



## Communion at Mass

The campaign against the coronavirus has cost Catholics dearly, most notably in having to “fast” from Mass and Holy Communion for nearly two months now. Dispensation from the Sunday obligation may (and should) ease the conscience, but it does not lessen the longing to sit in the pew for the Readings, stand for the Gospel, kneel for the Consecration, and savor the taste of the Bread of Life. Yes, these weeks have exacted an exceedingly high price: The invisible presence of coronavirus has meant the very visible absence of public Mass.

But that deprivation could also be an invitation to appreciate anew why the Church sets such high store on the Day of the Lord. What we come to understand more fully, we may learn to honor more knowingly when “normal” returns. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) can help us find our way.

The God of Israel set in order the rhythm of time for His Chosen People: “Observe the Sabbath day; keep it holy,” the Third Commandment says. In imitation of their Creator the Jews were to rest from work on the eighth day because it “represented the completion of the first creation.” Christians, by contrast, revere the *first* day, Sunday, because it “recalls the new creation inaugurated by the Resurrection of Christ” (CCC 2190).

To highlight the surpassing significance of the Lord’s Day liturgical law lays down a simple but character-shaping precept: “On Sundays the faithful are bound to participate in the

Mass” (2180). This *once-a-week* expectation of Sunday worship is coupled with another obligation to be fulfilled on an *annual* basis: “The Church warmly *recommends* that the faithful receive Holy Communion when they participate in the celebration of the Eucharist; she *obliges* them to do so at least once a year” (CCC 1417). Catholics *must* go to Mass every Sunday, but we are under obligation to receive Communion only once a year, not once a week.

This distinction would have been familiar to all four of my grandparents growing up in the 1880s. Like the vast majority of Catholics then and for centuries before them, they went to Communion each year to fulfill their “Easter duty.” But they were at Mass every other Sunday without fail and without taking Communion.

Just over a hundred years ago St. Pius X (1903-1914) turned this ancient practice upside down when he lowered the age of First Communion to what we have today and strongly promoted weekly, even daily, reception of the Sacrament. How many more times have you and I gone to Communion in our lifetime than our grandparents or great-grandparents did in theirs? The answer to that question is a measure of our spiritual indebtedness to the pastoral heart of St. Pius X.

The Eucharistic obligations of Sunday Mass and yearly Communion stem from our baptismal vocation to become children of God, children who need to learn to be grateful. Our whole life long the “school” of weekly Liturgy teaches us that we owe our God worship beyond all telling—I for my life, you for yours, and all of us together for *ours*—the life that keeps the human race going on this earth.

On the day of our adoption in Baptism each of us inherited a place reserved by name at the Eucharistic table. We do not dine there alone. We break bread and drink the cup with those whom Jesus calls “friends.” And our reservation comes with a very specific instruction: “Do *this* in memory of Me.”

“Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging . . . to Christ and to His Church,” *The Catechism* teaches (2182). So important is this testimony of our presence to the growth of the Church that it is not optional. Believers “who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin” by their refusal to take the place of praise assigned them at Baptism (2181). Their absence echoes the words of Peter in the courtyard of the Chief Priest only hours after the first Mass: “I do not know the man.”

During the coronavirus pandemic it has been my overriding concern as bishop to resume as soon as possible the celebration of public Mass, because only there do we receive Holy Communion in the setting our Lord so artfully designed for us. “Do this is *memory* of Me,” He said; do not separate the Sacrament from the Sacrifice. The Sacrament is made present because the Sacrifice “happens” before our eyes. From no other source comes Communion with the Risen Christ. Unless we are sick or homebound, therefore, we “take” Communion where it is *given* to us by the priest—at Mass. It will be a great day for us all when we gather at the Altar again to renew our work of remembrance.