.<sup>76</sup> Instead of reducing the form of the Eucharist, he says, we should be experimenting with the practical structures of the priesthood.<sup>77</sup>

The new form of lay ministry fostered by the SCAP also raises difficult questions. The regular presider at a SCAP will be someone who is very familiar with the community. In many ways, this leader can become a “pastor” of the community, despite what canon law may state.<sup>78</sup> This raises tensions when the “visiting” priest comes in to preside at Mass. The priest may feel like an intruder; the regular leader of prayer may feel shunted aside, or may still want to take an active role in leading the liturgical celebration.<sup>79</sup> Particularly for lay people, there is the question of how the parish should regard them – whether they are employees who can be hired and fired, and whether they have job security.<sup>80</sup> *Gathered in Steadfast Faith* suggested that leaders of prayer be appointed for a finite term, perhaps three to five years, with a possibility of unlimited reappointment. This is similar to how many dioceses treat extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. However, experience has shown that the same leaders tend to serve in the same role continuously until they die or decide to stop serving due to weariness.<sup>81</sup> The training required for these ministers can act as a barrier to keep new leaders from easily coming forward. Ironically, lay leaders of prayer can find themselves with de facto appointments for life – inadvertently recreating the lifelong commitment of priests.

Another ecclesiological concern is raised by communities which need to have SCAP on a regular basis. Since the preferred option is always to attend Mass, this implies that the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>78</sup> Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest,” 49.

<sup>79</sup> John Thomas Lane, SSS. “Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (Part IV) – Appendices and Conclusions,” *Emmanuel* (November/December 2006): 546.

<sup>80</sup> Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest,” 55.

<sup>81</sup> Henchal, *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, 20.

community could, in essence, temporarily disband, or be subsumed by another community, on the Sundays when a priest is not available. Hughes' survey revealed great anxiety among the poorer parishes – those in poor areas of the inner city, those in rural areas, and those serving ethnic minority populations. These communities seemed to take on a disproportionate number of SCAP services, while wealthy parishes in suburbs maintained their own pastors. Some reported feeling like “second-class” parishes.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, there is the concern of the relationship of a community which rarely sees its pastor to its bishop. A pastor, blessed by the bishop, is a key link between a parish and the larger church. The lack of contact with a regular pastor could seemingly invite congregationalism.<sup>83</sup>

There are catechetical challenges with the SCAP, as well. It is close enough to Mass, even in the current form, that many casual Catholics may not be able to tell the difference. If a parish is accustomed to offering Eucharist only under one species, distributing the already-consecrated hosts from the tabernacle, and racing through the Eucharistic prayer, then there is little difference indeed between Mass and a SCAP.<sup>84</sup> Some parishes with only one priest have offered both a Mass and a SCAP at two different times on the same day, though this is contrary to what is now envisioned. Indeed, some may come to prefer the SCAP (even calling such a service led by a nun “Sister’s Mass”) because of its shorter duration or a closer connection to the preacher.<sup>85</sup> The theological distinctions made above may be lost on many churchgoers. Do people know or care about the difference between Mass and a SCAP, as long as they can receive Communion? Edward Foley wonders if we have simply transferred the moment of undue emphasis, the “magic moment” of the Mass, from the moment of consecration to the reception of

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<sup>82</sup> Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest,” 53.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> Hughes, “Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest,” 52.

<sup>85</sup> Lane, “Communion Services (Part I),” 272.

Communion. Neither emphasis is incorrect, but both are incomplete.<sup>86</sup> Foley proposes that many Catholics have, not a Mass spirituality, but rather a Communion spirituality.<sup>87</sup>

## V. Conclusion

In the mid-1990s, the bishops of Kansas wrote: “Holy Communion regularly received outside of Mass is a short-term solution that has all the makings of becoming a long-term problem.”<sup>88</sup> Their words still ring true today. For the reasons outlined above, the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest remains a very problematic solution to a thorny problem. As Ton van Eijk wrote at about the same time: “Theologically, this solution [SCAP] leaves a lot to be desired. But everyone agrees on that.”<sup>89</sup> Not just theologically, but ecclesiologically, sacramentally, and catechetically as well, the continued use of the SCAP rite raises a lot of questions about the future of the Roman Catholic church. Yet, the new edition of the rite indicates a perceived continuing need for it. This new edition is another step on the way to the rite becoming a long-term problem.

What can be done? First of all, the SCAP rite remains problematic enough that it needs to be minimally used. I agree with O’Loughlin, Foley, and others that the Eucharist is too important to be minimized, as I would argue that the SCAP rite does, however inadvertently. If the Eucharist is to be the “source and summit” of Catholic life, then the Catholic church must discern how it is to be made more freely available to all. Many American bishops have engaged in a difficult process of strategic planning which has resulted in many parishes being closed. Others have been aggressive in recruiting seminarians from other countries. These efforts will need to continue, and even more creative solutions found besides. Second, and somewhat

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<sup>86</sup> Foley, “Communion in the Liturgy of the World,” 240.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>88</sup> Feuerherd, “Just how bad is it?” 4.

<sup>89</sup> van Eijk, “Communion Services after Vaticanum II,” 246.

paradoxically, to preserve the centrality of the Eucharist, other prayer forms must be emphasized and cultivated, so that Eucharist does not have to bear the entire weight of Catholic devotional life. This catechesis should also focus on what Eucharist is so that the faithful may come to appreciate it and even demand it. It will take a major catechetical effort to move away from what Foley sees as our “Communion spirituality.” But the church should be inspired by the fact that such a major catechetical effort has already taken place that led to the frequent reception of Holy Communion in the first place.

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