

The Mass is Jesus coming to us with arms wide open, inviting us into his company, into his life.
—Bishop John Folda

Why do we go to Mass?

By now all of the faithful in the Diocese of Fargo have heard that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation was reinstated on May 1. For over a year, that obligation was dispensed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risks entailed in gathering with large groups. Fortunately, we were able to resume our celebrations of Mass much sooner than most places, and now in the present circumstances, most are confident that we can gather safely and return to our normal practice of participating in the Mass each weekend. For those in exceptional circumstances, the dispensation still applies.

We often refer to the obligation to attend Mass, but it might be more appropriate to speak of our *privilege* to attend Mass. The Mass is a gift from Jesus himself. It is an opportunity for us to draw near to our Lord and to listen to his holy Word, just as his disciples did. It is an opportunity to receive him in the Eucharist. Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them always, and he fulfills that promise through the celebration of the Mass, offered in churches at every hour of every day all around the world.

We were created to worship God, to glorify and adore him as our loving creator. In this we find our own greatest glory, because through worship we become one with him. There is no higher form of worship than the celebration of the Mass, whether at a great cathedral or in a humble chapel. Every celebration of the Mass is the sacrifice of Jesus himself, and we participate in this sacrifice personally. When our Lord said to the apostles at the Last Supper, “Do this in memory of me,” he was making it possible for people of all times and places to partake in the sacrifice of his Body and Blood, which he offered for our salvation. The Eucharist is our opportunity to enter into communion with Jesus in the mystery of his death and resurrection, the supreme act of God’s life-giving love.

It follows then, that through our worship of God in the Mass, we are sanctified and shaped through God’s grace in holiness. Through the Mass we are being formed as the saints who will be a leaven of holiness in the world and who will abide with God forever in heaven. We can’t help but be affected by the grace of the Mass if our hearts are open and ready to receive God’s love. Just as the apostles were completely transformed through their encounter with Jesus, so are we in the celebration of the Mass.

You might hear someone say, “I don’t go to church. I can worship God privately at home, or out in the beauty of nature.” And it’s true, we can worship God privately, at home, in the mountains, and on the seashore. But the fact remains that we are created and called together as a family of faith, as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. Christ formed us to be in communion with him and with one another, and that communion reaches its high point in the celebration of the Mass. Even the person you don’t know who sits on the other side of the church is profoundly and mystically united to you in a relationship of grace. We need each other for mutual support and prayer, and sometimes simply by our presence.

One might also hear something like this: “I’m a good person. I do good things for my neighbor, so I don’t need to go to church.” But remember, the *second* great commandment is to love your neighbor. The *first* is to love God with all you your heart, mind, soul, and strength. St. John Vianney said, “All good works put together are not equivalent to the sacrifice of the Mass, because they are the works of men and the Holy Mass is the work of God.” If we truly love God, then why would we distance ourselves from him and the gift that he gives us? Could we really claim to love our spouse or our children if we skipped every opportunity to be with them? The Mass is Jesus coming to us with arms wide open, inviting us into his company, into his life. It’s wonderful and necessary to do good works for others, but those acts of charity are given even greater vigor if they are founded upon the saving love of Jesus.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that the liturgy of the Church—the Eucharistic sacrifice—is the source and summit of our Christian lives. It is the source from which all grace and all Christian activity flows, and it is the summit, the high point of worship, that we strive to reach. Why? Because it is Christ himself, made present in our midst. When Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, he said

to the apostles, “Do this in memory of me.” *Do this*. Jesus tells his apostles, and all of us, to do what he has done, to celebrate the Eucharist so that he might be with us always, and so that we might draw life from his life. The power of the Mass doesn’t depend on our feelings in the moment but on the promise of Jesus: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.”

The Mass is a foreshadowing and a pledge of the eternal life that Jesus has prepared for us, a gift that no one should lightly pass up. And the promise of Jesus isn’t just for the future, but for the present as well: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” Jesus is committing himself to be with us, to abide with us during our earthly journey, in our joys and in our sorrows. If we believe that Jesus means what he says, then nothing should stand in our way of participating in the celebration of the Mass. I look forward to seeing you in church!