



Committee on Divine Worship

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MEMORANDUM

To: All bishops

From: Most Rev. Leonard P. Blair, Archbishop of Hartford
Chairman, USCCB Committee on Divine Worship

Date: October 26, 2020

Re: Scheduling of Christmas Eve Masses

The USCCB Committee on Divine Worship has received a number of inquiries about this year's celebration of Christmas. Even though we may anticipate that significant numbers of the faithful may desire to attend Christmas Masses, many locales will be greatly limited by COVID-19 restrictions regarding the number of people who may assemble for the celebration of the liturgy. As a result, inquiries have been made as to the scheduling of Masses and their multiplication to provide more opportunities for Christmas Mass.

Clearly, Masses can be offered anytime Christmas Day itself. But given the cultural preference of many in our country to attend Mass on the vigil, a question arises as to whether more Masses can be scheduled on Christmas Eve, beginning earlier than usual, and allow the faithful to satisfy their obligation to participate in Mass on the holy day.

In response to an inquiry from the Divine Worship Committee, the Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance replied that the commonly held opinion among canonists is that "evening" is defined as "4:00 p.m. or later." At the same time, they recalled that the Instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium* (May 25, 1967) affirmed that the scheduling of vigil Masses for the fulfillment of the Sunday obligation is within the competence of each local Ordinary to determine: "Mass may be celebrated only on Saturday evening, at hours to be determined by the local Ordinary" – a principle that, *mutatis mutandis*, might be applied to all holy days of obligation. There have been private responses of the Holy See as well that have indicated that vigil or anticipated Masses in the afternoon are permissible when warranted for the spiritual good of the faithful.

The Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance is of the opinion that, particularly in this time of pandemic, a diocesan bishop can give a broad interpretation to what constitutes "evening." In doing so, he may choose to permit Christmas Eve Masses to be celebrated earlier than 4:00 p.m. However, given the common interpretation of "evening" under normal circumstances, any permission this year because of COVID-19 might be considered exceptional.

Finally, a related question arises as to whether priests can be permitted to celebrate more than three Masses at Christmas time. The Committee on Divine Worship is in the process of looking into this question.