

What Happened to Mass on Sunday?

By Fr. Joseph Sergott, OP

Ever since Covid, there has been a precipitous decline in Sunday Mass attendance. Even many life-long faithful Catholics have stopped coming to Mass on Sunday. The main theory for this occurrence is a combination of people being in the habit of not attending Mass because of having been quarantined to their homes for the duration of Covid, and the preoccupations of society and social media that have distracted them or disinterested them from attending Mass on Sunday.

No matter the reasons for not attending Mass, the Mass and the other sacraments are essential in the life of the Church. If we choose to excuse ourselves from attending Mass, *we are giving up the main vehicle of grace that God has established for us in this life*. Catholics who are exempt from Mass attendance are those, who through no fault of their own, cannot attend Mass because of infirmity or being homebound.

In my many years of priesthood, I've often heard the statement, or something similar, "God and I have an understanding that I don't have to attend Mass." Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Day of the Lord

Shortly after Jesus rose from the dead, the Christian community began to gather on Sunday, first in their homes, and then in established churches. They have been doing so ever since. We read accounts in the Acts of Apostles such as, "On the first day of the week when we gathered for the breaking of the bread" (Acts 20:7)

Sunday became the Day of the Lord when the Christian community celebrates the Liturgy of the Eucharist in order to commemorate the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Again, we hear, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

The Gospel of Luke gives us one of the great testimonies of Jesus' resurrection. He chose to reveal himself on the first day of the week (Cf. Lk 24:1,13), the day of his resurrection, *during* the "the breaking of the bread". "And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight." (Lk 24:30-31) It is not coincidental that the words from this text and others in Sacred Scripture are used in the consecration prayers at Mass.

The Holy Eucharist

Mass on Sunday is the most significant event/prayer in the life of the Church. It is the principle act of Christian worship. The Holy Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life."¹ "At the Last Supper, Christ instituted the Paschal Sacrifice and

banquet, by which the Sacrifice of the Cross is continuously made present in the Church whenever the priest, representing Christ the Lord, carries out what the Lord himself did and handed over to his disciples to be done in his memory.”²³ The other sacraments, and indeed ALL ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it.⁴ As the Body of Christ, Jesus is poured into the faithful who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to him.⁵

The Structure of the Mass

The Mass consists of two key parts, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These are so closely interconnected that they form one single act of worship.⁶

In the Liturgy of the Word, the people of God are fed from the table of his Word.⁷ When the Sacred Scriptures are read during Mass, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his word, proclaims the Gospel.⁸ In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the people of God are fed with the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Communal Aspect

The important communal aspect of the Mass cannot be denied. *Lumen Gentium*, one of the critical documents to come forth from the Second Vatican Council, echoes the reality of how the Holy Eucharist both expresses and brings forth the unity of the Christian community: “As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which Christ our Passover was sacrificed, is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on, and, in the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread, *the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ is both expressed and brought about.*”⁹

Thus, in partaking in the Body and Blood of the Lord during Mass, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another.¹⁰ “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (1 Cor 10:17)

We are Fed: the Past, Present & Future

The deeper theology of the Mass is often misunderstood, especially by many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, and by baptized Catholics who no longer attend Mass. Jesus Christ is a divine being with a human nature. In his human nature, he is like us in every way but sin. The sacrifice of his life on the Cross was offered *once* (Cf. Heb 10:12) for our redemption. Because he is man, it *was* an actual event documented in human annals; however, because he is God, and is outside of time and thus omnipresent, the Last Supper, his Passion and Death, and his Resurrection are events memorialized, that is, *are* made present to us—not repeated—by the power of the Holy Spirit each time we celebrate Mass. Thus, in our celebration of the Mass, we unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God “will be all in all”.¹¹

Upon being commissioned by Pope Urban IV, St. Thomas Aquinas composed the texts for the Mass and the Divine Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi, which was first celebrated in 1264, and has been celebrated in the Church ever since. The antiphon to the Magnificat in the Divine Office of that feast has been championed for its great revelation about the Holy Eucharist. Known as the *O Sacrum Convivium*, it reveals the gift of the Holy Eucharist and its supernatural effect upon us: “O Sacred Banquet, in which Christ becomes our food. The memory of his passion is celebrated. The soul is filled with grace and the pledge of future glory is given to us.”

In evoking the *past*, “the memory of his passion is celebrated”, the *present*, “the soul IS filled with grace”, and the *future*, “the pledge of future glory is given to us”, the prayer encapsulates how the Holy Eucharist is timeless, that is, it is meant for every age of the Church, as God’s gift for our sustenance on our journey to eternal life.

The Flesh & Blood of Jesus Christ

Catholics believe that the Body and Blood of Christ that we receive at Mass is his *real* flesh and blood, not just a symbol. It’s hard to read John Chapter 6 and think otherwise. Many nonbelievers somehow skip over John 6 in their explanation of how it cannot be the real body and blood of Jesus.

In teaching us about how he will give us his Body and Blood to eat and drink, Jesus reveals a connection to himself with how God fed the Hebrew people with manna, i.e., “bread from heaven” (Jn 6:31; Ex 16:4; Ps 78:24). He works miracles in the multiplication of the loaves, documented in all four Gospels, saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51), while saying further, “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (Jn 6:55-56) As we hear in John’s Gospel, this was too difficult for many to accept and they walked away from Jesus in disbelief. (Cf. Jn 6:60-66)

I believe that receiving the Holy Eucharist (in the “state of grace”) *is the most intimate connection that human beings can have with God in this life*. We call it the Real Presence because it speaks of how God is truly present to us and how he remains with us. It recalls how God made himself vulnerable (in Jesus’ human nature) for our sake, how much he loves us, and how far he would go to save us. If you ever doubt God’s love and care for you, ponder the events of Jesus’ Last Supper, his Passion and Death, and his Resurrection, and how they were accomplished for *you*. This is his great accomplishment of our redemption!

The Sending Forth & the Apostolate

As Mass concludes, having been nourished by the Living Word and the Body and Blood of Christ, the faithful are sent forth so that each may go out into the world to praise God and to spread their faith in Jesus Christ by their words and especially by their

actions.¹² Thus, as mentioned earlier, as all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate in the life of the Church flow from the Mass, so does all the work of St. Thomas More campus ministry and parish, through outreach to students, faculty and staff at the University of Oregon, “Newman nights”, student outings, retreats and dinners, faith-sharing groups (whether online or in person), bible studies, actions of social justice, community-building events, and other various ministries in the life of faith of this community.

The Church Visible

It is said that the Church is its people, not its bricks. On the one hand, that’s why as “living stones” we are to let ourselves “be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5); however, on the other hand, it is also part of our belief that visible churches are not simply gathering places but *signify and make visible the Church living in a particular place*, the dwelling of God where his people gather, and are reconciled, and united in Christ.¹³ The local Church is a “snapshot” of the Universal Church and it needs a place for the faithful to gather. In the early Church, it was absolutely fundamental that Christians had a place to gather as the Body of Christ. It became even more critical when the persecution of the Church began.

The Mass is Irreplaceable

During the Covid pandemic the Church throughout the world experienced an extremely rare circumstance where the Christian community could not gather in an enclosed space; thus, many churches were closed for the first time in their history and Mass was not able to be celebrated. This was a new experience for the young and old alike. This had not occurred on such a wide scale since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918.

However, due to modern technology the Mass was able to be celebrated via the internet. Though only a few were able to receive Holy Communion, this was the next best thing given the spread of the pandemic and the state of the world. Thus, the “Zoom Mass” became a vital connection for the faithful. In this case, social media played a huge role in connecting the faithful.

Following Covid people began to gather again in churches and life returned to relative normalcy; however, many did not return to Mass. Some had become complacent, no longer attending Mass, while others met in online faith-sharing groups or through social media instead.

However, Pope Francis sees the necessity of gathering in churches to celebrate the Mass together and he has emphatically insisted that there is no substitute for the people of God gathering in church for Mass on Sunday.

Regarding online Masses, Pope Francis says, “This is the Church in a difficult situation that the Lord is allowing, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and

with the sacraments—always”.¹⁴ He says that one’s relationship with Jesus “is intimate, it is personal, but it is in a community,” and this closeness to Christ without community, without the Eucharist, without the people of God assembled together and “without the sacraments is dangerous” because people could start living their relationship with God “for just myself, detached from the people of God”.¹⁵ As the Gospels show, Jesus’ disciples always lived their relationship with the Lord as a community—they gathered “at the table, a sign of community. It was always with the sacrament, with bread”.¹⁶

So, today the “Zoom Mass” is no longer allowed to be celebrated in most dioceses *as a substitute for Mass in person* because the faithful cannot receive the Holy Eucharist, nor can they gather as the visible Body of Christ. Online faith-sharing groups can be life-giving, but they cannot replace the Mass! For those who value faith-sharing groups on the internet, my recommendation is to let your faith-sharing flow from your experience of joining your parish community in person at Mass on Sunday morning, listening to the Sacred Scriptures and receiving Holy Communion, and then gathering online later on Sunday afternoon. The two are not mutually opposed—one is meant to literally *feed* the other.

There is an exception for those who cannot attend Mass because of infirmity or from being homebound. For them, the “TV Mass” or online Mass is still a viable option, but even for them, they should be connected to their local parish, where the Holy Eucharist can be brought to them, or other sacraments celebrated with them, including the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick.

For the Disenfranchised

There are some who no longer attend Mass because of an injury that they have suffered from a priest or a lay member of their parish. Anyone who hurts the faithful while representing God has to answer to God in this life or in the next. But, no matter how painful that experience may have been, don’t give up your path to grace! The Church is bigger than any one person because Jesus Christ dwells in the Church and acts as its Head.

Similarly, many who struggle with Church teaching, see no place where they fit in, or—*from their perception*—where they are welcome. Consequently, they withdraw and often take a different path away from God. The Church is for sinners, the learned and the ignorant, the addicted, the rich and the poor and everyone in between, the wounded and infirm, the homebound, the suffering, the lost and lonely, the “lepers” of our world, and those who are still searching for God, or who don’t understand all the ways of God. This is where we go to find Jesus Christ, and take refuge in Him—among his people—and where we discover the wonders of his love for us.

For those who *freely choose* to stay away from Mass on Sunday, whether they realize it or not, are giving up the many blessings and graces that are given to them by God through the Sacred Liturgy, especially the Food that they need as sustenance for their journey to heaven, the Body and Blood of Jesus. Conversely, those who attend Mass,

come as hungry pilgrims, sinners, broken in one way or another, persevering in trials and the hardships of life, who gather as the Church, seeking every good gift that God wants to bestow upon them. It is no wonder then that many Catholics come to Daily Mass as well.

Like in the early Christian community, there is still no substitute for when the Church gathers on Sunday to celebrate the memorial of the Last Supper, the Lord's Passion and Death, and his Resurrection in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. From this sacred gathering, the Christian faithful are united as one People in Jesus Christ as we are fed with his Body and Blood as sustenance for the week and our very lives. Don't relinquish God's greatest gift to you. ■

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Council, 21 November, 1964, #11

² *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, March 17, 2003, #72.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011, #1323

⁴ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree On the Ministry and Life of Priests, Second Vatican Council, December 7, 1965, #5.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Council, 21 November, 1964, #7

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Second Vatican Council, Dec 4, 1963, #56.

⁷ *Ibid.* #51.

⁸ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, March 17, 2003, #29.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Council, 21 November, 1964, #3

¹⁰ *Ibid.* #7

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011, #1326.

¹² *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, March 17, 2003, #90.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011, #1180.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, "Pope warns of danger in online Masses", *The Catholic Weekly*, Sydney, Australia, April 20 2020.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*