



When public liturgies were first suspended due to COVID-19, one of the topics of conversation among family members was about the dispensation from the obligation to participate in Sunday Mass. Do we go to Mass because we are obligated to do so, or is there something else that drives our participation in the Eucharist?

One of my favorite Scriptures is Acts 2:42, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.” I picture the early believers gathering together, growing in faith in the Lord Jesus and sharing a sacred meal. There is nothing in this passage that speaks of obligation, at least not in the way our 21st Century ears hear the word. The people gathered, not because they were told they must, but because it was unimaginable not to. They joined together in response to the astounding love of God, poured out through Jesus Christ. “They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people” (Acts 2:46b). How might we come to the celebration of the Eucharist out of obligation, not only by Church law, but compelled by the love of Christ?

Be thankful. The word “eucharist” means thanksgiving. The Mass is our communal thanksgiving feast, in which we offer praise to God for the blessings of life, salvation, faith, gifts and resources. With grateful hearts, we more readily see God’s grace in our midst.

Be open to Christ’s presence. In the Mass, we encounter Jesus. We are challenged and consoled through Christ’s presence in the Word of God; in the priest who stands as Christ among us; in one another as members of Christ’s Body; and in a special way in the bread and wine which are transformed into Christ’s Body and Blood. Through the Eucharist, we are formed, nourished, and sent.

Be connected. Through the Eucharist, we grow in communion with Christ and one another. The more deeply we belong within our parish communities of faith, the more we will be to grow as followers of Jesus and live as Christian disciples. Following the example of the early Christians, we will become devoted to one another, joining with others in worship and service, living and growing in faith together.

Be ready to change. We often say we are “going” to Mass. When we truly celebrate the Eucharist, we are not passive spectators but active participants. We listen, speak, sing, stand, sit, kneel eat. And our participation changes us. Pope Francis recently said, “The prayer of the Christian makes the sacramental presence of Jesus his or her own. What is external to us becomes part of us... The Mass is always celebrated, and not only by the priest who presides over it, but by all Christians who experience it. And the center is Christ! All of us, in the diversity of gifts and ministries, join in His action, because He, Christ, is the Protagonist of the liturgy” (Feb. 2, 2021).

Be responsible. There are times when we are tempted to ignore the blessings, love and saving grace offered in the Eucharist. There are days when we may be inclined to stay home, lingering in leisure or distracted by the swirl of weekend activities. And because we are tempted, the Church obligates us to attend Sunday and holy day Masses. Like a parent who establishes house rules in order to form a child into responsible adulthood, the Church establishes rules that lead us to spiritual maturity, which is expressed in willing participation in the Eucharist and a sacrificial life of love.

The dispensation of the Mass obligation was necessary in order to ensure our safety during the pandemic. Now, with the hope of vaccination and herd immunity, many of us have or will soon return to the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Let the example of the early followers of Jesus inspire us, for they gathered in prayer not because they were obligated by Church law but because they felt compelled to celebrate and to share in the love of Christ.