

The Sunday Eucharist: Value And Obligation

"Why Does The Church Make So Much Of The Eucharist?"

If the Eucharist were merely man's creation, another good way to worship God in common, the Church would not make much of it at all. But the faith of the Church is that the Eucharist is first of all the work of God, and that it holds a central place in God's plan for the salvation of man.

In Old Testament times, it was always God who took the lead. At Mount Sinai he called his people together to hear his word. The people then replied in faith, "All that the Lord has said, that we will do" (Ex. 24:3), and sealed this covenant or bond of love in blood.

In the Sunday Eucharist also, it is God who takes the lead; it is God who calls man together into his special presence, to hear his word, to respond in faith, and to seal a personal relationship of love with him in the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Eucharist is the God-given and privileged place of encounter between God and man. It is Salvation Event; for it is here, in this celebration, that God calls man today and offers him salvation in the sacrifice of Christ. In other words, we achieve union with God in a bond of love—in this we find our salvation.

"Do Catholics Still Have An Obligation To Go To Mass On Sunday?"

Yes. Nothing has changed in this regard at all. You see, the obligation comes from the very nature of the Church. What is the Church? A Eucharistic Community, a community whose very heart and centre is the celebration of the Eucharist (as the Mass is commonly called today). This is what the Church does above all else. If we belong to the Church, it is first of all to celebrate the Eucharist. It is as simple as that.

Of course, the question itself should not be necessary. There are many things in life that are real obligations, but which we rarely approach from this point of view. A mother has an obligation of love toward her children, but it is not for this reason that she loves them. It doesn't say much for our love of God if it is only out of obligation that we celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, the greatest act of God's love for mankind.

"Is Church Law Regarding The Sunday Obligation Likely To Change?"

No. As explained above, the obligation to take part in the Sunday Eucharist stands by itself. But the written law does have important values, even if it only supports an existing serious obligation arising from the nature of the Church and God's plan for our salvation. The law keeps before our minds what is essential to the life of the Church (no Eucharist, no Church); it gives us direction, and it shores up our weakness. For similar reasons, society makes laws for its members; otherwise life would be chaotic.

"Why Can't We Fulfill This Obligation During The Week?"

The Sunday Mass has a different dimension. On Sunday the whole community is called together, and that's the point. On Sunday we are called together to become a holy people, a single family under God.

Why is this assembly on Sunday? It's part of God's plan. It was on Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. It is on Sunday that the community is called together to celebrate that same Jesus and to be one with him in his death and resurrection.

"Is It, Then, A Mortal Sin To Miss Mass On Sunday?"

It most certainly can be. But first, what do we mean by mortal sin? The Christian life is centred upon a personal relationship—friendship with the living God. The "state of mortal sin," is the condition of a man who has set aside his friendship with God. Sin is a breakdown in love between man and God.

Now, what does the Sunday Eucharist have to do with all this? Everything; because the Sunday Eucharist is God's invitation to friendship—God's invitation to sit at his table, to share his life, to be his friend. If, then, our departure from the Sunday Eucharist is taken at its face value, it means that we are setting our friendship with God aside, that we choose to keep him out of our lives. We are talking about the complete breakdown of our friendship with God which, as we say, is called mortal sin.

Often enough, of course, we don't think clearly about what we are doing. We miss Mass without careful thought—through weakness, carelessness, laziness, habit, or for some flimsy excuse. In the cold light of day, however, the fact remains that we neglect God's invitation to be his friend, we threaten our relationship with God. Despite our lack of thought, we play around with God's love, and we may slip away from it altogether.

What is the degree of our guilt? We must consider before God and the Church, and in our own hearts, the extent of our realization and neglect, and, in short, the total picture.

The Eucharist is a love-feast, and the Lord himself understands that sometimes we simply can't be there. Attendance at Mass is not some cruel law with punishment hanging over us for any infringement, however involuntary. Practising Catholics know the importance of Mass. They make it a point to be there. They know when they are excused.

Finally, there are those who just don't believe anymore. They don't care about the Mass, the sacraments, the Church. They have written these things off as of little or no importance. Unhappily, we can only say that they have lost the Faith; they are, in fact, no longer Catholics. Regardless of the reasons, it must fill us with regret. We hope and pray for their return.

"Must I Confess Missing Mass Before I Receive Communion?"

When it is a question of mortal sin, yes. When it is not, but there is still some fault involved, it is best to bring it to confession. Of course, if you miss Mass through no fault of your own, it is not a matter for the sacrament of Penance.

"Am I A Good Catholic If I Go To Mass On Sunday?"

It's a good start. "It is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven". (Mt. 7:21) The Mass is directly related to our day-to-day lives. Those who celebrate the Eucharist have an obligation to live more and more like God, with concern for all men, to bring the Good News of God's love to those around them, to work for God in the society of men. If we fail to see the direct connection between liturgy and life, then we have missed the point completely. If we fail to take it seriously, then we cannot celebrate at all.

Problem Areas

"I'm A Catholic, But I Don't Bother With Mass Anymore."

It won't work. Sooner or later, and the sooner the better, you will have to come to terms with yourself and face this situation. It is just not possible to remain a living Catholic and at the same time cut yourself off from the community and what the community is all about, the Eucharist. You will have to change your attitude and ways—or cease to call yourself a Catholic.

"I Go To Mass At Christmas And Easter."

No one will be impressed. Some Catholics try to "hang on" in this way, "making their confession and communion," only to disappear into the woodwork once again. Eventually, you will have to face the root issue, that you cannot square your own practice with the basic demands of life within the Church.

"Why Should I Go To Mass? I Don't Get Anything Out Of It."

Good question. A better question is, "What do you bring to Mass?" Do you bring faith? In the Liturgy of the Word, do you hear God? In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, do you make the great prayer of thanksgiving your own? Do you offer your life with Christ to God? Do you seal your love of God in the partaking of the Body and Blood of the Lord? Do you participate or do you just sit around putting in time?

If you don't get anything out of it, if it doesn't turn you on, then perhaps what is missing is the one essential ingredient—faith. A dull Mass is inexcusable; but every Mass without faith is dull. We all need to pray for growth in faith.

"Those Who Go To Mass Are Hypocrites: That's Why I Don't Go."

A rather sweeping statement. There are some hypocrites, of course. They just go through the motions, choosing to forget that liturgy must affect their everyday lives. As for the others, their presence at the Sunday Eucharist is a sign of their constant commitment to do better, even if they often fail in their efforts. In Communion, at the table of the Lord, God claims us as his sons; we, for our part, must seek to live as his sons, to live like God. If our lives do not give evidence of this commitment, then it is up to us to do something about it, to come back to where we should be. But let's not stand outside and thank God that we are better than those sinners inside. After all, we are a Church for sinners.

"I Don't Believe In The Institutional Church."

A cliché at best. The Church is the community of believers; at the very heart of the community is God's family meal—the Eucharist. The symbolism is loud and clear. To sit at God's table, to partake of his food is to be claimed by God as his very own, son of God, sharer in his life and heir to the kingdom.

The Church is where the family is, in the Eucharist. Your own family has to have a structure, a visibility; it is an "institution"; otherwise it would not exist at all. In the great family of the Church the institutional aspect can present problems. People must be our first concern.

The Parish Liturgy

"Our Parish Liturgy Is Very Poor. We Shop Around."

You may be right. Such problems exist. But your solution may be wrong. Your first responsibility is to your own parish. Barring some compelling reason, you should put your efforts into your own parish liturgy. Above all, you should not flit about, always looking for something new or better. There are things to be improved in every celebration; but good liturgy is rooted in solid faith. So, if you find your parish liturgy poor, first ask yourself if you have courteously spoken about it to your parish priests and the parish council.

"There Is No Sense Of Community In Our Parish Church."

Then, it calls for work. You must be sure, though, that you have the right kind of community in mind. The Sunday Eucharist is not for some exclusive group. Its final purpose is to gather everyone into a single community of love under God—to reach beyond differences, to overcome prejudices and hatreds that hold men apart, and to gather together as one people, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, all men, regardless of race, language, social status or anything else. This is what the Sunday assembly is all about. This is what your Sunday community should be. For this kind of community—Amen.

"Why Can't I Just Pray To God Alone?"

It's fine, but not quite enough. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray always. The truth is that we have to pray alone; otherwise our life with God will not be real at all, and even the Eucharist will not mean much in our lives. Private prayer even has some advantages over prayer in common—no noise, no clutter, no distraction, alone with God.

But the Eucharist adds a new dimension to private prayer. In the Eucharist, God calls us out of personal isolation; He calls us together with the whole community of man to be His people, a single family under God. The Eucharist is the Lord's idea.