

Fulfilling Our Sunday Obligation



ALL BAPTIZED PERSONS, who are above the age of seven and have use of reason, are obligated to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days. Children under the age of seven are not obligated to attend Holy Mass, even if they already have use of reason. For example, St. Therese did not attend Holy Mass until she was four years old. Children and adults who are over the age of seven but do not have use of reason (perhaps due to some mental handicap) are not obligated to attend Mass.

For a perfect fulfillment of the Sunday obligation, four things are required:

(i) **Bodily Presence:** Bodily presence is considered sufficient if the person hearing Mass is morally united to the celebrant. Therefore, the following satisfy the Sunday Obligation:

—All who are in the church itself, even if they cannot see the celebrant, provided that by the sound of the bell or by viewing the actions of others can realize to some extent what is being done by the celebrant.

—Those outside of the church close to the door (even if it is shut) or who are in some neighboring building, provided that they have some view of the ceremonies and unite themselves to the celebrant.

(ii) **The Entire Mass:** It is always best to attend the entirety of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to receive its full benefit. If one misses the substantial part of the Mass, that is, most notably from the Offertory through to Communion, he does not fulfill his Sunday obligation. The following are considered slight omissions: Everything from the beginning of Mass until the Epistle, and all that follows from Communion. Although one must necessarily be present from the Offertory through Communion, it best to be present by at least the reading of the Epistle to avoid the danger of not fulfilling the obligation.

(iii) **Devout Assistance:** A devout and not merely physical presence is required to fulfill the Sunday obligation. The following are required:

—A right intention of worshipping God. Thus, one who merely goes to Mass to hear the music or meet someone does not fulfill his obligation.

—Proper attention in worshipping God. Although it is very easy to become distracted, one must at least make some attempt to pay attention insofar as he is able. One who is inside the confessional (that is, actually confessing his sins, not merely waiting in line) for the entirety of the Mass or during a notable part of

the Mass seems to lack proper attention, unless this is truly the only possible time one has during the week to go to confession. Also, please be sure to visit the restroom before Holy Mass begins.

(iv) **A Proper Place:** Traditionally, in order to fulfill the Sunday obligation, one must attend Holy Mass in either a publicly erected church, a public oratory, or a semi-public oratory. This rule, however, has been mitigated by the 1983 Code of Canon Law which states: "A person who assists at a Mass celebrated anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the feast day itself or in the evening of the preceding day satisfies the obligation of participating in the Mass" (c. 1248 §1).

In any case, publicly erected churches must be erected and approved by the local Ordinary. A Public Oratory is a place permanently set aside by the local Ordinary for public worship, and is blessed or consecrated by him. It is required that any of the faithful should be able to enter it during Mass. A semi-Public Oratory is erected by the local Ordinary, but not necessarily for all of the faithful, but for a particular community out of convenience. Here are some examples: Seminary Chapels, Ecclesiastical Colleges, Institutes with simple vows, Colleges, Hospitals and Prisons. Note: a local Ordinary can forbid certain locations as places where the Sunday obligation can be satisfied.

Causes which exclude one from his Sunday obligation of attending Holy Mass basically flow from the following principle: when an obligation becomes too burdensome, it ceases to be an obligation. St. Alphonsus Liguori teaches:

"Any cause which is moderately grave excuses from the precept—namely, any reason which involves notable inconvenience or harm to mind, or body either of one's self or another." Some examples: Being sick, especially if contagious (rule of thumb—too sick to go to work or school, then too sick to go to church). Taking care of a sick child, sibling, parent, etc. Traveling long distances, usually for an hour or more. Not possessing fitting attire (i.e., modest) for attendance at Holy Mass.

Finally, a pastor may dispense from these obligations for a serious cause: "Without prejudice to the right of diocesan bishops mentioned in can. 87, for a just cause and according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop, a pastor can grant in individual cases a dispensation from the obligation of observing a feast day or a day of penance or can grant a commutation of the obligation into other pious works" (c. 1245). 🐾

