

Holydays of Obligation

1. Background

A Holydays

The following are holydays of obligation in the universal Church (*Code of Canon Law* 1246 §1):

- Sunday
- The Nativity of the Lord (25 December)
- The Epiphany of the Lord (6 January)
- The Ascension of the Lord (Thursday Week 6 of Easter)
- The Body and Blood of Christ (Thursday after Holy Trinity)
- Mary, Mother of God (1 January)
- The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (8 December)
- The Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven (15 August)
- Saint Joseph, Husband of the Virgin Mary (19 March)
- Saint Peter and Saint Paul, apostles (29 June)
- All Saints (1 November)

The Code also establishes that, with the prior approval of the Holy See, Episcopal Conferences may suppress certain holydays or transfer them to the Sunday. (*Code of Canon Law* 1246 §2)

B The obligation associated with days of obligation

Code of Canon Law (1983)

- 1247 On Sundays and other holydays of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. They are also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body.
- 1248 § 1 The obligation of participating in the Mass is satisfied by one who assists at Mass where-ever it is celebrated in a catholic rite, either on the holyday itself or on the evening of the previous day.
- § 2 If it is impossible to participate in a eucharistic celebration, either because no sacred minister is available or for some other grave reason, the faithful are strongly recommended to take part in a liturgy of the Word, if there be such in the parish church or some other sacred place, which is celebrated in accordance with the provisions laid down by the diocesan Bishop; or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family or, as occasion presents, in a group of families.

C Universal Norms for the Liturgical Year

7 Where the Solemnities of the Epiphany, the Ascension and the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ are not observed as Holydays of Obligation, they should be assigned to a Sunday as their proper day in this manner:

- a. the Epiphany is assigned to the Sunday that falls between 2 January and 8 January;
- b. the Ascension to the Seventh Sunday of Easter;
- c. the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ to the Sunday after Trinity Sunday.

2. The Situation in England and Wales

I. The Current Situation

With effect from the 1st Sunday of Advent 2017, two holydays of obligation are being reinstated. This decision was made by the Bishops of England and Wales, and has been confirmed by the Holy See. The days are:

- The Epiphany of the Lord — 6 January (transferred to the adjacent Sunday when it falls on Saturday or Monday)
- The Ascension of the Lord — Thursday after 6th Sunday of Easter

Consequently the Holydays of Obligation in England and Wales are:

- Sundays
- The Nativity of the Lord — 25 December
- The Epiphany of the Lord — 6 January §
- The Ascension of the Lord — Thursday after 6th Sunday of Easter
- Saint Peter and Saint Paul, apostles — 29 June §
- The Assumption of the Virgin Mary into Heaven — 15 August §
- All Saints — 1 November §

II. Prior to 2017

The obligation has been removed from 1 January, 19 March, and 8 December, since 1970.

Additionally, in November 1984 the Bishops' Conference agreed that:

In conformity with canon 1246, when the solemnities of the Epiphany, the Assumption, All Saints and St Peter and Paul fall on a Saturday or Monday, the solemnity is to be observed and the precept discharged in England and Wales on the Sunday.

In 2006 the Holy See gave *recognitio* to the decision of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales to transfer to Sundays the Solemnities of the Epiphany of the Lord, the Ascension of the Lord and the Body and Blood of Christ following the provisions of the Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar

Appendix

I. Extract from The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Lord's Day

This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The day of the Resurrection: the new creation

2174 Jesus rose from the dead 'on the first day of the week.' Because it is the 'first day,' the day of Christ's Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the 'eighth day' following the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ's Resurrection. For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord's Day (*he kuriake hemera, dies dominica*) -Sunday:

We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead.

Sunday — fulfilment of the sabbath

2175 Sunday is expressly distinguished from the sabbath which it follows chronologically every week; for Christians its ceremonial observance replaces that of the sabbath. In Christ's Passover, Sunday fulfils the spiritual truth of the Jewish sabbath and announces man's eternal rest in God. For worship under the Law prepared for the mystery of Christ, and what was done there prefigured some aspects of Christ:

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.

2176 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 'as a sign of his universal beneficence to all.' Sunday worship fulfils the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of the Creator and Redeemer of his people.

The Sunday Eucharist

2177 The Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life. 'Sunday is the day on which the paschal mystery is celebrated in light of the apostolic tradition and is to be observed as the foremost holy day of obligation in the universal Church.'

'Also to be observed are the day of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Epiphany, the Ascension of Christ, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the feast of Mary the Mother of God, her Immaculate Conception, her Assumption, the feast of Saint Joseph, the feast of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul, and the feast of All Saints.'

2178 This practice of the Christian assembly dates from the beginnings of the apostolic age. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds the faithful 'not to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another.'

Tradition preserves the memory of an ever-timely exhortation: Come to Church early, approach the Lord, and confess your sins, repent in prayer... Be present at the sacred and divine liturgy, conclude its prayer and do not leave before the dismissal... We have often said: 'This day is given to you for prayer and rest. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.'

2179 'A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.' It is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ's saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love:

You cannot pray at home as at church, where there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests.

The Sunday obligation

2180 The precept of the Church specifies the law of the Lord more precisely: 'On Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass.' '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.’

- 2181 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.
- 2182 Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God’s holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- 2183 ‘If because of lack of a sacred minister or for other grave cause participation in the celebration of the Eucharist is impossible, it is specially recommended that the faithful take part in the Liturgy of the Word if it is celebrated in the parish church or in another sacred place according to the prescriptions of the diocesan bishop, or engage in prayer for an appropriate amount of time personally or in a family or, as occasion offers, in groups of families.’

A day of grace and rest from work

- 2184 Just as God ‘rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done,’ human life has a rhythm of work and rest. The institution of the Lord’s Day helps everyone enjoy adequate rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social, and religious lives.
- 2185 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, the joy proper to the Lord’s Day, the performance of the works of mercy, and the appropriate relaxation of mind and body. 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.
- The charity of truth seeks holy leisure; the necessity of charity accepts just work.
- 2186 Those Christians who have leisure should be mindful of their brethren who have the same needs and the same rights, yet cannot rest from work because of poverty and misery. Sunday is traditionally consecrated by Christian piety to good works and humble service of the sick, the infirm, and the elderly. Christians will also sanctify Sunday by devoting time and care to their families and relatives, often difficult to do on other days of the week.
- Sunday is a time for reflection, silence, cultivation of the mind, and meditation which furthers the growth of the Christian interior life.
- 2187 Sanctifying Sundays and holy days requires a common effort. Every Christian should avoid making unnecessary demands on others that would hinder them from observing the Lord’s Day. Traditional activities (sport, restaurants, etc.), and social necessities (public services, etc.) require some people to work on Sundays, but everyone should still take care to set aside sufficient time for leisure. With temperance and charity the faithful will see to it that they avoid the excesses and violence sometimes associated with popular leisure activities. In spite of economic constraints, public authorities should ensure citizens a time intended for rest and divine worship. Employers have a similar obligation toward their employees.
- 2188 In respecting religious liberty and the common good of all, Christians should seek recognition of Sundays and the Church’s holy days as legal holidays. They have to give everyone a public example of prayer, respect, and joy and defend their traditions as a precious contribution to the spiritual life of society. If a country’s legislation or other reasons require work on Sunday, the day should nevertheless be lived as the day of our deliverance which lets us share in this ‘festal gathering,’ this ‘assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.’

II Extract from Pope John Paul II. Dies Domini (1998)

The Sunday obligation

46. Since the Eucharist is the very heart of Sunday, it is clear why, from the earliest centuries, the Pastors of the Church have not ceased to remind the faithful of the need to take part in the liturgical assembly. ‘Leave everything on the Lord’s Day,’ urges the third century text known as the Didascalia, ‘and run diligently to your assembly, because it is your praise of God. Otherwise, what excuse will they make to God, those who do not come together on the Lord’s Day to hear the word of life and feed on the divine nourishment which lasts forever?’. The faithful have generally accepted this call of the Pastors with conviction

of soul and, although there have been times and situations when this duty has not been perfectly met, one should never forget the genuine heroism of priests and faithful who have fulfilled this obligation even when faced with danger and the denial of religious freedom, as can be documented from the first centuries of Christianity up to our own time.

In his first Apology addressed to the Emperor Antoninus and the Senate, Saint Justin proudly described the Christian practice of the Sunday assembly, which gathered in one place Christians from both the city and the countryside. When, during the persecution of Diocletian, their assemblies were banned with the greatest severity, many were courageous enough to defy the imperial decree and accepted death rather than miss the Sunday Eucharist. This was the case of the martyrs of Abitina, in Proconsular Africa, who replied to their accusers: '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.'

47. Even if in the earliest times it was not judged necessary to be prescriptive, the Church has not ceased to confirm this obligation of conscience, which rises from the inner need felt so strongly by the Christians of the first centuries. It was only later, faced with the half-heartedness or negligence of some, that the Church had to make explicit the duty to attend Sunday Mass: more often than not, this was done in the form of exhortation, but at times the Church had to resort to specific canonical precepts. This was the case in a number of local Councils from the fourth century onwards (as at the Council of Elvira of 300, which speaks not of an obligation but of penalties after three absences) and most especially from the sixth century onwards (as at the Council of Agde in 506). These decrees of local Councils led to a universal practice, the obligatory character of which was taken as something quite normal.

The Code of Canon Law of 1917 for the first time gathered this tradition into a universal law. The present Code reiterates this, saying that 'on Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to attend Mass.' This legislation has normally been understood as entailing a grave obligation: this is the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and it is easy to understand why if we keep in mind how vital Sunday is for the Christian life.

48. Today, as in the heroic times of the beginning, many who wish to live in accord with the demands of their faith are being faced with difficult situations in various parts of the world. They live in surroundings which are sometimes decidedly hostile and at other times — more frequently in fact — indifferent and unresponsive to the Gospel message. If believers are not to be overwhelmed, they must be able to count on the support of the Christian community. This is why they must be convinced that it is crucially important for the life of faith that they should come together with others on Sundays to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the sacrament of the New Covenant. It is the special responsibility of the Bishops, therefore, 'to ensure that Sunday is appreciated by all the faithful, kept holy and celebrated as truly 'the Lord's Day', on which the Church comes together to renew the remembrance of the Easter mystery in hearing the word of God, in offering the sacrifice of the Lord, in keeping the day holy by means of prayer, works of charity and abstention from work'.

49. Because the faithful are obliged to attend Mass unless there is a grave impediment, Pastors have the corresponding duty to offer to everyone the real possibility of fulfilling the precept. The provisions of Church law move in this direction, as for example in the faculty granted to priests, with the prior authorization of the diocesan Bishop, to celebrate more than one Mass on Sundays and holy days, the institution of evening Masses and the provision which allows the obligation to be fulfilled from Saturday evening onwards, starting at the time of First Vespers of Sunday. From a liturgical point of view, in fact, holy days begin with First Vespers. Consequently, the liturgy of what is sometimes called the 'Vigil Mass' is in effect the 'festive' Mass of Sunday, at which the celebrant is required to preach the homily and recite the Prayer of the Faithful.

Moreover, Pastors should remind the faithful that when they are away from home on Sundays they are to take care to attend Mass wherever they may be, enriching the local community with their personal witness. At the same time, these communities should show a warm sense of welcome to visiting brothers and sisters, especially in places which attract many tourists and pilgrims, for whom it will often be necessary to provide special religious assistance.

A joyful celebration in song

50. Given the nature of Sunday Mass and its importance in the lives of the faithful, it must be prepared with special care. In ways dictated by pastoral experience and local custom in keeping with liturgical norms, efforts must be made to ensure that the celebration has the festive character appropriate to the day com-

memorating the Lord's Resurrection. To this end, it is important to devote attention to the songs used by the assembly, since singing is a particularly apt way to express a joyful heart, accentuating the solemnity of the celebration and fostering the sense of a common faith and a shared love. Care must be taken to ensure the quality, both of the texts and of the melodies, so that what is proposed today as new and creative will conform to liturgical requirements and be worthy of the Church's tradition which, in the field of sacred music, boasts a priceless heritage.

A celebration involving all

51. There is a need too to ensure that all those present, children and adults, take an active interest, by encouraging their involvement at those points where the liturgy suggests and recommends it. Of course, it falls only to those who exercise the priestly ministry to effect the Eucharistic Sacrifice and to offer it to God in the name of the whole people. This is the basis of the distinction, which is much more than a matter of discipline, between the task proper to the celebrant and that which belongs to deacons and the non-ordained faithful. Yet the faithful must realize that, because of the common priesthood received in Baptism, 'they participate in the offering of the Eucharist'. Although there is a distinction of roles, they still 'offer to God the divine victim and themselves with him. Offering the sacrifice and receiving holy communion, they take part actively in the liturgy', finding in it light and strength to live their baptismal priesthood and the witness of a holy life.

Other moments of the Christian Sunday

52. Sharing in the Eucharist is the heart of Sunday, but the duty to keep Sunday holy cannot be reduced to this. In fact, the Lord's Day is lived well if it is marked from beginning to end by grateful and active remembrance of God's saving work. This commits each of Christ's disciples to shape the other moments of the day — those outside the liturgical context: family life, social relationships, moments of relaxation — in such a way that the peace and joy of the Risen Lord will emerge in the ordinary events of life. For example, the relaxed gathering of parents and children can be an opportunity not only to listen to one another but also to share a few formative and more reflective moments. Even in lay life, when possible, why not make provision for special times of prayer — especially the solemn celebration of Vespers, for example — or moments of catechesis, which on the eve of Sunday or on Sunday afternoon might prepare for or complete the gift of the Eucharist in people's hearts?

This rather traditional way of keeping Sunday holy has perhaps become more difficult for many people; but the Church shows her faith in the strength of the Risen Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit by making it known that, today more than ever, she is unwilling to settle for minimalism and mediocrity at the level of faith. She wants to help Christians to do what is most correct and pleasing to the Lord. And despite the difficulties, there are positive and encouraging signs. In many parts of the Church, a new need for prayer in its many forms is being felt; and this is a gift of the Holy Spirit. There is also a rediscovery of ancient religious practices, such as pilgrimages; and often the faithful take advantage of Sunday rest to visit a Shrine where, with the whole family perhaps, they can spend time in a more intense experience of faith. These are moments of grace which must be fostered through evangelization and guided by genuine pastoral wisdom.