

Holy Days of Obligation

Merry Christmas! Yes, for us this remains an appropriate greeting as we continue to celebrate the Incarnation. Since I wished everyone a "Happy New Year" when the New Year really began (Advent), I'll refrain from being redundant.

Monday, January first, is a holy day. Usually it is also a day of obligation, however, this year the obligation to participate in Mass is abrogated (removed). I know this puzzles some parishioners. I hear people ask, "How can it be a holy day one year but not another?"

The first point to clarify is that these days are ALWAYS holy days. That does not change. What we are really talking about is the obligation to participate in Mass. The directive is simple. When a holyday of obligation falls on a Monday or a Saturday the obligation is lifted. The two exceptions to this policy are Christmas and the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

The "Monday and Saturday" policy was instituted by our bishops. It was not to take away from the holy days but was a tacit acknowledgment of the shortage of priests. It was also recognition for liturgical ministers (musicians, ushers, sacristans, etc.) and the challenge that back to back feasts can pose to them. So that holy days did not become a burden but remained a joy for us to celebrate, the "Monday and Saturday exemption" was adopted. If you can remember "Monday and Saturday" it is fairly easy to know when you are obligated to be at Mass for a holy day and when you are not.

The custom of keeping holy days came from the people of God. There was a heartfelt need to celebrate certain events in the life of Christ and favorite saints. On certain days people came to church in great numbers to keep these feasts. Of course, which days and saints were so honored differed from one part of the world to another. During the Middle Ages it appears that all of the apostles were so honored.

Today the Church recognizes ten holy days of obligation (Code of Canon Law, 1246). "Sunday is the day on which the paschal mystery is celebrated in light of the apostolic tradition and is to be observed as the foremost holy day of obligation in the universal Church. The second part of canon 1246 gives Bishops Conferences the authority, with approval of the Holy See, to abolish certain holy days or transfer them to Sunday. That is why in the United States we do not observe the holy days of St. Joseph (March 19) or Saints Peter and Paul (June 29) as days of obligation. The Epiphany, Ascension and Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ are transferred to Sundays.

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