

The Holy Mass – Assisting at Mass vs. Going to Church – Part 3 of 4

Last Sunday, August 15, 2021, the Solemnity of the Assumption, the obligation to assist (be present) at Mass in-person is reinstated for Catholic Christians living in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. This means that we are to be present for Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Our absence carries with it the pain of grave sin. Exceptions to this obligation ordinarily consist of those obstacles posed by grave physical (illness) or moral (excess fear, anxiety etc.) factors that would make assisting at Mass difficult if not impossible.

Over the past few weeks we considered from where the obligation to attend Holy Mass each Sunday comes. We learned that our remembrance of the Passion, Death and Resurrection is not only an external one but one that literally changes us from within. As such, the Church requires her sons and daughters to faithfully be present for this memorial each Sunday, the definitive Lord's Day. Sometimes our participation at Mass can feel out of sync with how important we are told it is. At the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers recognized this very problem (it is ages old). As a result, they sought to encourage people to *actively participate* in the sacrifice of the Mass. What does this mean?

Active Participation does not so much mean “doing” something particular as it does being fully conscious and present to what Jesus is doing on behalf of his people. In Spanish, the verb used to describe “going to Mass” (our English expression) is *asistir* (to assist or to attend). In English, the term was and is still used by some describe their attending Holy Mass. The idea of “assisting” at Mass gives the impression that someone needs to be doing something in order to be at Mass. However, the expression involves a great deal more than simply executing a function.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council made it a point to illustrate the way the lay faithful participate in the life of the Church. Their words I believe help us understand how all of us who assist at Mass are called to do so. They teach:

“...the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne - all these become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹

¹ Lumen Gentium 34

Some of the immediate things we do to prepare for Mass can assist us in consciously making an offering of the whole of our lives to God through Jesus Christ. Taking time to read the Word of God which will be proclaimed in advance is an important part of our preparation. Fasting for one hour from food and drink (except water/medicine) remind us physically of the absolutely unique guest we prepare to welcome into our hearts. Taking care to dress and groom ourselves well for Mass reminds us of the fact we kneel in the presence of the King of kings who deigns to call you and me his brothers and sisters.