

Why can't I go to Communion if I don't go to Mass every Sunday?

by Father Thomas V. Berg, PhD

DEAR FATHER,

I don't go to church that often, but I enjoy going with the relatives on holidays like Christmas and Easter. On those occasions I also like to go to Communion with all the family—it gives us a special sense of togetherness, and it wouldn't be Mass without Communion. I am writing because this past Christmas, my mother-in-law, who is a fanatical Catholic, told me we needed to go to confession before going to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve if we wanted to receive Communion. I told her to mind her own business, that we would all be going to Communion as a family, and that I don't believe God's love depends on whether you go to Mass every single Sunday. So, who is right, me or my mother-in-law?

—VERY UPSET

Thank you for the sincerity and candor of your question. I can understand how this could be very upsetting. The quick answer to your question, however, is that your mother-in-law is basically right (even though the way she expressed herself was perhaps not the best).

A fuller explanation requires us to address one by one the closely related issues you raise here: Why do Catholics attend Mass in the first place, and why are we supposed to go every Sunday? Further, what does it mean to receive Holy Communion, and what is required of us in order to do so?

As always, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is our best guide here.

“The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian

practice. For this reason 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” (CCC, 2181).

The *Catechism* further explains that “it is in keeping with the very meaning of the Eucharist that the faithful, if they have the required dispositions, receive Communion when they participate in the Mass” (CCC 1388).

First of all, it means that a Catholic can certainly attend Mass without receiving Communion. (So, contrary to part of your question, yes, it certainly is the Mass, even if one does not receive Communion.) Our

➔ If you have a question for **Ask Father**, email AskFather@CatholicDigest.com.

essential obligation is to participate in the Christian Sabbath worship by attending and participating in the Mass as far as possible. Under certain conditions, however, that might have to fall short of actually receiving Holy Communion. The *Catechism* speaks of those who approach Communion as having “the required dispositions.”

The first indispensable disposition for receiving Holy Communion is that we believe what the Catholic Church believes about the Eucharist.


We live in a world today where other Christian communions, unfortunately, believe different things about the Eucharist. But that is not the faith of the Church. That is not the faith that the martyrs gave their lives for. We do not believe in “transignification,” the idea that the bread and wine, after being prayed over, now merely “mean” or “signify” or “remind us of” Christ.

Our Catholic faith tells us, on the contrary, that when the priest—acting in the person of Jesus—says the words of consecration (“This is my Body... This is the chalice of my Blood...”), he brings about what Jesus himself did at the Last Supper: Jesus becomes present under the appearances of bread and wine. This miracle that takes place at every Mass is called “transubstantiation.” The appearances of bread and wine remain, but the substance of bread and wine is replaced—miraculously—by the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. That is the Catholic faith. And from the beginning, to this day, only the baptized who believe that were allowed to come forward to receive him. If a baptized Catholic finds honestly that she does not believe this, then, very simply, she should

not approach Holy Communion—not until some later time when she comes to recover the faith of the Church.

But believing what the Church believes about this sacrament is not enough.

The second key disposition required is that we are free from having the guilt of any un-confessed serious sin on our heart. Technically that means that we are honestly not conscious of having committed any “mortal” sins—sins that rupture our friendship with God—since our last confession. If that were the case, then before coming to meet Jesus in Holy Communion, we very much need to meet Jesus in the sacrament of penance, confess our sins, receive absolution, fulfill the penance given to us, and then—and only then—approach Holy Communion at Mass.

With those dispositions, indeed, it would be a supremely joyous thing to receive Jesus in Communion with the whole family. Sadly today, far too many baptized Catholics who receive Communion fall short of those dispositions. Holy Communion is not a “blessed wafer” that “represents” Jesus; we shouldn’t be going up to Communion because it gives us a “special feeling of togetherness.” Rather, we should believe that we are about to receive Jesus: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. This is our incredible, amazing faith—our response to the incredible, amazing love of our Lord who desired to remain with us in this way in the sacrament of the Eucharist. 

Father Thomas Berg is a priest in the Archdiocese of New York and professor of Moral Theology at St. Joseph’s Seminary (Dunwoodie).