



August 25, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For more than 25 years of my priestly life, I taught moral theology, both in high school and college, and for over 17 of those years at the graduate level of the major seminary. Inevitably, a question would be posed by one of the students: "Father, is it really a serious sin to miss Sunday Mass?" I would answer directly and firmly "yes." Then, I would qualify that certain circumstances exempt a person from the obligation. Some look upon the obligation as fulfilling a law that the Church imposes. Laws are given to us to assist us and protect us in our journey through life. But, we must always look deeper, seeing the person and the relationship, which directs and defines the law. I would always attempt to have the students understand that our obligation comes from a deep relationship we have with God and the acknowledgment that His Son, who is our Savior and Redeemer, was raised on this particular day of the week. The importance of celebrating this day was something even the earliest of Christians could not live without.

What made sense for many of my students was the example of how we, as family members, are expected to attend certain family gatherings or functions, which demonstrate our belonging and the value that we have as family members. It is a means of acknowledging our identity and growing in our experience as a family. For instance, in my home, as an extended family member, you were always expected to attend Christmas Eve dinner at my grandfather's home and only a serious situation would justify your absence. Our family history and relationships were built upon this gathering and others that were deemed essential. The same holds true for Sunday Mass.

Our obligation to attend Sunday worship reflects the very character of who we are as Catholics. When we fail in our responsibility before God, we sin. Therefore, we need to form our consciences so that we can be fully informed in making decisions about our actions. The Church in Her wisdom offers us guidelines to help in our formation.

Knowing how serious the obligation is to attend Sunday Mass, you must understand the thoughtful and prayerful discernment that caused me to dispense from the obligation to attend Sunday worship for the last six months. As responsible parish communities, we needed to assess the transmission of the COVID-19 virus, permit our parishes the time to establish plans for sanitizing worship spaces, secure needed resources, evaluate the appropriate numbers for social distancing and solicit the voluntary personnel necessary to accomplish the tasks of preparing our worship spaces. The dispensation was made for the safety of all and to alleviate the burden of those conflicted by the obligation to attend Mass due to the coronavirus threat.

Many have been fortunate to continue their prayer at home because of technology, viewing the Mass on Heart of the Nation, public broadcasts or live-streaming. But televised or computer viewing does not fulfill the Sunday obligation. Instead, it is there to help those prohibited from attending public celebrations to have a sense of connectedness and it wonderfully fulfilled that task.

Assisted by many volunteers, our parishes have worked very hard to provide for sanitized environments, observing social distancing, the wearing of masks and the use of hand sanitizers. Because of these efforts since the end of May, we have already experienced a return to Sunday worship.

On September 14, 2020, the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and Holy Days of Obligation will expire, and it will be the responsibility of those who are capable and not prohibited by other circumstances to attend Sunday Mass. Those who deliberately fail to attend Sunday Mass commit a grave sin.

There are circumstances where the obligation cannot be fulfilled. One example is the impossibility to attend Mass. When our Churches were closed and offered no public Masses, it was impossible for people to attend, and so there was no sin for missing Mass. If a person is ill, especially during this pandemic, they should remain at home. Likewise, if a person is at risk because of age, underlying medical conditions or a compromised immune system, one would be excused from the obligation. If a person is caring for a sick person, even if they are not sick, they would be excused from the obligation out of charity. Fear of getting sick, in and of itself, does not excuse someone from the obligation. However, if the fear is generated because of at-risk factors, such as pre-existing conditions, age or compromised immune systems, then the fear would be sufficient to excuse from the obligation.

It is up to each individual to weigh their own circumstances through an examination of their conscience and determine, by use of their conscience, whether or not they are excused from the Sunday obligation. Remember, a well-formed conscience is upright and truthful.

Our Sunday worship is a joyful obligation. It is a witness to God as the priority in our lives. We place our trust in Him and His Church. We, together, recognize Him in the breaking of the bread as He offers himself to us in Communion so that, in His name, we might LOVE ONE ANOTHER.
Sincerely,

Most Reverend Jerome E. ListECKI
Archbishop of Milwaukee