



Summer Pastoral Letter

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A move from one location or building to another often entails some sorting through mementos and 'keepsakes'. Recently I came across my 'Baby Book' in which my mother noted that, as of two and a half years of age, I went to Mass with my dad. My own memories do not go back that far however I do recall the efforts my parents always made to attend Mass with their children. For me the determination and quiet devotion of my parents toward Mass tilled and nourished the ground in which the seeds of a priestly vocation would eventually germinate into a life of service to Jesus' Kingdom, as it begins here in our world.

We are now at the height of the summer vacation season, when many parishioners are away for a while but when they are also replaced in their 'home pews' by visitors from far and wide. Indeed, the many lakes in our diocesan territory attract plenty of summer vacationers. The Church, as mother, encourages leisure and in her instructions about obligatory Mass attendance, she actually calls us to shun work that prevents us from worshipping God but that also hinders our relaxation of mind and body. And, all of us who are able to take a vacation should thank God for the opportunity of refreshment and renewal, and pray for those who are not so blessed.

Vacationers to our area do not have too far to go in order to find Catholic churches in which to fulfill their Sunday obligation. But any of us traveling out of country might need to organize more carefully to ensure that we are able to fulfill ours. However, today the wonder of online communication means that it is really quite easy to locate the local Catholic church near our vacation spot. Just google 'Tucson' or even 'Tokyo' and 'Mass times' together and lots of options are sure to appear on your screen.

The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays is a precept that is rooted in the Third Commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. Catholics are called to obey this precept "on pain of mortal sin" which means that if we miss Mass without grave cause we should not receive Holy Communion again until we have been given absolution in the sacrament of Confession. But current discipline also lets Catholics fulfill their Sunday obligation by attending any Catholic Mass (liturgically it might be a wedding Mass) on a Saturday evening. Grave causes which exempt us from obligation include illness, childcare, looking after the sick and necessary travel. And of course, if we are in the depths of a wilderness far from a Catholic church and with no means of reaching one, then no obligation applies.

Different authorities probably can give varying interpretations of what constitutes 'necessary travel' on a Sunday. But rather than considering whether our travel plans 'let us off the hook' for Sunday Mass attendance, we are better to reflect on what the Mass really means to us and on how important this priceless treasure of our Catholic religion is to our lives. From the earliest days of Christianity, when the Apostles gathered together to 'break bread, the death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus, present anew at every celebration of Mass, has been the heart and soul of our Sunday worship, on the "day of the Lord". It is here at our 'weekly Easter' and our new Sabbath, that the whole family of Christ's brothers and sisters gathers to give thanks and praise for Our Lord Jesus who comes to our altars to continue his sacrifice for our sins and to nourish us with his Risen Body.

In the past during anti-Christian persecution, our Catholic ancestors risked everything to be able to attend Mass. They would sacrifice their safety, their livelihoods and sometimes life itself, for the privilege and the joy of attending Mass.

The truth is that, in this life, our love for Jesus and our love for his Mass, go together. It is in the Mass that his self-sacrificing love is made present to us just as truly as it was to his Blessed Mother and St John, two thousand years ago, as they wept at the foot of the Cross. It is at holy Communion that we encounter and receive our Lord in a union that is deeper than any union we can experience with any other person we cherish and love.

Reflecting on the importance of the Mass in our lives, an analogy or comparison can be helpful. Take a newlywed couple, for example, whose work or living arrangements mean that they are only able to be together on the weekends. And after a while, even their weekends together get increasingly interrupted by sports events or social engagements which separate them so that their times together become fewer and fewer. When this happens, it is a sure sign that something is seriously wrong with the marriage and that it needs to be addressed urgently.

Likewise, if we find that our attendance at Mass is becoming just an occasional option or an 'add-on' when convenient, then it is a sign that something needs to be addressed in our relationship with God.

I know that in writing this, I am speaking mainly to the "converted"; to all of you who are at Mass regularly and who faithfully attend. However, summer vacation is a social time with friends and family when on a deck or beside a camp fire, questions about our faith and religious practice can easily occur. Our first Pope, St Peter, wrote that we should always be ready to "give a reason for our hope"; that means that we should be ready to show why we are followers of Christ and why it includes 'going to Mass'.

In 1998 Pope St John Paul II wrote:

“Sunday is a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life. From the beginning of my Pontificate, I have not ceased to repeat: “Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors to Christ!”. In the same way, today I would strongly urge everyone to rediscover Sunday: Do not be afraid to give your time to Christ! Yes, let us open our time to Christ, that he may shine his light upon it and give it direction. He is the One who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us “his day” as an ever-new gift of his love.”

Today the Holy Spirit still speaks to us through the words of these Popes.

Let us again listen; let us again rediscover Christ’s gift of himself at Sunday Mass.

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Feast of St Jean Marie Vianney