

Catholic

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NINE REASONS FOR GOING TO MASS

THANKSGIVING EVERY SUNDAY

Our presence at Sunday Mass matters and is a witness to our love—for God and for our Church family.

by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, OFM Cap

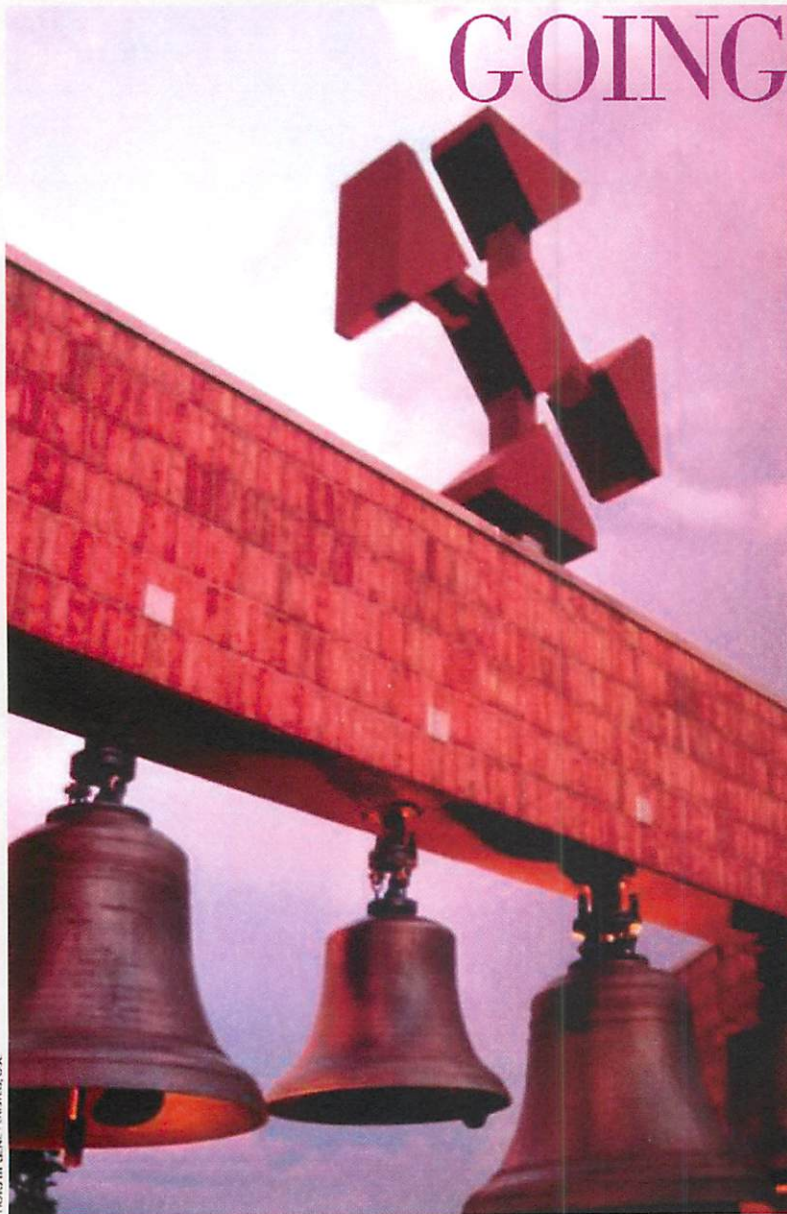


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On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, many of us endure traffic and crowded airports to get home for the holiday. Why? We do this because our presence matters to our family and friends. We witness to our love when we're present at the table for Thanksgiving and other family gatherings.

As a Church family, we celebrate a Thanksgiving meal every Sunday. The word *Eucharist* comes from the Greek for "thanksgiving." Jesus instituted this family tradition at the Last Supper.

Jesus washed the feet of the apostles, teaching them the importance of humble service. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and transformed it into his body, blood, soul, and divinity. He said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (Jn 6:54) and instructed, "Do *this* in memory of me" (Lk 22:19, emphasis added). The Church carries out Jesus' command.

A PRECIOUS GIFT

The Eucharist is Jesus' gift to us and the fulfillment of his promise to be with us always. It's central to God's saving plan of love. Many Catholics seem to take the gift of Sunday Mass for granted and choose to be absent from Mass. In the early Church, Christians didn't enjoy the freedom of religion that we in the United States do today. They faced persecution by Roman authorities for attending Mass.

The convenience and legality of Mass today shouldn't cause us to lose sight of how precious it is. Catholics around the world brave great inconvenience and persecution to receive what we may take for granted. Pope John Paul II recalled living under religious oppression and situations of faith triumphing over persecution. Mother Teresa of Calcutta instructed new priests to "celebrate each Mass as if it is your first, your last, and your only Mass."

Let us anticipate and participate in each Mass as if it could be our last or only Mass. Let us never take for granted this encounter with God each Sunday.

WHY CATHOLICS COME TO MASS

The reasons Catholics give for skipping Sunday Mass are important, and the Church needs to hear these concerns and respond. Equally important, however, are the reasons Catholics come to Mass.



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1 TO RESPOND TO GOD'S LOVE

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him . . . might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Jesus offered himself on the cross for our salvation. He continues to give himself through the Eucharist.

The word *love* in English has been stripped of much of its beauty and meaning. It's often reduced to a feeling. The word for God's love in Greek, *agape*, connotes action, a self-gift. Our love for God is a self-gift in return—of our time, energy, worries, hopes, and joy. The Mass is the best place to thank God for our gifts—especially life, family, friends, faith, and love.

2 TO ENCOUNTER CHRIST

At Mass, eternity and time intersect. It's part of God's plan of salvation that we meet him directly and receive his grace through the sacraments. We believe that God is really present with us in the Mass.

Christ is present in four ways during the Mass:

- 1) the community celebrating, 2) the word proclaimed, 3) the priest presiding, and 4) the Eucharist (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 7). Because of these encounters with Christ at Mass, we seek to be active participants—not passive spectators—listening to his word, sharing in the offertory, singing, and proclaiming a reverent Amen ("truly, I believe") when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

DIG DEEPER

Why do you go to Sunday Mass?
What keeps you from going?

How faithfully do you attend Mass?
How fully do you participate in the Mass?

Whom do you miss seeing at Mass?
How might you encourage their return?

3 TO GATHER AND PRAY WITH OUR PARISH FAMILY

Christian life is a pilgrimage with our brothers and sisters in Jesus. Discipleship is lived in friendship and fraternity with those for whom and with whom we pray at Sunday Mass. Our presence symbolizes solidarity and unity with God and others. It's the fullest expression of our Christian identity.

4 TO STRENGTHEN OUR PARTICULAR FAMILY

During the Sacrament of Baptism, parents are reminded that they're called to be the first and best teachers of their children in the ways of faith. Knowing that the Mass is Catholicism's central prayer and the source and summit of Christian life, we teach our children one of the most important lessons when we attend Mass with them.

Recently I attended a dinner honoring the principal of a Catholic high school. In his remarks, he said, "I grew up in a family where going to Mass on Sunday was about as optional as breathing."

Many of us can identify with his experience—this sense of how important Sunday Eucharist is for our family identity and survival. To miss Mass is to stop breathing.

5 TO WITNESS AND PROVIDE A LEGACY TO OUR CHILDREN

Children watch their parents and grandparents. We form our young people by the way we participate in the Mass. Children who see that their parents get to church early to pray before Mass will want to imitate them.

Children who observe parents and other adults reverently receiving the Eucharist will more readily realize that the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ. The example of parents is an essential part of preparation for first holy Communion. Children whose parents tell them how much and why they love Mass will be less inclined to compare Mass to television and consider it "boring."

The way we celebrate Sunday will affect the way we live the remainder of the week and is a mark of Christian identity from generation to generation.

6 TO BE TRANSFORMED BY SACRAMENTAL GRACE

The Eucharist gives us strength to face life's challenges and to keep mindful of God's love for us. Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. . . . Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and . . . remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:51, 54, 56).

(continued on back page)

WHAT IF I CAN'T RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?

To those who consider themselves unwelcome at Mass because of some irregularity or moral struggle, please know that you are always loved by God, and the Catholic community desires your presence with us. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

An inability to receive Communion shouldn't keep you from Mass. In fact, the habit of being faithful to the Sunday obligation to attend Mass can provide the actual grace, if you cooperate with it, to give you the strength to overcome current obstacles and find paths of reconciliation.

FOUR WAYS CHRIST IS PRESENT AT MASS

1. IN THE COMMUNITY OF THE FAITHFUL. Each of us is made in God's image and likeness. The kindness we show each other shows kindness to Jesus. By joining in the community of the faithful, we're included in Jesus' prayer of thanks and praise to God the Father. It's a holy encounter with Jesus and our fellow communicants.

2. IN HIS WORD. The Scripture readings are the words of everlasting life and the letter from a loving God to his people. If we pray before Mass for guidance and intently listen to the proclamation of Scripture and the homily, God often speaks to us in words we most need to hear.

3. IN THE PRIEST. During the consecration, when the priest says, "Take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my Body," Jesus speaks through him. The priest stands in the person of Christ. Through the priest, we participate in the greatest event in history, the one that saved us from our sins and opened up the possibility of spending eternity with God.

4. IN THE EUCHARIST. We take Jesus' body and blood within us, and Jesus transforms us. We become one with him by receiving him in holy Communion, and through him, we become one with each other.

—*from The Mass: Four Encounters with Jesus That Will Change Your Life, by Dr. Tom Curran; see also Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 7*



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The graces and transformative insights God provides in each celebration of Mass help us move toward happier, holier lives. As we prepare for Mass, we can pray confidently that Christ will give us sanctifying grace. When we arrive, we can ask God to speak to us through the readings, music, homily, and prayers, and show us how to become the persons we're created to be. We can then pray about how to put our new insights into practice in the upcoming week.

7 TO PARTICIPATE IN JESUS' VICTORY OVER DEATH

Each Sunday Mass is a "little Easter" because it marks the resurrection—Jesus' victory over death. This is the most significant victory in history because it opens up the possibility of everlasting life.

God loves each of us so much that he became incarnate—a human being—and died for our sins. He did this because he wants us to live eternally with him in heaven. His victory becomes our victory.

8 TO RECEIVE A FORETASTE OF HEAVEN

"Every time we celebrate the Eucharist," Pope John Paul II preached, "we participate in the Lord's Supper which gives us a foretaste of the heavenly glory."

In his encyclical *On the Eucharist* (*Ecclesia de*

Eucharistia), he wrote, "Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: *they already possess it on earth*, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day' (Jn 6:54)."

"This pledge of the future resurrection comes from the fact that the flesh of the Son of Man, given as food, is his body in its glorious state after the resurrection. With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the 'secret' of the resurrection. For this reason Saint Ignatius of Antioch rightly defined the eucharistic bread as 'a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death'" (no. 18).

9 TO FOLLOW GOD'S GUIDANCE AND GROW IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

God's Third Commandment instructs us to keep the Sabbath holy. By keeping Sunday for God, keeping first things first, and putting God above other things, we will experience greater order and peace in our lives.

The Church calls us to make a commitment to attend Sunday Mass. In doing so, we promise to keep up our relationship with Christ and our Church family—the body of Christ.

We come to Mass in response to a commitment of love, not just to fulfill an obligation. Christ eagerly desires to meet us in the Mass and be present to us at all times. He hopes that we reciprocate his desire and make it a personal commitment of love and gratitude each week.

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Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley, OFM Cap, of Boston wrote the pastoral letter "Jesus' Eager Desire: Our Participation in the Sunday Mass" to Catholics in his archdiocese in November 2011. In it, he called them to more frequent and more enthusiastic participation in the Mass. With his permission, we share a condensed version of this letter here. The entire pastoral letter can be found at bostoncatholic.org.



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