

Father Matthew's Catechesis on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation.

Dear Parishioners,

As many of you will already be aware the bishops of England and Wales expressed the hope that the obligation for every Catholic to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation would return on the first Sunday of Advent, the 28th November. It has been dispensed since 21st March 2020, the cancellation of Sunday Masses in light of the pandemic. However, as it is still impossible for every Catholic who would normally wish to attend Mass on these days to do so, so far the bishops have held back from reviving the Sunday and holyday obligation. Nevertheless, they do ask us all to take stock and to reflect on how we can best observe Sunday and other holydays in light of the ongoing effects of the pandemic. Perhaps now is the time to think again about returning to Sunday Mass, holyday Masses, and the other ways of observing these days. So, this is what I am going to talk about today. The Church tells us we are obliged to attend Mass either on the Sunday or holyday itself or the vigil thereof, and "also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the due relaxation of mind or body." (canon 1247; Catechism of the Catholic Church 2180-2183).

This obligation has its origins in the third of the Ten Commandments: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work." (Exodus 20:8-10). In the early Church the sabbath was changed from Saturday (the Jewish sabbath) to Sunday, as a celebration of the day of the Resurrection.

Sunday Mass should be at the heart of the life of every Catholic. We shouldn't attend Mass because of a sense of obligation but because we want to! In the Mass we participate in the great events of Jesus Paschal Mystery- his death and his Resurrection. In the Mass these events of our salvation are made present to us sacramentally by way of the words and actions of the liturgy. By the Mass, and our worthy reception of the Lord in Holy Communion, we draw our spiritual strength for the rest of the week, for our mission in the world.

The reason the Church, in normal times, obliges us to attend Mass on Sundays and holydays is not to saddle us with an extra burden, but to highlight their great importance to living as a Catholic Christian. Sometimes we hear the word "obligation" in the wrong way. We see it as an absolute requirement which we must obey no matter what, in the same way that we must obey our traffic laws, or face a fine or worse. It is not intended in this sense by the Catholic Church. Canon 1248 clearly states with regard to the Sunday obligation that no one is obliged to do the impossible. There are many reasons why it might not be possible or wise to attend Sunday or holyday Mass. If you are sick, or you have been advised not to go into busy places; or if you have been told to self-isolate, you are not obliged to attend Sunday Mass. The pandemic has

also taken its toll on many people mentally, so if you are unable to gather to celebrate Mass because you are anxious or worried, you are not obliged to do so. Other examples might be that you cannot attend Mass because of work or transport issues, or perhaps because numbers are still restricted in your church and there simply isn't enough room for everyone to attend safely.

One solution might be to attend a weekday Mass instead. In our four churches we have nine weekday Masses most weeks. They are shorter and there is more social distancing. Please see our newsletters for details. Another solution could be to watch a Mass by livestreaming. There are many different possible churches to visit, both within and outside our diocese.

The Sunday obligation has a second aspect which today is all too frequently forgotten- that of rest and recreation. As our Dean, Fr Andrew, says in a letter to his own parishioners, "We celebrate the re-creation of the world in the Resurrection by our recreation." The Catechism explains this obligation to rest and recreate: "On Sundays and other holydays 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 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." (Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 2185). No one is ever obliged to do the impossible, so if you have to work, try and find another day for your rest. If you have to work on Sunday, you should also try to find some time to rest and celebrate the Lord's Day at the end of your work. In these ways you will be fulfilling God's will as best you can.

To summarize the Church wishes us to observe Sundays and holydays by being sensible, flexible and safe in our Christian living. If you are unsure about anything I have said, or how it might apply to your own circumstances please do not hesitate to ask me or Fr. Lim. We are here to help.

With my prayers and every good wish for the coming season of Advent,

Fr. Matthew Jakes