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Holy Days of Obligation

“Does it count for Sunday,” the caller asked, “if I go to Mass on Saturday evening for *such and such* a holy day?” The call is not unusual. The formal question might be phrased this way: “Does a holy day mass on Saturday meet my obligation to attend mass on Sunday?” Usually this question arises when a holy day falls adjacent to a Sunday. Often, there is a simple answer. But sometimes one call raises a flurry of related questions. Holy days of obligation can be confusing because they are treated differently depending on their importance in the liturgical year. So, let’s list the six holy days of obligation and then explore the terms and issues that surround them.

<u>Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God</u>	Jan. 1 st
<u>Ascension of the Lord</u>	40 days after Easter
<u>Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary</u>	Aug. 15 th
<u>All Saints Day</u>	Nov. 1 st
<u>Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary</u>	Dec. 8 th
<u>Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)</u>	Dec. 25 th

Obligation: Catholics are required to participate at mass on every Sunday and holy day of obligation unless the obligation is removed. Notice, I said participate, not “attend” or “go to mass.”

Anticipated Masses: You may fulfill your Sunday or holy day obligation by participating in an anticipated mass the previous evening.

Lifting or *abrogating* the obligation. The bishops of the United States established a rule in 1993 to remove the obligation for three of the six holy days in certain circumstances. When January 1st, August 15th or November 1st fall on a Saturday or a Monday, the obligation to participate at the holy day mass is lifted or *abrogated*. Nonetheless, the church still encourages participation at mass on these days.

Other holy days: The Nativity is always a holy day of obligation even when it falls on a

Monday or Saturday. The Immaculate Conception of Mary, as the patronal day of our country, remains a holy day of obligation except when it falls on a Sunday of Advent. Only then, when the celebration must be moved to December 9th, is it not obligatory.

The Ascension of the Lord is always a holy day of obligation but with a twist. The dioceses of the ecclesiastical provinces of Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Omaha, and Philadelphia (which includes Erie) celebrate on the proper Thursday. All other provinces of the United States transfer the Ascension of the Lord to the following Sunday.

No *Twoifers*: When there are adjacent holy days of obligation, one being a Sunday, you are obligated to participate in liturgies for both days unless the obligation has been lifted for the holy day as described earlier.

For example, when Christmas falls on Monday you must participate in mass for Sunday — either the anticipated mass on Saturday evening or the Sunday morning mass — as well as mass for Christmas— either one of the evening masses or a mass in the morning. Mass celebrated on Sunday evening does not “count” for both days. When you are obliged to participate at mass for a holy day there are no *twoifers*.

Precise language helps. Callers sometimes say: “So, it’s not a holy day this year?” Yes, it is. Holy days do not go away just because the obligation is lifted. It remains a holy day and we are encouraged to celebrate mass and the special way that day helps us understand the mystery of Christ and our redemption.

To summarize, some days are so important in the life of the church that we are obligated to participate in mass on those days even when they fall on days adjacent to Sunday. Three other days regularly lose their obligation when they occur on a Saturday or a Monday. As always, if you’re not sure, ask “Has the obligation been lifted for this holy day?” And then consider participating in mass anyway.