

Our Sunday Obligation

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“Much obliged” is an old fashioned phrase first noted in the Old Oxford English Dictionary in the sixteenth century. Over the centuries, the phrase has lost some of its richness. Originally, it meant to be bound to a person by ties of gratitude. Today, the phrase is more often used as an automatic response to someone who has performed a perfunctory service. Unfortunately,

this practice does not convey the sense of truly being bound to each other by gratitude. What a loss! Because of that loss, many people understand the word *obligation* as a burden rather than a commitment and duty that flows from a relationship. Obligation is a form of indebtedness that comes from within the heart of a relationship.

Think of the obligations that make for a rich family life. A parent does not say, “I wonder if I have to feed my children this week?” Husbands and wives carry out a myriad of obligatory tasks in service to each other during the course of a week and never ask, “Do I have to?” In loving relationships, we are grateful for the gift of each other and we express that gratitude by doing right actions because we want to do so. Obligatory behaviors grow out of communication, intimacy, and personal and communal relationships. These examples can help us reflect on our “obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2041).

The heart of Sunday obligation is gratitude. The word *Eucharist* means “to give thanks.” We gather each week because we are “much obliged” to God—for everything. This obligation is not an automatic response to someone who has performed a perfunctory service. We come together to “give thanks” to God, our Father who is the source of all life and creation, and to Jesus, God’s Son who gave us eternal life through his death on the Cross that is made present in every Mass as we participate again in Christ’s death and Resurrection through the Eucharist.

Each time we “attend Mass,” we bring our lives, our very selves, to the *Eucharist*. We gather together as a community,

grateful to have each other as fellow pilgrims in faith and grateful to be nourished by the body and blood of Christ. Just as the relationships and obligations in families are nurtured and strengthened by intimacy and communion, so too does our participation in the Eucharist nurture and strengthen our relationship with the Trinity. Food nourishes our body in the same way that our participation in Holy Communion nourishes our spirit and unites us together as individuals and as a community in Christ. Acting on our Sunday obligation of being “much obliged” gives us reason to be “more obliged” in the most authentic sense of obligation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways do I live out my Sunday obligation? What impact does my participation in the Eucharist have on my daily life?
- How can I explain Sunday obligation to someone who asks, “Do you *have* to go to Mass every Sunday?”

ACTIONS TO TAKE

- Volunteer to become part of one of the liturgical committees or groups of liturgical ministers in your parish.
- Think about what you can do to improve your experience of Sunday worship.
- Talk with your family or another faith-sharing group about ways to make Sunday a day of worship.

SCRIPTURE CORNER

Exodus 34:10–26; Psalm 100; John 4:4–42

Read and reflect on these passages. What do you bring to the worship experience in the light of your reflection?

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