



NewsLetter

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The Mass Obligation of the Faithful on Consecutive Feast Days

The May-June 2016 issue of the *Newsletter* discussed the proper choice of liturgical texts when one major feast immediately follows another, namely, which texts have precedence on the evening they share in common – those of the day itself or for the vigil of the next day. As previously noted, the question is answered by the Table of Liturgical Days, but with the caveat that a feast of precept can take precedence over a non-obligatory day, even if the latter ranks higher. A related issue concerns an individual's Mass obligation when two obligatory days fall one after the other: can a person satisfy both obligations by attending Mass on the evening of the first day? The obligation does not depend on the liturgical texts used, since a wedding or funeral Mass celebrated on a holy day of obligation still satisfies that day's obligation. But is a "two-for-one" Mass a possibility?

In the first place, it should be noted that this situation is relatively rare. In the dioceses of the United States, it can occur with only two of the six holy days of obligation: Immaculate Conception on December 8 and the Christmas on December 25. By particular law, the obligation to participate in Mass on three feasts of precept (Mary, the Holy Mother of God, Assumption, and All Saints) is abrogated when the feasts fall on a Saturday or Monday, and the question does not affect the Ascension, whether observed on Thursday or Sunday. The issue also does not arise in years when the Second Sunday of Advent falls on December 8 (as will happen in 2019, 2024, and 2030) and the Immaculate Conception is transferred to Monday, as Mass attendance on the solemnity is not obligatory in that circumstance. Consecutive feasts of precept, however, occur once every two years or so on average.

The Obligation of the Faithful and Its Fulfillment

According to the Code of Canon Law, "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body" (canon 1247). The faithful are thus obliged, under normal circumstances, to go to Mass between 54 and 59 times each year, depending on the quirks of the calendar and the occurrences of the various holy days of obligation.

Since the mid-twentieth century, it has been possible – first by indult, later by the law itself – for the liturgical celebration of major feasts to take place not only on the day itself but also on the prior evening. This innovation offered by the Church was a welcomed convenience for many of the faithful as a way to fulfill their obligation. The current Code of Canon Law states that "A person who assists at a Mass celebrated

anywhere in a Catholic rite either on the feast day itself or in the evening of the preceding day satisfies the obligation of participating in the Mass” (canon 1248 §1). Most canon lawyers defer to Venerable Pope Pius XII’s Apostolic Constitution *Christus Dominus* (January 6, 1953), which gave 4:00 PM as the earliest time when anticipated Masses may be scheduled (see article VI).

The prevailing view of many canon lawyers is that each obligation must be fulfilled with a separate Mass. Thus, when consecutive obligations occur on Saturday-Sunday or Sunday-Monday, the faithful must attend Mass twice to fulfill two separate obligations. A *dubium* concerning the possibility of simultaneous fulfillment of obligations was answered in the negative by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy and approved by Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1970. Although it was not issued as a conclusive and authoritative interpretation, it did indicate the considered opinion of the Holy See and the approval of the Holy Father. (The response was published in the November 1974 *Newsletter*.) Some canonists suggest that, in the absence of a definitive interpretation by the Holy See, attendance at the evening Mass shared by the two holy days is indeed sufficient to fulfill both obligations, based on the principle that in cases of doubt, laws are to be interpreted broadly. Nevertheless, a majority of authors maintain that the Church’s intention in extending the possibility of meeting Mass obligations through vigil Masses, while intended to make it easier to fulfill obligations, was never envisioned as a legal loophole, and, hence, separate obligations remain. Aside from canonical requirements, it would be hoped, of course, that Catholics foster a love for the Sacred Liturgy and hold a desire to celebrate the holy days as fully as is reasonably possible.

Dispensations and Commutations

“The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Situations arise, of course, in which fulfilling Mass obligations on consecutive days is either impractical or impossible for an individual or a family. The Church allows parish pastors to “grant in individual cases a dispensation from the obligation of observing a feast day or a day of penance or can grant a commutation of the obligation into other pious works” for a just cause and subject to any regulations laid down by the Diocesan Bishop (canon 1245; see canon 87 §1). Members of the Catholic faithful who can only attend one anticipated evening Mass to fulfill their obligation (whether that of Sunday or of the holy day) should speak with their pastor to seek alternate accommodations. At the same time, Diocesan Bishops may examine their regional circumstances and grant general dispensations or commutations, while permitting their pastors to make judgments in individual cases.

Applicability in Future Years

Consecutive feasts of precept affecting Sunday and the Immaculate Conception or Christmas occur in many years, including the present year. Since these same questions concerning proper liturgical texts and Mass obligations resurface periodically, the present review of this issue might serve as a useful reference for Diocesan Bishops, pastors, and other liturgical ministers in the years ahead.

For the benefit of our readers, listed here are the consecutive holy days of obligation between 2017 and 2030:

	<i>Saturday</i>	<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Monday</i>
2017		Fourth Sunday of Advent	Christmas
2018	Immaculate Conception	Second Sunday of Advent	
2021	Christmas	Holy Family	
2023		Fourth Sunday of Advent	Christmas
2025		Second Sunday of Advent	Immaculate Conception
2027	Christmas	Holy Family	
2028		Fourth Sunday of Advent	Christmas
2029	Immaculate Conception	Second Sunday of Advent	

The Preface: Praying Across Liturgical Time and Space

At every Eucharistic celebration, the faithful gather together in prayer and in praise of God. One instance among many in which this unity of purpose is expressed is the Preface, a part of the Mass that is often-times brief, but theologically rich. Situated at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the Preface can help to focus one's attention on the relationship between the themes of the particular liturgical celebration and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Preface also reminds the gathered community that the liturgy is not just a gathering for those in one place or time, but rather is an expression of the eternal worship the *whole* Church is participating in, both here on earth and in heaven above. Thus, the Preface can help to contextualize the liturgical actions within the Mass in the broader paradigms of liturgical time and liturgical space.

Liturgical Time

Because the Preface is generally variable, it very often serves as a reminder of the themes of that day's liturgical celebration as the people prepare to receive the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ. The daily celebration of Christ's Paschal Mystery is contextualized within the larger cycle of the liturgical year, which is itself a protracted expression of the Paschal Mystery. When proper Prefaces are used, they help to illuminate this essential relationship by connecting a specific moment in the life of Christ with the entirety of his Paschal Mystery. For example, the Preface for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord reminds us of the reason we gather to celebrate the Mass on that day, stating:

For your co-eternal Son was presented on this day in the Temple
and revealed by the Spirit
as the glory of Israel and Light of the nations.
And so, we, too, go forth, rejoicing to encounter your Salvation,
and with the Angels and Saints
praise you, as without end we acclaim:

This Preface highlights the connection between a feast celebrating the revelation of Christ and each one's mission to spread the Good News to all peoples. Even though the Feast of the Presentation celebrates one moment within the Paschal Mystery, the Preface invites each of us to continue the work accomplished by Christ's entire life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The faithful share in the Body and Blood of Christ during Holy Communion, and then share that promise of salvation with others as they are sent forth from the Mass.

The *Roman Missal* provides many Prefaces: for the different liturgical seasons, for feasts of the Lord and of the saints, and for ritual masses and other celebrations that occur in the life of the Church. While some are rather generic, such as those offered for Ordinary Time (eight for Sundays and six for weekdays), others are extremely specific. Even a brief reflection on the relationship between these feasts and the Eucharistic celebration can help root us more firmly within the paradigm of liturgical time.

Liturgical Space

In addition to a connection with the liturgical time, the Prefaces also situate the faithful within a profound concept of "liturgical space." It is not so much the church building that is referenced, but rather the cosmic understanding of *who* is involved in the Church's liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that "[i]n the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, [and] we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army" (no. 8). The USCCB's guidelines on liturgical art and architecture, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (2000), reiterates this idea and situates its comments on physical space within the bounds of both heaven and earth: "For every time the Church gathers for prayer, she is joined to Christ's priesthood and made one with all the saints and angels, transcending time and space" (no. 15). These concepts are expressed, for example, in the above-mentioned Preface for the Presentation. The faithful gathered to celebrate the Eucharist take part in this worship of heaven and earth as "we, too, go forth, rejoicing to encounter your Salvation, / and with the Angels and Saints / praise you, as without end we acclaim..." All the prefaces in the *Roman Missal* connect the earthly worship being offered with the eternal worship occurring in heaven.

Most of the Prefaces illuminate this connection by mentioning specific choirs of angels with whom our prayers of praise are being offered. While traditions vary, many authors list nine different orders of angels: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations (or dominions), virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels. Except for principalities, all these types of angels are mentioned at least once in the Prefaces of the *Roman Missal*. They range from the short and simple to a more expressive acknowledgement of the praise of the angels:

Preface V of the Sundays in Ordinary Time:

And so, with all the Angels, we praise you,
as in joyful celebration we acclaim:

Common Preface II:

Through him the Angels praise your majesty,
Dominions adore and Powers tremble before you.
Heaven and the Virtues of heaven
and the blessed Seraphim
worship together with exultation.
May our voices, we pray, join with theirs
in humble praise, as we acclaim:

There are only a very few Prefaces that do not make explicit mention of any particular order of angels. Yet even these connect our heavenly worship with the ceaseless worship of heaven:

Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation I:

And so, filled with wonder,
we extol the power of your love,
and, proclaiming our joy
at the salvation that comes from you,
we join in the heavenly hymn of countless hosts,
as without end we acclaim:

Common of the Dedication of a Church I:

And so, with the countless ranks of the blessed,
in the temple of your glory we praise you,
we bless you and proclaim your greatness,
as we acclaim:

All in Praise of the “Thrice-Holy God”

The Roman Prefaces place the Church’s worship on earth within the context of the worship that is eternally celebrated in the presence of God in heaven. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) notes, “In the *preface*, the Church gives thanks to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, for all his works: creation, redemption, and sanctification. The whole community thus joins in the unending praise that the Church in heaven, the angels and all the saints, sing to the thrice-holy God” (no. 1352).

By including references of the angels in the Preface, we are reminded of their presence in our lives and throughout salvation history. They are continually “announcing this salvation from afar or near and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan” (CCC, no. 332). There are numerous stories of the angels interacting with men and women in the Bible, from the beginning of creation to descriptions of the eschaton. One passage found in Isaiah relates to the function of the Preface as it is used today. In one of the prophet’s visions, he describes the following scene:

I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple.
Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces,
with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. They cried one to the other:
“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!” (Is 6:2-3)

This hymn of praise that the angels continually sing in the presence of God demonstrates the ancient proclamation of the “thrice-holy God” that is still found in the liturgy today as the *Sanctus*. The Preface leads into the *Sanctus*, connecting our worship with that of the angels as we join their hymn of praise to God.

This reflection on liturgical time and space in light of the Preface reminds us that our liturgical efforts on earth transcend the bounds of the physical world. The beauty of the heavenly liturgy is reflected in the beauty of the earthly liturgy, where all peoples gather together with the common purpose of praising God and calling out to him in need. The Prefaces of the Eucharistic Prayer offer a brief but powerful reminder that the actions in the Sacred Liturgy unite every person with the whole Church, both here and in heaven, and place them within the unceasing worship of God throughout eternity.