

RETURNING TO MASS

Faithful should be guided by Jesus and well-formed conscience as we are asked to return to Mass

For more than five months now, the world has been suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no one whom it has not impacted. Each day we continue to hear reports about the novel coronavirus and its impact in our communities – local, state, national and global communities. Yes, these remain extraordinary times for all of us.

On March 17, I had to make one of the most difficult decisions as a bishop, that of suspending the celebration of public Masses to help stem the spread of the coronavirus. Just over two months later, on May 25, public Masses resumed under the conditions as outlined in the *Liturgical Guidelines and Protocols for Resumption of Public Masses*. Though Mass resumed, the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remained in effect and continues through Sept. 27.

By the time this article appears in our *FAITH Saginaw* magazine, we will be near this date. So what happens now? Much of our local economy has reopened for business, at least in part. Our Catholic schools have opened for in-person instruction. We have been celebrating public Masses for three months now, carefully adhering to all safety precautions. Therefore, effective Oct. 4, I will be reinstating the obligation to attend Sunday Mass in the Diocese of Saginaw following the *Liturgical Guidelines and Protocols for Resumption of Public Masses*.

Allow me to explain this decision.

AN ACT OF CHARITY

In March, given the circumstances of the threat to public health from COVID-19 and the many unknowns surrounding it, I felt the need for the faithful to be protected. Given the extraordinary times, I, like most of the bishops in this country and around the world, made a prudent decision based upon a *well-formed conscience*. When it came to a potentially serious health risk, it was in the best interest of the People of God for me to suspend the celebration of public Masses. In other words, the obligation to attend Sunday Mass was not binding. The circumstances were so challenging, and not knowing what we were really dealing with regarding COVID-19, that in fact, to me, it was an act of charity for the safety and health of all my flock to suspend the obligation to attend Mass.

What is important for this discussion is to see that my decision was not a bishop making up a new rule or imposing or changing a rule. My actions were the expression of a trustworthy and well-formed conscience because of my relationship with Jesus and what he would have me do given the circumstances.

GUIDED BY JESUS AND A WELL-FORMED CONSCIENCE

As we move forward in this COVID-19 environment and as circumstances change, so will the judgment around the binding of the obligation to attend Mass. For the Faithful, in understanding the reinstatement of their obligation to attend Mass, the decision to attend must be made from a place of relationship with Jesus and the responsibility which comes from this relationship and a grace-filled conscience. In other words, each person must decide for themselves how and when they will return to participating in Sunday Mass based upon their physical and/or mental health and a grace-filled conscience formed by their relationship with Jesus Christ. This would hold true whether we were in a pandemic or not.

To give you some examples - a parent caring for a sick child, personal sickness, a vulnerable condition to the coronavirus, icy roads - a well-formed conscience does not bind a person to the obligation to attend Mass in these circumstances, and therefore a reason to miss Mass would not be a sin. On the other hand, reasons for missing Sunday Mass such as being on vacation, wanting to sleep in, sports on weekends, etc., are not made from a grace-filled conscience formed by a relationship with Jesus Christ and would be sinful. A conscience formed by a relationship with Jesus Christ would desire deeply to participate in the sacramental life of the Church and make sacrifices to do so, except for good reasons, some of which I outlined above.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.”¹ Through personal prayer and exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, our hearts grow

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1785

² *Pope St. John Paul II - Apostolic Letter: Dies Domini*, #7

in desire for Christ, leading us to think not about obligation, but about faithful worship.

The Catholic Church has always taught, given the examples for missing Mass cited above, an individual has never been obliged to attend Mass. That is not because the obligation has been suspended by someone, but rather because the obligation was not binding upon them given their particular circumstances. In the same way, in our present circumstances, the obligation to attend Sunday Mass is real and applied, but for those people who feel they are at risk, etc., the obligation is not binding.

CONCERNS AND UNINTENTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Having shared this, I would also like to express some of my concerns as I reflect upon potential unintentional consequences of these past many months as people have remained home on Sundays and not physically present at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. I have concerns for the Body of Christ entrusted to my care. These concerns offer us a teachable moment. Therefore, I share these concerns with you with the hope of teaching the beauty of our Catholic faith and offering encouragement.

My first concern is that the situation of these past months may cause some members of the Body to see attending Mass as less important than it truly is. There is no replacement for attending the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. Watching Mass on television or online and making a spiritual communion, while having a spiritual value and renewing our love and reverence for the Eucharist, does not replace the true spiritual union that takes place from receiving Jesus in his Body and Blood. Making a spiritual communion prepares us for being physically present at the celebration of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist - the celebration of the Mass - which is irreplaceable.

INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN DIVINE WORSHIP

The Sacred Liturgy is not simply a special prayer service. It is divine worship. Only Jesus offers divine worship. It is Jesus who, as both victim and priest, continues his self-offering to the Father, interceding on our behalf, bringing our offerings together with his. This takes place at every liturgy. The celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass, is our participation in the worship that Jesus, in his humanity, offers to the Father in heaven.

The Mass is not simply a means to receive the sacred host. If that were the case, there would be no difference between the Holy Mass and a Communion service. Receiving the sacred host is certainly holy and important. But the celebration of the Holy Mass is far more. It is the re-presentation - making present here and now - of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. A proper understanding of this mystery and reality should lead to our desire to come and be present, seeking this union with Jesus Christ in the Mass.

Another concern comes from the knowledge that during this pandemic, many members of the Body of Christ did not participate even through spiritual communion by watching Mass on television or online. For whatever reason, they “got out of the habit” as someone told me. A habit of this kind can easily lead an individual to spiritual malaise, to spiritual sloth, to a spiritual laziness which will profoundly impact every area of one’s life. This creates a deep void in one’s heart that will be filled with worldliness. The chaos of our culture today is due to this reality.

SUNDAY SHOULD BE SET APART FOR THE LORD

The third commandment states: Remember to keep holy the Lord’s Day. Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life. In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, this day of the Lord has been given to us “as an ever new gift of his love.” “The rediscovery of this day is a grace which we must implore, not only so that we may live the demands of faith to the full, but also so that we may respond concretely to the deepest human yearnings. Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.”²

There may be many reasons for not attending weekly Mass as obliged by the Church. But we must be very attentive not to adopt some idea that something can replace attending Sunday Mass. There is no greater gift in all of life than Jesus giving himself to us in a very profound way in the Eucharist. If we can attend Mass without serious risks to ourselves and others, a well-formed conscience would encourage us to do so, not out of guilt, but out of a longing and a deep desire for union with Jesus. And through our receiving him in the Eucharistic encounter, Jesus fulfills this desire, and more!

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1785*

² *Pope St. John Paul II - Apostolic Letter: Dies Domini, #7*