

Now that the coronavirus pandemic in the United States seems to have lost most of its steam because people have diligently observed safety protocols and are getting vaccinated in greater and greater numbers, Archbishop Gregory is lifting the general dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass in person that he granted in March of 2020 when the pandemic first arrived in our area.

Beginning the last weekend of June—June 26 and June 27—the faithful of the Archdiocese are once again obliged to attend Sunday Mass in person unless there are serious, mitigating circumstances that prevent them from doing so, such as sickness, frail health, lack of transportation, a recent exposure to the coronavirus, or other grave obligations that must be attended to, such as caring for a sick family member or being required to work on Sundays by one's employer.

The obligation to attend Sunday Mass is not a matter of human law—something the Church can change on her own authority—but of divine law. It is rooted in the Third Commandment of the Old Covenant, "Remember the Sabbath day—keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). In the New Covenant, the obligation to observe the weekly Sabbath is transferred from Saturday to Sunday, called the Lord's Day since it is the day of the Lord's Resurrection, his definitive triumph over sin and death. It is also the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, giving birth to the Church.

Sunday is the day when the Church gathers to render the outward, visible, public and regular worship that she owes to God. The core of Christian worship is the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrifice and sacrament that Jesus established at the Last Supper as the perpetual representation of the Paschal Mystery through which he redeemed the human race.

Participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the preeminent means by which Jesus bestows his divine life upon the Church, and whereby the Church is made capable, through the exercise of her faith, to fulfill the Great Commandment to love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and with all one's mind and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:37-39).

The pandemic has disrupted the regular pattern of our participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I firmly believe the Lord has allowed this pandemic to endure for as long as it has as a penance for our personal sins, that our faith in Jesus might be strengthened. It is part of the salutary suffering that brings us to a greater participation in the grace of redemption, of which St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans:

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:1-5).

It is my prayer that the pandemic has only increased our appreciation for the Eucharist and desire to celebrate it in person with the rest of the Church. Jesus has told us, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:53-54)

It cannot be doubted that the Lord sustains us in his grace whenever we are unable to attend the Eucharist as he has prescribed. By making an act of spiritual communion with Jesus, we receive these

sustaining graces. But these graces are not meant to substitute for participation in Mass whenever we are able to attend in person. Sharing in the Sacrifice of the Mass and receiving our Lord in sacramental Communion is the way Jesus has established for us to bring us into Communion with his Father in heaven.

I will be frank with you as your pastor. I am concerned that some of our parishioners have grown used to not coming to church for Sunday worship. I fear that some of you, post-pandemic, may excuse yourselves lightly from one of the most solemn promises we made to the Lord in our baptism—to attend the Sunday Eucharist.

I am confident that the Lord has implanted in the hearts of the great majority of our parishioners a profound love of the Eucharist, and that now that the pandemic has lifted, you will be returning to regular Sunday worship, perhaps with an even greater love for Jesus and the Eucharist and for your fellow parishioners.

I hope, as we search our hearts, we will discover or rediscover this profound love for the Eucharist which is Jesus' gift to us. I hope we will realize how much we love the Mass and love coming together with our fellow parishioners whom Jesus has called to be his own. I hope we come to realize how much we love the Lord and the Church and how much we need the Lord and the Church. I hope we also come to recognize how much we owe the Lord and his Church, that we are deeply obliged to both of them to give powerful witness to immensity of God's grace that has been poured into our hearts.

We come to Mass because Jesus invites us to come. He does not compel us, because he is keen to preserve our freedom to make choices, without which we cannot come to love him. How beautiful, how salutary, to always say "yes" to Jesus in whatever he asks us to do, he whom St. Paul tells us was always "yes" to our heavenly Father as he labored for our salvation (see 2 Corinthians 1:19).

This weekend at Mass we return to some of the regular practices that were suspended during the pandemic. All three entrances to the church are now open and holy water has been returned to the stoups at every entrance. We still ask you to sanitize your hands as you enter church. You will find hand sanitizer at each entrance.

You are free to sit where you choose in the pews, though we ask that a three-foot distance be kept between persons who do not belong to the same household. Missalettes and hymnals have been returned to the pews for your use. Please leave them in church so that others may use them.

We will resume communal singing of the Entrance Song, the Concluding Song, and the Marian Antiphon at the conclusion of Mass at all vigil and Sunday Masses except the 8am Mass on Sunday. The cantor will once again chant the responsorial psalm at all vigil and Sunday Masses except the 8am Mass on Sunday.

The priest and other ministers will once again process at the beginning of Mass from the front entrance of the church to the sanctuary.

The first and second collections will once again be taken up by the ushers using collection baskets. The first collection is taken up after the gifts have been brought to the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The second collection is taken up after Communion. The priest will once again announce the second collection at the conclusion of the Prayers of the Faithful.

The invitation to exchange a sign of peace will continue to be omitted until all our parishioners are comfortable exchanging a sign of peace.

The ushers will invite the faithful to come up for Communion in two lines to receive the Sacred Host in Holy Communion. For the time being, Communion will be offered under the appearance of bread only. Remember, the Church teaches us that we receive the Lord's Body and Blood, soul, and divinity entirely under the species of bread alone, even as we receive the Lord's Body and Blood, soul, and divinity entirely under the species of wine alone.

The faithful may receive Communion either in the hand or on the tongue. If you receive on the tongue, the priest will sanitize his fingers before giving Communion to the next person in line.

We continue to invite those who will not be receiving Holy Communion for whatever reason to come forward in line to receive a greeting of peace from the priest.

As always, we are appreciative when parishioners come to Mass on time and leave church only after the priest has processed from the sanctuary down the main aisle. This is a matter of proper church etiquette and a courtesy to your fellow parishioners.

We will continue to wear masks in church until we have a better indication that it is entirely safe to remove them.

As I understand it, those who are vaccinated have only a small chance of contracting Covid 19 or spreading it to others. However, it is prudent to continue to wear masks for a bit longer until more people are vaccinated, and we are certain the vaccine is effective against all variants of the virus.

I encourage all parishioners to be vaccinated unless your health provider advises you not to. The Holy Father and all the bishops have made it clear that a Catholic may receive the vaccine with a clear conscience. Even so, some of the faithful may yet be uncertain in their conscience about receiving the vaccine.

In the weeks, months, and even years ahead, I encourage you to bring your experience of the pandemic to the Lord in prayer and, perhaps discuss it with others, that over time the Lord may reveal to its significance to you and others. Nothing happens outside of God's providential plan for our salvation.

Yours in Christ,

Father Walter