

# Questions & Answers

## About Dispensation from Mass

### **Q. What is a dispensation?**

A. When we become a member of the Body of Christ through Baptism, we receive many graces and rights. But we also have obligations. We are bound to the laws of the Church. As a human being, we already have obligations to God and neighbor by the Natural Law; as a member of the Church, we have obligations to Ecclesiastical laws insofar as they are promulgated by proper authority.

While “Keep holy the Sabbath” is a divine law that must always be observed, the specific obligation to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation is an Ecclesiastical Law. Specifically, the Mass Obligation is one of the Precepts of the Church, which bind all Catholics. A dispensation is a relaxation of a merely Ecclesiastical Law for the spiritual benefit of one of the Faithful, or a group of the Faithful. In early spring of 2020, when health authorities announced that we were in a pandemic, many bishops, including Bishop Folda, granted a general dispensation (to all the Faithful in the diocese) from the precept which establishes the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. This dispensation comes to an end on May 1, 2021.

### **Q. Who is exempt from the Sunday obligation?**

Even in ordinary times, certain people are not required to observe the Mass Obligation, for example when there is a grave (that is, very serious) reason making it physically or morally impossible to attend, such as illness or contagion, when caring for an infant, when one is homebound, during dangerous travel conditions due to seriously inclement weather, or even when distance prohibits the attendance of Mass.

As stated by Bishop Folda in his decree which reinstates the General Mass Obligation, all the normal exemptions still apply. However, in addition to these, he added an exemption for those who have serious underlying conditions making them vulnerable to the coronavirus, and those who have significant anxiety of illness by attending Mass. It is also important to note here that the Faithful may always ask for a dispensation from the Mass Obligation from their pastor, who has the authority to grant it in a particular situation.

### **Q. If I don't fall under the exemptions, is it a sin for me not to attend Mass?**

In short, yes. The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation is grave matter, meaning that if one has sufficient knowledge of the gravity of the sin and freely chooses to commit the sin, he or she has fallen into mortal sin. If one of these conditions is lacking, the sin is venial, or not even sinful, depending on the level of knowledge and freedom in committing the grave act.

### **Q. If I discern that I am exempt from the Sunday obligation, how valid is a spiritual communion? Or can I request my parish bring communion to me?**

Spiritual Communion is a devout practice of seeking to grow in love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and receiving the graces of the Sacrament, even though one cannot receive the Eucharist physically. Spiritual Communion is beneficial to the person who makes it, even if they regularly go to Mass. The Lord can grant graces to us in many ways, which is why we use devotions outside the Sacraments such as meditation, Scripture reading, and the Rosary. The practice of Spiritual Communion has been recommended and practiced by many saints. We may even imagine a situation wherein a person making a devout Spiritual Communion without receiving the sacramental Communion (through no fault of their own) may receive more graces than those who receive the Eucharist sacramentally, but without proper dispositions (being in the state of mortal sin, or being distracted or indifferent when receiving Communion). Obviously, the ideal situation would be for both a sacramental Communion and a proper spiritual disposition.

Someone may request that Holy Communion be brought to their home. However, we never want to forget that there is great spiritual value in being present at the Sacrifice of the Mass in person. For Holy Communion is but a sharing in the Body that was given up for us and was brought to life again by the power of God. For those who cannot attend the Holy Sacrifice in person, they can be assured of the Lord's abiding presence in them through Sanctifying Grace, even if their actual participation in the life of the Church is less than they would desire.



# The Resurrection and the Sunday Mass obligation

“**T**he Lord is Risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia!” With these words, I wish a Happy Easter to

all the faithful of the Diocese of Fargo and to all people of good will in North Dakota. The annual celebration of Easter is a milestone in our lives every year, a day and an entire season that acknowledges the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. After our solemn remembrance of the passion and death of our Lord, we declare with firm faith that Jesus Christ has conquered death and is risen and now lives forever. This is the cornerstone of our faith, the essential truth that enables us to persevere even when our crosses become heavy and darkness is all around us. Jesus is risen, and he has opened up to all of us the way to eternal life.

This last year has had more than its share of darkness. It was just over a year ago, during Lent, when the COVID-19 pandemic exploded in our nation and around the world. Ordinary activities and employment were suspended, and with deep regret we even suspended the public celebration of Mass in our churches. Last year’s observance of Holy Week and Easter was somber and disappointing because we could not all be present for the greatest liturgies of our Church year.

During the months that followed, countless people have been impacted by the unfolding pandemic. Many of us contracted the coronavirus, and a significant number have died. We were isolated from each other for a time, and many people lost their jobs and their livelihood. And on and on.

But now we have cause to rejoice, because we know in faith that Jesus is risen. With great relief, we are seeing significant gains against the spread of COVID-19, and we are free once again to celebrate the mysteries of our salvation, not just on a screen but in our churches, with our families and with all the faithful gathered again as the Body of Christ.

Last year, at the outset of the global pandemic and health crisis, I dispensed all the faithful within the Diocese of Fargo from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. While many of you have already returned to regular attendance and participation at Mass, the dispensation remained in effect.

But in view of the improved situation throughout our state, the time has come for all of us to return once again to active participation in the liturgical life of the Church. Beginning on the weekend of May 1-2, 2021, the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation is reinstated for all the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Fargo.

There are some exceptions to this obligation. The dispensation remains in effect for those who are ill or who have reason to believe they were recently exposed to COVID-19 or another contagious disease; those who are confined to their homes, or a hospital, or a nursing facility; those who care for the sick, the infirm, and the homebound; those who are unable to attend Mass through no fault of their own; those with underlying health conditions or in a high-risk category; those who have significant fear or anxiety of becoming ill by attending Mass. One may always consult their pastor if questions arise about the obligation to attend Mass.

It is fitting that we should return to Mass during the Easter season. Since the days of the Apostles and the early Church, Sunday was considered the Lord’s Day, the day of the Resurrection. The faithful gathered on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ, the Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection. And ever since then, the Church has observed Sunday as a solemn feast, the one day of the week when all the faithful come together to worship God. The Church teaches us in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life” (1277).

We speak of our Sunday obligation to attend Mass, and it is an obligation because of the worship that we owe to God: “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day” (Exod. 20:8). But we don’t go to Mass only because we have to; we go out of love. We return the love that our Lord offers to us in his saving death and resurrection. We come to hear God’s Word and to receive the incomparable gift of the Eucharist, which no secular activity could ever match. We come not to be entertained, but to rejoice in the salvation that Jesus won for us by giving his life on the cross and taking it up again on the first Easter. We come to Mass because we need to be one with God, and there is no better way to draw near to him than in the sacred liturgy of the Mass. Without the celebration of the Eucharist and the Lord’s Day, we would be aimless and adrift, buffeted by the attractions and the perils of our world. But when we do attend Mass with all the faithful, we know we are rooted in Christ and anchored in the safe harbor of his Church.

Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that all of us will experience the saving grace of our Lord’s resurrection in this holy season of Easter. Our Risen Lord waits to meet us, and will be there when we come once again to celebrate his sacrifice, his Mass.