

**GUIDELINES FOR CELEBRATIONS OF PORTUGUESE
RELIGIOUS FESTAS (FESTIVALS)**

Prologue

The public expression and manifestation of devotions to the mysteries of our faith and to the various saints of the Church in the form of processions and other similar expressions has always been a part of the tradition of the Church and is very entrenched in the faith practice of the Portuguese people, both in their country of origin and in their newly adopted homeland.

It is a reality that in every town, or city, in our diocese where there is a significant number of Portuguese people, certain devotions to particular saints or to other aspects of the mysteries of faith are celebrated. If these “festas” are well structured and organized, they can provide a legitimate means of strengthening social, cultural and religious (faith) development among the people of God.

These “festas” are the expressions of a people, an era, a culture and a faith structure. They give witness to and strengthen the unity and friendship of the various groups, and offer viable means for evangelization, especially in the communities where the Portuguese people do not receive Portuguese pastoral care on a regular basis. These “festas” may also serve to sustain a popular religious devotion practiced by the older generation for whom a proper integration within the new social structure and religious environment is very difficult, if not impossible.

Through these “festas”, the social clubs and fraternities are invited to enter into dialogue with the local pastors and the faith communities, thus receiving proper direction and leadership in the coordination of these religious events.

It is the intention that these *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Religious Festas* for the Portuguese in our diocese create an environment for further cooperation and dialogue among the faithful, their pastors and the faith community. Also, preserving these sacred traditions can be an excellent means of evangelization and celebration of faith, both among the older and younger generations.

It is my hope that these guidelines will reduce difficulties, promote unity and peace and contribute to making all the “festas” joyful, harmonious and faith-fostering undertakings.

Most Rev. John Michael Sherlock
Bishop of London

A History of Religious Festas

Faith, culture, community, nostalgia and heritage are the motivating forces by which Portuguese immigrants in every corner of the world are spirited to celebrate religious festas of various types.

The Portuguese people of the Diocese of London celebrate many festas honouring patron saints, such as “Our Lady of Fatima”. These festas are very sacred to the community, both on a national and regional basis.

Generally festas commemorating the patron saints are coordinated and observed by the local parish communities where there are Portuguese clergy present. In communities where Portuguese clergy are not present, festas tend to be celebrated independently and in conjunction with local clubs and fraternities.

The focus of these “Guidelines” is to bring all festas celebrating patron saints under the leadership and guidance of the Portuguese clergy of the Diocese of London and/or members of the local faith community leadership.

Fraternities of the festas tend to be separate entities but do have a religious nature that requires some religious services from the Church. These fraternities of the festas are invited to work in greater collaboration with the Church and the faith communities.

The “festa” to the Holy Spirit, deeply rooted in the Portuguese people of the islands of the Azores, is one such celebration. This festa is celebrated essentially in every town or city where there is a significant number of Portuguese people.

They gather to reminisce, to pray, to worship, to sing and to dance as they share their stories of success and struggle in their adopted homeland. The Church plays a central role in these gatherings as the people come together through their devotional faith. Religion, for most Portuguese people, is an expression of faith lived in a tangible socio-cultural context.

This festa has its roots in the New Testament. We recall the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and upon Mary, the Mother of Jesus, on Pentecost Sunday.

The Acts of the Apostles (2:44-45) tells us that the “faithful lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.”

To be faithful to this biblical text, the German emperor Ortho IV (1197-1218) instituted a fraternity to the Holy Spirit, whose primary purpose was to feed the hungry and poor affected by the famine of the early thirteenth century.

It is in this same spirit of providing for the destitute that these fraternities to the Holy Spirit began to emerge in Portugal. According to many historians, on Pentecost Sunday in the year 1296, in the Royal Chapel of Alenguer, Queen Elizabeth of Portugal (Isabel of Aragão) initiated the tradition of offering a banquet to the poor and of crowning a poor child during the festas of the Holy Spirit. This tradition is still commemorated today.

Queen Elizabeth, a holy woman, later canonized as an official saint of the Roman Catholic Church, had a very keen sense of charity and love for the poor. Through this invitation to the royal palace, she wanted to show that all human beings have value and dignity and so, at this banquet she would choose a poor child to sit at the throne specifically designated for the monarch.

This child would then be endowed by the bishop with the crown worn by the king and his scepter placed in the hand of the child. During this ritual, the song “Veni Creator Spiritus” (“Come Holy Spirit”) was chanted to invoke the Holy Spirit upon the faith community.

Crowns may be brought into the church every Sunday from Easter to Pentecost by a different family. Children or adults are crowned and incensed while the song “Veni Creator Spiritus” is chanted by the choir. These symbols are usually placed on a table in front of the church, in a place that does not take away from the central elements of the sanctuary.

These symbols are very sacred in the minds of the people and respect for them is of utmost importance. In the homes where families have accommodated the crown for their designated week, the crown and the banner are situated in a prominent place within the house and have beautiful decorations surrounding these holy symbols. During that week the community is invited to the home to pray daily. Social time usually follows.

With the culmination of Sundays from Easter to Pentecost, a cortège (“cortego”) is presented, which over the years has incorporated many elements of the life of the Azores, as well as emerging secular elements of the new Portuguese-Canadian customs and traditions.

The cortège is usually organized by members of “social clubs” who tend to be separate fraternities from the faith community, although most people in these fraternities’ also devout members of the faith communities.

The cortège usually leaves from the church and proceeds to the Portuguese Club. In places where there are no Portuguese Clubs, a hall is rented for the activities. Upon arrival at the hall, members of the cortège, made up of various components and representatives from other fraternities and committees, of Church leaders, of government representatives and of cultural organizations are invited to say a few brief words. The festivities continue with the sharing of food and beverages, which have been blessed by the priest, and with much singing and dancing as part of the celebration. All are welcome to participate and share the warm welcome, hospitality and energy of the Portuguese people.

As priests of a faith community and responsible faith leaders, we need to be sensitive and respectful of the roots of this festa. We also need to challenge the abuses that have crept in over the years and have demystified some of the myths and superstitions associated with this festa. We need to be aware of whether we are celebrating for personal gain or because we are truly motivated to remain faithful to the benevolent Spirit of the Gospels and to that of Elizabeth of Portugal.

Guidelines for the Celebration of Festas

The public celebration of devotion to the Mysteries of the Faith and to various saints of the Church in the form of processions and festas has long been a fruitful way of praising God and increasing the faith of the Portuguese.

The celebrations offer an opportunity for evangelization and serve to sustain popular religious devotion.

Celebrations Organized by Parishes

An *ad hoc* committee for the religious, financial and social subjects of the celebrations should be organized in the parish by the pastor in cooperation with other interested parishioners. This committee is to be dissolved after a final report is submitted

1. a) No celebration honouring a local saint may be scheduled on a solemnity, which must take precedence.
 - b) Celebrations of festas should be scheduled apart from Sunday liturgies in parishes here there is no regular Sunday Portuguese liturgy, so as not to interfere with the established Mass schedule.
 - c) These festas must be scheduled in keeping with the liturgical calendar.
 2. A proper spiritual preparation for the festa (Novena, Triduum, etc.) is required so that the religious and faith dimension is clearly proclaimed.
 3. When special traditions call for the blessings of gifts (e.g., bread, meat, wine, fruit, etc.), such traditions should be considered a special means for the spiritual growth of the people and as an expression of gratitude to God.
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Celebrations Organized by Cultural Groups of Clubs

1. a) A group or committee organizing a public festa, must supply the name of the priest who is assisting them to the pastor of the parish where the celebration is taking place.

b) Festas are to be celebrated publicly only by priests with the faculties of the Diocese of London. A visiting priest may not publicly celebrate any festa without the express permission of the Ordinary and without supplying a letter of reference from his diocese or religious community. This process is to take place from Chancery Office to Chancery Office.
 2. All religious festas and statue processions are to be directed and guided by a parish faith community.
 3. It is recommended that all festa committee members be encouraged to practice their faith within their own communities.
 4. Only one festa may be organized in honour of a given saint per parish per year.
 5. All liturgical celebrations must be approved by the priest associated with the group. Any celebration should strengthen the faith of the participants.
 6. Secular contents (i.e., pageants, tournaments, and other such activities) should be strongly discouraged as part of any festa endorsed by the Church.
 7. Any statue permanently honoured in a church is the property of that church.
 8. After the public celebration of a festa, the statue must be placed in a suitable location for private devotion. The sacred image is to be located in a place apart from social activities connected with the festa.
 9. No one is permitted to collect money in the parish without authorization of the pastor of that parish.
 10. There should be no charge for the use of the church. Any offerings given in honour of the saint or during the Eucharist are to be dispersed according to the directions of the pastor and the organizing committee.
 11. When a eucharistic celebration takes place outside a church, it is to be done only with the express permission of the local Ordinary.
 12. No one is permitted to collect money in the parish without authorization of the pastor of that parish.
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13. There should be no charge for the use of the church. Any offerings given in honour of the saint or during the Eucharist are to be dispersed according to the directions of the pastor and the organizing committee.
 14. When a Eucharistic celebration takes place outside the church, it is to be done only with the express permission of the local Ordinary.

Processions

1. Care should be taken to make proper arrangements for a procession (permits, permissions, insurance, etc.)
2. Processions should be of limited distances.
3. Processions are to be religious celebrations. No political, commercial, or other money-raising ventures are to be associated with the processions in any way.
4. It is prohibited to pin money on ribbons hanging from the statues, to collect money during the processions to bid for the privilege of carrying the statue, or to encourage similar practices.
5. Any money remaining, after the expenses of the feast have been paid, is to be used for the needs of the parish.
6. After a festa or a social, a financial and religious report must be prepared, in full, and submitted to the pastor of the parish where the celebration has taken place.
7. Fraternities of the festas of the Holy Spirit tend to be separate entities from the parish. However, they have a religious nature and they require some religious services from the Church, i.e., blessing of foods, the ceremonial regarding the crowing by the Holy Spirit, etc.