

## “UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS” OF THE EUCHARIST: FULFILLING OUR EASTER DUTY

I have heard more chatter of an “Easter Duty” in the past seven weeks than I have heard in years. And for obvious reasons, given Covid-19. On this Solemnity of **Corpus Christi**, it seems opportune to address these questions. The phrase “**Easter Duty**” appears neither in the Church’s Canon Law, nor is it specifically named in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Perhaps it should be. Still, it most assuredly exists, stemming from **two related** Church laws: to receive the Eucharist **at least** once a year during the Easter season, unless a **just cause** indicates another time as preferable (canon 920); and to **receive absolution** in sacramental confession for any **mortal sin** at least once a year (canon 989). Those two canons combine to constitute the essence of the Easter Duty. Let’s be clear— it’s a **minimal duty**. We are “unprofitable servants,” as Luke 17:10 states.

Only a handful of U.S. bishops gathered for the **First Provincial Council** of Baltimore in 1829. We were a tiny **missionary church** with dioceses established in Baltimore (Archdiocese) and Boston, New York and Philadelphia and Bardstown, Kentucky. That’s right, **Bardstown KY!** Due to the vast distance priests had to travel to visit their missions, the bishops **humbly requested** of Pope Pius VIII that the time for fulfilling this duty extend from the first Sunday in Lent to Trinity Sunday to allow more time for people to receive Holy Communion. Previously, Catholics had been required to receive Holy Communion during a **much narrower** time frame; this was unworkable in our circumstance. Pope Pius VIII “nodded to the request” and gave his blessing. His approval of the decrees of the Council helped **strengthen the ties** between the U.S. Church and Rome.

Though his papacy lasted only **20 months**, any priest offering Mass passes under Pius VIII’s monument on the way to the sacristy in St. Peter’s Basilica. And the timeframe he approved was never rescinded, meaning that this **1829 “exception”** to the law has become enshrined as our practice to this day. By 1866, Catholics numbered 2.5 million and the **Second Plenary Council of Baltimore** invited bishops with an abundance of priests to return to the earlier practice of a shorter timeframe, albeit on a voluntary basis. I have not come across evidence that there were any takers! Canon 920 states §1: “After being initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive holy communion at least once a year. §2. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season unless it is fulfilled for a just cause at another time during the year.” This is crucial, as it provides for the possible extension of the precept beyond the Easter season.

Yes, it is a grave obligation to receive Holy Communion at least once per year. But in this time of pandemic with our **limited return** to Mass, the Easter Duty is certainly delayed for those unable or dissuaded from attending Mass. Thus, those who have not received Holy Communion should have a **clear conscience** because Covid-19 certainly fulfills that “**just cause**” criterion. Archbishop Hebda has released Catholics from attending Mass for as long as the pandemic continues. Fulfilling the **grave obligation** of Holy Communion **during the Easter Season** is best understood as a secondary obligation, because a “just cause” permits it to be fulfilled at **another time** during the year. There is still time. Hopefully, when the pandemic subsides, people can get back to Mass and Holy Communion before too long. The timeframe of one “year” could reasonably be reckoned from the last Holy Communion received.

This regulation derives from one of the **most consequential** ecumenical councils (1215) held in the Church’s history. The **Fourth Lateran Council** states: “All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discretion, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the Eucharist **at least at Easter** (*ad minus in pascha*) unless they think, for a good reason and on the advice of their own priest, that they should abstain from receiving it for a time.” Lateran IV, *Constitutions*, 21. The same section mandates this “salutary decree be frequently published in churches, so that nobody may find the pretense of an excuse in the blindness of ignorance.” So, what exactly occasioned this decree? Sadly, the faithful had absented themselves from receiving Communion to such an extent that the Church discerned it was **necessary to legislate** in this regard. It would strike us as odd if at a Sunday Mass everyone stayed in their pews at Communion time.

Still, the **historic reluctance** of people to approach Holy Communion was not completely misguided. They did **not want to receive unworthily** and that guided their thinking, albeit to an extreme in some eras. However, if we approach without examining our conscience, that too, speaks volumes. Corpus Christi reminds us that the Holy Eucharist is a **precious gift**, one that we ought never to approach lightly. Still, we endeavor to make Holy Communion available to the faithful who desire to receive Our Lord sacramentally. Some health care workers are hesitant, while others (seniors) are flatly discouraged from attending public Mass, even with social distancing. Yet, these people **may feel comfortable** coming to Church outside of Mass. If you call ahead, we would be delighted to arrange for you to receive Holy Communion.

- Speaking of Holy Communion—I am delighted to celebrate **First Holy Communion** with some of our children at the **10:00 a.m. Mass** today. Others will follow throughout the summer. They were all most patient, and Corpus Christi is a wonderful Solemnity on which to receive Jesus for the first time.
- It has been extremely disappointing that **Major League Baseball** has been so slow to devise a plan that is satisfactory both to owners and players for a shortened season. Meanwhile, the fans are left in the lurch. Frankly, people have short memories and they are **finding other things** to do with their time. Start the season without fans and get some games in. This is not that complicated! **Batter up!**
- When encountering someone on the sidewalk or in a store who comes from a different ethnic background, have any of you noticed that you are **more attuned** than usual to saying hello or **greeting with a smile**? It's not that I ignored people before— but I am keenly aware that I have become more intentional in greeting people. Is there a lesson here?
- Today is **Flag Day**, for on this day in 1777, the Stars and Stripes theme was adopted by Congress as the flag of our nation. I thank the Cathedral Men's Association for their **donation of the new U.S. flag** that currently flies proudly in the courtyard near the sacristy. The flags take a beating with all the wind on Cathedral Hill.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector