

The Sunday Obligation Explained

The Catechism on the Sunday Obligation

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. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] no. 2181)

1. Foundation: How is Sunday Mass “foundation” of “all Christian practice”?
2. Obligation: Why are we “obliged” to go to Mass Sundays and holy “days of obligation”?
3. Missing Mass: How can it be a “grave sin” to deliberately miss Mass?
4. Dispensation: If so important, how can we sometimes be “excused” or “dispensed”?
5. Spring 2020: Vatican and bishops dispense Catholics from Sunday obligation.
6. Fall 2021: Sunday obligation reinstated. Raises question: Why the Sunday obligation?

1. Sabbath Rest in the Old Testament

The Ten Commandments: “Keep Holy the Sabbath”

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. (Exodus 20:8–11)

1. Two Tablets: “written with the finger of God” (Exod 31:18)
2. Holy: “set apart” (Hebrew *qadosh*) for God (= sacred) (Fri Sunset–Sat Sunset)
3. Rest: “you shall not do any work” (cf. Lev 23:23: “no laborious work”; CCC 2172)
4. Creation/Imitation: “in six days the LORD made heaven and earth”
5. Love: “those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:6)

Jesus Went to Synagogue Every Sabbath

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and *he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day.* (Luke 4:16)

Exceptions to Sabbath Rest

1. Healings: Jesus casts out demons and heals people (Mark 1:21–28; John 9:1–17)
2. Good Works: feeding oneself (Mark 2:23–28); saving life of an animal (Luke 14:5)
3. Reason: “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)
4. Divinity: “The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.” (Mark 2:28)

The Gospel reports many incidents when Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath law. *But Jesus never fails to respect the holiness of this day.* (CCC 2173)

Jesus Rested on the Sabbath (Even in Death)

1. Friday: Jesus is Laid in a Tomb before Sundown (Sabbath begins at Sunset)
2. Saturday: Jesus “rests” in the sleep of death (= Sabbath)
3. Sunday: Jesus is raised from the dead (at dawn Sunday morning!)

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2. Sunday Worship in the New Testament

Sunday = The Day of the Resurrection

But on the first day of the week [=Sunday], at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. (Luke 24:1-3)

Sunday “Breaking of the Bread” = The Eucharist and Homily

On the first day of the week [=Sunday], when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight... And a young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. He sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.” (Acts 19:7-10; cf. 2:42)

The Sunday Collection

On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:2)

The Ancient Church: From Sabbath to Sunday (2nd century A.D.)

St. Ignatius of Antioch: Those who lived according to the old order of things have come to a new hope, no longer keeping the sabbath, but the Lord’s Day, in which our life is blessed by him and by his death. (To the Magnesians 9.1; in CCC 2175)

St. Justin Martyr: We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead. (1 Apology 67; in CCC 2174)

The Catechism on Sunday as “Fulfillment” of the Sabbath

For Christians [Sunday’s] ceremonial observance replaces that of the sabbath... The celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship... (CCC 2175-76)

The Five Precepts of the Church: The “Necessary Minimum”

The first precept: “You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor...” “The precept of participating in the Mass is satisfied by assistance at a Mass which is celebrated anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the holy day or on the evening of the preceding day.” (CCC 2041, 2180)

Ancient Christian Martyrs (4th century A.D., Northern Africa)

St. John Paul II: Many [Christians]... accepted death rather than miss the Sunday Eucharist... “Without fear of any kind we have celebrated the Lord’s Supper, because it cannot be missed; that is our law”; “We cannot live without the Lord’s Supper.” As she confessed her faith, one of the martyrs said: “Yes, I went to the assembly and I celebrated the Lord’s Supper with my brothers and sisters, because I am a Christian” (Quoted in John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Dies Domini no. 46)

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3. The Sunday Obligation Today

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1. Foundation: The Words of Jesus Himself

“Amen, amen, I say to you, *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* (John 6:53-56)

2. Obligation/Dispensation: Jesus Gives “Binding” Authority to the Apostles

Truly, I say to you, *whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* (Matthew 18:18)

“*He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me...*” (Luke 10:16)

A diocesan bishop, whenever he judges that it contributes to their spiritual good, is able to dispense the faithful from universal and particular disciplinary laws issued for his territory or his subjects by the supreme authority of the Church. (Code of Canon Law §87)

3. Deliberately Missing Mass: Why is it a “Grave Sin”?

1. Two Kinds of Sin: “mortal” and “not mortal” (1 John 5:16-17)
2. Venial Sin: “wounds” life of God in us (CCC 1855)
3. Mortal Sin: “destroys” life of God in us by “grave violation of God’s law” (CCC 1855)
4. Conditions: [1] “grave matter, [2] full knowledge, [3] deliberate consent (CCC 1857)
5. Grave Matter: “specified by the Ten Commandments” (CCC 1858)
6. Ignorance: “can diminish or even remove the imputability of grave offense” (CCC 1860)
7. Confession: “normally accomplished” in “the sacrament of reconciliation” (CCC 1856)

The Obligation of Sunday Rest

On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, *the faithful are to refrain from engaging in work or activities that hinder the worship owed to God...* Family needs or important social service can legitimately excuse from *the obligation of Sunday rest.* The faithful should see to it that legitimate excuses do not lead to habits prejudicial to religion, family life, and health. (CCC 2185)

The Words of Jesus: The Vine and the Branches

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned... By this my Father is glorified, *that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.* (John 15:5-6)