

Why attending Mass is important

Bishop Hying's Column

Written by Bishop Donald J. Hying

Wednesday, Sep. 16, 2020 -- 12:00 am

Recently, the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin jointly decided to lift the suspension of the Sunday Mass obligation in all five dioceses in the Province during the month of September.

So, beginning the weekend of September 26 to 27, it will be once again obligatory for Catholics in our diocese to attend Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation.

I lifted the obligation six months ago, beginning on March 17 in the very beginning of the COVID pandemic.

These months have been long and difficult; the inability to go to Mass and receive the Eucharist has been a great hardship, but I made that decision out of concern for the public health and in union with my brother bishops in the state and the country.

Because the Eucharist is the very heart and center of our Catholic faith, we need the Mass to be spiritually sustained in Christ.

At Mass, God speaks to us through His Word, we offer our prayers, gifts, and sacrifices, symbolized by the bread and wine laid on the altar, we share in the sacrificial offering of Jesus to the Father through His death and resurrection, and we receive the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life, the living presence of God in our midst.

Watching a livestreamed Mass and making a spiritual communion are pious practices, necessary during these months of pandemic, but they serve only as substitutes for the wonder, power and grace of the actual reality.

Watching Mass virtually can never replace the grace received when we are there in person.

Sacraments are not virtual experiences. That is why confessions cannot be heard over the phone.

Situations for being exempt from attending Mass

I want to emphasize that, although the obligation to attend Mass every Sunday and holy day is being restored, canon law has always made exceptions for situations which would exempt a person from the obligation.

If you are elderly, in poor health, have a compromised immunity, are proximate to vulnerable individuals, or are at risk for catching COVID, you may (and in many cases, should) utilize that exemption and excuse yourself from the obligation. You are not incurring sin in doing so.

Please continue to take seriously the reality of the virus and its potential threat to you. Others may not be in one of the categories aforementioned, but may be very afraid of catching COVID.

I know young people who have essentially lived in complete isolation since March. Each person and situation is unique, so discernment is needed.

But if you are young and in good health, is it possibly time to consider returning to Mass?

If you wear a mask, socially distance, and are careful in interactions with others, church seems to be no more dangerous than stores, restaurants, and other public places.

I invite you to prayerfully and prudently discern the question, encouraging you to emerge from fear into a focus on that to which the Lord is calling you -- a place of peace, grace, and life in its fullest expression.

Attention to safety

When we opened up our parishes for public Masses at the end of May, some folks expressed extreme concern about the safety of such an action.

Overall, our pastors, leaders, and people have been careful about following reasonable safety procedures.

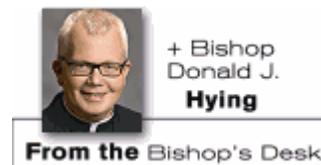
This attention to safety has borne results; to my knowledge, no one has caught COVID or died because they went to Mass in the Diocese of Madison, and at the same time, thousands have been able to be present and taken part in the source and summit of the Christian life.

I thank everyone for the enormous efforts made to mitigate the risks of participating in the Eucharist these past three months.

I especially commend our priests for their heroic work.

Uniting to the Lord

On Holy Thursday night, Jesus instituted the Eucharist in the context of the Last Supper.



At some point, He must have asked Himself, "What would be the most efficacious, intimate, gracious way I can not only abide among My followers, but actually live within them until the end of time?"

We gratefully know and live the answer to that profound question.

For 2000 years, the Church has been radically faithful to the Lord's command, "Do this in memory of me."

We can never forget that, only hours before Jesus was arrested, falsely accused, imprisoned, scourged, crucified, and died, He was thinking of us.

He was looking deeply into the ensuing centuries and imagining how He could abide with us in a bond that can never be broken. The Eucharist unites us to the Lord in such an intimate fashion that we become what we eat.

When we consume the Body of Christ, we digest the great secret of the resurrection of Christ, as St. John Paul II reminds us.

As we reinstitute the Sunday Mass obligation, my encouragement is two-fold.

I encourage all Catholics in the diocese whose health and circumstances would make it prudent and safe to attend Mass on every Sunday and holy day with devotion, prayer and praise to God, to do so, and I encourage all Catholics who are elderly, infirm or immune compromised to not attend Mass, knowing with a clear and peaceful conscience that you are not sinning in doing so.

Keep praying with the Mass on television, make a spiritual communion, pray the Rosary, read the Scriptures, and make Sunday a holy day of prayer and rest, even if you cannot attend Mass at this time.

I thank everyone for their patience, perseverance, hard work, forbearance, and prayers during these very difficult times.

Needless to say, people hold opposite opinions on all of these matters.

I have tried to pursue a prudent middle course, but understand the variety and intensity of concern.

I know we all agree on the need to pray for healing, to love each other and to put God first.

Blessings to all of you.
