

Why do Catholics need to go to Sunday Mass?

Many Catholics today mistakenly believe that there is no compelling reason for Catholics to attend Mass on Sundays and that, not to attend, is not a grave sin. They claim that:

1. the Third Commandment refers to the sabbath, which is Saturday, and not to Sunday; and
2. the precept of the Church which requires attendance at Sunday Mass is purely a man-made law and non-compliance with it cannot therefore result in a grave sin.

The Church's position on this is very clearly stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church ("CCC"). Keeping holy the Lord's day has been a tradition of the Church from its earliest days and is soundly based in scripture (CCC 345-7).

The Third Commandment required the Israelites to keep holy the sabbath day. This was a day set aside by the Lord under the Old Law where the Israelites should rest and worship Him.

At the Resurrection, Jesus had fulfilled the Old Law and replaced it with the New Law or covenant (Eucharist). Through his example, the risen Jesus indicated to the apostles that henceforth, we should adore and worship God on the first day of the week in place of the sabbath and that we should do this by participating in the offering of Eucharist.

From its very beginning, the Church kept holy the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of the Resurrection by celebrating Eucharist on this day (CCC 349). It has also been a day of rest.

Paragraph 1166 of the CCC explains this tradition of the Church very clearly: -

“By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's Resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every seventh day, which is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday' (Sacrosanctum concilium). The day of Christ's Resurrection is both the first day of the week, the memorial of the first day of creation, and the “eighth day” on which Christ after his “rest” on the great sabbath inaugurates the “day that the Lord has made the day that knows no evening” (Byzantine liturgy). The Lord's Supper is its centre, for there the whole community of the faithful encounters the risen Lord who invites them to his banquet. (cf John 21:12 Lk 24:30 – Jesus appearances to his disciples on two separate occasions).”

The story in Luke's gospel where two of the disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus had Jesus breaking bread with them on the Sunday of the Resurrection.

Luke 24:30

30. And it came to pass when he reclined at table with them, that he took bread and blessed and broke and began handing it to them.

Other New Testament examples are: -

Acts 20:7

7. And on the first day of the week, when we had met for the breaking of bread, Paul addressed them, as he was to leave the next morning, and he prolonged his address until midnight.

Apocalypse 1:10, John refers to the Lords Day, Sunday:

10. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice

Is the Third Commandment still relevant?

The Third Commandment remains relevant. The Church amended the Third Commandment by issuing a precept requiring Catholics to attend Mass on Sunday and not to perform servile work. By so doing, it changed the day on which Christians adore and worship God and specified the way they should adore and worship God. At Baptism, we become members of the Church. This makes us co-offerors of the Sacrifice of the Mass with the priest and with Jesus. Our membership also makes us eligible to receive the remaining six sacraments.

However, acceptance of membership of the Church obliges us to obey the natural law (set down in the Ten Commandments) and the Supernatural Divine Law. This Supernatural Divine Law invests in the Church the authority to make rules binding Christians. In requiring us to worship and adore God on the first day of the week, Sunday, the Church has acted under this authority. Christians in agreeing to become Christians agree to follow the rules of the Church. This means that they must obey the Third Commandment as amended by the Church. They must also obey Jesus' command at the Last Supper to offer the Eucharist in memory of him. St Paul tells us of this command at the Last Supper: -

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, 24 and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26)

Attending Mass each Sunday and celebrating Eucharist is an essential aspect of our faith and it is important that every Catholic should be aware of this and the reasons why this is so. To disregard the Third Commandment to adore and worship God is therefore a grave sin.