

Rector's October 26 email to parish leaders: "Possible changes to Sunday masses as of 1 Advent. Your response welcomed."

Hello, all,

A number of factors including parishioner inquiries have recently led me to wonder about changing our present (pandemic-induced) Sunday mass time(s) and form(s). The first Sunday of Advent (this year November 28) presents one sensible opportunity to implement any changes. I'm writing both to share my present thinking and to welcome your responses.

Options for Sunday masses as of 1 Advent 2021

Below are four possible options. The first three options reflect my own assessment (taking into account all the data that follows) of what may be feasible and may yield positive outcomes for parishioners as a whole and for our mission and our guests. The fourth option leaves room for the Holy Spirit and your imagination.

Option 1: 9 am Low Mass (i.e. said, probably Rite I), 11 am Solemn High Mass (Rite II).

Option 2: Keep schedule as is: one Rite II Solemn High Mass at 10 am, with a '9am format at 10 am' once every 4 to 6 weeks.

Option 3: 8 am Low Mass, 11 am Solemn High Mass.

Option 4: *Wildcard/What if?* An option that has yet to take shape, awaiting inspiration, conversation, collaboration.

Please see the link below if, after reading what follows, you wish to share your thoughts with me and the wardens.

Anecdotal and hard data to date includes the following:

* Some of the stalwart faithful from the pre-pandemic 9AM sung mass and from the pre-pandemic 8AM low mass have inquired about a Restoration.

* We do not at this time have adequate volunteer or paid ministers/staff to return to the full pre-pandemic Sunday schedule. *I would welcome a Vestry task force to investigate this and would be pleased to be proved wrong.*

To quantify: A low mass may be done with one priest, one server and no additional bulletin. A 9AM mass, as previously offered, included not only priest and server but a deacon, thurifer, lector and usher, and also a separate musical 'program,' printed bulletin and sacristy ministrations.

* Average attendance at the pre-pandemic 8am mass was 7 in 2018 and 8 in 2019 (or, netting out the priest and server, 5 and 6 respectively).

* Average attendance at the pre-pandemic 9am mass was 19 in 2018 and 18 in 2019. Netting out the Organist and four ministers in the sanctuary, the average congregation size was 14 in 2018 and 13 in 2019.

* Average attendance for our pre-pandemic Solemn High Mass at 11 am was 63 for 2018 and 64 for 2019. (These numbers include those in the pews -- the congregation -- plus ministers in the sanctuary and organist, choirmaster and choir/shola. I don't have data breaking out congregation only.)

* Numbers of worshipers in the pews (only) at our one 10am mass on recent Sundays have been as few as 18 and as many as 45.

* I've been told more than once and by more than one longtime member that the 9am mass originated as an alternative for families needing or seeking nursery care and/or Sunday School. As I understand it, a Sunday School was being sustained here until 2014 or so but was collateral damage and loss in the turbulence of 2015. With regard to rebuilding a children's ministry, we may wish to think along the lines of '*If we build it, they will come*' (i.e. If we restore the mass previously created with families in mind, families will come to Ascension.) But I don't believe we presently have the will and human resources to start and sustain a Sunday School program, and, in any case, Episcopal families looking for strong children's ministries have two excellent nearby options, at St. Chrysostom's and the cathedral. None of this is meant to diminish needs of our families with children or the preferences of those, without children, who continued to share in the 9am mass prior to pandemic, but neither should the history and the rationale for this mass be forgotten.

* Ascension's Solemn High Mass is not only it's marquee offering but also its sole consistent member growth portal. In my nearly six years at Ascension, the 8am mass has drawn one new regular household; the 9am mass three new households. The new young members we purportedly wish to attract and keep (on which, indeed, the future of Ascension acutely relies) are nearly all drawn to and return to the Solemn High Mass.

* Choir members and their voices would prefer an 11 am Solemn High Mass, both for time-of-day voice quality and because some have singing commitments on Saturday evenings that get them home late (and an 8am 'call' at Ascension is tough).

* By widespread counsel among those who study church dynamics, schedule changes are a shock to the system and should be undertaken thoughtfully and infrequently. If we make a change, I wish it to be one we can agree to live with through Corpus Christi 2022.

Conclusions: My proposed #1 Sunday schedule above includes a low mass at 9 am and a SHM at 11am. The 9 am mass would provide a service both at a time and of a length for which some have expressed a preference. Admittedly unknown are the related thoughts and possible decisions of those who preferred not only the time and length but also the form of the pre-pandemic 9am mass (music, incense, Rite II). For a Sunday low mass at 9 (or at 8) I am quite confident we can find 3-4 lay servers willing to minister once or twice a month (each) so that the low mass could be realistically sustainable.

[Click here for a link to a form you can use to respond to this email and share your own thoughts about our Sunday masses \(and more\).](#) *Please do not 'reply all' to this email unless you really can't help yourself.*

Thank you for continuing to share in the life and ministry of our parish during these extraordinary times and for sharing your thoughts and questions about the worship that lies at the heart of our faith and common life.

Patrick +