

# From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

Written by Bill Dunn - Published by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Harwinton, Conn.

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## Do I have to go to Mass every week?

Many Catholics nowadays are under the mistaken impression that attendance at Sunday Mass (or Vigil Mass on Saturday) is optional. The incorrect thinking goes something like this: back before Vatican II in the 1960s, the Church was very authoritarian and ordered all Catholics to go to Mass each and every week. It was known as the “Sunday obligation.” But after Vatican II, the Church relaxed its harsh stance and now allows each person to do what he or she feels is best.

In a way, it is understandable that people would have this mistaken view, as the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass each week has dropped drastically—a decline that dates back directly to the 1960s. But the fact is, the Church has always taught that attendance at Sunday Mass is required of all the faithful. Vatican II did not make it optional.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is quite clear: “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....Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin” (section 2180).

Some Catholics explain their lack of weekly Mass attendance this way: “I don’t have to go to church every week to be a good Christian. God doesn’t mind.”

This point-of-view begs a few important questions, such as: How do you define being a “good Christian”? Does believing and following the words of Jesus have anything to do with it? How do you know that God doesn’t mind? Did He speak to you personally about it? When you say, “God doesn’t mind,” don’t you really mean, “I don’t mind”?

Let’s take a look at some of Jesus’ words. At the Last Supper Jesus held up the bread and wine and said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). This can be done only when a group of believers gather for Mass.

Speaking of that same Eucharist, Jesus told a crowd, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:53-54). Again, this is done at Mass as a group, not individually at home.

Jesus said, “Where two or three gather in my name, I am there with them” (Matthew 18:20). The emphasis here is on the group rather than the individual.

When asked to teach his disciples how to pray, Jesus told them to say, “Our Father...” (Matthew 6:9). He did not tell them to say, “My Father...” Although the Lord’s Prayer certainly is wonderful individual prayer, clearly it was meant for a group of believers to proclaim in unison.

Private personal prayer and devotion are excellent spiritual exercises. But the Church says we also have to go to Mass each and every week. If we deliberately fail to do so, it’s a sin. A key word here is “deliberately,” which means that a person knows something is a sin, but chooses to do it anyway. This possibly might excuse a person who sincerely but mistakenly believes weekly Mass attendance is optional. (On the other hand, if you’ve read this essay up to this point, you no longer can make that excuse!)

The Church’s teaching about weekly Mass attendance is not a harsh, authoritarian command; it is instead more like the desperate plea of a loving and caring parent. Knowing how crucial it is for believers to be unified with Christ (a common union, or “communion”), and knowing exactly what Jesus taught about the need to worship regularly as a community, the Church merely spells out the reality of the situation: weekly Mass attendance is what Jesus desires for us, so it is what we need to do.

Ideally, we shouldn’t attend Mass because we *have* to. We should attend because we *want* to. Practically, however, the Church needs to set clear guidelines.

The early Christian community knew how important it was to gather together as a group each week, as described in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the teachings of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

In the letter to the Hebrews (a text divinely inspired by the Lord, of course), we read in 10:25: “We should not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”

Twenty centuries after Jesus asked His disciples a question in the Garden of Gethsemane, He asks the same question of us today: “Could you not stay with me for one hour?”

Going to church for an hour each week is not a bothersome chore. Rather, it is an opportunity to gather with fellow believers and offer praise and worship to the Almighty God who created us. It is a chance to be in communion with the One Lord who offered His life to pay the price for our sins.