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'The masses want the Mass'

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Arguing that "the masses want the Mass," the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is encouraging Catholics around the country to protest a possible decision by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) to forbid member stations from broadcasting sectarian programming, including the Catholic Mass.

"People just want to have access to the Mass," Sister Mary Ann Walsh, RSM, director of media relations for the USCCB, wrote on the USCCB Media Blog. "The airwaves belong to us all, so church people aren't asking any undue favor when they seek to have the airwaves they own be used for what they want."

According to a blog about public media, the PBS board wants to clarify "the Three Nons" that define public TV's identity: noncommercial, nonpolitical and nonsectarian. Federal law and the FCC restrict the first two, but the board wants "some degree of clarity of what sectarian programming is, and it would be assumed that a religious service like a Mass would be sectarian," says Station Services Committee Chair Jennifer Lawson. Journalistic shows like "Religion & Ethics Newsweekly" and "Walking the Bible" would be acceptable as nonsectarian, she says.

The ruling, expected next week, could affect at least five stations, including Lawson's WHUT in Washington, which carries "Mass for Shut-ins" on Sundays and Denver's KBDI, which also airs a local Mass. WLAE in New Orleans and KMBH in Texas are both owned by Catholic organizations, the latter by a nonprofit created by the Diocese of Brownsville. The ruling also would affect KBYU, a PBS affiliate owned by a division of Brigham Young University.

Although a televised Mass for shut-ins is a wonderful service, it's not clear that all Catholics would agree a public station is the best or only place to broadcast it. Walsh is encouraging Catholics to voice their opinions to USCCB Secretary of Communications Helen Osman at hosman@usccb.org or 202-541-3129

by Friday, June 12.

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