

This Is The Day The Lord Has Made:

A Pastoral Letter To The Faithful Of St. Anthony Parish

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We have been called together by the love of God the Father, and by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to form the Body of Christ active in the greater Morris community. It is our privilege, and our salvation, to continue the work of our Lord in the world, most especially in our local community. Today we would like to offer some reflections on the greatest of our works in the world, the worship of God, and on our individual responsibility to assist in the greatest act of worship, the Mass.

The Love Of God Is Our Greatest Work

When asked by a doctor of the Law, a scribe, which is the greatest commandment, our Lord replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, Oh Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*’” Mark 12:29-30. When the scribe recognized that Jesus had given the true answer, he publicly praised the wisdom of Jesus’s words, and the Lord said to him in reply, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Mark 12:32-34.

That the love of God is our greatest obligation is made clear by the Ten Commandments. The first commandment is clear that God is owed our exclusive allegiance, “I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.” The second commandment makes it clear that we should love God to the extent that we do not use His Name in an evil or even a careless manner, “You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain.” The third commandment make clear that we have an obligation to honor God by weekly worship, “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath.”

That God asks for, and indeed requires our love, is nothing more than simple justice. He created us, sustains us, and, in the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, suffered and died to redeem us from the debt of our sins. We owe God our love because He has loved us first, “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:10. John added, “We love because He first loved us.” 1 John 4:19.

Simple justice requires that we should love God in the measure that He has loved us. When we reflect on all that He has done for love of us -- given us life, the capacity for friendship with Him and with each other, health, material blessings, and all of the good things of this creation, we soon realize how great is His love for us and how much we should love Him in return. When we consider that He even asked of His beloved Son that which He did not require of Abraham’s son Isaac – that is, that He should be sacrificed, we should be overwhelmed with love and gratitude as was the hymnist when he wrote, “And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing; Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in; That on a Cross, my burdens gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin.” *How Great Thou Art*. The response to this extraordinary love is loving, heartfelt, worship of God, “Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee, How great Thou art!” Ibid.

How Can We Love God? By Being With Him In The Mass.

There are basic questions that we face as Christians, “What does it mean to say that we love God, and what must we do to love Him?” These questions arise out of the ambiguity of the English word “love.” Simply put, the English word love means a number of things, many of which do not apply to our relationship with God. We use the word love to describe romantic attraction, simple affection, and enjoyment. These are not the type of love that we owe God. The type of love that God has for us, and the type of love that we are to give to Him in return is *agape*, self-giving love. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, it is willing and working for the good for another.

It may seem impossible for us to love God in this way. It is impossible to do anything to make God’s life better than it is because it belongs to His divine nature that His life is the fullness and perfection of every good, and there is nothing that we human beings can do to make His life any better than it is. Simply put, His life is as good as it is possible to be, and we cannot add to it in any way. We also cannot detract from the goodness of God’s life. In His nature as God, He is not subject to either suffering or change. Thus it would seem that we cannot love God in the sense of *agape* love.

There are ways in which we can love God, however. We are children of God, and we can love God in the same ways that children have always loved their parents. Those of you who are parents or who have been parents will recognize those ways. We can love God by honoring and obeying Him. We can love God by being grateful to Him. We can love God by choosing to be with Him and communicate with Him.

Attendance and active worship at the Mass is a matter of honoring and obeying God, and, thus, of loving Him. To worship God is, in the first place, a matter of honoring Him in a way that is due to Him. It is a way of acknowledging that He is God and Creator, and that we are His creatures. It is a way of acknowledging and respecting His goodness and holiness. Just as it is good, right, and just that children honor their parents, it is good, right, and just that we who are God’s children honor Him.

Assisting in the worship of the Mass is also a matter of obedience to God. We have already seen that God, in the Ten Commandments, commanded the people of Israel to keep holy the Sabbath. This commandment, like all of the commandments of the moral law, did not cease with the coming of the Christ. Indeed, He Himself kept the Sabbath out of love for His Father. The Gospels are filled with the stories of Jesus worshipping in the Synagogue or the Temple on the Sabbath.

The obligation to honor the Sabbath did not end with the establishment of the new covenant and the Church. Although the Jewish Sabbath was no longer the day of worship for Christians, the obligation to worship continued. The Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that Christians have a duty to worship God in the Mass, “*We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near.*” Heb. 10:25 (*Revised Standard Bible, Catholic Edition.*) One of the earliest Christian writings, *The Didache* or *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, which was most likely written some time in the first century A.D., said this about participation in the worship of the Mass on the Lord’s Day, “On the day of the resurrection of the Lord, that is, the Lord’s day, assemble yourselves together, *without fail*, giving thanks to God, and praising Him for those mercies God has bestowed upon you through Christ, and delivered you from ignorance, error, and bondage, that your sacrifice may be unspotted, and acceptable to God, Who has said concerning His universal Church: In every place shall incense and a pure sacrifice be offered unto me; for I am a great King, says the Lord Almighty, and my name is wonderful among the heathen.” (*Didache*, XXX.)

Thus from the earliest days of the Church God has required His people to gather in worship of Him. This obligation continues to this day. The current Code of Canon Law, adopted in 1983, provides, “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass.” (Code of Canon Law, can. 1247.) *The New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* explains that this Canon “minimally means *physical presence and consciousness.*” (*The New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, p. 1445.) *The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, the code which governs the Eastern Catholic Churches, imposes a similar obligation on Eastern Catholics. (See *The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, can. 881 §1.) *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday is a precept of the Church, “The precept of the Church specifies the law of the Lord more precisely: ‘On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2180.) *The Catechism* further notes, “Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2181.)

It is clear why the deliberate choice to miss Mass is a serious sin when we consider our obligations to God as set forth in the Ten Commandments. First, as was explained above, we are bound to love God above all things since He is the source of our life and every blessing in our life. Do we demonstrate that we love God above all things when we choose to forgo being with Him in the Mass in favor of leisure, sleep, or any other human activity? Furthermore, we are bound to keep holy the Sabbath. If we refuse to be with the Holy One on His day, how can we say that we are keeping that day holy?

The Mass is our opportunity to express our gratitude to God for all that He has done for us. As we pray in the opening to the preface of the Eucharistic Prayer: “Priest: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. People: It is right and just.” The Mass is our most important act of gratitude to God, and it truly is right and just for us to willingly and gladly give thanks to Him for our life and all of our blessings, because He has given us these things freely out of His loving kindness and not because He owes us anything.

There are, of course, times when missing the Mass is not a sin because God understands that there are times when attending Mass may put ourselves or others at risk. When a person is ill, injured, or suffers from some condition that renders attendance at Mass dangerous to the person him or her self or to others, the failure to attend Mass does not constitute a mortal sin. Likewise, when a person is traveling and does not have ready access to a Mass, the failure to attend Mass does not constitute a mortal sin. As we have seen during the Covid-19 crisis, the obligation to attend Mass may be dispensed by the proper pastoral authority for good cause. In general, however, the voluntary failure to attend Mass on Sundays or holy days of obligation constitutes a mortal sin.

Beloved brothers and sisters, God not only has given us life and the good things of this world, He desires to bring us to the eternal life of friendship with Him for which He created us in the first place. He desire to give us, in the words of the hymn, “blessings without number and mercies without end.” (Michael Perry, *O God Beyond All Praising.*) All that He asks of us is that we willingly and freely choose to love Him in return. He asks that we obey Him out of our love for Him as our Father. He asks that we give some of the time that He has given to us back to Him by being with Him and communicating with Him, most specially in the Mass. Brothers and sisters, let us love God and give Him our friendship by thanking and praising Him in the Mass. It *is* right and just to do so, and it *will* bring us blessings without number and mercies without end.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Stan