

Holy Days of Obligation Explained

The 4th Thursday after Easter Sunday is the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, a Holy Day of Obligation. ‘Holy Day of Obligation -- Do we still have those?’ you may ask. Yes, we do! Part of the reason why some may be confused is that our obligation to celebrate Mass on some Holy Days depends on which day of the week the Holy Day falls. Before I get to that, let me list the six Holy Days of Obligation we celebrate in the Church in the United States:

- Mary, Mother of God (January 1)
- The Ascension of the Lord (40 days after Easter)
- The Assumption of Mary into Heaven (August 15)
- All Saints (November 1)
- The Immaculate Conception of Mary (December 8)
- Christmas (December 25)

Here’s where the confusion comes: some of the Holy Days are not obligatory if they fall on a Saturday or a Monday, but *are* when they fall on other days. These Holy Days include Mary, Mother of God, the Assumption and All Saints. Why this exemption for Saturdays and Mondays? The U.S. Bishops made this decision to lighten the burden on people so that they would not have to go to church two days in a row, especially those who live in parts of the country where the closest Catholic church is a good distance away.

Now the other Holy Days -- the Ascension, the Immaculate Conception and Christmas -- are always obligatory. Why are these three different from the other three? The reason for each is as follows: the Ascension always falls on a Thursday, Mary, under her title the Immaculate Conception, is patroness of the United States and Christmas is deemed too important a feast ever to miss. Granted, in their effort to be accommodating, the bishops may have created some confusion. That’s why I try to clear up any confusion by putting information in the bulletin, making announcements at Mass and writing columns such as this one.

So far, I have concentrated on the ‘what’ and ‘when’ about Holy Days. I speak now about the ‘why’ -- why are these days given such emphasis to the point that the Church teaches that all Catholics have a serious obligation to celebrate them under certain circumstances? The short answer is that they mark events in lives of Jesus, Mary and the saints, which are so important that our understanding and celebration of them is vital to our salvation. Without going into great detail, I ask us to think about the six Holy Days and see that they are the story about how our Savior came down from Heaven and was truly born of a sinless woman so that he could go back to Heaven and take her and us with him. In particular, the Ascension is the day when Christ finally transcends this world to go and throw open the gates of Heaven. He gave His life and every drop of blood on His way to accomplishing this. How can we say to Him that we can’t make time to thank Him for the gift of eternal life on the day that marks His complete victory over death?

For such reasons, the Church considers it so important for us to celebrate these Holy Days that it places a moral obligation on us to participate at Mass on Holy Days of Obligation, just as it does on the Lord’s Day. Failure to do so through one’s own fault is a grave offense against God which we must confess sacramentally before we can receive Communion again worthily. I say this, not to breath fire and brimstone, but to remind us that Mass is the source and summit of our faith, at which we encounter the Risen Christ in word and sacrament, and should be a priority in our lives. To put it more positively, the question should not be, ‘Why are we obliged to go to Mass?’ but, ‘With all that God wants to give us at Mass, why would we ever miss it?’

(re-printed from Fr. Ken’s column in the May 7, 2017 bulletin)