

SUNDAY MASS OBLIGATION

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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“The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice.”¹ Thus says the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is both a precept of the Church and Church law that Catholics must worship God on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation by participating in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness or the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor.

“Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.”²

Most you here, I assume, are aware of this but you would be surprised to find out how many Catholics aren't. Many of them think that Sunday Mass attendance is something that Catholics should do, but that if a person misses Mass on Sunday once in awhile, it isn't really that serious. On one hand, this is the result of decades of inadequate and faulty catechesis. But it's also the logical conclusion of our relativistic “make up your own rules” culture in which the word “obligation” really doesn't mean that you “have to” do it. It's the same mentality that turns the “Ten Commandments” into the “Ten Suggestions.”

But then, some Catholics are aware of the Sunday obligation but are just a bit lazy, especially while on vacation or away on a weekend business trip. They somehow manage to make all of their travel arrangements—determine what route to take or purchase their plane tickets, make hotel reservations, plan what they're going to do—but never quite get around to planning Mass into the schedule. It is so easy to find churches and Mass times today on the Internet, that there should be no excuse for missing Mass while away from home. It just takes a little extra effort and the desire to do something that we should want to do.

So, when I hear about the difficulty that some Catholics have in getting to Mass on Sunday in an age when travel is so easy, convenient and comfortable, my thoughts invariably turn to my great-grandparents, who came to America in 1891 from Poland. They settled in central Wisconsin, which at that time was still relatively primitive. The closest Catholic church for them was about nine miles away and until they were able to afford a horse and carriage, they got to Mass by walking the entire distance along a dirt road on foot. We all have high-tech cars today and yet there are some Catholics, who still find it hard to make to church. Sure, it was a hardship for my great-grandparents and their family, but they did it out of a desire to be true to their obligations as Catholics, but most of all, out of a great love for the Mass, which nourished their souls in a strange foreign land.

Then there is a special category of Catholics these days, who justify missing Sunday Mass when they're on vacation by saying that “there wasn't a Latin Mass in the vicinity.” To be frank, this no different than the same relativistic “make up your own rules,” mentality which lax Catholics use to justify why they don't have to go to Mass every Sunday. The precept of the Church in regard to Sunday Mass attendance never said anything about language. If the closest Catholic church for my great-grandparents would have been a German parish instead of a Polish parish, they wouldn't have missed Mass

just because they didn't know the hymns or because the homily was in a different language. For them, their obligation to God and His Church was, pure and simple, an obligation.

The possibility of almost unlimited options, which characterizes so much of our present-day culture, has also had an overflow effect even in the practice of our faith. We are confronted almost every day with a myriad of options of things to do, and so, even on Sunday, there are those Catholics, who treat Mass as just one of their options for that day. And if they get so involved in one of the other options that they lose track of time, then suddenly they find that they had missed Mass.

And it isn't enough that so many Catholics don't know, or just don't care, about their obligation to attend Sunday Mass. There are also so many of them, who seem to be quite oblivious to the fact that when they deliberately miss Mass on Sunday or holy days of obligation without serious cause, they commit a grave sin, that is, a mortal sin,³ and that they shouldn't receive Communion. The Code of Canon Law states: "A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to . . . receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess."⁴

But why, some may ask, if you take some time out to pray to God in the privacy of your home on Sunday, is it so important to go to church and attend Mass? The short answer is that it is both a precept of the Church and Church law. But aside from this, attendance at Sunday Mass logically follows from the fact "that in the Mass it is Christ Himself who worships the Father, joining our worship to His. In no other way is it possible to adequately give thanks (...) to God for the blessings of creation, redemption and our sanctification than by uniting our offerings to that of Jesus Christ Himself."⁵ Just take a moment to reflect upon everything He has given you. Then look at all of the other things you do during the week and ask yourself if it is really that difficult to find one hour a week to spend with Him in order to thank Him.

Occasionally, a person does have a justifiable excuse for missing Mass on Sunday because of illness, hazardous weather or some other reason. But we must always remember that this is the exception and in those cases there is no sin. But we can never justify our absence at Sunday Mass by saying that God doesn't care if we pray to Him at church or in the privacy of our home. This is nothing short of a Protestant mentality. The reason we are obligated to attend Sunday Mass is that "Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church."⁶ You can't do this alone at home. You either belong to a church or You don't.

"Private worship is not enough. From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have understood that being a Christian isn't a private matter. We are called to be Christians together; while we can and should engage in the private worship of God throughout the week, our primary form of worship is public and communal, which is why Sunday Mass is so important."⁷ The Mass is not just a prayer like any other prayer. It is the supreme worship of God because it is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to God the Father.

If we try to understand **why** participating in Mass is so important, **why** skipping Mass is a mortal sin, then perhaps, it will no longer seem like an "obligation." Then, when a person begins to love the Mass, to love going to church on Sunday, it is no longer

about having to understand why the Mass is so important. It suddenly becomes “I want to. I need to.”

When Jesus set off across the Sea of Galilee, a large crowd of people followed Him because they had seen the wonderful signs He had performed in curing all the sick. They didn't know that He was going to multiply five loaves so that five thousand could eat. They didn't know that this miracle was to be a foreshadowing of an even greater miracle, the Eucharist. All they knew was that He was a great prophet. But we have something even greater here that so many aren't even interested in. People followed Jesus all the way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and here people can't even get into their car and drive a few miles. We don't only have a prophet. We have God Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Lord of the Universe, here on our altar. We have the greatest miracle in the history of the world. When we realize this, we won't just come because we “have to” but because we “want to.” We will be drawn here because this is where He is.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2181.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 916.

⁵ Donovan, Colin B., http://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/sunday_mass.htm.

⁶ *Catechism*, 2182.

⁷ http://catholicism.about.com/od/worship/f/Sunday_Duty.htm