



Pastoral Letter - 22 October 2022

If you want to go far, go together

Dear sisters and brothers,

Removing the exemption

I am lifting the exemption from the obligation to worship God at Mass on Sundays from All Saints Day, November 1, 2022. The diocese did not require us to attend Church during the pandemic as an extraordinary measure and for our safety and wellbeing. This exemption will no longer apply.

As was always the case before COVID, the obligation does not bind if we have serious health concerns or are physically or morally prevented from attending Church. Also, I ask you to continue to remain at home if you are feeling unwell, have cold or 'Flu symptoms and believe you might pose a risk to the health of others.



At the deepest level of our hearts we don't go to Mass because there is an obligation, though this rule can support us, teach us and even carry us when we are struggling.

I thank the many of you who are coming to Mass at the moment and love and admire you for the authenticity of your love for God and your desire to worship the most holy Trinity with the faith community in the Church.

I wish to share with you some of the reasons that make sense to me of this serious obligation and at the end of this letter I invite you to share with me reasons that help you to understand it and keep it. I am also interested in your experience of the closure of churches and in your experience of coming back to Mass.

Do this in memory of me

Fr Ronald Knox, the British theologian, notes that we don't always love our enemies, turn the other cheek, bless those who curse us, forgive those who kill our loved ones, reach out enough to the poor, or be equally compassionate with the bad as with the good. Rather, we cherry-pick the teachings of Jesus. But, says Knox, we have been faithful in one great way, through the ritual of the Eucharist. Jesus asked us to keep celebrating that ritual until he returns and, 2000 years later, we are still celebrating it. The ritual of the Eucharist is our one great act of fidelity. And it is an important fidelity; it keeps us connected with the Father in Jesus. And this connection is foundational and vital. Fr Ron Rolheiser even goes so far as to suggest that ultimately this faithfulness might be enough.

We are worshipping God in, with and through Christ

This connection is wondrous in its depth. With the eyes of faith, we know that at Mass we are really with all the angels and all the saints at the Last Supper, truly with John and Mary at the foot of the Cross, actually present with Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb as Jesus says our name, and in the presence of the risen Jesus breathing the Spirit upon us without reserve. It is as though time has collapsed. It is so much more than a calling to mind or memorial – it is an actual being present at each of these events. Mass is an awesome event.

We encounter Jesus; He leads us in our prayer and we give ourselves in worship to the blessed Trinity and as Jesus gives himself completely to us in love.

Being the witnessing church

We don't go to Church only, or even primarily, for ourselves. To explain one dimension of this, let me start with our martyrs for the Eucharist.

We take our religious truths on faith and, I believe, our faith needs reassurance. What's more reassuring than noticing that some other people, people whom you admire, are so faith-filled that they're willing to go the



ultimate mile? There are martyrs for the Mass in every age but from among all of these I want to hold up Margaret Clitherow who was crushed to death between two doors for enabling a secret Mass in her house and hiding the priest. Please look at her story online.

Margaret's conviction and courage strengthen my faith and experience of the Mass. And so, also, does the faith of everyone of you who worships with me. And, I am sure, you also encourage those who worship every week with you and are reinforced by them in turn. Jesus gives us each other and we need each other. If we stay away from worshipping with the community on Sundays, we weaken the body of Christ.

I am reminded of the proverb: *'if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.'* And it goes beyond this to the whole world, for, by our loving, faithful, joyful, persevering, patient and worshipping attendance at Mass, we propose Jesus and a life of trusting in him to our loved ones and to society at large. Going to Mass on Sunday may be the most evangelising and missionary thing we ever do.

The need to get together

One of the things I learned from COVID was that I need to physically be with others. No amount of Zooming with my family could replace being with them: laughing; crying; hugging; eating; and being in their presence. Similarly, while livestreaming was the best we could do and was important in our lockdowns, community and common personal participation are irreplaceable. It is not enough to be electronically present. We are incarnate beings.

Our thirst for God brings us to the altar

Pope Francis has many powerful and beautiful reflections on the importance of the Eucharist. In one, he ruminates about Jesus sending his disciples to prepare the place where they will celebrate the Passover meal. They had asked: "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" (Mk 14:12).

The sign that he gives them is the sign of a man carrying a pitcher of water (Mk 14:13). This nameless man became the guide who brings the disciples to the place later known as the Upper Room. All of us walk through life with pitcher in hand: all of us thirst for love, for joy, for a fulfilling life in a more humane world. To sate this thirst, the water of worldly things is of no avail, for ours is a deeper thirst, a thirst that God alone can satisfy.



Jesus tells his disciples that the Passover meal can be eaten wherever a man carrying a pitcher of water leads them. We go to Mass on Sundays in part because we recognize our thirst for God, sense our need for God, long for the presence and love of each person of the Trinity, realise that we cannot go it alone, but need the Food and Drink of eternal life to sustain us on our journey.

Conclusion

The lifting of the exemption from attending Mass on Sunday recognises that we have come through the emergency phase of our COVID response and that we need to come to the brave place where we are fed well with God's love, holiness, strength, welcome and hospitality, to the summit and source of our relationship with God.

I invite you to share with me the experiences or reasons that have been integral to your ongoing faithfulness to the Eucharist. Please send your responses at secretary@wagga.catholic.org.au I also welcome your account of the experience of the closure of the churches and of the return to Mass.

Yours in Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate,



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