

A Jealous God

For the last year during Covid-19, the Church has given a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. Rarely does the Church lift the obligation to attend Mass. It was done during the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918. Also, churches in Mexico City were closed in 2009 to slow the spread of H1N1, known as “swine flu.”

This is a good time to reflect on the obligation to participate in the Eucharist. What is behind the obligation? What should be my attitude about Sunday Eucharist during a pandemic?

In Sunday’s first reading (Ex. 20), the Ten Commandments were proclaimed, and we heard, **“Remember to keep holy the sabbath day.”** The sabbath day is actually Saturday. For Jewish people, the sabbath is not only a day of rest, but also a day for the praise of God, his work in creation, and his saving actions on behalf of Israel (*Catechism*, 2171). The purpose of the sabbath was to rest and to praise God for creation and salvation.

In the introduction to the Ten Commandments, God reminds us of his saving actions. He said, **“I, the Lord, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery”** (Ex. 20:1). Those words are more important than all Ten Commandments. If you do not remember those words, then you will not live the commandments with the right attitude.

“I the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.” Remember how I saved you? Remember how I opened the Red Sea for you? Then I poured down manna from heaven for you, and I made water flow from the rock when you were thirsty. I am your protector and redeemer. You cannot survive without me. **“[Therefore,] you shall not have other gods besides me”** (Ex. 20:2).

That is why you must praise God on the sabbath, for the wonder of his creation and for his saving actions. We live the commandments by praising God for his saving actions. He is not only the God who opened the Red Sea, but also, the Lord Jesus who opened his side on the cross.

Christians keep this commandment on Sunday, the Lord’s Day. We honor the day Jesus rose from the dead. For Christians, the observance of the Lord’s Day replaces the sabbath. The Israelites were indebted to the Lord for saving them from Egypt. But the salvation flowing from the cross far exceeds that gift! We share in the Eternal Life of God.

Jesus said, **“I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly”** (Jn. 10:10). At Baptism, we are immersed into the Life of the Trinity. We die with Christ and are raised to new life with him (Rom. 6:4). At Confirmation, God breathes his Spirit into us. In the Eucharist, Christ pours out his life for us.

With a bit of sarcasm, one could say that the best reason not to celebrate the Eucharist is because this week I have no reason to praise God. Or worse, I do not need the gift of Life poured out in the Eucharist. It is not that big of a deal. People who are lackadaisical about the Eucharist have lost sight of the gift of God poured out so abundantly.

Participation in the Sunday Eucharist is more than an obligation. It supersedes any human activity. Nothing else compares to it. It is the heartbeat of our spiritual life. It is to acknowledge that I need God more than anything else. I cannot be a good person without the Lord’s grace. Participating in the Eucharist is not so much something that I do for God, but it is to celebrate what God has done for us.

The obligation expresses the truth of love. When you love someone, then you have an obligation to be true to that love. The obligation states that we must serve God, yet it reminds us that Christ

serves us. Jesus said, ***“The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”*** (Mk. 10:45).

If the Church gives a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, then the stakes are high. With the pandemic, it is a matter of life and death. In essence, the Church leaves the individual to decide based on his or her conscience. The Catechism lists a few examples which are legitimate reasons to miss Mass: illness or the care of infants. In places like Wyoming, it might be a blizzard.

Over the past few months, I have spoken with elderly or others with health conditions who are not coming to Mass. They have legitimate reasons. They are making prudent decisions because of how lethal Covid-19 is. They should not be attending Mass, and they told me that they long to return.

However, if a person is participating in other public activities, like sporting events, traveling to see relatives, eating out at restaurants, that is, if they are doing many other normal activities, but not attending Mass, then they have lost sight of the gift of God. They are likely in a state of serious sin. The dispensation from the obligation cannot be used as an excuse to ignore God.

What is your attitude about the Lord’s Day? Do you revere the gift of Christ’s Life in abundance graciously poured out at Mass? If your health prevents you from attending, are you longing to return?

In the commentary on the First Commandment, the Lord says, ***“I the Lord, your God, am a jealous God”*** (Ex. 20:5). This is the language of lovers. You know how lovers will say, “He’s all mine,” or “She’s for my eyes only.” The Lord is a ***“jealous God”*** because the relationship between God and the people of Israel is described as a marriage. God cannot stand unfaithfulness or indifference in this relationship.

Jesus had God’s jealous love in mind as he cleared the moneychangers out of the temple, so the disciples recalled the Scripture passage, ***“Zeal for your house will consume me”*** (Jn. 2:17). The Hebrew word for ‘zeal’ is the same word as ‘jealousy’. The Jewish leaders had lost a sense of God’s jealous love; instead, they were focused on the business of selling temple offerings. Jesus came to renew God’s jealous love for us. Jealousy for God’s people consumed him.

Do you believe in God’s jealous love for us? What more could the Lord do to prove that love than by going to the cross? ***“We proclaim Christ crucified ... to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”*** (1 Cor. 1:24).

Marvel at how much God loves you. Receive it with humble gratitude. Then renew your commitment to praise God. Renew your obligation to love the Lord above all things.