



What is my Sunday obligation?

Dear Father Kerper: I have three questions about the requirement of attending Mass on Sunday. First, someone told me that people over 75 are dispensed from attending Mass. Is this true? Second, can people fulfill their obligation by watching Mass on television? Third, years ago I learned that being present in church from the Gospel through Communion was enough to keep the law. Now I hear that this has changed. I'm confused!

To answer your questions we must explore two matters: first, the precise meaning of a legal obligation proposed by the Church; and second, the nature of our participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, commonly called Mass.

God's law, as clearly expressed in Sacred Scripture, mandates many specific acts, notably "keeping holy the Lord's day." (Exodus 20: 8ff) For many centuries the Catholic Church has defined participation at Mass as the required way of keeping this divine law.

While this obligation is extremely important, it is not absolute. To put it another way, in some situations the legal obligation to attend Mass ceases. Two sets of "dispensing situations" exist. The first pertains to the capacity of a person to participate safely and with due regard to other serious obligations, especially the demands of Christian love. If someone is seriously sick with a contagious disease, unable to get into a church without falling, caring for a sick child, or helping someone through a serious personal crisis, the obligation to attend Mass disappears.

The second set has to do with the Church's own inability to provide the means for fulfilling the obligation. If the Church cannot organize the celebration of Mass in a

particular place, say, in a national park far removed from a town with a Catholic church or in the midst of a blizzard, the obligation does not apply. This, by the way, is why many dioceses have moved some holy days, such as the Ascension, to the nearest Sunday. To put it simply, the Church never obliges us to do the impossible.

As to people over 75 supposedly being dispensed from Sunday Mass, this is not true. If people – whether 15 or 105 – are truly unable to attend Mass because of the reasons cited earlier, they have no obligation. Moreover, given the wide range of health and mobility conditions among people, why specify 75 – or any other age – as the cutoff point?

Now let's move on to your question about fulfilling the Sunday obligation by watching Mass on television. The answer is definitely no – for two reasons.

First, if someone can't reasonably get to Mass, then there's simply no obligation to fulfill. However, if they can get to Mass, there are no "substitutes," including Mass on television.

While the Church heartily recommends that people prevented from going to Mass pray on Sunday and perhaps

read Sacred Scripture, especially the texts for the day, there is no strict obligation to do these things. Nor is it ever legally required to attend a “Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest,” a so-called “Communion Service.”

Second, the Mass, by its very nature, is a profoundly personal and living experience. When Catholics enter a church for Mass they have immediate personal contact with other believers and the priest-celebrant, even if they don't know any of them. Most important of all, a person's participation at Mass culminates with the personal reception of Holy Communion, an act that can never occur through even the most sophisticated technology.

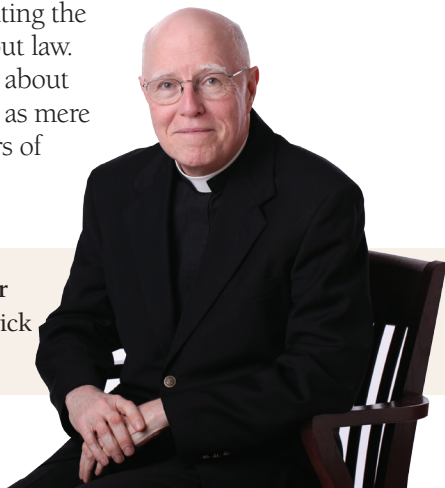
Televised Masses, then, are always artificial in that the viewer sees an “event” that passes through lenses, cameras, recording devices, cables, satellite dishes, and screens. Even if people watch Mass in “real time,” they never “attend” a real event but see only a “copy” of activity that happened minutes – or even days – earlier! For sure, many people benefit spiritually from watching Mass on television, but we should never be too eager to accept the “copy” instead of the “original” for the sake of mere convenience.

Finally, you asked about the old “definition” of Mass as consisting of the time from the Gospel to Communion. This widespread rumor arose because many old moral theology manuals identified some parts of the Mass as absolutely essential and others as less important, yet required. Some people, sad to say, took this to mean that they could fulfill the legal obligation by attending only the “essential” parts. This was never the case.

Father Henry Davis, S.J., who wrote the classic four-volume manual *Moral and Pastoral Theology* in 1943, provided a detailed calibration of every piece of the Mass, but prefaced his “rankings” by stating: “Bodily presence must be continuous during the Mass from the beginning to the last Gospel exclusively. The faithful are obliged to hear the whole Mass, without even the smallest omission.” (Note: The “last gospel” refers to John 1:1-14. In the so-called Latin Mass, the priest used to read this text after the final blessing.)

If we truly believe that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ, always accompanied by the proclamation of God's Word, we would never quibble about its length or regard it as a bothersome “obligation.” Instead, we would joyfully and gratefully receive the Lord's gift of Himself without counting the minutes and fretting about law. In the end, our attitudes about these matters identify us as mere “time servers” or as lovers of the Lord. ■

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