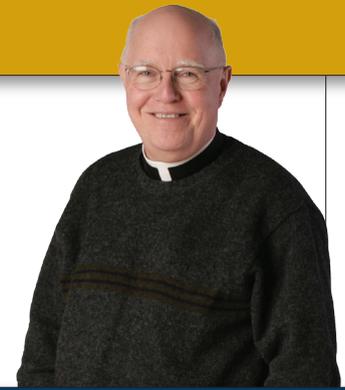


Dear Fr. Kerper

Is Sunday Mass mandatory?



If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail editor@parablemag.com.

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** My question is about mandatory Sunday Mass. I really enjoy attending Sunday Mass, and my husband and I never miss, even when we travel. Participating in Sunday Mass in other countries and even other states is always joyful and interesting. But I'm a little confused. Priests have told me that Catholics are obliged to attend Mass every Sunday. However, I have also heard that the obligation is just for the Christmas and Easter seasons. So, which is it?

To give a helpful answer, I need to change the word *obligation*, which you use, to *responsibility*.

True enough, church law says that "Sunday is to be observed as the foremost holy day of obligation." (cf. Canon 1246.1) This fact alone, however, reinforces two bad notions: first, that worship is so unappealing people must be compelled to do it by mandate; and second, that Catholics will be "safe" if they stick to the minimum form of observance.

Focusing on *obligation* always diverts discussions about common worship into sterile, hair-splitting arguments. For example, Catholics often ask: "If I go to a 3 p.m. wedding on Saturday, does it 'count' for Sunday?"

By switching the focus to *responsibility*, we get to the right sort of question: How do I *respond* to God's love?

Obligation has little or nothing to do with love. Rather, it usually pertains to impersonal relationships with a superior authority. If we do not fulfill our obligation to pay our taxes, for instance, we will suffer some penalty, such as a fine, or even jail time. If I fulfill my obligation to my employer, I will receive compensation. If I do not, I will probably lose my job.

Sunday Mass is primarily an act of *responsibility* because it arises within a personal relationship between God and human persons. By partaking of the Eucharist, I lovingly *respond* to the Lord, who bestows life and all good things. How can one find a *minimal*

response to such massive love?

Perhaps thinking about family relationships will help you to see my point. Imagine a husband asking something as silly as this: How often must I kiss my wife during the month? Every day? Once a week? Does a kiss given on Saturday afternoon take care of Sunday morning? Or think of an adult child weighing this problem: How often do I need to eat dinner with my mother? Does eating with her on Christmas Day cover for her birthday, which falls on December 27?

We cannot legislate minimum requirements for loving personal relationships. That's why the New Testament says nothing directly about "mandatory" weekly Mass attendance. This conspicuous absence of a specific law in Scripture does not mean Mass is optional or of no real importance. Not at all. Rather, it powerfully demonstrates that the Lord proposes worship, specifically the Eucharist, as an invitation offered lovingly, rather than as a cold, legal mandate. Each person must freely choose to accept or reject the Lord's invitation because of love.

Our free decisions about Sunday worship have far-reaching consequences. If we regularly accept the Lord's invitation to his Supper in company with other believers, our personal relationship with Christ and others will deepen and grow stronger, filling us with genuine happiness and hope. If we rarely or never accept His invitation, our relationship with the Lord – and other people – will gradually become frigid, filled with anxiety, and eventually disappear. The "rewards" and "punishments" for our choices begin in the present, not just after death.

By switching our focus to *responsibility* for worship, our questions necessarily change: How often do I lovingly respond to the Lord's self-gift in and through the Eucharist? What free choices have I made that prevent me from responding lovingly to the Lord through worship? To what extent am I willing to adjust my work schedule, vacation plans, and personal preferences so that I can partake of the Eucharist every Sunday?

We need to probe the quality of our *personal response* to the Divine, instead of seeking possible "dispensations" and "acceptable excuses" for skipping Mass. Our principal concern should be *personal relationship*, not mere legal observance.

As to your question about Mass attendance during the Christmas and Easter seasons, I suspect that someone has passed on to you a confused understanding of the so-called Easter Duty. Some history will help to clarify.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council held in Rome enacted a law requiring Catholics to receive Holy Communion at least once during the Easter Season. In the 16th century, the Council of Trent reaffirmed this law. More recently, the 1917 Code of Canon Law, and its 1983 revision, codified this legal requirement.

This law, of course, never meant that Catholics fulfill their obligation to worship by attending Mass *once a year*. Rather, the Lateran Council tried to correct the dangerous medieval practice of attending Mass weekly without *ever* receiving Holy Communion. By instituting the Easter Duty, the church definitively taught that receiving Holy Communion at least once a year is not only permitted, but actually *required*. The law, then, was never about minimal Mass attendance. Rather, it reinforced Christ's teaching that partaking of his body and blood is the proper and ordinary response to his self-gift.

Church law does indeed specify Sunday Mass attendance as a legal obligation. But this should be a starting point, something like training wheels on a bicycle. When one learns to ride a two-wheeler with proper balance and skill, the training wheels look rather silly. Likewise, when someone finally appreciates the Eucharist as a wondrous occasion for responding to the Lord, nagging concerns about law and obligation fade away under the warm gaze of Divine Love.