



DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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May 14, 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Catholic Church in Eastern Montana,

The steady increase in the numbers of Catholics attending Mass on Sundays, even with the dispensation yet in force, indicates the importance many Catholics place on the Eucharist. They know that Eucharist is at the heart of our faith as Christians. From the earliest days of the Church, the followers of Christ knew the importance of the Eucharist as celebrated on Sunday. It was and remains a remembrance of the Resurrection and a celebration of salvation from sin and death.

In the family in which I grew up, we had regularly family meals. It would have been strange for one of my brothers or sisters not to be at the table with mom and dad for supper. It was just part of being a family. As for special holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving, we gathered as extended family: grandparents, aunts, and uncles and lots of cousins. There may have been occasions in which someone could not join in, but always for a good reason. It would have been hurtful for a member simply to “opt out” for no good reason. Gathering together demonstrated belonging and togetherness.

The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days was not specifically codified in the early centuries of the Church. As membership increased and as the Church received legal status bishops began to urge attendance to those members whose faith was not so fervent. It was not until the Code of Canon Law was enacted in 1917 that the obligation was made law for Catholics. The current Code reiterates that, “...on Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to attend Mass”. The intent of the Law of the Church is not to impose a penalty as such, but to reach out to Catholics who have become half-hearted or negligent to their own spiritual well-being. Spiritually, the means to receive spiritual nourishment best is by coming to the Table of Plenty. It is from the altar that we receive the Lord of life who overcomes sin and death and provides us the means to attain eternal life. The intention for making Mass attendance an obligation (which is really more an opportunity) is for the good of each member. The teaching of the Church informs us that when the obligation is not dispensed, absence without a good reason is a serious sin.

There are excusing causes. This past year with the closing of churches for Mass for a period of time and then with spatial restrictions for buildings made it impossible for many Catholics to attend Mass at their parishes. Many Catholics, even if they wanted to, could not attend Mass. It was at this time that many parishes *began livestreaming* Masses which provided a way for parishioners to “attend” Mass and make a “spiritual” communion. Aside from impossibility, there are other valid reasons why a Catholic might judge they should not be at Mass on Sunday or Holy Days. If a person is at serious risk due to age or an underlying health condition, this



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could be a reason to be absent. If a person is genuinely ill or seriously injured, this could be an excusing cause. If a person has a communicable disease, they should not come to Mass. A person who cares for another individual who is seriously sick and/or injured, may not be able to leave the person they care for. It is possible that some types of employment, e.g., working a weekend shift at a hospital, may preclude a Catholic from coming to Mass on Sunday. In rural areas, attendance at a Mass on Sundays is sometimes even more difficult. These are not exhaustive reasons but are offered to provide a better understanding of what the obligation expects.

Church law reminds us of the seriousness a Catholic must take regarding presence and participation at Mass. The Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of full, conscious, and active participation and the only way to do this fully is by being present in person. To absent oneself without sufficient reason from Sunday Mass or a Holy Day Mass is to commit a grave sin. It is, in a real sense, rejecting the Lord himself who died on a cross for our salvation.

After consulting, my Presbyteral Council, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and my staff at the Chancery, I issue the following update to our directives.

On Saturday, June 5, 2021, with the vigil of the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (formerly Corpus Christi), I am lifting the dispensation of the obligation to attend Sunday and Holy Day Masses in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. From June 5, 2021, the obligation is fully restored.

Parish Guidance Updated, effective June 5, 2021: Local Government directives which are more restrictive are to be followed by parishes within those jurisdictions.

- **The following remain suspended:**
 - **Exchange of the sign of peace by hand**
 - **Communion under the form of the Precious Blood.**
- **All other restrictions in the liturgy and parish life can return to pre-COVID conditions.**

In Christ,



Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings