

Together & the Bread of Life – Obligation: Law & Love

In the Bread of Life Discourse in the Gospel of Saint John chapter 6, Our Lord reveals himself as the Bread of Life and acknowledging it is a hard teaching to accept (Jn 6:60-69). Having experienced the absence of the Eucharist during the pandemic, our yearning for Jesus, the Bread of Life, has grown deeper. We continue to reflect upon the importance of the Eucharist in our lives, how it gathers us as the body of Christ, nurtures and strengthens us for our mission and service in the world and ultimately prepares us for the great heavenly feast with God.

“The precept of the Church specifies the law of the Lord more precisely: ‘On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.’” -Catechism of the Catholic Church. “We do not go to Mass in order to give something to God, but to receive what we truly need from him. We are reminded of this by the Church’s prayer, which is addressed to God in this way: ‘although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation’.” “Why do we go to Mass on Sundays? It is not enough to respond that it is a precept of the Church; this helps to preserve its value, but alone does not suffice. We Christians need to participate in Sunday Mass because only with Jesus’ grace, with his living presence within us and among us, can we put his commandment into practice, and thus be his credible witnesses.” –Pope Francis

We are obligated to participate in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. It might seem odd to be obligated to attend a celebration, so what is this all about? It may help to first think about where the obligation comes from. We are blessed with life, salvation, faith, gifts, and resources, and all these many blessings come from God. Out of gratitude, we come to the Eucharist - the word means thanksgiving – and with grateful hearts, we celebrate Christ’s presence among us. Our obligation, then, comes from deep within ourselves as we make Christ and the Eucharist the center of our lives. In Christ, we are offered life to the full. In the Eucharist, we are formed and nourished by Christ to live as his people. That is a reason to celebrate!

Think about the things you do out of love for another. Parents get up in the middle of the night to feed or console their children. Adults care for their aging parents. Siblings and good friends stop everything in order to support their loved one through a difficult moment. We might say that we are obligated to do these things, not because someone tells us we must, but because we cannot imagine doing anything else. The obligation is our loving response which shows the importance of the person in our lives and our gratitude for him or her. This is a helpful way to think about our obligation to participate in Sunday Mass. We come to the Eucharistic feast, not only because the Church tells us we must, but as a response to the astounding love of God which is shown and shared through Jesus Christ.

