



Coming Home to Mass

A Pastoral Letter to the Diocese of Worcester

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During this past year so much of our life has moved online, to a “virtual” reality, including Masses streamed from our parish churches. However, as much as technology has helped us to bridge somewhat the pandemic divide, virtual reality remains virtual and is not the same as being present at the celebration of Holy Mass in person.

We only have to remember the longing we have felt to be present for a meal with family members or friends for anniversaries, weddings or birthdays. How much we have yearned to see them face-to-face. It’s the same with the Mass. As helpful as it has been to stay connected to our parishes virtually, it is nothing like gathering in person with our brothers and sisters at Sunday Mass.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives as Roman Catholics. It is where Christ gives himself to us in his Body and Blood. Christ is present at every Mass, in his Word proclaimed, in a tangible way in his Body and Blood and in the person of his priest. He is present to feed us with Word and Sacrament, to embrace us with his love and to give us the grace we need to face the struggles of our daily lives. We hunger for his presence. We draw from the Mass the grace we need to love and we return to it in thanksgiving to God for all he has given to us.

In the early Church, when cruel judges condemned the first Christian martyrs for worshipping God they replied, *Sine dominico non possumus*: “Without the Lord’s day, we cannot live.”¹ With the inspiring words of these martyrs, our beloved Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminds us, “the Sunday Eucharist was not a commandment but an inner necessity...Without [Christ], who sustains our lives, life itself is empty.”²

That is why our hearts ache when we see the pew where a brother or sister used to sit in Church. We must admit that the great societal change in our world, and especially in New England, has led to profound changes in the relationship of many Catholics with the Sunday obligation of attending Mass. So often Sunday, the Lord’s Day, has been supplanted by “the weekend,” a sort of secular sabbath, a weekly break from work set aside for everything from sports to recreation, from shopping to cleaning the house.

Rest is good. Time for family, recreation and catching up on the practicalities of life is good. However, can any leisure activity inspire us to know that we are loved for who we are, or forgiven for our failings or make us stronger as a family? How much more fulfilling our lives would be if we would give our hearts to Sunday Mass and allow the Mass to satisfy them.

Christ waits for you, my dear friends. He waits for you to come home with all your brothers and sisters in the Church, to hear his saving Word proclaimed, to join your joys and sorrows to his Holy Cross, and to receive him in Holy Communion, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 9 September 2007.

As Pope Saint John Paul II wrote, not so many years ago:

Do not be afraid to give your time to Christ! Yes, let us open our time to Christ, that he may cast light upon it and give it direction. He is the One who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us "his day" [Sunday] as an ever new gift of his love... Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.³

Just think of that. Our attendance at Mass is not "time lost," but "time gained."

How grateful we now are that we can "gather once again to praise God's name in the heart of his Church, delivered from all distress and confident in his mercy!"⁴ As a community of faith we have been praying for this moment during these many long months of the pandemic. Now our ability to be present personally at Mass is a blessed reality.

With this letter, therefore, I restore the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, effective on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, June 6, 2021.

Whether you attended Mass every Sunday before the pandemic, or not for many years, I invite you to come home now to Mass which is "a foretaste of the eternal bliss and repose to which we are called and which we share, even now, in Holy Communion."⁵

Come home to joy. To the God who waits to embrace you with his tenderness and become the joy of your soul.⁶

Come home to hope. To hope that in the present moment at Mass, Jesus will change your life by giving you the strength to love. To hope for heaven, where you will "forever enjoy the fullness of the Lord's glory."⁷

Come home to the Church, to your brothers and sisters, as imperfect and struggling as we all are, but each of us in need of the Lord Jesus, joined together with him through our worthy reception of Holy Communion.

Come home to Mass. Christ invites you and so do I, along with your brothers and sisters in the Household of Faith, the Body of Christ, his Church.

With every prayerful best wish, I remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert J. McManus". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Robert J. McManus
Bishop of Worcester

³ Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, no. 7.

⁴ Diocese of Worcester, *Prayer in Time of Pandemic*, 2020.

⁵ Pope Francis, General Audience, December 13, 2017.

⁶ Cf. Isaiah 61:10.

⁷ *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer III.