



**DIOCESE OF
STOCKTON**

Frequently Asked Questions on the “Sunday Obligation”

“The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life. We Christians go to Sunday Mass to encounter the Risen Lord, or better still to allow ourselves to be encountered by him, to hear his Word, to nourish ourselves at his table, and thus to become the Church, that is, his mystical living Body in the world.... Without Christ we are condemned to be dominated by everyday weariness, with its worries, and by fear of the future. The Sunday encounter with the Lord gives us the strength to experience the present with confidence and courage, and to go forth with hope. For this reason we Christians go to encounter the Lord on Sunday, in the Eucharistic celebration.”

- *Pope Francis, Wednesday Audience of December 13, 2017*

For over a year, there has been a dispensation in our diocese from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. As the pandemic recedes, before the obligation is reinstated it is important that we take the opportunity to relearn what this obligation entails, and clear up any confusion and misunderstanding regarding it. These frequently asked questions are provided to help everyone more fully understand what it is that the Church asks of us in seeking to keep holy the Lord’s Day.

What is the “Sunday Obligation”?

When we talk about the “Sunday Obligation”, we generally mean that Catholics have a duty to participate at Mass on Sundays and certain other Holy Days, except when prevented by a legitimate reason.

Does the Sunday Obligation only include going to Mass?

There is another part of the obligation which doesn’t get as much attention, that of rest:

“On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s Day, the performance of the works of mercy, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body. Family needs or important social service can legitimately excuse from the obligation of Sunday rest. The faithful should see to it that legitimate excuses do not lead to habits prejudicial to religion, family life, and health.” (CCC 2185)

While there are many legitimate reasons that someone might need to work on Sundays, the Church still encourages us to make Sunday rest possible for as many people as we can:

“Sanctifying Sundays and holy days requires a common effort. Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day. Traditional activities (sports, restaurants, etc.), and social necessities (public services, etc.), require some people to work on Sundays, but everyone should still take care to set aside sufficient time for leisure...In spite of economic constraints, public authorities should ensure citizens a time intended for rest and divine worship. Employers have a similar obligation toward their employees.” (CCC 2187)

Is it a mortal sin to not attend Mass on Sunday?

The Catechism, in describing the Sunday Obligation states that “[t]hose who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.” (CCC 2181)

It is important to remember the three conditions for a sin to be considered ‘mortal’: grave matter (it is a serious wrong), knowledge (you know or should know that it is wrong), and consent (you have to freely choose it, even though you know it is wrong). When people say it is a mortal sin to miss Mass on Sunday, what they really mean is that it is grave matter. But the other two conditions need to be present for it to be a mortal sin.

Those who do not participate in Mass for a legitimate reason, or are dispensed from the obligation, do not commit a sin by missing Mass.

What is a legitimate reason to not attend Mass?

You have no obligation to come to Mass when it is impossible, either physically or morally, or where charity would require absenting yourself, such as if you have a contagious illness. Examples of legitimate reasons to miss Mass given in the Catechism are illness or the care of infants (CCC 2181). Another case might be that you go to your parish for Mass, and a priest doesn’t show up. You have attempted to fulfill your obligation; while it would be praiseworthy to attempt to find a Mass at another parish, you would not be obliged to. Yet another case might be a teenager whose parents are for whatever reason not willing to take them to Mass. It is not possible for them to get to Mass, so they have no obligation. Missing Mass in this case is not a sin. Sin requires some level of assent, of choosing against God. They would, however, need to *want* to go to Mass if it were possible.

However, even at times when you are not able to get to Mass, the Church recommends spending an appropriate time in prayer, either alone or as a family, in order to honor the Lord’s Day in some way.

What if I'm not sure that I have a legitimate reason?

If you are not sure that the reason you have exempts you from attending Mass on a particular Sunday, or if you have a reason but one which isn't serious enough to excuse yourself, *check with your pastor. He can dispense or commute your obligation to attend Mass for a particular Sunday or Holy Day*, though whether he does so is up to him. A *commutation* is when instead of releasing someone of the obligation completely, they are asked to do something else as an alternative, such as prayerfully meditate on the readings of the day.

Even when travelling, if a Mass is available, you should go. However, if it is impossible or gravely inconvenient to go to Mass where you are, then there is no obligation. But it is a praiseworthy practice to plan for Sunday Mass alongside planning travel or a vacation.

If it is impossible for you to come to Mass, or you are ill, you do not need to ask for a dispensation; you can make that decision yourself in conscience.

How much of Mass can I miss and still fulfill my obligation?

If you grew up before 1983, you may have heard a definite answer to this question- you had to be present for the three elements of the Sacrifice- the Offertory, the Canon (Eucharistic Prayer), and the Priest's Communion. However, with our renewed emphasis on the Mass, including the Liturgy of the Word, as a unified whole, there is no clear answer to the question in the current Code of Canon Law. Instead, our focus should be, if I am late for Mass, why was I late? If you are late because of unforeseen traffic, or because of a family emergency, this is not your fault, and you are fine getting to Mass when you are able; you don't need to turn around and go to a different Mass at a different time just because you are late. If, on the other hand, you are late because you were waiting to find out the score of the big game before you went in, then you did not fulfill your duty for the part of Mass that you missed.

Why do we have a Sunday Obligation?

If you think about what the Mass is, and what Holy Communion is, it is hard to imagine why anyone who truly believes in what is happening would even *want* to miss Mass. Why would we willingly deprive ourselves of this grace? This is why it is important for all of us to understand the purpose of the Mass and Jesus's gift of himself in Holy Communion. We all need to be continuously evangelized!

However, the Church, knows not only the importance of the Mass in the Christian life, but also the weakness of our human nature. There are similar areas throughout human life. We do not always have happy feelings for doing the right thing, and if we will not do something out of love sometimes, perhaps we can be encouraged to do so out of a sense of duty. If everything is in the right place, we do not *need* the Sunday obligation, because we would be there anyway if we could. But when maybe not everything is right, we need a nudge to do the thing which will help get everything right.

The Sunday Obligation is what is called *ecclesiastical law*. This is law which is made by the church, and which it can be possible to change- this is why it was able to be dispensed during the pandemic. However, the Sunday obligation is not *only* ecclesiastical law, but is based on a divine law obligation to render worship to God on the Lord's Day, following the 3rd Commandment. The Church believes that the Sunday Eucharist is the best way to keep holy the Lord's Day. This is why from early days in the Church, the faithful have been expected to take part in divine worship on Sunday as a community.

Who does the Sunday obligation apply to?

Those who have been baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it, have sufficient use of reason, and have completed seven years of age.

Does Mass on Saturday evening 'count' for Sunday?

Mass on Saturday evening usually *is* 'Sunday' Mass. Liturgically, Sunday begins on Saturday evening. This borrows from the Jewish tradition of the new day beginning at sunset, rather than midnight. When priests, deacons, and religious pray Evening Prayer on Saturday, it is usually Evening Prayer I of Sunday. What exact time 'Sunday' begins liturgically depends on the diocese. In most of the dioceses of the United States, Masses celebrated on Saturday evening beginning from 4pm may be celebrated as Sunday Mass.

As far as fulfilling your obligation, it doesn't matter what the Mass liturgy actually is. If an important feast day occurs on Saturday, and the parish decides to celebrate the evening Mass as a Mass of that feast day, you will still have fulfilled your Sunday obligation, even though the readings and prayers weren't those of Sunday.

If I don't go to Mass on Sunday, can I make it up by attending a weekday Mass?

Sunday Mass is different than weekday Mass. What we have is an obligation to attend Sunday Mass, not just Mass, because what we are doing is keeping holy the Lord's Day, and because Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, where the entire Church gathers together as the Body of Christ to participate in Christ's sacrifice to the Father together. If you aren't able to attend on Sunday for a serious reason, then you have no obligation, and don't have to make it up. If you want to freely go to Mass during the week after, as a pious practice and to receive the grace of participating at Mass, hearing God's word, and receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, that's great! If you didn't have a good reason, going to weekday Mass does not make up for not having fulfilled your obligation. It is possible that if you ask a priest for a dispensation he might *commute* your obligation, asking that you attend Mass another day, rather than dispensing it altogether.

What are Holy Days of Obligation?

Holy Days of Obligation are the most important feasts of the Liturgical Year besides Sunday, because of their centrality to our Catholic faith, and sometimes the celebrations of the patron(s) of a particular country. Canon law lists ten Holy Days, but the bishops' conferences are allowed to make their own list, which is usually less than the full ten. Some of the Holy Days, in countries where that day is not a civil holiday, can be transferred to Sunday.

In the United States, we observe the following Holy Days:

January 1- Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

Ascension – 40 days after Easter, but transferred to the Seventh Sunday of Easter in much of the US, including our diocese

August 15- Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

November 1- Solemnity of All Saints

December 8- Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (Patronal Feast of the US)

December 25- Solemnity of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Christmas)

However, when January 1, August 15, or November 1 fall on a Saturday or Monday, there is no obligation to attend Mass on those days in the United States. But when the other days (Christmas, Immaculate Conception) fall on those days, we do have to go to Mass two days in a row! The next time this will happen is Christmas 2021. And, no, you can't just go once in the evening and have it count for both days!

"Today, as in the heroic times of the beginning, many who wish to live in accord with the demands of their faith are being faced with difficult situations in various parts of the world. They live in surroundings which are sometimes decidedly hostile and at other times — more frequently in fact — indifferent and unresponsive to the Gospel message. If believers are not to be overwhelmed, they must be able to count on the support of the Christian community. This is why they must be convinced that it is crucially important for the life of faith that they should come together with others on Sundays to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the sacrament of the New Covenant."

- Pope St. John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, 48