

“NO SUBSTITUTE FOR BEING THERE”: WHY SUNDAY MASS MATTERS

One of the Minnesota Vikings greatest **comeback** victories occurred on **December 14, 1980**. Then a high school senior, I scored end zone seats for a “must-win” game for the Vikings to have any shot at the playoffs. Trailing the Cleveland Browns **23-9** in the 4th quarter, we decided it was time to head for the exit. With a single digit wind chill, I was cold! And there was nowhere to go in the old **Met Stadium** to warm up in that **awful** large stretch of bleachers from third base to the left field foul pole of the stadium. But an unlikely scenario played out and the Vikings came back on the final snap, with **Ahmad Rashad** catching a Tommy Kramer pass while **falling backwards** into the end zone—literally a few rows from where I **had** been sitting. I listened in disbelief on WCCO radio on the drive home. Served me right— there is **no substitute** for being there. I immediately regretted my decision, learning my lesson the hard way!

However, for many of our seniors unable to attend Sunday Mass in person due to health concerns, mobility issues and advanced age, their decision to remain home is eminently defensible. The continuation of **livestreaming** is primarily intended for our valued parishioners, friends and caregivers who fall into this category. For the vast majority of people, the **obligation** to attend Mass returned the first weekend of this month. There was a bit of an “inside baseball” canonical kerfuffle over a letter to the faithful of New York from **Cardinal Timothy Dolan** regarding the Sunday Mass obligation. In his June 30 letter, he wrote: “Unfortunately, there has been some confusion recently over whether or not a “dispensation” from Sunday Mass has been in effect. Here in the Archdiocese of New York, there has never been a dispensation from Sunday Mass because no man can “dispense” or set aside a Divine (as opposed to man-made) law.”

He was **100% correct**— well, kinda, sort of! In truth, some of these distinctions are **so nuanced** as to be meaningless to all but the most engaged individuals. The Cardinal went on to quote the Third Commandment, which every grade school Catholic should know by heart— “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath.” He then clarified various **legitimate reasons** why somebody would be effectively excused from attending Mass during a pandemic. So, is this a **distinction without a difference**? Not exactly. It is true that divine law cannot be dispensed. **Divine Law** enjoins us to “Keep Holy the Sabbath.” That is not a man-made law. So, what is the distinction here? Divine Law says we must **observe the sabbath**. Attending Sunday Mass is **one way** in which the Church has decreed that we do so. But the Third Commandment is broader than Sunday Mass attendance alone.

Thus, in the case of a severe 15-inch winter snowstorm, one **would not need** a dispensation to be granted— the **impossibility** of safely traveling to Mass that morning suffices. At the same time, Canon 87 §1states: “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.” Archbishop Hebda’s **prudent decision** to formally grant a dispensation provided both clarity and the easing of conscience that was necessary for the faithful of our Archdiocese. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes “... 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.” Paragraph # 2181.

Canon Law also provides a mechanism whereby a **pastor** may grant a dispensation to a **parishioner** on a given Sunday for a serious reason. Canon Law #1245 relates: “A pastor can grant

in individual cases a dispensation from the obligation of observing [the Sunday obligation.]” Some of the reasons may include long international travel days, camping in the Boundary Waters miles from any church, etc. It is prudent to obtain a dispensation for the sake of clarity. Typically, I ask the individuals to bring a copy of the Magnificat with them and read the Sunday readings and offer prayers. In short, one could both **observe the Sabbath**, while also being **dispensed** from attending Mass. We observe the Sabbath by means of prayers, exercising Sunday rest, and refraining from servile work.

Yes, there is a difference between **ecclesiastical** and **divine** law, though I’ll readily admit the distinction can be **confusing**. I hope this provided some clarity. The Catechism states, “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.’” (CCC # 2176) It will take some time for people to return to the stable habit of weekly Sunday mass. It is already happening and as the summer unfolds, we are aiming for a full return to normal operations (e.g., Sunday coffee and donuts) after Labor Day. In the meantime, let us joyfully return to honor the Lord **in person** on Sundays.

- No **good deed** goes unnoticed. A youth group of 80 from the **Diocese of Duluth** (with four priests) on their way to a weekend conference stopped by the Cathedral for Mass. After Mass, they pitched in for 75 minutes of service. They flanked out and weeded the campus grounds, cleaned in between the pews, swept up the winter’s sand debris in the parking lot. Many hands make light work! Wow! After a quick trip to the grocery store, at least I was able to thank each of them with a **Klondike Bar**!
- St. Louis Cardinal Hall of Famer **Bob Gibson’s** 1968 season (304.2 innings pitched, 22-9 W-L record with a 1.12 Earned Run Average) was dominant beyond belief. In fact, it even caused MLB to **lower the pitching mound by five inches** and shrink the strike zone to its current parameters. How much the game has changed. Gibson died last fall at the age of 84.
- Your **response** to the fiscal year-end mailing was extraordinary. **We collected \$36,161**. It was surely a challenging year, and we will continue to exercise prudence in the allocation of your Sunday stewardship. The Cathedral deserves our best efforts. Deo gratias!
- **Attendance** at Sunday Mass has shown an **uptick** of late. Last Sunday’s 10:00 a.m. Mass seemed palpably fuller than say a month or two ago. We’ve ordered additional copies of the bulletin, so that as visitors come throughout the week (and they have been coming in droves!), copies are available. We’re moving in the **right direction**.
- Destination wedding? Indeed, and the **destination** is the **Church!** Please pray for our engaged couples as they prepare for **sacramental marriage** in the Church. It is never too early to impress upon your teenagers and **young adult** children the **value of marrying** with the blessing of the Church. It remains one of the joys of my ministry to witness the vows of our young people.
- **Swing and a miss!** The MLB All-Star Game featured the players in new **matching uniforms**, with only a small logo identifying their particular team. Traditionally, the players wear their own team uniform, providing for a rich array of colors. Why mess with tradition?

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector