

Returning to Mass out of Love & Hunger, not Obligation

From an early age, though I didn't always know at first what was happening at Mass, I knew it was important that we go as a family. Mom and dad would teach me prayers, and also talk about what happens at Mass, and in the event we had a very busy weekend Mass was never thought of as optional.

As I got a bit older, I started to serve at Mass for Fr. Vince Colon. And over the years what I've come to realize is how what happens at Mass is God coming to be with us in a special way. We meditate on His word; and we receive His Body to free us from sin and give us strength to carry out our mission as disciples in the world. Mass is really where heaven and earth meet.

This is why the Church asks Catholics to "assist" at Mass on Sundays; or to be present and go to Mass. Added was Mass on Saturday evenings too as a vigil Mass each week. When I was young I knew it was important we go even if I didn't always know why we would go; but as I got older what I realized is our family was not going out of just a sense of duty, but because it was important for us to be with Jesus.

With so much of the world turned upside down since the pandemic began in March of 2020, we all experienced the pain of seeing our churches closed. We reopened as soon as possible and took appropriate safety measures. And in some cases bishops had to seek legal recourse to ensure our Constitutional rights were enforced to be open. Now as most restrictions in various states are moved back, and as the vaccine is widely available, bishops are beginning to reinstate the obligation for Sunday Mass. But my hope is that people do not go out of obligation or feeling guilty for not going, but indeed because they love God and want to be with Him.

Why is it an obligation? Fr. Michael Van Sloun, a priest of our archdiocese writes the following as 5 key reasons:

Sunday Mass fulfills God's law. The Third Commandment is, "Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day" (Ex 20:8; see also Dt 5:12). The Christian Sabbath is Sunday, and Catholic's keep the Sabbath holy by fulfilling the obligation to attend Mass (Canons 1246-1248; Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2174-2178). The Commandment is not a suggestion or a request; it is a command or an order. The law makes compulsory what we should want to do on our own.

Weekly Worship Follows Jesus' Example. Jesus was in the habit of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day (Lk 4:16b). His mother Mary was "full of grace" (Lk 1:28) and his stepfather Joseph was "a righteous man" (Mt 1:19) and they both carefully "fulfilled all of the prescriptions of the law" (Lk 2:39) which means that they went to the synagogue every Sabbath. Not only did they observe this law themselves, they took their son with them, and when Jesus was old enough he went on his own. If Jesus went to the synagogue to observe the Sabbath every week, we should go to Mass every week.

Sunday is a Day of Thanksgiving. Eucharist means thanks. It is right and just to give thanks to the Lord our God, and the Mass is the best prayer to offer thanks. God graciously blesses us with everything that we have: life and health, food and shelter, family and friends, intellect and talents, opportunity and resources – and faith. These gifts are so awesome that we ought to be overflowing with gratitude and eager to give our thanks and praise. The ideal is to give thanks every day. Weekly thanksgiving is a bare minimum. If we give thanks only intermittently or rarely we fail to adequately honor the Giver of the gifts.

Community Prayer is Essential. From the beginning of the Church the community “devoted themselves ... to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Christians pray together by nature, and the Mass is the premier form of communal prayer. Some make the unfortunate claim: “I can pray by myself and I do not need to go to church.” Usually the more negligent a person becomes with their Mass attendance, the more negligent the person becomes with their private prayer. There are two pillars to a well-rounded prayer life, communal and private, and to do one or the other exclusively is to be imbalanced. The more a person prays privately, the more the person should want to worship with the community, and the more a person worships with the community, the more a person should want to pray privately.

Weekly Eucharist is Solid Spiritual Food. Most people are health-food conscious. It is important to eat properly every day to avoid hunger pains, weakness, malnutrition, and disease. It is the same with our spiritual life. We need to be spiritual-food conscious if we wish to avoid emptiness, spiritual weakness, vulnerability to temptation, and sickness due to sin. The Mass begins with the Liturgy of the Word. God told the prophet Ezekiel, “Eat what is before you; eat this scroll” (Ez 3:1). God wanted him to devour his word, and God wants us to do the same. Peter accurately observed, “Master, you have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). The second half of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Jesus declared, “My flesh is real food, and my blood true drink” (Jn 6:55). Spiritual malnutrition begins when we go without Word and Sacrament for longer than a week.

So why not just go virtually and sit on the couch with a cup of coffee and watch Mass? Because it's not the same. It is powerful when we come together to pray. Jesus tells us, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) Certainly, we can pray anywhere; the Lord invites us to relationship with Him. But there is something extra special about coming together in worship on the Sabbath (Saturday evening-Sunday) in the sanctuary. St. John Chrysostom said, “You cannot pray at home as at church, where there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests” (CCC 2179).

At Mass, we also receive Communion. This can't be done virtually. It's why we make an effort to bring Communion to the sick and the homebound. Holy Communion is "the source and summit of the Christian Life." (CCC 1324). The Apostles and earliest Christian communities joined in community for celebration of the Eucharist. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). St. Paul also refers to the celebration of communion, writing, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Jesus chose such a moment to reveal his identity soon after the resurrection, following his journey alongside two travelers on the road to Emmaus: "And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight... Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24: 30-31, 35).

What a gift Mass is! God waiting for us, ready to envelop us with His love. Let us make time for Him.

Now even with the obligation, there are exceptions. Maybe one can't get to Mass due to no transportation; as I've shared before a pet peeve is in confession if a 10 year old says they missed Mass; it's obviously not their fault at all. Our archbishop is also clear that if a person is ill or feels ill; or they are the caregiver for someone who is ill, these are also reasons a person is not obliged to go. Also if a person is in a vulnerable health position, seriously concerned about Covid risks, this would be a valid reason too. But again, Mass isn't about obligation but about relationship - being with God, and also with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the Lord's table.

It's been so great to see more faces in the pews over the past couple of months, and hopefully this trend continues. Thank you for your support of our parish through the pandemic, and know at Saint Joe's you always have a spot at God's table.

For more information on the return to Mass, or to find a parish near you when traveling, be sure to check out <http://backtomassmn.org>. (Parts of my article were taken from a helpful Q & A they have there).

God's blessings to you, and welcome back!

Fr. Paul