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January 5, 2024
St. John Neumann, Bishop

Dear Fathers,

Thank you for participating in our recent Priests Study Day in October. As St. Paul reminds us, we priests are "Servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." (1 Cor 4:1-2). One of the best things we can do for our people is provide them with the Eucharist and other sacraments, celebrated with integrity and reverence.

As promised, I am following up with a written summary of my presentation. Documentation citing relevant Church documents is attached.

These policies may be implemented immediately at your discretion, but are to be considered Normative and must be observed by ***Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024.***

1. CONFIRMATION:

All parishes are to follow a two-year program for Confirmation for youth.

Adult confirmation programs may be shorter and adapted to each candidate at the pastor's discretion.

Confirmation (and Baptism) Sponsors should be practicing Catholics in good standing with the Church. For sponsors coming from outside your parish, there is a form you may give them to have signed by their own pastor attesting they are practicing and in good standing. ***[Attachment 1]***

The Bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation. Pastors may confirm those they receive into the Church who are converting to the Catholic Faith at the Easter Vigil. Baptized Catholics who are uncatechized or lapsed, and who for convenience have taken part in RCIA alongside converts, should join a Confirmation ceremony administered by the Bishop at your parish or one of the Cathedral Adult Confirmations.

For exceptional circumstances, please contact the Vicar General or Bishop.

2. COMMUNION SERVICES IN THE ABSENCE OF A PRIEST:

This type of service, conducted on the Altar, and using the ritual book "Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest" was conceived for missionary dioceses where it is impossible for people to have access to the celebration of Mass. In a small and compact diocese like ours, this situation does not apply. All our parishes are within a 10-15 minute drive from another parish. We have had multiple complaints from parishioners of lay people "saying Mass" in their churches, even when the priest was at home in the rectory.

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I ask that these Communion Services cease in our parish churches. I recommend daily Mass be available in all our parishes. However, when that is not possible (the priest is sick or away on retreat, etc.) I ask you to advertise Masses that are available in nearby parishes. We should give our people access to the Eucharist and provide them full and active participation in this mystery, as Vatican II famously taught. When priests gather at Deanery meetings, you should exchange Mass schedules, so you may pass on information to assist your respective parishioners in attending daily Mass.

If there is an emergency situation, please contact the Bishop or Vicar General.

Lay people may certainly lead the public celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, as well as the rosary, Divine Mercy, and other devotions in our parish churches, at the direction of the pastor. **[Attachment 2]**

3. LAY PREACHING:

Some of the best evangelists in our country are lay people, and many talented and grace-filled Catholics have given talks at our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress, Days of Recollection, Men's and Women's Retreats, Marian Congresses, Social Justice events and workshops. I commend the evangelizing work of FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) and lay campus ministry teams in our diocese. The Community of St. Egidio famously hosts Evening Prayer in major Roman basilicas, led exclusively by young adults, who give excellent reflections. I encourage all these practices in our diocese.

However, the US Bishops in a decree issued December 13, 2001 decided that: ***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.***
[Attachment 3]

Norms for Preaching in the Diocese of Oakland:

- A. Only a priest or deacon with faculties may preach the homily following the Gospel at Mass.
- B. A qualified lay person, non-ordained religious, or seminarian may be invited to speak following the Prayer After Communion at the end of Mass, or at the beginning of Mass after the Greeting, to offer testimony or give witness in support of the teachings of the Church. No one may be invited to speak in our churches in opposition to Catholic teaching or to promote partisan politics.
- C. Qualified lay persons, non-ordained religious or seminarians may be invited to lead the service and give reflections at Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, or other devotions outside of Mass.

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4. ON THE MANNER OF RECEPTION OF HOLY COMMUNION:

The communicant may choose to receive standing or kneeling, on the hand, or on the tongue. It is the communicant's choice, not the priest's or minister's choice. We should respect the manner chosen by the communicant. See attachment on the full policy from USCCB. **[Attachment 4]**

5. KNEELING DURING MASS:

The General Instruction for the Roman Missal for the United States, No 43, states that "In the dioceses of the United States of America, they should kneel beginning after the singing or recitation of the *Sanctus* (*Holy, Holy, Holy*) until after the Amen of the Eucharistic Prayer, except when prevented on occasion by ill health, or for reasons of lack of space, of the large number of people present, or for another reasonable cause.... The faithful kneel after the *Agnus Dei* (*Lamb of God*) unless the Diocesan Bishop determines otherwise."

I understand it had been the policy in our diocese set by a previous bishop to remain standing following the Lamb of God. However, I see no valid reason for us to diverge from the common practice of the Church in the United States.

Therefore, I ask that in our diocese we join the rest of the faithful in our country in kneeling after the Lamb of God in order to prepare ourselves reverently for reception of Holy Communion.

Following reception of Holy Communion, each person may stand, sit or kneel as they choose, until the priest asks everyone to stand for the Prayer After Communion. **[Attachment 5]**

6. OBSERVE THE RUBRICS & PROPER PRAYERS WHEN CELEBRATING MASS AND THE SACRAMENTS:

I ask that all of us priests be attentive to the rubrics and prayers of the Missal when celebrating the Eucharist. We should not paraphrase the Eucharistic Prayer or replace the Opening Prayer or other prescribed prayers with our own inventions. We have plenty of room for personal expression in the homily and Prayer of the Faithful.

I ask that we be attentive to the sacramental formulae when administering Baptism, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, and the other sacraments. We have seen the harm caused to the faithful when some priests changed the formula for Baptism, and then those baptisms were declared invalid by the Holy See. All those people had to be located and re-baptized validly.

When we were ordained, we solemnly promised "to celebrate faithfully and reverently, in accord with the Church's tradition, the mysteries of the Christ, especially the Sacrifice of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for the glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people." Let's be faithful to that promise.

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7. MASS OFFERINGS AND SUGGESTED CONTRIBUTIONS:

See the attached schedule, effective January 1, 2024. *[Attachment 6]*

Note these are not "charges". Christ said, "What you have freely received you should freely give." (*Matt 10:8*). No priest should ever turn someone away from reception of the sacraments because they are unable to make the suggested offering.

Pastors are free to waive requested donations altogether or suggest a smaller offering. But no pastor may request a higher offering without permission from the Bishop or Vicar General.

I as bishop reluctantly endorsed the increases in "suggested offerings" after hearing feedback from the Presbyteral Council -- who gave a unanimous vote of approval for the revised schedule.

CONCLUSION:

I thank you all for your fidelity and "being there" in your parishes, on duty, day after day, season after season, serving our people. When I visit our parishes the number one comment I get from people is not a complaint, but a plea: "Please don't transfer our priest! We love him." Thank you for taking such good care of the flock entrusted to you.

Happy New Year.

Yours fraternally in Christ,

+ Michael Barber S.J.

The Most Reverend Michael C. Barber, S.J.
Bishop of Oakland