

The Cross is steady while the world is turning

In these weeks there have been so many changes, things we never imagined. History, indeed, has always had upheavals, even quite a few pandemics. It reminds us that ‘we have here no lasting city’ (*Heb* 13:14) and ‘the form of this world is passing away’ (*1 Cor* 7:31). We fix our eyes on what never changes – ultimately, Jesus Christ, ‘the same yesterday, today and forever’ (*Heb* 13:8). And there is a famous phrase, the motto of the Carthusians: *Stat Crux Dum Volvitur Orbis* – ‘The Cross is steady while the world is turning’. Through the storms of this world we keep hold of this one firm anchor, that keeps us steady in this life and safe for the next.

Amidst the crisis, and the different sufferings it has brought for many, Catholics have strived to continue their practice of faith – by special prayers, reflection on the Sunday readings, and praying along with livestreamed and televised Masses. Yet there remains the pain of being unable to physically attend Mass, or even pray before the Blessed Sacrament.

It helps us empathise with those for whom, through illness, that is always the situation. But we also recall how, when we do our best in these circumstances that God himself has willed to permit, to a great extent he takes our desire or intention as equivalent to the reality. We’d be aware, for example, of Spiritual Communion: when it’s impossible for us to receive Communion, we can devoutly express to God our *desire* of receiving, if it were possible; and that brings so many of the graces we would have had from actually receiving.

It also applies to the forgiveness of mortal sin. When someone has perfect contrition (i.e. sorrow for sin arising from supernatural charity by which God is loved above all things), and with that, is firmly resolved to confess sacramentally as soon as possible, this contrition, combined with the desire of sacramental Reconciliation, brings forgiveness and grace even before the actual confession. By contrast, imperfect contrition, motivated merely by fear of hell or the ugliness of sin, opens us to forgiveness only in the actual reception of the Sacrament. This is why the Sacrament itself can be absolutely necessary for salvation, for which reason priests must always ensure its accessibility for all. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 1452-53) (Somewhat similar things can be said about adult Baptism.)

What about participation in the Mass? Doubtless, some benefits come only by our actual presence. But when, as now, we can’t attend physically, yet have the *desire* to attend were it possible; when we unite ourselves to the Masses that *are* being offered, taking part online or on TV – then God will surely give us so many of the graces we would have received by being physically present. United with the priest, the faithful attending a Mass ‘offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it’ (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 11); but those unable to be there physically can still make that offering spiritually.

Concerning the *obligation* of Sunday Mass (which as we’re aware, we’re currently released from, except priests), the *Catechism* gives the basic principles: ‘The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.’ (n. 2181; cf. St John Paul II, *Dies Domini* (‘On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy’) 47; cf. also *Catechism* nn. 1857, 1861, on the danger here to eternal salvation.)

The *divine* law to keep the Lord's Day holy always obliges (and so we must still find ways to sanctify our Sunday); but the specific application that we do this *by attending Mass* is a *Church* law. The obligation of attending ceases: (1) when it is simply impossible; (2) by dispensation by Church authority; or (3) from a grave excusing reason. All three currently apply: (1) there is no Mass to attend, no matter how we tried; (2) the Bishops here have dispensed us; and (3) even if Masses were available and no dispensation had been given, the health risks of these times (to ourselves or others) could constitute a serious excusing reason (depending on the situation). For some laws indeed, God expects us to risk or even lose our lives, but attending Sunday Mass is not one of these; and so even notable ordinary illness excuses.

(Broadcast Mass, while very commendable, never fulfils the Sunday obligation. Rather, the obligation to attend is simply non-existent if we *can't* reasonably get there; and not fulfilled by online Mass if we *can* get there. By the same token, online Mass never binds under pain of sin, whether or not physical attendance is possible.)

The present crisis gives Catholics a choice: to advance or fall back. Some will use the opportunity to appreciate the Eucharist more deeply, and to develop their own initiative in the spiritual life. But others might become accustomed to not keeping the Lord's Day holy at all. When the crisis ends, they may think, 'I've done well enough without Mass all these months, and it was quite nice having my Sundays free. It turned out it wasn't obligatory after all, all those months, so I guess it's not really an obligation even now the crisis is over'. And so they fall away, with grave risk to salvation. They judge the benefit of the Mass just from the felt benefits to themselves – not seeing all the hidden benefits, and overlooking that we primarily attend not simply for ourselves, but for the adoration and thanks we owe and give *to God*.

As for the obligation, they would deceive themselves to think it hadn't returned, since the three factors of impossibility, dispensation or serious excuse would no longer exist. The crisis has indeed highlighted that the obligation of keeping Sunday holy specifically *by Mass attendance* is a Commandment of the Church (and so, able to be dispensed by the Church) – rather than God's law directly. Yet God still commands us to obey such laws under pain of sin, since Christ gave lawmaking authority to the Apostles and their successors: 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven.' (*Mt* 16:19; 18:18; cf. Vatican I, DS 3060)

We return to the centrality of the Mass. If the Cross is steady while the world turns, then this is true also of the Mass, which *is* the Sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages: the fixed axis amidst all upheavals. So unite your hearts with the priests who continue to offer the Holy Sacrifice daily – giving perfect praise, adoration and thanks to God; interceding for the needs of the faithful and the world; winning graces, atoning for sins, releasing souls into heaven. May we all keep our desire for the Mass burning in our hearts, until the joyful day comes when we can again gather to worship God in the Most Holy Sacrifice.