

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

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Why is Mass so important?

In a previous essay (Vol. 1, No. 7) we explored the question: Do I have to go to Mass every week? The short answer is: yes. (The long answer is: yes, indeed!)

Despite what many people think nowadays, the Catholic Church has never relaxed her view toward the “Sunday obligation.” All Catholics are required to participate in the Mass each week, unless there is a good excuse. Being ill or infirmed are good excuses; deciding “I just don’t feel like it today” is not a good excuse. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly points out that those Catholics who do not attend Sunday Mass (or Saturday vigil Mass) without a good excuse are in fact committing a grave sin (section 2180).

Unfortunately, many Catholics do not know why the Church treats this issue so seriously. Why is Mass so important? Why is it a grave sin if we do not attend each week? The main reason many Catholics do not understand the seriousness of this issue is because they do not understand what happens at Mass.

The Mass is comprised of two primary parts, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Word, various texts from the Bible are read aloud. The first reading is usually from the Old Testament. The Responsorial Psalm comes next, verses from the book of Psalms, Israel’s poetic songbook, which contains some of the most inspiring words of praise and worship ever written. Then, the second reading is proclaimed, usually from a section of a New Testament epistle. Finally, we hear the Gospel reading, a record of the words and actions of the Lord Jesus Christ.

After the readings, the priest or deacon delivers the Homily, which opens up the Word of God just proclaimed, and helps us to understand and apply those words to our lives.

It’s important to remember that the readings are not simply ancient religious writings with little relevance for us today. They are the eternal *Word of God*. Many people complain, “I wish God would speak to me.” Well, He does! He speaks through His holy, inspired Word, the Bible. The Almighty Creator of the Universe uses His written Word to communicate to mankind. We must be attentive during the Liturgy of the Word. We must be open to hear and understand God’s voice.

The second major part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Obeying Jesus’ instructions, given at the Last Supper, we “do this in remembrance of [Him].” But again, the Eucharist is not simply an ancient religious

ritual with little relevance for us today. As Catholics we truly believe Jesus’ firm promise: that the bread and wine are transformed during the prayer of consecration into the real flesh and blood, soul and divinity, of Christ. The Church teaches today, as she has taught from the first century on, that a supernatural miracle occurs at every Mass. Christ truly becomes present in our midst.

The Eucharist is a supremely sacred and holy sacrament. The *Catechism* says, “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life” (section 1324). The Eucharist is the primary means used by Jesus to nourish our souls.

The most sacred moments during Mass are when we are kneeling, which shows reverence to the Lord who has come to be with us in the flesh. (So please keep this in mind next time you wander to the restroom during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Unless absolutely necessary, it is very disrespectful.)

Attending Mass should not be thought of as an “obligation,” something distasteful we are required to do. Mass should be seen for what it is: a blessed opportunity to hear God speak to us through his holy Word, and to be in communion with Our Savior, through His true body and blood, soul and divinity.

Many Catholics “don’t get anything out of Mass” because they do not understand the correct roles of the people at church. It is mistakenly believed that the priest is the main performer, and his job is to put on an inspirational and entertaining show. Next, it is thought that God’s role is the prompter, who, just as at a Broadway show, feeds the next line to the performer. Finally, many are convinced that the folks in the pews are merely the audience. Their role is to sit back and be entertained.

If someone goes to Mass expecting to sit back and be entertained, then he or she is sure to be disappointed. In reality, the people in the pews are the performers, who have the lead parts in a production of praise and prayer and worship. The priest is the prompter. His role is to guide the performers to speak the right lines at the right time. Finally, God is the audience. The whole production is directed toward Him, for His enjoyment.

When people go to church with the correct understanding of what actually happens at Mass, they stop looking to “get something out of” Mass because they are too busy trying to “put something into” Mass. Paradoxically, as Jesus told us, when we are focused on giving rather than receiving, that’s exactly when we end up receiving the most.