

Recent discussions surrounding this year's transfer of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary from a Sunday (Dec. 8) to a Monday (Dec. 9) have sparked discussion on one practice that we often tend to forget we have: holy days of obligation. Likely, we are all too familiar with the ritual that occurs around them. One pops up on the horizon, we see extra Mass times in the bulletin, with the note "holy day of obligation," and Father, during the announcements, takes a moment to remind you of the obligation. Let's go back to the question at hand: Why do we have holy days of obligation?

This is actually somewhat reminiscent of Jewish practice and custom, even back to the time of the Old Testament. The Jewish community was very used to feasts and celebrations that would occur on a regular cycle. For example, take the feast of Passover, which would happen based on the first full moon of the spring. Or the feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*), or the feast of booths, which was "the 15th day of this seventh month," as the book of Leviticus instructs the Israelites (Leviticus 23:34). Perhaps it was the feast of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), which was "the 10th day of the seventh month" (Leviticus 23:27). Now, I won't necessarily go into how the timing of these feasts work, as that can be an entire topic to itself, but the point is still there: these feasts are a sort of "day of obligation" for the Jewish community. These were days of importance that were considered pivotal to the life of the Jewish community, and they merited special consideration.

When we enter into our Catholic tradition, we will find that there is very little difference in our practice as to celebrating our own set of holy days. Simply put, holy days of obligation are days of solemnity (our highest class of

Why do we have 'holy days of obligation'?

celebration) that are of great importance to the Catholic Church.

In the universal Church, there are 10 total days that could be days of obligation, but the ability to choose the days of greater importance to a particular place was given to our local bishop's conference, the USCCB. Out of those days, the USCCB chose six, with some still being celebrated on Sundays. The six that we observe are Mary the Mother of God, the Ascension, the Assumption, All Saints, the Immaculate Conception, and the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, I should return back to the original question: why? The answer: because they are important moments of celebration in our faith. The Church knows all too well that life gets very busy, and as a result she tries to put in these moments where we "breathe" with purpose. Recently, we did this with the transferred Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception—a recognition of Mary being preserved by God's grace from the stain of Original Sin. We have a day to ask ourselves not only what this means, but also to glorify God—who saw fit to send His Son to us through a vessel kept pure and spotless. We can too easily blow off this moment of the beginning of Mary's life as a bit of Catholic doctrinal trivia. But in all reality, this should impact our understanding of God's great love to go through a lot of extra steps and trouble to save us and offer us redemption through His Son.

Yes, I recognize that "obligation" tends to be a dirty word these days, and perhaps even one that today elicits a sort of rebellious response in many. Maybe that is a place we could clarify! It isn't just supposed to be the Church saying, "do this or else you'll be punished. Forever." We are the ones who turn it into this, "bare minimum Catholicism" way of thinking—and that is not what the



HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION—The Lord loves us in beautiful and abundant ways. The Church knows all too well that life gets very busy, and as a result she tries to put in these moments where we "breathe" with purpose through special holy days of obligation. (*The Mirror*)

Church desires.

What then is the Church saying to us? Come celebrate as a member of the Body of Christ! Take a moment to partake in the way Catholics celebrate best—by going to Mass! It even encourages us to try to rest throughout the day, as if this were a Sunday, even on a weekday. Sure, there is the penalty of incurring mortal sin by missing Mass that day—but I honestly do not think it's best we be motivated by that alone. That can turn us into people who resent the fact we are there—or we ignore it and go about our regularly-scheduled business.

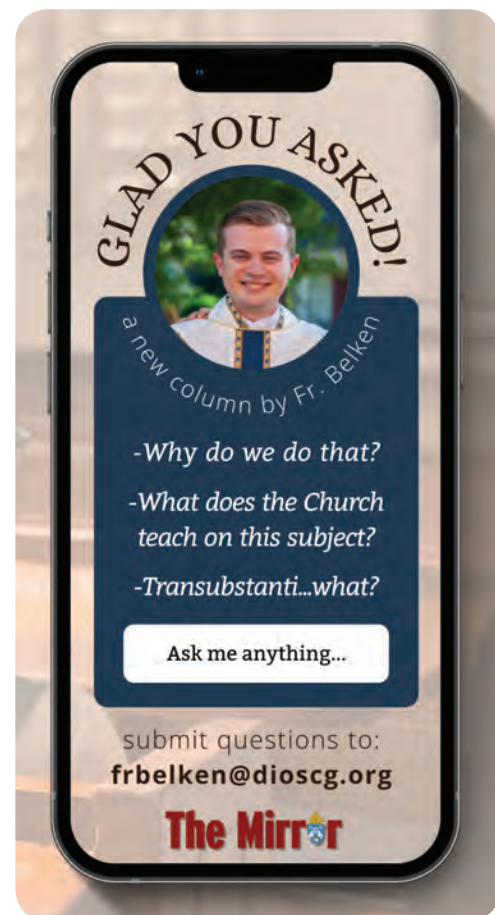
To be clear, the fact that it would be a serious sin to miss should be motivational, even if it is less than ideal to only operate by that line of thinking. Instead, what we should do is really grow enough in our spiritual maturity to look at it through an attitude of love. If the Church is looking out for our spiritual wellbeing—can we afford to love the Lord a little more in a concrete way when these days come up? Can't I go to Mass one extra time on this day because the Church sees it as being an important part of my life of faith?

So, why do we have holy days of obligation? It's because the Lord loves us in beautiful and abundant ways that

we attach to these holy days and in what we celebrate through them.

The question I'd ask in return: are we going to be faithful enough to love the Lord back in these celebrations and holy days (even if it means going to Mass one more time)? ©TM

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