



Obligation: Law and Love

Sample Homily

A Debt of Gratitude

A teacher once told our class that there are three things we can never avoid: death, taxes, and homework. He always said this before giving us even more homework. Now I never liked homework and as a Catholic, I've never liked that term "Holy Day of Obligation." As soon as someone tells me I MUST do something, I find myself either dragging my feet or looking for a loophole. I'm likely not alone in this reaction. We can see this when our weekday Holy Days are often less attended than weekend masses.

If you look up "obligation" in the dictionary, it says that an obligation is an action to which a person is morally or legally bound. It's a duty or a commitment. In our busy lives we are often over committed so we often resist any additional obligation on our time. In our culture of comfort and convenience, it's easy to see any duty as unpleasant and something to be avoided. However, reading further in the dictionary we see there is another definition. An obligation is also a debt of gratitude for a service or favor. If someone does me a favor, I naturally feel I owe them a favor in return.

We see this often in everyday life where spouses sacrifice time, money, and sleep for each other and for their children. Vacation destinations, family entertainment, and often the family food is chosen not out of personal preference but because it would be good for the other. Being home on time from work, school, or an outing with friends may seem like an obligation, but it's also an act of love and respect for the rest of the family. My family has done so much for me, out of gratitude, I should do this for them. That obligation is a debt of gratitude.

We have many examples of people who have made the ultimate sacrifice. People who have given their lives for the sake of others: war heroes, first responders, or saints like Gianna Beretta and Maximilian Kolbe. Their free gifts of their lives

endears a debt of gratitude from all of us. We are obligated to acknowledge and honor their sacrifice. It's a debt of gratitude.

What has God done for us? Everything. Our very life, the world we live in, all of creation is a gift from God. What greater love is there than to lay down your life for a friend? Yet this is what Jesus has done for us. When we come to mass, we do this in memory of Jesus who sacrificed himself for our sins, so that we may be one again with God. As Saint Thomas Aquinas said "God has no need for our worship. It is we who need to show our gratitude for what we have received." Yes, we are obligated to attend mass. We are obligated out of a debt of gratitude.

For many months we have been "dispensed from the Sunday obligation" to ensure our health and safety and to promote the common good during the pandemic. While this time of confinement has dragged on, we can clearly see that soon we will be able to return to "normal life." Once again we can joyfully return not just to the public marketplace but to the source and summit, the home of our faith, the Eucharistic celebration. And when we are here, our participation in the Mass should not be some passive duty to check a box or earn a get out of jail free card.

We are called to fully, consciously, and actively participate in the Eucharist, and to be open to the change of mind and heart that results from this active participation. The Mass is a gift, a gift we receive gratefully in love, not reluctant compliance like homework or taxes. Once again, regular participation in the weekly sacrifice of the mass will be not an obligation, but a privilege, a debt of gratitude.