

# Celebrating Mass and the Sacraments “for the glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people”



**BY BISHOP MICHAEL C. BARBER, SJ**

Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ has been bishop of the Diocese of Oakland since May 25, 2013.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Recently I met with all the priests of our diocese to discuss one of the most important things we can offer you: the proper and reverent celebration of the Mass and Sacraments. St. Paul refers to priests as “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” (1 Cor 4:1-2) After ten years as Bishop of Oakland,

there were some issues we needed to address in order to do our job better and be faithful to our ordination promise to celebrate Mass and the Sacraments “for the glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people.”

Here are some of the practices where our diocese needs to be better aligned with what the Church asks of us.

1

**At Mass, most of our parishes follow the instruction to kneel following the “Holy, Holy, Holy” until the “Great Amen.”**

That’s normal. And that’s the Catholic practice. But we should also kneel following the “Lamb of God” until it is time to rise and walk forward to receive Holy Communion. When I had my first “question and answer” session with about 100 Cal Berkeley students at the Newman Center about seven years ago, the first question they asked me was “Shouldn’t we be kneeling after the ‘Lamb of God’?” Yes. The General Instruction on the Roman Missal



**Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ celebrates Mass on Christmas Eve at the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland. (Photo by Chuck Deckert)**



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(no. 43) says this is the proper practice in the United States. Kneeling is a sign of reverence, prayer and belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. St. Paul says, “At the name of Jesus, every knee must bend.” (Phil 2:10-11) We are going to follow that.

2

### The importance of providing access to daily Mass

In some parishes, pastors have routinely replaced Daily Mass with a Communion Service, where a layperson vested in an alb stands at the altar and conducts a Liturgy of the Word, preaches and then offers a Communion Rite, omitting the Consecration. Sometimes these occurred even on Sundays. I had a call from a concerned lady saying, “Susie was saying Mass in our church last Sunday!”

The Church does have a rite for “Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest,” which was authorized for mission countries where they have one priest for a parish the size of Contra Costa County. Or in parts of the United States, like Wyoming or Alaska, where because of distance or geography it is physically impossible to get to a church offering a Mass. In my first assignment as a Jesuit priest in Samoa,

I alone served a parish with 12 chapels in as many villages. This is not the case in our diocese. All of our churches are a 10-15 minute drive from one another. I know that because I drove to each of our 84 churches in five days to wish the priests “Merry Christmas” during Covid. If a daily Mass is not available in your parish, I do not think it unreasonable to drive to the parish next door. I drive farther than ten minutes to buy cheap gas.

You deserve the opportunity to have full, active and conscious participation in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, and not a substitute service.

3

### Lay Preaching

You may not realize, but the Church’s canon law does make provision for lay people to preach, under certain conditions, inside a Catholic Church. This can occur at the beginning of Mass – as an introduction on a special occasion. Or it may happen after Communion, when a lay missionary gives an account of their work overseas or an ambassador from Catholic Charities talks about service to the poor. I invited a Rabbi to speak after Communion at the Cathedral. But I gave the formal homily that Sunday following the Gospel.

One of the best examples of lay preaching I’ve heard was from a 16-year-old student who had just been confirmed at an all-school Mass at a Jesuit High School. He spoke after Communion to give witness to what Jesus meant in his life. And explain to the whole school why he wanted to be confirmed. Following Mass, about 12-15 students came up to ask how they could get confirmed or received into the Church.

This is to be commended. But the Church firmly teaches *“In providing for preaching by the lay faithful, the diocesan bishop may never dispense from the norm which reserves the homily to the sacred ministers. Preaching by the lay faithful may not take place within the Celebration of the Eucharist at the moment reserved for the homily.”*

There were other liturgical concerns we discussed, which I hope to cover in future articles. I just want all of you, parishioners of the Diocese of Oakland, to know that we priests are here to serve you and not be served. That we are servants of the Church’s Sacred Liturgy and not above it. That we strive each day to be more and more faithful to our ordination vows. So we can be shepherds like the Good Shepherd.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ