

The celebration of the Eucharist: *Do I have to attend Mass on Sunday?*

It might seem unnecessary to address this question, but in light of the current data we have on the percentage of those who believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, I think it's essential to reflect on why the answer to the question is a profound YES, and not just a tepid 'yes' or an occasional 'yes'.

In 1998, Pope St. John Paul II already recognized the erosion of the commitment to the Sunday obligation among Catholics, and so he wrote an inspiring apostolic letter called *Dies Domini*, on keeping the Lord's Day holy. With this brief reflection, I want to share some of the insights from his letter and let the Holy Father reinvigorate our love for Sunday and our desire to recommit ourselves to prayer and worship on that day.

The Holy Father begins by reminding us that at the core of our identity as human beings is the gift of creation, that we are created in the image and likeness of God, something not to be overlooked or discarded. As the highest form of creation, we honor and praise God by following His own example of resting from the work of creation. "On the seventh day, God completed the work he had been doing; he rested on the seventh day." In that spirit, the Holy Father emphasizes that "All human life, and therefore all human time, must become praise of the Creator and thanksgiving to him" (15). And so it is that Sunday moves us to pause from other worldly attractions and set specific time aside to praise God, to recall the gift of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, and our baptism that shapes our identity and gives us our mission. "In effect, Sunday is the day above all other days which summons Christians to remember the salvation which was given to them in baptism and which has made them new in Christ" (25).

And so the Holy Father refers to the parish as a 'Eucharistic community' because "the Eucharist is not only a particularly intense expression of the reality of the Church's life, but also in a sense its 'fountain-head'" (32). Thus when we gather together, we are all being formed and nourished in a way we would not otherwise be formed, we are being formed as a true 'Eucharistic community.'

And finally, the Holy Father offers this exhortation for parishes and for families when he says: “The Sunday assembly is the privileged place of unity: it is the setting for the celebration of the *sacramentum unitatis* which profoundly marks the Church as a people gathered ‘by’ and ‘in’ the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For Christian families, the Sunday assembly is one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their ‘ministry’ as ‘domestic churches’, when parents share with their children at the one Table of the word and of the Bread of Life. We do well to recall in this regard that it is first of all the parents who must teach their children to participate in Sunday Mass; they are assisted in this by catechists, who are to see to it that initiation into the Mass is made a part of the formation imparted to the children entrusted to their care, explaining the important reasons behind the obligatory nature of the precept.” And so when we intentionally dismiss or ignore this blessed invitation to participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist on Sunday, we are rejecting the blessing of God and placing ourselves in mortal sin, a sin which alienates us (by our own decision) from the transformative love and mercy of God.

The Holy Father concludes by saying: “It is with this strong conviction of faith, and with awareness of the heritage of human values which the observance of Sunday entails, that Christians today must face the enticements of a culture which has accepted the benefits of rest and free time, but which often uses them frivolously and is at times attracted by morally questionable forms of entertainment. Certainly, Christians are no different from other people in enjoying the weekly day of rest; but at the same time they are keenly aware of the uniqueness and originality of Sunday, the day on which they are called to celebrate their salvation and the salvation of all humanity. Sunday is the day of joy and the day of rest precisely because it is “the Lord's Day”, the day of the Risen Lord” (82)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Why would God give a day of rest on the seventh day to man as a part of the design for creation?

How do I typically spend a Sunday, and how do my activities reflect the Lord's day of rest?

What commitments can I make to better spend a Sunday as a day of joy and a day for rest in the Lord?

Resources

For additional reading, please see Ecclesia de Eucharistia (the Church from the Eucharist) an encyclical letter written by Pope St. John Paul II in 2003 on the gift of the Eucharist, that the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. He writes:

The Church is called during her earthly pilgrimage to maintain and promote communion with the Triune God and communion among the faithful. For this purpose she possesses the word and the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, by which she “constantly lives and grows” and in which she expresses her very nature. It is not by chance that the term communion has become one of the names given to this sublime sacrament.

The Eucharist's particular effectiveness in promoting communion is one of the reasons for the importance of Sunday Mass. I have already dwelt on this and on the other reasons which make Sunday Mass fundamental for the life of the Church and of individual believers in my Apostolic Letter on the sanctification of Sunday Dies Domini. There I recalled that the faithful have the obligation to attend Mass, unless they are seriously impeded, and that Pastors have the corresponding duty to see that it is practical and possible for all to fulfill this precept. More recently, in my Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte, in setting forth the pastoral path which the Church must take at the beginning of the third millennium, I drew particular attention to the Sunday Eucharist, emphasizing its effectiveness for building communion. “It is” – I wrote – “the privileged place where communion is ceaselessly proclaimed and nurtured. Precisely through sharing in the Eucharist, the Lord's Day also becomes the Day of the Church, when she can effectively exercise her role as the sacrament of unity”.