

Corpus Christi

Year A, 2026

Dt 8:2-3, 14b-16a

1 Cor 10:16-17

Ps 147

Jn 6:51-58

Communion and the obligation of Sunday Mass

The connection between the Body and Blood of Christ and the holy Mass is inseparable. Mass is the commemoration of the Last Supper, when Jesus gave the disciples the gift of Bread-no-longer-bread and the Wine-no-longer-wine to be a memorial of his approaching death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus would soon give his body and blood for the life of the world; in the eucharistic memorial, that same sacrificial gift is recalled and made present again.

From time immemorial, Christians have gathered on the Lord's Day to worship in this new way, to do this (that is, to give thanks, *eucharistein*, in Greek) in memory of the Lord Jesus. The Lord's Day was the day after the Jewish sabbath; it was the first day of the week, the day on which the Christ rose from the dead. Sunday became the Christian holy day, replacing Saturday, the Jewish sabbath. We Christians gather on Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, to commemorate his passion and to give thanks by sharing in his body and blood in the holy Eucharist.

Around the year 150, St Justin Martyr, in a writing called his first Apology, gives eloquent witness to the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist. Listen to what he writes:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles [the Gospels] or the writings of the prophets are read...; then, when the reader has ceased, the presider verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings..., and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a sharing in that over which thanks have been given... And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the one who believes that the things that we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins and [for rebirth ...] and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these. But just as Jesus Christ our Savior, made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food blessed by the prayer of his word ... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

Just over a hundred years after the resurrection of Jesus, Justin is describing Christian belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. At the same time, he gives a description of Christian worship, that is, Sunday Mass, and does so in a way that makes it understood that this had already become a longstanding tradition, a consolidated way of worship for Christians. This is remarkable historical testimony as to the importance of Sunday eucharistic worship.

Even earlier, in the Acts of the Apostles, which many scholars believe was written between AD 80 and 90, we read how in the first days of the Church, shortly after Pentecost, the disciples, that is, the community of believers, “*devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). Devotion to the teachings of the apostles; devotion to life in common; devotion to the breaking of the bread; and devotion to prayer – this eucharistic communion was a defining characteristic of the Church, from the first days of Christianity, even before a word of the New Testament had been written down.

But let’s go back even earlier, where, in the letter to the Hebrews, written around the year 65 or so, we read: “*We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near*” (10:25). *We should not stay away from our assembly*: here, the importance of communal worship is brought to the fore. Fellowship among believers is important, because it is within the context of Christian fellowship that teaching, prayer, and mutual support takes place.

We must not neglect this aspect of holy communion. The Eucharist places us in communion with one another, as individual grains of wheat are broken and ground into meal to be baked into one loaf, as individual grapes are crushed and blended to become wine. To forsake or abandon the worshiping assembly is to abandon the oneness and wholeness of Eucharist and ecclesial communion.

The early Christians, especially in times of persecution or hardship, could not always meet openly, but still they risked gathering on Sundays in homes or in out-of-the-way places. To neglect the dominical assembly – then as now – was, in essence, to cut oneself off from spiritual life support. By staying away from the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, we risk social and spiritual isolation (think covid), we become vulnerable to false teachings and harmful influences, and we open ourselves to spiritual stagnation and to the malign spirit of worldly indifference to the higher things that we must pursue as faithful disciples (Col 3:1-2).

The Eucharist, you see, is not something we can do on our own, that is, without others. Jesus instituted the Eucharist when gathered with his disciples. The Eucharist has always been celebrated in a gathering of disciples. Communion, then, is with the Body of Christ, which is both eucharistic and ecclesial. The eucharistic body of Christ, the ecclesial body of Christ – the Eucharist and the Church are both the Body of Christ, though in different ways, to be sure.

And Jesus is really present in both of them: really, truly, substantially present in the eucharistic Bread and Wine; really and mystically present where two or three are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20), especially when we do this in memory of him. When we are gathered together in his name, Jesus is present in our midst; when we do this in memory of him, he is present again eucharistically, in the Body and the Blood. We cannot separate the Eucharist and the

Church, for the eucharistic presence depends on the ecclesial presence, which is nourished by the eucharistic presence.

Which is why neglecting the assembly is spiritually (and morally) problematic. And which is why there is an *obligation* to attend Mass. And that obligation is so much more than a legal obligation imposed from without; it arises from within us as disciples, as a spiritual, moral, and religious responsibility.

So let's talk about this for a bit. Why do we come to Mass on Sundays? Because the Church says we are obliged to do so? I hope *obligation* is not the main reason why we attend Sunday Mass. Because missing Mass is a mortal sin? I hope we come to Mass less out of fear of sin than out of love for and fidelity to what Jesus has asked his disciples to do in memory of him.

When, though, is missing Mass a sin? When we miss Mass deliberately or intentionally. If you miss Mass, but not deliberately or intentionally, it is not a mortal sin, which means you are not prohibited from receiving communion.

Suppose you usually go to Mass on Sunday morning, but one weekend you have some commitment on Sunday morning and so you plan on going in the evening, but as evening comes around, you just honestly forget. Is this a mortal sin? No, it is not. You may continue going to communion, but next time you go to confession you may want to explain briefly how you always go to Mass, but a change in routine/plans caused you to miss Mass inadvertently. Sin

is always deliberate, not inadvertent. Let me say that again, sin is by definition intentional and deliberate. We do not sin by accident, by inadvertence. We choose to sin.

When we are unable go to Mass because we're sick or we're caring for a sick person, then there is no fault on our part, and so no sin. Now sick means sick – contagious, or coughing, or feeling very poorly, such that you're not really going anywhere else socially. Stay home, get well, be at peace. You're not missing Mass because you want to miss Mass.

When we're traveling or on vacation and cannot attend Mass without real burden ... then there is no sin. Let me ask you this: when planning your travel or vacation, are you arranging your plans so that you that will get to miss Mass, or are you making ordinary plans and it just so happens that you'll miss Mass? Those are two very different intentions: one is sinful, the other is not. We must make reasonable efforts to attend Mass on Sunday: this is our obligation. Reasonable efforts, not heroic efforts, not extraordinary efforts.

Let's say you're on a cruise and there's no way to attend Mass even at the ports of call due to the cruise schedule. You're fine. Let's say you're on a hiking trip and there are no Catholic churches anywhere around you for miles. You're fine. Let's say your flights are scheduled such that you're in airports across Saturday and Sunday. You're fine. Let's say that you're at a cabin in the

mountains and the nearest church is a three-hour drive one way. You're fine.

Suppose there's bad weather on Sunday, and it's unsafe for you to leave the house. Then stay home and be safe. There is no sin attached to being *unable* to attend Sunday Mass in this situation. If the bad weather is only in the morning, then try to make it to an evening Mass. If you usually go to Mass in the evening and the bad weather keeps you from leaving home in the evening, then be at peace. You're fine.

In short, "*if it [is] your intention to keep [God's] commandments,*" if you're in the habit of always going to Sunday Mass, and you happen to miss when otherwise you would not have missed, due to sickness, travel, vacation, weather, caretaking, or some urgent or emergency situation, then you have not sinned. If you're ever in doubt, talk it over with your priest or pastor. We can help you understand what your real obligation is, and if appropriate, we can even give you a dispensation from attending Sunday Mass ahead of time, putting your mind at ease. This is part of the pastoral ministry of priests. It is not the intention of the Church to impose burdens that are hard to carry while not lifting a finger to help (Mt 23:4; Lk 11:46). As disciples, we have an obligation to the Eucharist, yes. But an obligation is not the same thing as a burden. And the Eucharist, by its nature, must never be made into any kind of burden, whether physical, moral, or spiritual.

On this feast of Corpus Christi, let us be more prayerfully aware of our communion in the holy Eucharist and with one another as members of Christ's mystical body, as we feed upon the Lord Jesus, present among us, present in his Word and in his Sacrament. Amen.